Pre-Employee Testing:
Virtual Job Tryouts, Cultural Screenings can Help Avoid Bad Hires

In 2007, millions of job applicants will submit their résumés the newfangled way — online. But the ones that make the cut will be screened nearly the same way as applicants were 50 years ago, through interviews, references, and occasionally, with a skills test.

However, a small number of employers are using a screening tool that employs technology to move the assessment process into the 21st century. The virtual job tryout (VJT) is an online assessment tool that creates an interactive simulation of the work experience modeled on video games or flight simulations.

Designed to benefit the employer and the applicant, the VJT gives candidates a feel for the job and offers employers assessments based on candidates’ performance on a hands-on simulation.

“They get a chance to see if the job is right for them,” says Brian Stern, president of Shaker Consulting Group of Cleveland, a provider of online screening tools.

Diebold Uses Virtual Job Tryouts
Applicants for service technician positions at North Canton, Ohio-based Diebold (the company calls them customer solutions engineers) can watch a video posted on the careers section of the company website that depicts a typical day on the job, illuminating the pros and cons. If prospects decide to apply and meet the job requirements, they are called in to take a virtual job tryout for the company, which makes ATM and security products.

Diebold incorporated the tool into its recruitment and screening process 18 months ago in order to better differentiate the skill levels of candidates. The turnover rate for customer service technicians was relatively low. But with 4,000 positions nationwide, the company always has hundreds of openings to fill and thousands of applicants to process.

“We knew the program would be paid for if we reduced turnover by just two individuals per year,” says Jerry Gilin, vice president of global training and development.

The VJT provides a more objective assessment tool than relying on what candidates say about themselves in interviews. “Some applicants are skilled in ‘impression management’ and saying what you want to hear, but they lack the skills to succeed in the position or organization,” Stern adds.

High Tryout Performance Correlates with Job Success
The Diebold virtual job tryout assesses a variety of competencies that the company considers key to job performance, including:

• Technical knowledge;
• Troubleshooting;
• Achieving results;
• Building relationships; and
• Providing customer service.

These competencies were identified by Shaker consultants through in-depth observations of, and interviews with, current service technicians and their managers, and a thorough assessment — of which job requirements and skill sets are keys to success.

One example is the troubleshooting exercise in which the applicant has to evaluate a simulated equipment malfunction and determine where the system has broken down. Tackling the task online more closely approximates on-the-job experience than a written test. Performing well on this exercise has been strongly linked to troubleshooting success on the job.

Diebold technicians initially tested the tryout to assess which exercises and responses were most predictive of performance in the field. The final assessment takes an hour and includes troubleshooting exercises and questions that assess personal attributes, such as working on a team.

Online Assessments Best Suited to Jobs with Clear Skills
Like the customer service engineer, the positions best suited to a virtual assessment have clearly defined roles and measurable results, Stern says. The assessment is popular with call centers and manufacturers that have set clear performance goals.
Sherwin-Williams, for example, uses the virtual job tryout for its manufacturing positions, introducing applicants to its product line of paints and wood finishes. It plans to extend the tryout to distribution positions.

A large supplier of premium coffee is currently developing a tryout for prospective store managers, presenting them with challenging customer situations, such as a disagreement on the balance of a store credit card. Banks also use it to evaluate prospective tellers.

When it comes to management and supervisory positions, the tryout can capture 75% to 80% of the role, with other methods assessing the rest, according to Stern.

Diebold is currently completing a new virtual assessment for management positions. There are certain competencies required in any management position. As a result, Gilin says an assessment system is a good tool to identify individuals who will impact the success of the company.

In one interactive component of the management VJT, called “strategy richness,” applicants are presented with a challenging scenario and are asked to generate as many viable options as possible. The exercise is structured to gather data that is used to predict success in handling various management situations.

Managers Say Tryout Assessments Work

Most conventional screening techniques use inference rather than direct evidence to assess whether a candidate can do the job. For example, if an applicant has comparable work experience, a manager will infer that the individual can perform a similar job. Even a behavioral assessment that captures an applicant’s personal characteristics relies on inference, such as assertiveness correlating with sales success.

But with virtual assessments, when applicants are called on to simulate specific job tasks, managers have solid evidence on which to base their decision.

“The data tells us that if you give someone a chance to try out the job, you see exactly how well they perform. It’s less risky than drawing inferences based on traditional applicant information,” Stern says. “This can be especially valuable for companies that want to reduce turnover for specific positions and decrease hiring costs.”

At Diebold, where the tryout is part of an assessment process that includes intensive behavioral interviews, turnover has been reduced by 50%. While the test is required of all applicants, managers apply it at their own discretion.

“In instances where managers have hired a candidate who didn’t do well on the test, the assessment nailed it. And I’ve never heard that the assessment missed a good candidate. These stories spread fast among managers,” Gilin says.

According to a 2005 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management, only 3% of organizations currently use an online or virtual assessment. However, that may change as companies recognize the advantage of incorporating technology into the screening process.
• Collaborative or authoritarian management style;
• Recognition and rewards practices;
• Jargon and symbols;
• History; and
• Dress codes and daily routines.

