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The Seven Rules of Employee Testing

By Jon Haber, SkillCheck President and CEO

A well-conceived employee-screening program can help HR practitioners to measurably reduce turnover, raise productivity, eliminate rework, increase loyalty, and improve overall job satisfaction. Long used solely for employee selection, skills and behavioral testing has increasingly become a strategic tool for making critical organizational decisions about promotion, retention, training, downsizing and reorganization.

If you are thinking about implementing a skills or behavioral testing program in your organization, these seven rules of employee testing can help ensure your success:

Rule #1: Test for the job requirements

Testing must be job-specific. Most jobs require certain knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs), and there are a variety of resources for determining what those are for any particular position. The Occupational Information Network (O*Net at <http://online.onetcenter.org/>) is just one of many online job-description databases and tools that can be used to find detailed descriptions of specific occupations. Many organizations maintain their own job-description databases for internal positions, or can generate this information using focus groups or surveys of existing employees.

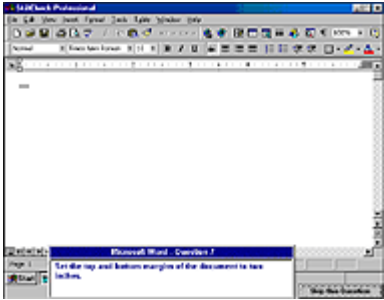
Rule #2: Select the right KSAs

Most jobs consist of a number of diverse KSAs (knowledge, skills and abilities), and not every one of those can be measured or should be measured by testing. A call center position, for example, may require an understanding of the products being sold (knowledge), the ability to use a telephone system and/or computer-based customer-relationship management (CRM) system (skills), as well as a positive sales attitude and well-mannered phone presence (ability). Assessments, such as paper or computer-based tests on product features or computer-literacy skills, or a personality-profiling instrument on sales attitudes, can be used to measure most of these KSAs. However, certain KSAs (such as phone presence) might best be measured via observation of the candidate during role-playing or live sales calls.

Rule #3: Select the best means of measurement

Different types of KSAs should be measured with different forms of testing. For example, traditional *linear assessments* (i.e., assessments that contain traditional types of questions such as multiple-choice, matching or fill-in-the-blank items) measure specific knowledge and can be deployed either via paper, desktop computer or online. When measuring skills, organizations have turned to *performance-based testing*, a form of testing that places people in a real-world environment or simulation and measures their abilities to perform specific tasks.

For example, determining a candidate's computer literacy skills is best performed by asking the candidate to sit in front of live software or a simulation of live software and perform specific tasks (such as starting programs, creating documents or working with databases), rather than asking them to answers multiple-choice questions about the same topics. The following example demonstrates the superiority of performance-based testing for testing certain types of skills.

Linear Test Item	Performance-Based Test Item
<p>Which of the following commands will allow you to change margins?</p> <p>A. From the File menu, select Margins.</p> <p>B. From the File menu, select Page Setup</p> <p>C. From the Format menu, select Margins.</p> <p>D. From the Format menu, select Paragraph.</p>	
<p>This linear test item (multiple-choice) is testing just one component of an objective: which menu choice contains an option to change margins. The question is not put into the context of the software program, and does not ask examinees to perform a complete software task.</p>	<p>This performance-based testing item, in contrast, places examinees in a perfect simulation of the software environment and asks them to perform the task from start to finish in any correct way the software allows. Only a fully interactive performance-based item allows you to determine competency with a single test item.</p>

Psychological tests utilize a variety of question types and test styles to gauge a candidate's attitudes and aptitudes. Likert Scale tests, like the one illustrated below, are one of the most familiar styles of psychological test, one in which candidates are asked to provide their level of agreement with a particular statement.

How much do you agree with the following statement: "I am willing to do anything legal to win."

