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Tools & Techniques for Staffing & Recruiting

supplier focus:
Testing and Assessment

By Jeff Reeder

Testing and “Soft” Assessments Up, and Increasingly Online

Testing has now become a must-have for most staffing firms, both to match the right candidates and because of client demand. Indeed, in general, workplace assessments are on the rise — 68 percent of employers engage in various forms of job skill testing, and 29 percent use some form of psychological measurement or assessment, according to a survey by the American Management Association.

As staffing firms become more sophisticated in their use of tests, vendors told us they are expanding their tests to include soft-skills assessments, and looking at testing as one part of the whole applicant tracking process. Here follows a list of trends in the testing sphere.

Trends Drive Technology

This last point is one that Jon Haber, a long-time testing guru whose company, SkillCheck, is now part of First Advantage, is quick to make. “The biggest trends we are seeing are firms reviewing their





entire intake process and seeing how not just assessment, but all of their processes, can be made more efficient and effective.”

This overview goes hand in hand with technology. “Technology is fueling many of these trends,” notes Haber. “With online recruiting via job boards, online applications and remote testing, staffing firms have the ability to push much of the recruiting activity that used to take place in the office to the candidate’s home. However, they also have to balance this with the benefits of having a candidate spend time in their office to build a relationship.”

This can also have an effect on a staffing firm’s ability to retain contractors. “In an age when so much of the screening process can be virtual, it’s an open question how to establish loyalty between an employee and a staffing firm when the employee may be applying online to dozens of firms at the same time online.” Perhaps a healthy mix of online screening and in-house interviewing is best.

But whether in-house or off-site, the focus on the intake process has led firms to examine their testing systems.

“The need to streamline the intake process has focused attention on testing, which studies have shown to take up more than half the time of a candidate’s time in a staffing office,” continues Haber. “Many of the issues we identified as being part of ‘Third Wave Testing’ (including testing that takes advantage of time-saving techniques like adaptive and remote testing) are being scrutinized as part of this process.”

Time can be saved by having candidates test off-site, and to use online or adaptive tests. Still, many staffing firms apparently believe that in-house testing works best. Says Haber, “I don’t have data on how much testing is taking place in person vs. Internet, although sales of software vs. Internet are still around 50:50, indicating that a substantial amount of testing is still being done in the office on standalone PCs and networks.”

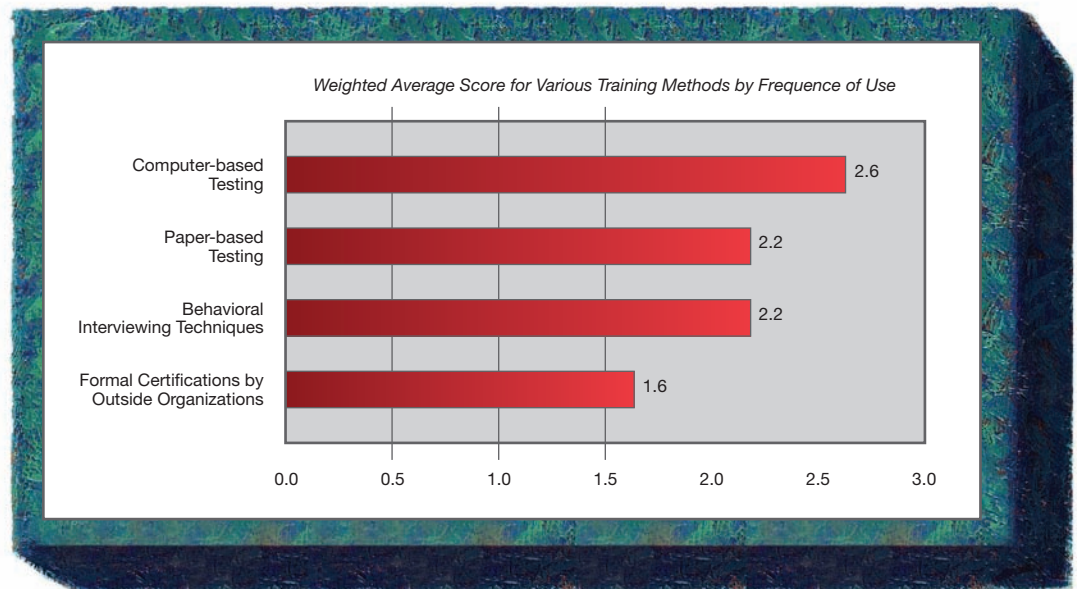
Reid Klion, noted psychologist and chief science officer of pan, a division of TALX has a slightly different perspective. “We are seeing an increasing interest in Web-based assessment because of its efficiency



Top Testing Method of Staffing Firms for Temporary Employees: Computer-Based Testing

■ Responses to the question – Rate the following methods on a scale of 1 to 4 in terms of how often your organization uses them for testing your temporary employees' skills and abilities: Always Use=4, Frequently Use=3, Occasionally Use=2, Never Use=1.

■ 52% of staffing firms always or frequently use computer-based testing. Formal certification of temporary employees is only occasionally required.



