

Six things you should know about pre-employment tests

By Sarah E. Needleman

Executive candidates often are surprised when asked to take a test or other assessment for a job. They shouldn't be.

Pre-employment testing is on the rise. In the past five years, 60% of companies have increased their use of workplace-behavior assessments, according to a survey of more than 500 human-resources professionals at U.S. companies from Spherion Corp., a staffing firm based in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

Employers typically use assessments to confirm a candidate's cultural fit or skill competency, according to Doug Wolf, vice president of consulting services at Select International Inc., a Pittsburgh-based provider of career-assessment tools. Bear in mind that for questions about your work style or personality, he says, there are no right or wrong responses. "If you answer honestly and don't get the job, it means the position wasn't a good match for you in the first place," he says.

Candidates should take the assessments seriously, even if they feel they aren't necessary. A shoo-in for an executive job at Mindbridge Software Inc. torpedoed his candidacy when completing a personality assessment in 2004, even though the results met the employer's expectations, says Scott Testa, chief operating officer of the intranet-software company in Norristown, Pa. The proctor told him the candidate arrived late, wearing a t-shirt and shorts, which, he says, was disrespectful and showed a lack of seriousness. "The guy thought he had the position, and he did, but then he blew it," he says.

Here's what job candidates should know about pre-employment testing:

1. Senior executives are not exempt. In fact, the higher you aspire to climb the corporate ladder, the more likely you are to be evaluated on how well you might fit in personality-wise, says Joel H. Wilensky, an executive recruiter in Sudbury, Mass. His clients require most candidates to undergo assessments, he says. "It's almost an absolute for jobs that pay salaries of \$300,000 and up," he adds. According to Mr. Testa, Mindbridge administers personality assessments to all prospective hires to see if they'll fit into the company's culture. But he says the company most closely scrutinizes the results of assessments from senior-level candidates. "We have the most to lose if they are a bad hire," he says.
2. Curb your antagonism. Many senior candidates scoff at having to take a test, says Deborah Sawyer, a partner in Atlanta at executive-search firm Morgan Howard Worldwide, whose clients require assessments for most candidates. "They see it as being unnecessary and don't put enough energy into it," she says. "Then they can't make it to the next round." You can derail your candidacy if you show your displeasure, says Mr. Wolf. "Complaining says a lot to an employer about your overall attitude, tolerance for stress and how open you will be to future opportunities," he says.
3. Your candidacy can benefit. Erin Vadala, 40, took a personality assessment two years ago for her public-relations-manager job at Warner Communications in Manchester-by-the-Sea, Mass. "I was surprised at how accurate it was," she says, noting that the results indicated she's outgoing. "I'm constantly talking to people and telling stories," she says. "When you are a public-relations professional, you can't be a wallflower."
4. Clear your schedule. Ask recruiters about how long a pre-employment assessment might take. You may need to devote anywhere from a few minutes to several hours of your time, says Bill Erickson, executive vice president of human-capital management at Kenexa Corp., a provider of pre-employment-testing technology in Wayne, Pa. Some assessments are oral and administered on site by an industrial psychologist, while others may be completed online from any location, he adds.

If taking a test by phone, ensure there will be no interruptions or distractions, says Ernest Feiteira, regional manager at NAS Recruitment Communications LLC, a human-resources-communications provider in Woodbridge, N.J. Candidates for jobs at the firm who successfully complete first-round interviews are administered a brief personality assessment by phone, he says. Those who perform well must then complete an online assessment, which takes about an hour and must be done within 48 hours, he says.

5. Exercise your brain. Familiarize yourself with pre-employment assessments by taking free ones on the Web, such as this personality quiz from eTest Inc., a pre-employment testing and assessment company in Atlanta. Practice tests can help you feel more comfortable when it's your turn in the hot seat, says J. Larry Tyler, founder of Tyler & Co., a retained search firm headquartered in Atlanta. "You'll remove the fear out of taking a test," he says. Playing problem-solving games such as Suduko also can help sharpen your mind for test-taking, says Mr. Wolf.
6. Weak results may not matter. Ms. Sawyer says in 2002, a candidate for an executive position at a client of hers was hired even though results from a behavioral assessment suggested he was a poor fit. "He did well in the interviews and they thought he had the innate competencies to do the job," she says. "They said, 'We're going to dismiss it and go on our gut.' "

Ms. Needleman is associate editor at CareerJournal.com.