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SYCHOLOGICAL assessment is often used in recruitment to measure behavioural characteristics, preferences and aptitude for predicted job performance. Personality and temperament tools uncover the traits and behaviours that individuals may attempt to conceal.

However, research indicates that many of the commonly used psychometric tools are unlikely to produce data that uncovers the unconscious values and ethics of prospective employees. And, of course, values and ethics are important. They are not tender, fuzzy attributes that make for a pleasant environment, but essential determinants of business performance.

Values and ethics are arguably the most significant determinant of suitability for a job, and also the most difficult to gauge. Every organisation needs employees who genuinely value integrity, tolerance, cooperation, safety, quality, innovation and so on—and almost every employee will tell you that they have these values. Either the universe is replete with wonderful individuals, or some job applicants are twisting the truth.

Consultants, HR professionals, psychologists and managers all recognise that values are significant, but few appreciate their broad implications. Employees who genuinely value cooperation and camaraderie are more collaborative and cohesive, and research has demonstrated that they are also more likely to propose novel, effective suggestions and thus foster innovation.

Conversely, employees who significantly value material possessions are not only more likely to feel aggrieved if their salary is modest, they are also less inclined to exhibit enthusiasm and inspiration at work.

In other words, employees' values and ethics govern a broad spectrum of behaviours and outcomes, including innovation and productivity.

THE TECHNIQUES that recruiters and allied professionals apply to gauge the values of applicants are unsound. Many applicants might assert that integrity is more important than reward, or that cooperation is more important than personal success, but there are several unrecognised obstacles to recruiters identifying the distortion.



Untwisting the truth

Research has come up with a range of new ways to assess job applicants' true values, as opposed to their acting ability and delusions.

By Christopher J Shen

Firstly, recruiters demonstrate a truth bias by being more likely to perceive any statement as accurate.

According to some research, misleading claims are especially likely to be trusted if the job applicant has large eyes, thick lips, thin eyebrows and a narrow jaw line. These features, typical in children, stimulate unconscious images of purity and probity. In addition, such assertions are more likely to be trusted if the candidate speaks rapidly and illustrates their contentions with hand movements.

Contrary to popular opinion, these shortfalls in judgment don't dissipate but tend to be amplified with experience. Experienced recruiters often trust their intuition and become even more susceptible to biases.

Likewise, this difficulty persists when the recruiter uses a psychometric instrument that purports to uncover dishonesty. In most instances, these instruments are not advanced enough to identify people who exaggerate their qualities habitually.

Studies suggest that applicants who effectively inflate their attributes to superiors and recruiters are more likely to exhibit contempt towards their peers and subordinates.

Secondly, even if deliberate distortion could be prevented, it is futile to use many of the techniques that measure values. Job applicants who genuinely value safety, diversity and camaraderie in one context often relinquish these principles in stressful circumstances. Few job applicants can accurately predict their values in demanding contexts.

Similarly, research shows that sociable and assertive job applicants—attributes that recruiters often crave for—tend to misconstrue their own values. Many inadvertently overestimate the extent to which they are supportive, sincere, tolerant and innovative. Applicants who portray themselves as ethical, and perceive themselves as ethical, often do not behave honourably in the workplace.

Thirdly, many of the values that recruiters and managers covet are actually destructive. For example, ambitious, competitive applicants are almost universally preferred to their rivals, but they are more likely to become deflated and even lethargic after a failure or criticism.

MANY OF these obstacles have been redressed by recent advances. Specifically, psychologists have discovered several revolutionary techniques to gauge bona-fide values. They gauge the behaviours, beliefs, interests and demographics of job applicants that might not be expected to correlate with their values and ethics.

To illustrate, research suggests that job applicants who become especially excited when they receive rewards are less likely to value rules and regulations. Hence, recruiters can partly decipher the extent to which applicants will value rules and regulations from whether or not they demonstrate excitement when they experience a triumph.

Likewise, studies indicate that job applicants who frequently use words that emphasise exclusion (“but”, “without”, “except”) as well as uncertainty (“perhaps”, “maybe”) are less likely to value career success and enjoy social interactions. So the words applicants use also offer some insight into their values.

A plethora of other characteristics, including music preferences, birth order, family relations and beliefs, also coincide with specific values. Recent research by Dr Simon Moss, senior lecturer in psychology at Monash University, has uncovered over 200 characteristics that can be gauged to help identify job applicants' underlying values.

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