

Financial Times 16th December 2004

Job tests begin to score highly again

By Richard Donkin

Some journalists road test cars. Some like to compare the merits of domestic appliances and others deliver personal critiques of holidays or restaurants. My own thing is psychometric testing. It started about 10 years ago when I decided that the best way to understand the processes behind psychometrics was to take one of the tests.

Since then I have completed most of the better known questionnaires and a few that are less well-known. Beyond that I have undergone various interviews with psychologists exploring their methods for finding what makes a person tick. In the early days I took some ability tests and they told me what I would have expected: that I was more literate than numerate. But the personality tests just kept on coming and they still do. The market for such tests has wavered in recent years, particularly in the US where recruiters have been frightened off by potential litigation related to any suspicion of ethnic or gender bias.

But interest has been strengthening again as recruiters continue to demand some insight not only of what we can do, but of the way we go about our work.

This means that it is quite possible to have an impressive collection of technical qualifications for a job or a promotion yet miss out against other similarly qualified candidates simply because of the way you react in the workplace.

Last week I received assessments from two relatively new personality questionnaires and decided that enough was enough. My reservoir of self-awareness is brim full.

The first was an 81-item, internet-delivered questionnaire called the Parallax profile, offered as an optional service to clients of Longbridge International*, a City headhunter. While some tests concentrate on opposites in personality such as comparing introversion and extroversion, Parallax says it looks at the brain in a three-dimensional way.

Just in case we might fail to understand this, Bruce Page, finance and operations director at Longbridge, which owns the Parallax process, uses a cardboard-box representation of the brain, marked up like a grid. On each square of the grid is a behavioural attribute. This reminds me a little bit of phrenology where practitioners would judge your character by feeling the "bumps" in your head.

Although Victorian phrenologists were mistaken in their assumptions, scientists have since proved that different parts of the brain are responsible for different thinking mechanisms. Studies have found, for example, that the hippocampus, a part of the brain that influences our navigational ability, tends to be enlarged among London cab drivers.

A three dimensional grid allows for a varied analysis of thinking styles. But what can it tell us about ourselves? The test decided that I was a "hope generator". Is that the same as an optimist? It also described me as a "recursive thinker", whatever that means, and a "thrill seeker" but delivered low scores in areas such as wealth and power-seeking, project-organising and planning. What it didn't tell me, however, was whether I would be any good at my job.

In all the reports I have seen arising out of personality testing, I have rarely come across an interpretation presented as a negative. Yet my old school teachers never had such problems. Phrases such as "disruptive in class" and "easily distracted" were not uncommon in my school reports. The behaviour that led to such comments in the past, however, is interpreted today as "innovative and creative".

Some commentators believe that companies want creative people today and some managers are tempted to agree. In practice, however, few companies are prepared to tolerate the distracted and distracting behaviours that can characterise creativity. The creative can be demonised as a dissident, a non-conformist or an irritant, sometimes fairly so.

I suppose I must regard myself as creative if this surfaces in personality testing since it is based on self-reporting. It reflects what we think of ourselves and, to a broad degree, what we know of ourselves. The problem here is that we may not know ourselves quite as well as we think we do.

The Spony Profiling Model, another test new to the market, seeks to overcome this problem by asking three former or existing colleagues of the candidate to complete questionnaires designed to investigate the strength of his or her self-awareness. In my case, there was a 90 per cent agreement between the three colleagues. More than that, their impressions closely reflected the outcome of my own test.

Again the test report does not discuss "strengths and weaknesses". Personality measures tend to avoid the judgmental approach. Anything that begins to circle the wagons around our ego in this way demands some sensitivity.

There are those who can interpret flattery as a kind of criticism. I know of a cook who, when you compliment her on the vegetables, will respond by asking: "What's wrong with the meat?"

The SPM questionnaire, marketed by a company called FutureToBe**, was devised by Gilles Spony, a former lecturer at Cranfield School of Management, drawing heavily on the thinking of Shalom Schwartz, professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and Geert Hofstede, both of whom have explored the factors behind different national cultures.

Among the findings of the SPM test are pointers to where in the world you might find yourself at home. I was not surprised to find myself among the Norwegians, the Swedes and the Danes. I don't need to go too far back in to my family history to find its origins on the north-east coast of England.

Looking at the map of national cultures overlaid on a map of the qualities that the test describes as "motivating factors", I can see I would have most difficulty finding common ground with a Venezuelan. This is not an immediate problem.

More of a problem is that I would probably not see eye-to-eye either with a boss who stressed the value of hard work, self-discipline, method, precision and adherence to rules. But that's what bosses do.

"It is not designed to rule someone out of a job," says Christine Communal, principle consultant at FutureToBe. "Its use should be to enable someone to maximise their enjoyment of work and the areas in which they prefer to work."

But such tests are being used in selection. So would I be so honest in my selfassessment

as a job candidate? I doubt it, although the findings of these tests suggest that they have ways of exposing a lack of candour.

There is another question: to what extent should we allow such profiling to influence our lives? Perhaps we would be happier people if we selected our career paths on the basis of self-knowledge. But where's the fun in that? And where's the fun in knowing I would write something like that? Do we want to be so predictable?

*www.longbridge.com ** www.futuretobe.net

©2004 Richard Donkin