



Screening and skills testing

Written by Lauren Mackelden, Online recruitment magazine

Advanced screening and skills testing capabilities enable employers to concentrate on the best quality candidates at interview, say our correspondents. They also save time and money and hence are increasingly used as an integral part of the recruitment process.

Felix Stroud-Allen, from FADV says: "Online assessment is a popular and highly effective form of employment screening. Employers use online testing to measure a job candidate's knowledge, skills and abilities to determine whether they will be successful on the job. Knowledge and skills are measured using objective assessments (tests with right and wrong answers), while abilities are measured using behavioural assessments, mostly psychometrically validated self surveys that gauge behavioural traits such as dependability, attitudes towards illegal drugs or rules compliance. Once a standalone screening tool, over the past several years, assessments have been increasingly integrated into HR systems such as applicant tracking or learning management. In the case of applicant tracking systems (ATS), assessments are used to screen candidates during the data collection phase of the process, so that recruiters have a fuller picture of a candidate before moving onto more expensive "high-touch" steps such as interviews or reference checks. More than half of employers use some kind of assessment in their hiring processes, although the specific tools being used varies widely and only a small percentage of assessment users have integrated online assessment into other HRIS systems and processes."

Jane Owen, Sales Manager at Kenexa Prove It! says they have over 900 tests, so the tra-

ditional idea that you only test for typing speeds is long gone, companies now want to test for a wide variety of roles including call centre, IT, financial, legal and technical roles and at all levels. She explains: "For an employer, online testing involves logging onto a website, selecting tests from a wide range of subjects and then deciding on how and where you want the candidate to take the test. The best online testing systems will let you choose from a variety of methods: either sent to the candidate by email or administered in an office during the interview process or as part of an assessment centre with multi candidates. All skills testing systems should have a repository for the score reports and this should be searchable and compatible with Excel so that management information can be manipulated at both a user and group level."

Online screening and applicant tracking has a critical role to play in effective recruitment processes on a global scale, not only from the perspective of the prospective employer, but also the jobseeker, asserts Tim Richards, Managing Director of Bond UK. Appropriate and measured screening questions can cut huge swathes of irrelevant applications that would otherwise swallow up large portions of administrative time from the recruitment teams and can afford a candidate a wider appreciation of the prerequisites to a vacancy before an unsuitable application is offered. Screening allows recruiters to determine the fit of the candidate before the application is even fully submitted by utilising questions that are prerequisites for a successful CV submission. Questions can ensure, in the broadest sense, that applicants hold valid work permits or are UK citizens, or can be used to ensure that finite job

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requirements are fulfilled such as certain years' worth of experience, specific qualifications or competencies and even geographical location. By implementing these fail-safes, recruiters are able to devote more time to actually processing candidates that fulfil the criteria, rather than filtering through irrelevant CVs.

Of course, the advantages are reflected on the other side of the job vacancy – with the applicant. Given a clearer appreciation of the requirements of the position up front, jobseekers are able to assess the vacancies for which they are best suited or hold the most appropriate skill set for, without having to apply to many varying openings with hopeful even tentative applications. Indeed, unsuccessful applicants are often left uncertain as to their success for many weeks while the recruitment team concentrates on the more appropriate candidates. When they are finally notified that their application was unsuccessful, the delay has inadvertently prevented the applicant from moving on to the next job opportunity, waiting in vain having unwittingly submitted an unsuitable CV.

The necessity and utility of screening is fundamentally the same across all industries and companies, however, individual vacancies differ dramatically and so the software that powers these screening questions has to have a remarkable level of flexibility. It must allow the recruitment team to set the screening to handle any of their multiple varying positions. For example, an airline may have vacancies for cabin crew, pilots, ground staff and administrative staff, all of whom require a different must-have skill set,

whether that may be customer service experience or a certain number of flying hours in a particular aircraft. The need for screening remains, it is only the specific filters that change. Further flexibility is essential when screening is deployed on a global scale. The legislative employment obligations that are placed upon companies vary wildly from one nation to another. In one country, it may be perfectly permissible to filter out candidates outside of a set age bracket, whilst in another this would be firm grounds for discrimination."

