

TOP 5 MYTHS ABOUT PERSONALITY ASSESSMENTS

by Greg Ford and Stephen Race, August 1, 2017

People are complex, and when it comes to the screening and selection of applicants, it can be extremely difficult to predict exactly how someone will behave on the job in future. There are many tools to help employers with hiring, and behavioral assessments (commonly called “personality tests”) have become very popular over the years, to the point where 60-70% of Fortune 500 companies are now using assessments.

But are assessments the silver bullet, the magic ticket to the promised land of foolproof hiring? No. Personality assessments are not perfect, and no reputable test publisher has ever claimed that they are flawless. But neither is behavioral interviewing, role-based exercises, reference checks, background screening, and skills testing.

As with anything, education and awareness is the key to choosing and using any business tool. Here are some misconceptions about assessments which you should be aware of when making decisions about your HR practices.

Myth #1: It's easy to GAME a personality assessment.

Actually, it is quite difficult for most people to fake their results. All reputable assessment publishers have built-in "lie detectors" which throw up a red flag if a participant is answering in a way that appears to be “too good to be true.” That said, there has historically been a small margin of error, which reputable publishers have always acknowledged.

Myth #2: Personality assessments are INVASIVE

There are a few personality tests on the market which, arguably, might be considered invasive. They ask questions about childhood, parental influences, etc. Most job applicants feel these questions are inappropriate, and their negative impression can reflect poorly on the employer. The best assessments are non-invasive and do not ask these types of questions, but rather ask questions which are only **workplace** related.

Myth #3: Personality assessments present LEGAL ISSUES

In the past, there have been several legal challenges in the U.S. But, even upon appeals, the courts have ruled favorably with regards to personality assessments if they meet certain criteria. What are the criteria? A high-quality, reputable test publisher will have ensured that its products have validity, reliability and their recommended use meets the standards specified in the *Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures* (1978). In terms of legal issues resulting from adverse impact or bias based on ethnicity/race or gender, personality assessments have been shown to have minimal adverse impact which is in contrast with the higher likelihood of adverse impact from other types of assessments such as cognitive ability tests. This focus on compliance is partly why so many Fortune 500 companies now use personality assessments, and their legal departments are comfortable doing so.

Myth #4: Personality assessments are EXPENSIVE

In the good old days of testing, a candidate sat with a pencil and filled in bubbles on an answer sheet, and then a trained expert had to manually score the answer sheet and write up a report. This was a time-consuming and labor-intensive process and was therefore expensive. Publishers routinely charged \$200-300 per person. These days, however, almost all testing is done electronically, and most publishers have the products available in a mobile-friendly platform. Because of these efficiencies in technology and software, publishers are able to charge a fraction of the old cost...if they want to. Unfortunately, many assessment vendors have clients who are accustomed to paying hundreds of dollars per person, so it's extremely difficult for those established vendors to decrease their prices, otherwise they'll be cannibalizing their own business.

And the biggest myth of all...

Myth #5: Personality assessments are INACCURATE

Actually, high-quality, job-relevant personality assessments have been shown to be as accurate or more accurate in predicting on-the-job behavior compared with other assessment methods such as interviews, reference checks, criminal record checks, and role-based exercises:

- **Interviewing:** We all think we have a good 'gut instinct' about others, but we don't. Research shows that an unstructured interview alone has a low success rate in hiring 'good' or 'high' performers (McDaniel et al 1994, Journal of Applied Psychology). Using a quality assessment in combination with an interview can raise those results to around a 75% success rate. Not 100%...so not perfect. But, still, a huge gain.
- **Reference Checks:** Funny thing: references always seem to speak glowingly about the job seeker, don't they? After all, nobody ever provides a reference who they know will speak poorly of them. And more and more, companies have created policies prohibiting managers and staff from acting as references for a former employee.
- **Criminal Record Checks:** Dave Dinesen, former President of Sterling-Backcheck International says that, "20% of the population marches to a different drumbeat. Just because those people don't have a criminal record, it doesn't mean they have *not* done anything; it just means they have not been caught yet." Furthermore, in the U.S. there is no centralized federal database of criminal records that background screening vendors have access to. The vendor must search each jurisdiction where the candidate lived. If the person lies about where they lived, the information may go undetected. "A quality psychometric test that focuses on risk," says Dinesen, "can help fill the gaps that traditional screening programs may not detect."

- **Role-Based Exercises:** These types of assessments are all about observing someone in a job-specific situation before determining if they're a good fit for the role. This *can* be accurate and useful. But there are two problems:
 - People act on their best behavior when being observed, according to a well-documented psychological phenomenon called the Hawthorne Effect, and
 - It's not always feasible or realistic to set up that type of 'clinical' simulation and monitoring. If you can manage it, then by all means add it to the decision-making mix and weigh the results accordingly.

Weighing the results accordingly is important with ALL of the tools you use, whichever ones they might be. We suggest that each screening tool (interview, reference check, background check, assessments) be weighted at no more than 20-25% of the final decision.

Make no mistake, we are NOT saying that one should abandon doing interviews, reference checks, and criminal record checks. Keep doing those things! It's just that a high-quality personality assessment can be a valuable **additional** piece of the puzzle when trying to gain insight into applicants and predict if they will become a top performer in your organization.

Authors: [Greg Ford](#) and [Stephen Race](#) are the co-founders of TalentClick Inc. In over 40 countries worldwide, leading companies use TalentClick's behavior-based personality assessments to hire and train better employees and create happier, safer, and more productive workplaces. For more information about TalentClick, or to do a free assessment, see your own results, and evaluate our report, visit: www.TalentClick.com