This proprietary information from Staffing Industry Analysts' Staffing Industry Benchmarking Consortium (SIBC) shows that while computer-based testing is still the preferred method of testing, many are using behavioral interviewing techniques first – in fact, this method is tied with paper-based testing. No doubt many firms are using multiple methods to test.

Moreover, more than half of firms are always or frequently using computer-based testing. Look for this number to go up as the Internet makes online testing ubiquitous. **SI**

and the increasing need for computer-based skills in the workplace.”

Assessments and Soft Skills Up

Perhaps the biggest buzz over the last few years in the testing industry is so-called personality or behavioral testing. As this has taken place in the HR/Corporate world, it is mirrored in the staffing industry as well.

“There has been significant uptake in the use of these types of testing instruments by staffing,” says Haber of First Advantage. “This reflects

trends in corporate HR which makes much more use of behavioral testing than skills testing.”

For example, a client company may ask its top salesperson to take a personality assessment test, and those traits may serve as benchmarks for the staffing firm when looking at other candidates.

What is behind the rise in this type of test? Concludes Haber, “The reason for this, which staffing firms are also discovering, is a recognition that while skills can be gained and knowledge learned, behavioral traits are more fixed

and need to be understood before making a hiring or placement decision.”

Klion says his firm sees a lot of demand from several commercial groups, including both computer skills and mechanical ability (in manufacturing situations). But does he see a rise in “soft skills” or behavioral assessment as well?

“Very much so,” he says, “and this spans the range from entry-level to sales to executive-level positions. For entry-level positions, there is significant interest in attitudes toward work (i.e., rule compliance, attendance) as well as toward customer service. The latter is of particular interest to employers who need to hire a large number of entry ‘customer-facing’ employees.”

He continues, “Employers are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of hiring employees who have positive attitudes toward interacting with customers. For sales personnel, there are a number of assessment tools that are useful for selecting those individuals who are likely to be successful in these positions. For executives, there is continued interest in the assessment of leadership ability.”

But Haber sees such testing as growing more slowly in the staffing realm. He notes, “Other abilities normally covered under the term ‘soft skills’ including writing ability, communication skill, interpersonal skills, etc. are tested less within staffing. This is largely because good measures for these types of skills are difficult to automate, and recruiters may not have the time and experience to use assessment tools (which are often manual) to measure

these skills except for higher-level positions such as sales and management.”

As far as assessment trends, Haber says, “An interesting trend in HR is the integration of assessment into the applicant tracking process that takes place via job boards or in-store kiosks. This is starting to be used by staffing firms, but the trend is really accelerating in HR, blurring the distinction between assessments, applicant tracking systems, job boards and other hiring technologies.”

Who knows what the future holds, but with a blend of technology, applicant tracking, testing and assessment, staffing firms of the future may well use a one-stop shop for all assessment and candidate tracking needs.



Especially in these days of online testing, assessment and testing is only one part of the process. Reference checking and on-site interviews must remain crucial parts of a screening process.

A Legal Note

Staffing firms should also be aware of the legal implications of any test, whether a skills test or an assessment. Most professional assessments, such as those used by most staffing firms, are regulated by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. And companies have to use them fairly and equally across the board.

Cautions Klion, "It is critical that any testing program be used fairly and consistently. Assessment procedures must be used consistently with all applicants. Employers also need to be sure that the assessments they are using are measuring skills and characteristics that are job-related. That is, the skills that are being tested need to have direct relevance to the job at hand. For example, a test of mechanical ability is likely to be job-related for assembly line workers but most probably not for secretarial staff."

The good news here, however, is that since staffing firms are most often seeking specific candidate types and skills, they

are unlikely to apply an irrelevant test.

Says Haber, "As ever, staffing firms should continue to follow EEOC guidelines and make use of tests that are professionally developed and validated, test candidates consistently and make sure that their hiring process as a whole does not suffer from any form of discrimination."

He continues, "...testing companies must continue to adhere to the highest standards in test development, and staffing firms must continue to monitor all aspects of their screening process and make sure there are no discriminatory outcomes to their hiring process overall."

Advice for Staffing Firms

Suppliers say that staffing firms, besides needing to be aware of the legalities of testing, need to have an integrated plan when it comes to programs.

Haber exhorts, "Stop approaching testing as though we were still in the 1980s when all anyone cared about was high test scores and whether or not

your testing system covered the latest version of Multimate. The way most staffing firms still approach testing – sending everyone through inconsistent batteries of tests based on how much time the candidate can stand being in front of the computer, and caring more about high scores than accurate ones – is looking as dated today as the haircuts on 'The Facts of Life' reruns."

He stresses, "Testing is part of an intake process that chews up much of the time and resource in the day-to-day operation of a staffing company. Firms owe it to their job candidates and their bottom lines to apply the latest technologies and techniques to making the screening process as efficient and accurate as possible."

Also, staffing firms would do well to remember that, especially in these days of online testing, assessment and testing is only one part of the process. Reference checking and on-site interviews must remain crucial parts of a screening process. **SI**

For a comprehensive list of testing and assessment suppliers to the industry, please go to our Web site and the supplier directory at: http://www.staffingindustry.com/supplier_directory/.

For more information on First Advantage's Assessment Solutions, visit www.FADVassessments.com or call 800-648-3166