

How to avoid hiring a round peg for that square job

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By Andy Smith, Journal Staff Writer



Peter Brown's company offers pre-employment assessments.

(visit <http://www.theworkforcebuilder.com>)

Peter L. Brown, who owns a company called The Workforce Builder, in Swansea, MA, and is a member of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, compares a business trying to match job candidates with the right job to an online dating service trying to match two halves of a couple. (Maybe that's because Brown met his wife Cheryl through an online dating service six years ago.)

Brown, whose business assists companies with hiring and work-force assessments, said it's increasingly important to make smart hires. Wrong ones, he said, can result in problems that range from theft and fraud to subtler difficulties, such as poor performance or a high turnover rate. Brown said a company that doesn't properly match employees to jobs is like a baseball team that decides to scramble its lineup and have the pitchers play in the outfield and the catcher play shortstop.

The more information companies have about job candidates, the better, Brown said. He compares job

applicants to an iceberg. What you see in the interview and on a resumé is the part of the iceberg that sits above the water. The larger part, below the surface, is revealed through background checks, talking to former employers and various methods of aptitude testing.

Brown works in partnership with a company called Profiles International Inc., which specializes in assessing job candidates and existing employees. Brown said 35,000 companies have used material from Profiles International. The company, based in Waco, Texas, says its products can be used for hiring, promoting, training and succession planning. (John Appel, executive vice president of Profiles International, said the company does not look to online dating sites for inspiration.)

"People aren't going to buy a [job] assessment just for information," Appel said. "They call us because they have a problem. Some companies, for example, are faced with tremendous turnover rates. The cost of turnover can be exorbitant."

A word neither Brown nor Profiles International likes to use is "test," preferring the term assessment. "It's not something you pass or fail," Brown said. "It's an attempt to measure how you think and behave."

Most Profiles International assessments are taken online, although they don't have to be. The company has created a wide variety of material, from a relatively simple survey that tries to predict for integrity and reliability on the job to a far more elaborate procedure called job matching.

The first step in job matching, Brown said, is to create an elaborate analysis of the job, often a job that's a high priority for the company, or one that has been difficult to keep filled. Brown said the idea is to have people who have already proven successful at the job fill out an occupational assessment. "Take a sales job, for example. You might have 10 people in a department, and two of them are selling more than everyone else combined.... You want to get more employees like those two," he said

The goal, said Appel of Profiles International, is to look at what characteristics the successful employees share that make them good at what they do. Profiles International then creates a "job-pattern description" using the results of the assessment, assigning numerical values to different job skills. For an engineering manager, for example, Profiles International found that a

successful candidate should score between six and eight, on a scale of one to ten, in numeric reasoning, the ability to analyze data from numeric information.

Then job candidates fill out the same assessment, a six-part series of questions that reads like a cross between a psychological evaluation and an SAT test. The assessment includes a long series of yes or no questions, such as:

- You find it easy to start a conversation with a total stranger.
- The word “aggressive” accurately describes you.
- Most organizations have too many rules and regulations.

Brown said some of the questions cover similar material, although from different angles, to see whether the test-taker is being consistent. Inconsistent answers generate a higher score on a “distortion scale” that casts doubt on the validity of the assessment.

The job match survey also has a section on preferences. For example, would you rather design a machine, or represent your organization to the public? Would you rather read a budget, or a scientific journal? Would you rather write computer programs, or work outdoors?

When the survey is done, Profiles International provides an analysis of how well the candidate fits the job parameters, and will even compare a series of candidates.

But Profiles International also adds a warning. While job matching should be an important part of the placement process, the company says, it shouldn't be the only

factor. As a matter of fact, the company said the results of any test should not account for more than a third of the final decision on hiring. Other factors to consider, Appel said, are interviews, recommendations, skills and work experience.

Brown said major corporations, such as Loew's and Wal-Mart, are increasingly using online questionnaires as part of the hiring process. In an informational meeting last month, for example, executives from MGM Grand at Foxwoods, which will be hiring 2,000 new employees between now and May, said most job candidates will be administered online assessments in addition to their interviews.

Bob Eubanks, executive director of the Northeast Human Resources Association, said various kinds of pre-employment tests have been around for a long time, although the Internet has changed the way they are administered.

“The traditional view [of such tests] is that if they are extremely well-constructed, they can be very useful,” Eubanks said. “But there is some risk, under the heading of discrimination. People involved with the tests need to be sure that nothing can be construed as a discriminating question.” Profiles International addresses that issue in a description of its assessment system, calling it “age-blind, gender-blind and ethnicity-blind.”

Appel said he considered his company's job assessment process beneficial not just for employers, but for employees as well. “I say to people that I wouldn't walk around wearing shoes that are a half size too small,” he said. “But that's what it can be like when you're in a job that doesn't fit you.”

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