It’s everything from the reserved parking spot for the employee of the month to the work schedule of the CEO, whether it’s round-the-clock or strictly 9-to-5.

Though personality has an effect on cultural fit, they are not the same thing, observers say. “Interviewers often make the mistake of assessing individual personality fit rather than the organization fit,” says Michelle Lederman, an adjunct professor at New York University’s Stern School of Business.

While some believe that although defining the culture of a particular enterprise is like nailing Jell-O to the wall, effective HR and hiring managers know a culturally fit candidate when they interview one. Yet the efficacy of this approach is unproven, and it is fraught with the potential legal and public-relation pitfalls of eliminating candidates for entirely subjective reasons.

How can employers test cultural fit? One way is to engage assessments that bring some objectivity to the intrinsically subjective notion of company culture.

Test Instruments Add Objectivity to Cultural Fit

One company that has made cultural fit assessment part of its business is Taleo Corp., a maker of staffing management software. “The cultural fit assessment is part of our multi-tier selection strategy,” says Adrienne Whitten, a spokesperson for the Dublin, CA company.

For example, questions on the assessment ask candidates how desirable it is to work in a stable work environment or to be held to high performance expectations.

“We ask our client’s executives to rank the 38 facets of culture, and then we build the actual list of questions for applicants, rewording some questions if necessary,” states Nathan Mondragon, a senior industrial psychologist and assessment product manager at Taleo. The firm also helps clients interpret applicants’ responses to the questionnaire.

HR Gets Involved in Many Aspects

Human resource departments typically play a critical role in the selection of a provider of cultural fit assessments, and in the implementation and ongoing administration of those assessments.

“It’s always interesting to see what the staff thinks the culture is versus what the leadership thinks,” says Anna Safran, an industrial psychologist at the Human Resource Management Center.

According to Mondragon, HR, which typically makes the decision to use a cultural fit assessment, is often heavily involved in the development, implementation and interpretation of cultural fit assessments. How hard is it to sell a cultural fit assessment to top management?

“Some clients will give it a try, even though they’re skeptical,” says Ron Selewach, CEO of Human Resource Management Center in Tampa, FL. “They quickly see that we’re onto something, because they see improvement in their workforce’s productivity, performance, satisfaction, and tenure.”

Some Prefer Customized Assessments

Other industry insiders say that an effective assessment of cultural fit cannot be gleaned from a standardized questionnaire that is only tweaked to accommodate the needs of a particular client company.

“With computerized instruments, you get a lot of standardization,” says Linda Ford, a business consultant based in Austin, TX. “What you don’t get is anything that specifically reflects the behaviors you want to see in your culture.”

Ford’s approach to providing cultural assessment involves greater customization of the instrument. It’s consultation process involves an investigation of the client’s corporate cultural values, both professed and actual.

“Most companies have a values statement; you’ve got the platitudes on the wall somewhere,” Ford continues. “You create opportunities for individuals to tell you about examples of when they saw the values lived out — or violated.”

These interviews led to the creation and administration of a questionnaire that Ford believes effectively assesses the natural fit of the candidate’s work-related behavior with the culture of the hiring company.

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What Color are You?

Assessment centers, virtual tryouts, and cultural screenings are but a few of the MANY assessment tools. Others not mentioned in this month’s Brown Bagger and EAR cover story include the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or MBTI® and the Predictive Index or PI®. While the assessment tools used (and what works) will vary depending on the company and EAP, one thing is clear — everyone spends a substantial amount of time with his/her co-workers.

As a result, consider the traits of the different colors below and ask yourself which one best fits your personality, your colleagues, and what could be done to overcome any obstacles based on these differences. (The EAP may aid in this exercise.)

(Editor’s note: While it’s usually helpful for an organization to have a cross-section of personality “colors,” it likely is NOT useful to have predominantly only one color. For example, a laid-back, type B “gold” can be expected to have problems if most of his/her colleagues are type A “oranges.”)

GOLD
Workplace Strengths:
• Sees the facts, realistic, practical.

Workplace Weaknesses:
• Resist change, impatient.

On a Team:
• Provides attention to detail.

Stressed by:
• Chaos, confusion, incomplete tasks.

ORANGE
Workplace Strengths:
• Good in a crisis, adaptable, take risks.

Workplace Weaknesses:
• Unpredictability, bored without a crisis, impulsive.

On a Team:
• Will spot problems and make it happen.

Stressed by:
• Deadlines, details, being stuck at a desk.

BLUE
Workplace Strengths:
• Communication skills, knows how to bring out the best in people.

Workplace Weaknesses:
• Too generous and easily hurt, decisions based on likes rather than facts.

On a Team:
• Can really sell the organization if he/she believes in it.

Stressed by:
• Conflict, lack of social contact.

GREEN
Workplace Strengths:
• Sets high standards, knows how to “look ahead.”

Workplace Weaknesses:
• Little sensitivity, impatience.

On a Team:
• Will be a problem solver.

Stressed by:
• Incompetence, social functions.

Source: This handout is an overview ONLY to the Predictive Index or PI®. See the PI® for more on this topic.