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Ipsative vs. Normative Personality Tests: Which is the Right Tool for Hiring?

by Stephen Race, MSc Occupational Psychology
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Introduction

Employee assessments have become more and more popular over the past twenty years, and according to Forbes, 60-70% of all U.S. employers now use personality tests. But not all tests are alike, and it is important to understand the differences between the two main types — Ipsative and Normative. These differences affect how the tools should and should not be used in human capital decisions like screening, selection, and employee training and development.

Are You Using the Wrong Tool for the Job?

Using a test in a manner for which it was not designed has consequences:

- It may lead to common **hiring errors** such as poor job fit, sub-standard job performance and productivity, and misguided career decisions.
- Use may result in missing potential high-quality hires.
- It has potential **legal risks** if hiring or promotion/demotion decisions have to be justified on a group or individual level.

Choices

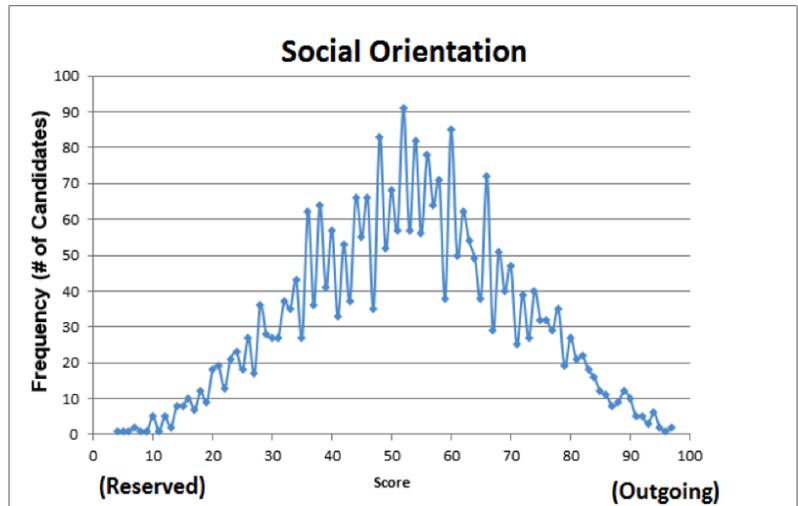
The best assessments for hiring are 'Normative' tests which measure quantifiable personality traits on individual scales and allow people to be compared to other people, which is preferable when more than one candidate is being considered.

What is 'Normative', you ask? Personality tests used in business settings fall into two categories: **(1) Normative vs (2) Ipsative**

1) Normative

*Normative tests answer questions such as: How **outgoing** is a candidate compared to other working adults? How **achievement-oriented** is a candidate compared to other working adults?*

A person's "score" for each construct measures a specific set of traits against group data represented on a bell curve, like the one above (normal Distribution).



The purpose of normative tests is to **predict performance, strengths and risks**. They are used to compare individuals and identify who is most likely to be successful on the job and to avoid placing people in jobs they are not suited for. Normative tests are best-practice tools for hiring, recruitment and selection applications, and are also useful in training and development, succession planning and team building applications.

2) Ipsative

Ipsative tests answer questions such as: Would you describe yourself as dominant, influencing, steady or compliant?

Unlike normative tests, ipsative tools indicate only orientations and the relative strengths of the person being tested. They compare the strength of orientations **within a person, not compared to other people**.

Myers Briggs and DiSC tests are ipsative, as are many other popular, user-friendly assessments on the market. Myers Briggs identifies people as a "type" from one of 16 types, derived from four dimensions. DiSC tests evaluate people on four dimensions often by asking 'forced choice questions' where the person is required to choose adjectives that describe them most and least. The DiSC results draw conclusions about the person's workstyle based on their High and Low scores on the four dimensions. Typically, the results classify the person as having one or two primary dimensions.

Along with the Myers Briggs and DiSC tests, there are many other ipsative assessments available such as Thomas International, McQuaig Word Survey, TTI, P3, Omnia, Performax, ProScan and Pro.file. Most are based on a four dimension behavioral model.

Legal Risks

Legal implications also are a factor to be considered. Normative tests, when validated, job relevant, and used properly in a recruitment and selection situation are legally defensible tools to help make employment related decisions such as hiring. Ipsative tests are **not**.

Normative personality tests and cognitive ability tests are stronger predictors of future job fit and skill potential than ipsative tests. Many of the DiSC and MBTI publishers state in their technical documentation that they are not intended to be used for employee selection.

“It is not, and was never intended to be predictive, and should never be used for hiring, screening or to dictate life decisions.”

CPP, publisher of the Myers-Briggs

“DiSC is not recommended for pre-employment screening because it does not measure a specific skill, aptitude or factor specific to any position.”

“DiSC is not a predictive assessment so assumptions should not be made regarding an applicant’s probability of success based solely on their style.”

DiSC Profile

Ipsative tests may be appropriate when used for applications like development, coaching, team building, and interpersonal conflict resolution, where comparisons among people are not necessary. However, experts in occupational psychology and psychometrics agree that **ipsative tests are not recommended for use in recruitment, screening, and selection** because the goal when hiring is to compare people and predict their performance.

Ipsative tests may indicate how someone might handle job situations but provide no insight into whether they have strengths or risks compared to other people. Ipsative tests are limited in their application because they compare people against themselves and are therefore very limited in any application where the purpose is evaluating strengths and risks compared to others, and selecting the most suitable candidate.

Choosing the Right Test for your Needs

Purpose	Normative	Ipsative
Hiring (Screening, Recruitment, Selection)	✓	
Succession Planning	✓	
Training and Development	✓	✓
Team Building	✓	✓

Feature/Benefit	Normative	Ipsative
Ability to compare people	✓	
Get an objective measure of an individual's traits	✓	
Predict performance	✓	
Legal defensibility	✓	

Summary

Personality tests are either Normative (compares an individual to other people) or Ipsative (compares an individual to themselves). Normative assessments are recognized as the only acceptable tool for employee screening and selection during the hiring process.

Ipsative tests, on the other hand, are suitable for situations where there is no need to compare the results of different people, for example, a team building or self-discovery activity. This view is supported by one of the world's foremost experts in psychometric testing, Dr. Paul Englert, Managing Director - OPRA, Registered Psychologist, PhD I/O Psychology. Englert summarizes the subject in his posts "Ipsative Tests: Psychometric Properties" and "What are ipsative tests?" He states, "By its very design ipsative tools are designed for counseling or individual coaching where the focus is the individual not comparisons. Because the scores derived from the measures are relative to the individual and not independent of each other, scale scores cannot be compared across people. In Summary, ipsative testing is applicable when working with an individual. Ipsative testing is inappropriate when used for selection."

Related Resources:

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DISC Profile Website <https://www.discprofile.com/which-disc-to-use/disc-for-hiring-or-recruitment/>

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