

And Now for Something Completely Different — Personality Testing

Bob (not his real name) was hired by an insurance firm on the recommendation of his brother-in-law, a top producer. "Bob has the 'gift for gab,'" the company was told. At first Bob's sales took off like a rocket, but now, at the three year mark, the rocket is fizzling. It's obvious to his boss and his co-workers that Bob would soon join the ranks of 75% of all insurance salesmen; he won't make it to his third anniversary. Employee turnover is a way of life in insurance sales. It's a fact that regardless of their reasons for leaving; job stress, lack of recognition, behavior and personality factors, or anxiety, employees like Bob are costing you money.

Personality testing is not new. Research back in the 1970's-80's, found little relationship between an individual's personality and his/her job performance, but new research in the 1990's has come a long way in establishing key personality traits leading to a successful employment. And by "successful" I mean meaningful and productive employment for people like Bob, his employer, and his employer's clients and potential clients. At the time of this writing, there were several companies (on the web and otherwise) who specialize in personality testing. However, for some insurance companies, personality testing is new, uncharted territory; something completely different for their human resources department. In this article we'll look at two companies, the Gallup Organization and Talent Plus, who are at the forefront of what is sometimes called, "aptitude testing," and we'll also explore the new technique of "client personality testing."

The Gallup Organization

Best known as a polling company, Gallup has also spent years researching ways to help their clients improve their hiring and development strategies. Finding the right individual "talent" for a position has led Gallup to formulate a guiding principle: "The right fit for the job." With that principle in mind Vandana Allman, Gallup's global practice leader for talent-based hiring says that "Hiring employees with no talent for the job or who are not the right fit waste recruiting dollars, time and effort." In addition, "mismatched talents turn off customers; disrupt workgroups, and corrupt brands."

Each company's employee requirements are different. Because of those differences, Gallup studies the best talents within an organization. After asking these top performers a series of questions, Gallup determines which questions draw out the answer most indicative of a productive performer, and then uses these questions in the testing process.

According to Allman, "All employees, not just those in leadership roles, who achieve great outcome and have great fit for their jobs, tend to answer questions in a similar fashion." Prospective employees are tested via the Web, or on the phone using an automated system. Sometimes an analyst is involved in the testing process. The more traditional way of hiring an employee with its emphasis on a resume' and previous work experience is jettisoned in favor of a series of questions that determine how the prospective employee is "hardwired". According to Allman, "Our decisions and reactions are functions of talent, and talent is hardwired into who we are. People who lack the core talents needed for success in a role are never going to achieve and sustain superior levels of performance; they're never going to grow at an exponential rate."

Talent Plus

Kimberly Rath is President of the Lincoln, Nebraska-based, international-recognized, Talent Plus. Among her many credentials is the strategic development of the Quality Selection Process®, with over 50 validated selection interviews in 20 languages. In addition, Rath created Collaborative Coaching® for the development and career planning of executives. Clients include The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, Estée-Lauder Companies, Mercedes-Benz USA, Cadbury Schweppes and ConnectiCare, Inc.

Talent Plus has developed interviews that "tap into" an individual's natural talents and abilities. Rath commented that, "Talent is natural ability not acquired through effort. When you do something it gives you intrinsic satisfaction. It results in spontaneous behavior and it can be cultivated to achieve a near perfect performance."

In many cases Talent Plus interviews an individual who has not done a particular job for a company or is being promoted into a job they have never done. Talent Plus interviews to determine if this individual can do this job with excellence. By interviewing senior leadership, HR, and those employees already doing the job, Talent Plus determines "Key Performance Metrics" for the position. Talent Plus conducts focus groups with successful individuals within the company; and interviews them to learn about their behaviors, thoughts and feelings, and why they are successful. These 'role model studies' establish a 'talent benchmark' that allows companies to select candidates with the potential to be among their best performers. In the past, companies have hired individuals and relied on training to "fix people," and over the years

companies have concluded that you can't fix people. Unlike traditional face-to-face interviews, 90% of Talent Plus' interviews are conducted over the telephone. Why the sudden rise in 'aptitude testing'? Employers want to insure that they're selecting the right person. The key for a company is putting the right people together.

Rath notes that no process is perfect, but Talent Plus' clients achieve an 85% accuracy hiring rate, and over time, that rate sometimes hits 90% accuracy in finding the right employee. She notes that sales results are the most measurable indicator of success and in one example a company found that for every one individual hired who met Talent Plus' 'talent benchmark,' that individual sold an average of \$2.8 million a year. People who do not meet the 'benchmark' sold an average of \$1.4 million a year. For this company each hiring decision is worth \$1.4 million a year.

'Personality testing' often only focuses on past behavior as an indicator of future success. 'Aptitude testing' looks at three components; an individual's thoughts, feelings, and their behavior in order to have a better understanding of them. The result is an employee with the right talents for the job. Dick Rogers—Senior V.P. H.R. and Diane Monaghan—Staffing Consultant with ConnectiCare, credits Talent Plus with helping them become the #6 rated Best Health Plan of the 257 rated by U.S. News and World Report in 2006.

Client Personality Testing

Sound far-fetched? The strategy behind the relatively new science of client personality testing is simple; to give your employees a look at how clients make decisions. One particular test used to determine a client's personality is the Myer-Briggs. This test lets companies categorize clients into four personality groupings—Extroversion/Introversion, Thinking/Feeling, Sensing/Intuition, and Judging/Perceiving. Personality testing benefits your client in three ways: First,

by sharing the results of personality, you build trust with your client. They know from frank conversations about personalities, that they are considered more than just a commission check. Second, sales representatives gain valuable insight into how to best communicate with their client. Lastly, personality testing enables the rep to narrow down his acceptable list of insurance or investment choices, saving both client and rep a good deal of time.

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Before dismissing the idea of client personality testing altogether, consider that Merrill Lynch is a proponent of such testing. What Merrill Lynch discovered during the testing process, was that there is a strong correlation between personality traits and investment errors. This discovery has allowed Merrill Lynch representatives to have more involved discussions with clients, based on their personality types.

Another four-way personality test is simply called DISC, an acronym for the four personality types explored; dominant, influencer, steady, and compliant. Krista Sheets, a managing partner with Paragon Resources in Atlanta, uses DISC tests on her staff as well as her company's clients. What Sheets found was that reps tend to fall into the dominant/influencer category and that when clients also fall into this category, "something has to give." Sheets comments that, "It's important for them [clients] to see the process and the philosophy. They like reassurances but can see through insincerity. If you can win them over, they will be loyal customers."

Are You Ready for Something Completely Different?

An old adage says: "If you continue doing what you're doing in the same manner in which you're doing it, the results will always be the same." For some insurance companies, the same old way of doing business is no longer good enough. They're looking for something completely different to match talents to tasks, and talents to clients.

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