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“Job seekers, get ready for personality tests”

By Ruth Mantell

And you thought vandalizing your high school's drama club room wouldn't haunt you in adulthood.

As it turns out, your childhood misdeeds, along with whether you care about someone else's bad day and how much you read, may have an impact on how a prospective employer views you.

To get a read on applicants, more employers are using pre-hire assessments, which can check personality, cognitive ability, and competency, among other areas. About 56% of companies are using some sort of assessment tool as part of the hiring process this year, up from 48% in 2010, according to Aberdeen Group, a Boston-based research firm.

Proponents say assessments are a relatively low-cost tool to increase the odds of finding a good match. “Culture fit is an absolutely critical determinant of longer-term fit, and not easy to discern in an interview,” said Jay Gaines, chief executive of Jay Gaines & Co., a New York executive search firm. “There are some short psychological tests that might provide reinforcement and support to observations we might make on candidates.”

While senior-level workers may face in-depth assessments, workers at any level should be prepared to face an assessment. For instance, since August 2010, all applicants to Bethlehem, Pa.-based St. Luke's Hospital & Health Network have been taking an assessment that aims to pinpoint, among other things, an applicant's attitude about customer service.

Here's what job seekers should know about personality assessments and other hiring screens.

Honesty is the best policy

It might be tempting to fudge assessment answers to sound perkier, more honest or more diligent than you really are. But some assessments contain scales to detect such misrepresentations.

“When people try to fake, they try to fake in very characteristic ways, and it's really easy to tell when someone is trying to game the test,” said Robert Hogan, president of Hogan Assessment Systems, a Tulsa, Okla.-based personality assessment and consulting firm.

Job applicants taking assessments may try to predict what the company is looking for and develop a profile they think fits the bill for a good candidate. Others may check the

box on the positive end of the scale for every question—a pattern that employers may look for.

“Sometimes companies will put in a kind of nonsense question to make sure people are paying attention,” said John Hausknecht, associate professor of human-resource studies at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.

Tests don’t have the final say

“Bombing” a personality assessment won’t necessarily lose you a job, experts said.

“For companies that manage their staffing system well, personality tests are going to be a small part of the process,” Hausknecht said. With assessments, “there is no one magic bullet that works for all people and all jobs. Personality tests might be combined with an interview, plus some kind of a work sample.”

Dana Landis, vice president for global search assessment with executive search firm Korn/Ferry International, said the firm has assessed almost 700,000 applicants over about 10 years. Rather than taking negative assessment results at face value, Korn/Ferry uses results to dig deeper, she said.

“We don’t want to ignore the results, but we also take them in context,” Landis said. “We often try to circle back to the candidate to ask follow-up questions.”

Assessment results generally don’t come into play until there is a short list of candidates. “When you get down to the last three, they tend to be really impressive, present well, have excellent track records,” Landis said. “But one of those people is a better fit than the others, and it’s at that point that we need the extra information.”

Charles Wardell, chief executive of Oak Brook, Ill.-based Witt/Kieffer, which specializes in executive searches for health education and nonprofits, said he treats assessments as another reference. “If you do very well on tests, I consider it a very good reference,” he said. “And if you don’t do well, I look at it as OK, not everybody gets 10 great references.”

Assessments can help applicants, too

While companies pay for assessment tests, applicants can reap some benefits.

“A personality assessment is like a two-way interview for the individual,” said Michael Anderson, senior research scientist at CPP, a Mountain View, Calif.-based provider of assessment tools. “If you feel you have to stretch your answers on an assessment, then maybe it’s not the position that’s best suited for you.” For example, while being conscientious might be helpful for most jobs, being extroverted may be predictive of success only for certain positions, he said.

Michael McDaniel, a human-resources and organizational-behavior professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, said applicants see certain tests as “fair” if they include

questions that clearly relate to the job. He says these tests have “pretty good acceptance by applicants and are easier to explain to management.”

But McDaniel added that “for those who have been out of school for a while, the thought of taking a test can make one anxious. No one likes the idea of being evaluated and being found not to be good enough.”