

POP QUIZ

TEST YOURSELF NOW

Are you a thinker or a driver? Impulsive or cautious? Considerate or candid? A liar? A thief? There are thousands of personality tests floating around in cyberspace that purport to tell you what kind of person you are, but fewer than a hundred are used professionally. Some tests ask you to answer “true” or “false”; others allow you to answer on a scale, and most have unique ways of categorizing people. Some questions are meant to identify psychoses, others measure integrity, and others focus on your strengths and weaknesses. Here’s a sampling from a variety of tests. Where do you fall? [A.E.R.]

- >> I avoid philosophical discussions.
- >> I use swear words.
- >> I try not to think about the needy.
- >> I resist authority.
- >> I have frequent mood swings.
- >> I usually feel that life is worthwhile and interesting.
- >> Evil people are trying to influence my mind.
- >> I am afraid when I look down from a high place.
- >> If my boss makes an unreasonable request, I have difficulty saying “no.”
- >> I always look forward to situations that reward me with prestige or peer approval.
- >> I keep my room well organized, with things in known places, almost all the time.
- >> There have been occasions when I resented being asked to return a favor.
- >> Whenever I make a mistake I am always willing to admit it.
- >> Most people pretend to care more about others than they really do.

Want instant feedback?

Go to www.brainbench.com to take a free 60-question test that gives you results as soon as you’re done.

Mental

By Alexia Elejalde-Ruiz
REDEYE

Your interview suit has been dry-cleaned and pressed. Your resume, printed on fancy paper, glows with achievement. Your references stand ready to vouch for your brilliance.

Think nothing can come between you and that job?

Think again.

With employers eager to clamp down on costs and turnover, more companies these days require job applicants to take personality tests so they can see beyond work experience to what really makes a person tick. But can these tests tell whether you’re right for the job? Opinions are mixed.

Advocates say personality assessments—which measure how assertive, sensitive or detail-oriented job candidates are—help identify who is an ideal fit for the job and company so hires will work harder, be happier and stay longer.

“It helps a company hire someone who’s not going to be just minimally qualified, but exceptional,” says Charlie Wonderlic of Wonderlic Inc., a Libertyville-based recruiting firm that offers about 100 employment-related tests, including the well-known intelligence test used to

assess NFL players. “For the vast majority of organizations, it’s the people that make the difference.”

But some critics blast the use of personality tests in hiring as useless and unfair.

“Many of them ask intrusive, invasive or offensive questions,” says psychologist Annie Murphy Paul, author of “The Cult of Personality.” For example, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory—often used to hire police officers, firefighters or airline pilots—asks about applicants’ bathroom habits, sex lives and religious beliefs, she says.