- A. Strongly Agree
- B. Agree
- C. Neutral
- D. Disagree
- E. Strongly Disagree

Rule #4: Utilize valid testing instruments

Validity is the collection of evidence that demonstrates that a test actually measures what it purports to measure. There are different ways to demonstrate test validity, including:

- **Content validity:** Proof, normally provided by subject-matter experts, that items in an assessment cover the most important and frequently used knowledge, skills and/or abilities needed to accomplish the objectives being measured by the test. For example, a test on a word processor can be said to be content valid if it can be proven that the subjects covered in the test (setting margins, printing, etc.) represent the most important and frequently used functions critical to the success of the use of a word processor.
- **Construct validity:** Proof that the individual items in a test are accurate measurements of the subject being tested. For example, an item that asks an applicant to set margins within a performance-based simulation of a word processor or a concurrent test that uses a real word-processing program are based on a perfect or near-perfect construct. A test can also be based on an overall construct. For example, a college entrance exam that tests vocabulary and mathematical knowledge is built on the construct that these two skills are an accurate predictor of success in higher education.
- **Criterion validity:** Proof that the overall test accurately correlates with some other independent measure. For example, one can assess a test taker's on-the-job performance with a spreadsheet program one month after he or she has taken a test on that subject and seeing if test scores accurately predicted job performance. This type of criterion validation method is known as **predictive** validation. Alternatively, a test can be administered to people whose job skill is already known and test scores can be correlated with an independent measure of those skills. This type of criterion validation is known as **concurrent** validation.

Most companies providing tests or testing services sell assessments that are valid based on one or more of these validation guidelines. Organizations creating assessments for internal purposes should at least ensure content validity by having custom assessments vetted by subject matter experts, ideally under the guidance of an industrial psychologist or other test-development professional.

Rule #5: Use scoring information appropriately and wisely

Testing is rarely the sole basis upon which hiring or any other organizational decisions are made. If assessment is part of a candidate-screening program, HR professionals should take care in ensuring that test results are integrated into other parts of the hiring or employee review process (such as interviews, resume review and reference checks) to create an overall profile of a job candidate. Some assessment instruments can help guide other parts of the candidate-review process. For example, some psychological assessments for attitude and aptitude will generate suggestions for interview questions based on a candidate's response to items in a personality survey style assessment.

Rule #6: Implement testing in a non-discriminatory manner

When used appropriately, assessments can provide objective information upon which to make hiring and other organizational decisions, which can protect an organization from accusations of discrimination against protected groups. The US Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC - <http://www.eeoc.gov/>) provides detailed guidelines for how to implement a non-discriminatory assessment process. In addition to asking employers to utilize valid assessment instruments (see Lesson #5), the guidelines also specify other important steps employers should take when utilizing testing as a means to screen candidates. These include:

- Ensuring that testing is provided to candidates consistently (i.e., making sure candidates whose test scores will be compared are taking the same tests in the same environment)
- Providing proper proctoring, including consistent instructions to candidates as to how to take a particular test and monitoring against cheating and other abuses
- Integrating assessment into an overall hiring process so that no single assessment will serve as the sole basis of a hiring decision

With regard to testing, the barrier to proving discrimination is relatively high. One must first show a statistically significant discriminatory outcome against a certain protected group based on race, age and gender, and then prove that a test or set of tests is specifically responsible for that outcome. Still, employers should be familiar with relevant EEOC guidelines to ensure fairness in all organizational decisions.

Rule #7: Take advantage of the latest testing technology

Advanced testing technology makes assessment easier and more effective than ever before. *Adaptive testing*, for example, is a dynamic form of testing that asks a candidate a more difficult question each time they answer a question correctly, or asks them an easier question each time they answer a question incorrectly. This provides the maximum amount of information about a candidate's skill level in the shortest amount of time.

Training organizations make use of *bin-based testing* that randomly draw items from a large pools to create a unique assessment each time a test is launched. This technology is particularly useful when preparing candidates for standardized tests or certifications where comprehensive testing on hundreds or thousands of potential subjects becomes time prohibitive.

Some systems also allow test administrators to launch single tests or test batteries that are pre-configured to test most or all of the KSAs required for a single job, integrating results on multiple job-related knowledge, skills and abilities into a single "candidate profile" report.

Finally, Internet-based test delivery systems allow testing to take place in any location, and many employers are making use of at-home testing as a pre-screen, particularly for delivery of low-stakes assessments, or personality profiling assessments which cannot be "cheated" in the same way as tests on knowledge or skills can be.

Employers who follow these seven simple rules of testing will find their skills and behavioral assessment program an invaluable part of their overall organizational development effort.

If you would like more information on how to implement a skills or behavioral assessment program, please call SkillCheck at 800-648-3166 or send an email to sales@skillcheck.com

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