Fast and effective testing

Felix Stroud-Allen says: "Unlike other forms of employment screening, assessments offer an objective measure that has been specifically designed to correlate to job performance and be free from subjectivity or bias. Research has shown that assessment results correlate to job success 2-4 times more strongly than interviews. This does not eliminate the need for interviews. But assessment-generated information can guide the conversation and enable a recruiter to spend more time exploring issues specific to an individual candidate. As The Test Factory's Client Services Manager, Lizzie Withington says: "One of our clients has reduced interviews of technical candidates by 90% by testing skills prior to interview. This has meant more hires, by focusing efforts on the right individuals." Another plus is that Jane Owen says an average test takes around 15 minutes to complete and is a fraction of the overall cost of recruitment. As she says: "You only need to watch a recent episode of the Apprentice to know that even the best candidates may have lied on their CVs! Candidates like taking online tests; they can take them in their own time and at their own desks. In today's job market candidates make valued judgments about which employer they want to work for and expect to be tested during the process; they will appreciate that a company who offers a sophisticated testing method is investing in them. Prove It!"

More integration in the future

Felix Stroud-Allen sees the future is in integrated systems: "The pace of testing moving from a standalone process to an integrated component of an integrated, automated, comprehensive screening process has been accelerating over the past two years. While this is still new for many companies, it's clear that the trend is towards (1) moving a majority of testing from proctored facilities to remote testing via the Internet and (2) viewing testing as a critical piece of a larger integrated process. The speed of this change has been striking, even if there is a long way to go before integrated assessment is fully

optimized within HRIS. We've also noted a convergence between the staffing industry (temporary staffing) which screens all of its candidates for skills, but still performs little behavioural testing and HR which has invested heavily in behavioural assessment over the last three decades, but is just now adding testing on skills and knowledge to the mix. As time goes on, we expect to see single, unified assessments that measure knowledge, skills and abilities integrated into a single, time-optimized assessment delivered seamlessly through an online application process, powered by Applicant Tracking and other software. The pieces are in place, but we vendors (assessment and HRIS) have to work together to "close the circle" and bring the full capability of our tools to our clients, which we have to think of as consisting of both recruiters AND job candidates. Recruiters deserve to have lots of information, well organized and in one place. And candidates (whose needs are often ignored when systems are put in place) deserve an application experience that is efficient, enjoyable and responsive."

"This time last year it was often just large organisation's graduate schemes that warranted online tests to be built," according to The Test Factory's Managing Director Kevin Beales. "As authoring tools such as The Test Factory have developed, anyone can now create and issue tests in minutes." He says companies like his now enable tests to be taken directly from jobs boards. "Recruiters now simply add a link onto an online jobs advert and can assess candidates with the right skills for each role before they have even reviewed a CV. Over the next 12 months I believe that we will start to see skills test results used by recruitment consultancies, jobs boards and CV libraries to offer clients the best candidates."

Now companies are used to testing, they are finding many more applications. Jane Owen says: "One of the innovations that we have seen in the last year is that as many companies are now using online skills tests for assessing existing employees as they are for assessing new candidates, particularly in regard to the levels of IT skills which exist within the organization. It makes sense that if you are gaining a competitive edge by bringing in new recruits with these skills you should look to upskill the existing workforce. We have also seen an increase in the number of companies who are keen to differentiate themselves, firstly by branding their skills testing site with their corporate logos to match the look and feel of their websites and secondly by using our Make Your Own module to create bespoke tests which are unique to their organization." In the future, they also expect growth in the European market and

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WCN clients use online tests to assess a candidate's ability in a given domain, such as numeric and/or verbal reasoning, and literacy in MS Office tools, or to gauge their suitability to a position requiring specific skills, such as data entry or data checking. Online questionnaires are also used to evaluate how candidates may react in a given situation and hence assess their suitability and fit. Such questionnaires may be used for screening or to allow candidates to assess their own suitability. For example, at Barclaycard candidates applying for a call centre role are provided with a realistic job preview (RJP).

These questionnaires are designed to give candidates a clear understanding of the typical tasks they may face within the organisation in the role they are applying for. RJP's are also used in public sector recruitment by organisations like HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC), who recruit people into specialist roles such as Anti-Smuggling Officers or Tax Inspectors.

Normally, RJP's are followed by factual biographic pre-screening which tests things like candidates' right to work in the UK, educational qualifications, work experience or nationality. For example, candidates applying for jobs with the police are asked whether they hold a criminal record, if they have any visible tattoos, or whether they have been bankrupt. This type of screening saves time and money to the employers as it automatically eliminates unsuitable candidates. Most organisations use these types of questions to filter out unsuitable candidates who are applying online. Sometimes, as with the National Audit Office, candidates with mitigating circumstances may be permitted to continue with their application.

WCN say that they have found that online testing can increase the consistency and efficiency of the recruitment process and, by enhancing its effectiveness and thus the quality of recruits, it can help drive improvements in the overall business performance. So, in the future candidates can look forward to an increasingly seamless integration of such tests into the recruitment process, and as budgets tighten, we can expect screening and skills testing to become even more appealing to employers.

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