“Test-takers are often told that

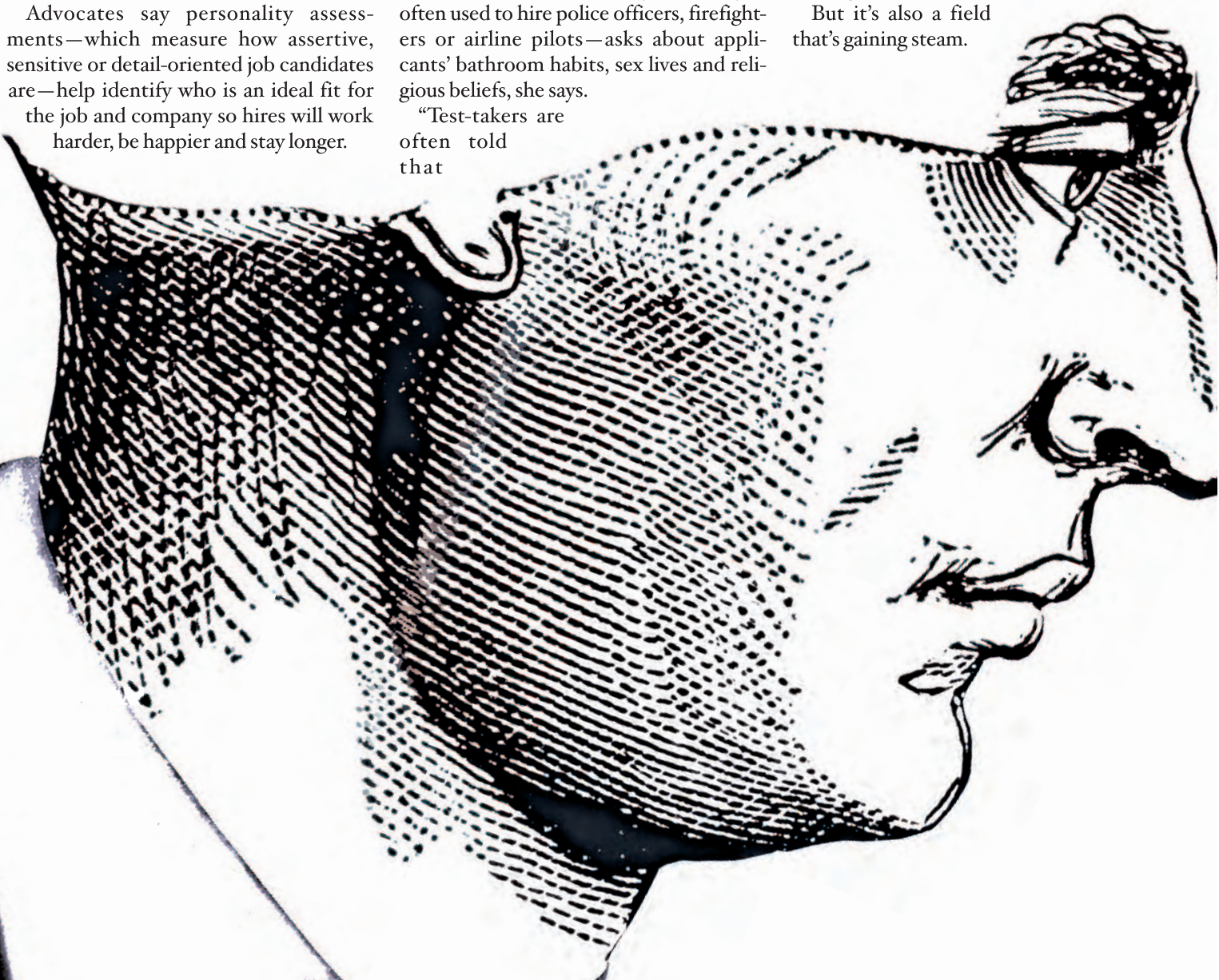
‘there are no right or wrong answers’ to these questions, but in fact their answers could lose them a job,” Paul says.

Dr. Jordon Levin, a Skokie career counselor and president-elect of the Chicago Psychological Society, says pre-hire personality screening is “controversial because the tests do not necessarily prove how the person will perform on the job.” For example, a person whose test suggested great leadership skills could turn out to be a pushover, he said.

There also is the potential for tests to discriminate against certain ethnic groups or genders, as “any test that is developed, with some exceptions, will reflect the culture of the people who are developing it,” Levin says. “It’s a field that’s become ripe for litigation.”

But it’s also a field that’s gaining steam.

COVER STORY



floss

Want a job? Be prepared to offer up more information than ever before as companies search for the perfect fit for their bottom line



Salesman Conrado Santos (second from right) passed the Talent Plus personality test before he was hired by Autohaus on Edens. [BARRY BRECHEISEN PHOTO FOR REDEYE]

Testing on the rise

Sales of pre-employment testing services, which include knowledge- and skills-based tests, are increasing about 10 percent each year among members of the Association of Test Publishers, says the association's executive director, William Harris.

Michael Russiello of Brainbench, a Virginia testing company, estimates that about 40 percent of employers do some kind of pre-employment testing, a \$500 million industry. About 25 percent use personality tests, he says.

The Chicago career counseling firm Friedman and Marcus has seen an increase in employers asking for personality tests for sales positions, partner Jot Friedman says. That test in part gauges whether someone will be call-avoidant—that is, whether they'll stop making sales calls under pressure.

Jobs that require acute people skills, like customer service, usually are the ones that require an attitude check.

"If I'm hiring someone for customer service, I want someone extroverted with a high tolerance for ambiguity," Harris says. But employers that use such testing run

the gamut.

Cydney Koukol of Nebraska-based recruiter Talent Plus, which counts the Ritz Carlton among its clients, says housekeepers would be evaluated on attention to detail or pride in their work, for example.

The value of such testing depends on the job, says Debbie Berman, vice president of Chicago-based CMC Consultants, a recruiting firm that does personality testing for a handful of clients—and it's not foolproof.

"I think that it can sometimes highlight issues that could be red flags," Berman says. "But I've also seen it work differently, where some companies have passed up on a candidate that doesn't test exactly as they would like, but still would be a quality candidate. It's not a black-and-white issue."

Proof positive

For Northbrook-based Mercedes Benz dealership Autohaus on Edens, it's a green issue.

Since hiring Talent Plus in February to do personality assessments on its sales team, productivity per salesman has gone up from five cars per month to nine or 10 cars monthly, Autohaus President Michael Rosengarden says.

"We now have people with the right attitudes, the right talents and the right skills," he says, and managers better understand how to handle their existing employees.

The dealership sought out the personality assessments to improve the quality of its hires and curb turnover, which in the auto sales industry hovers between 65 percent and 70 percent, Rosengarden says.

Of course, there were casualties.

One salesman resigned after testing poorly, and four applicants for a general sales manager position were rejected because they did not meet the benchmarks established by Talent Plus, which conducts personality interviews rather than written tests, Rosengarden says.

"The fourth [applicant] was very difficult [to pass on] because he had very good work experience," Rosengarden says. "But the interview showed some weaknesses."

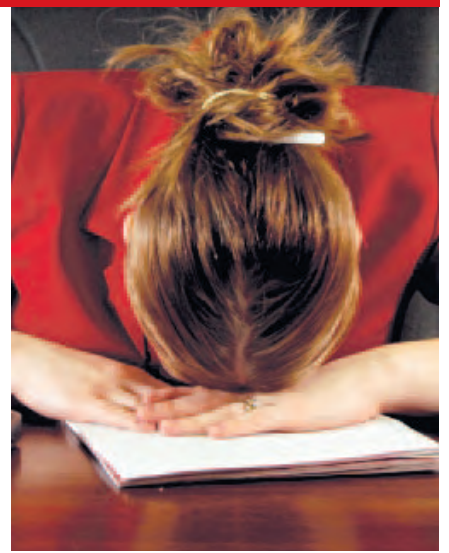
Fair and balanced

Though any employer who uses a personality test to eliminate a job applicant faces the threat of a legal challenge, University of Minnesota psychology professor Paul Sackett says that most have not proven to be discriminatory.

To avoid controversy, test makers try to choose questions that are relevant to the job and "norm" their tests to a diverse sample group. Wonderlic says the key to successfully using personality assessments is to "verify, verify, verify." An applicant who was deemed submissive when the job requires a go-getter, for example, could then be asked targeted questions about his assertiveness during an interview, he says.

"A properly used test is a good thing," Sackett says. "If it is carefully developed to identify characteristics that are a good fit for the job, the employer gets a good fit, and people don't end up in jobs for which they're not suited."

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Are you beating the test, or is the test beating you?

Have you ever intentionally lied? Have you? Hmmmm?

Job applicants required to take a personality test often face that very question, with the answer seemingly a Catch-22.

Say "yes" and the employer might think you're a liar; say "no" and the employer might, well, think you're a liar.

"Workplace personality tests present workers with an unpalatable choice," says psychologist Annie Murphy Paul, author of the "The Cult of Personality" and a testing critic. "Answer the questions honestly, and any whiff of creativity, independence, unconventionality, or open-mindedness will be counted against you. Or answer the questions the way the employer clearly would like you to, and engage in deliberate deception."

Even questions that seem to have obvious answers won't necessarily help you get the gig.

"When you ask someone why they want to be in sales, they might say that they like interacting with people," says Jot Friedman of the Chicago career counseling firm Friedman and Marcus. "Well, that's fine, but what you really want them to say is, 'I'm money-oriented.'"

Test supporters say there's no way to prepare for the tests, as they simply ask about how you think and behave. And many tests are designed to detect if people are "faking" or "slanting" their answers to make themselves look better.

Sometimes several versions of the same question will be sprinkled throughout the test to see if the applicant answers them consistently.

"If they're not giving the same answer to the questions, you get a red flag that something's wrong," says Paul Sackett, psychology professor at the University of Minnesota.

And there's nothing worse than a lying liar. [A.E.R.]