

# Testing the test

Enthusiasts argue psychometric testing is essential for hiring, but critics still question its worth. The conclusion might lie with which test you choose, writes Sarah O'Carroll

Personality tests were developed by the American army in 1917 as a way to weed out recruits who couldn't stand the stress of battle. They soon became a common method to assess the ability and personality of CEOs and other high level executives. Today, they're used across the board.

According to Stephen Kohl, senior lecturer at the University of Queensland, and managing director of Genesys, the main reason why psychometric testing was not commonplace until recently was due to expense. However, today many affordable online tests are making it an integral part of the recruitment process.

"What you get in psychometric testing compared to what you get with an interview or doing reference checking is that they focus on their skills and their knowledge," says Kohl. "The big benefit of psychometric testing is that it gives you potential."

A lot of companies are now incorporating it into their interview process, including retailers like Myer and throughout the mining industry. So the use of psychometric tests is changing as it's no longer just used for senior managers and financial services.

"Now the breadth of industries and organisations that are using these tests is very significant," says Cherie Curtis, Head of Psychology, Onetest.

## Should the test be the deal breaker in the hiring process?

HR must be careful in how they use these tests because candidates can be quite wary of them, find them stressful and be sensitive to the idea that they've lost a job because of it.

"HR shouldn't make a judgment based purely on psych results," says Kohl. "What they should do is compare those results to the

other information they've got and work out what the problem is, if there is one."

There are often cases where somebody might be going well in the job application process but after doing the test some problems or weaknesses become evident. But Kohl says that employers shouldn't immediately make a decision based on the test.

"What they should do is go to a reference check or find other confirmation that this is genuinely a problem and the person then gets rejected because they are unsuitable for the role," he says.

"If somebody actually acts purely on the psych results they're in a more difficult legal position and would find it hard to defend. Because as much as there is a lot of predictive validity in psych tests, if you use that alone and don't include other information, you're in a trickier position legally."

Curtis also offers advice on how to minimise legal risks when choosing a psychometric test. She says that HR managers should only choose providers that have organisational psychologists within their business who are supporting those products. The reason for this is that they have a professional and ethical obligation to meet the standard and that will safeguard HR both ethically and legally.

"So say for example making sure that the comparison groups is up to date and accurate, that the test is being used in the most appropriate way to ensure the test is relevant to the job," says Curtis. "It's our job as organisational psychologists to ensure they are being used under these guidelines to

safeguard both the candidate and the organisation using it.

All HR managers who are using the test should not only be trained in how to use the results but also in how to interpret the results.

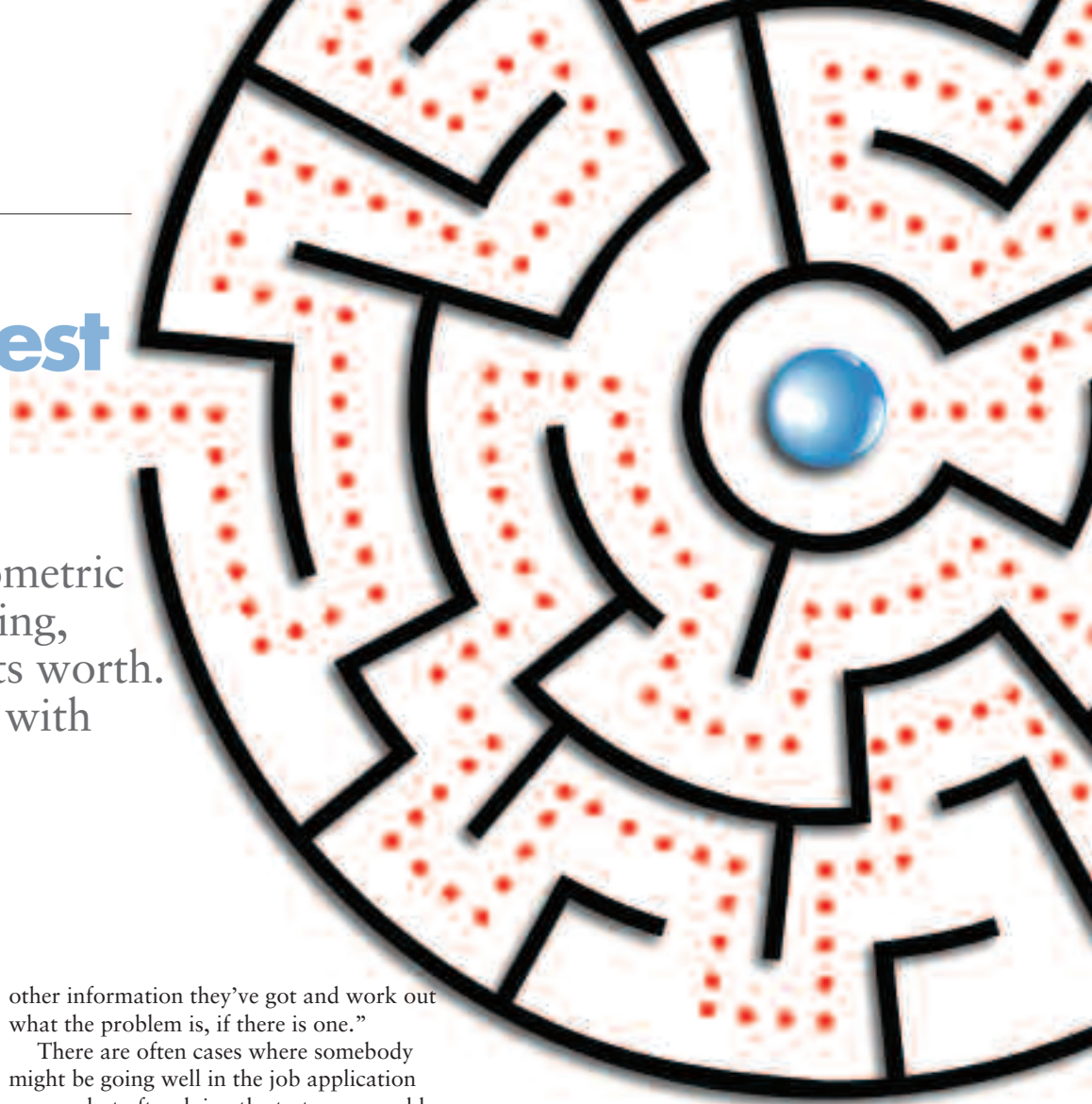
## Choosing the right test

As with everything some tests are more accurate than others and various psychometric tests have varying predictive validity and some are better at predicting performance than others.

It can often be confusing for an HR department when choosing a test because there are so many available, but when choosing one there's some basic criteria for identifying a good test. One way is to ensure the test comes with a technical manual.

"The technical manual should provide you with two really critical pieces of information," says Kohl. "One is the reliability of the test which is basically how accurate it is and whether it will give the same result each time. And the other is the validity of the test which is evidence that this test measures anything that's useful."

If HR is concerned about the reliability of a test there are a couple of good information sources when conducting due diligence. One would be Australian Psychological Society or asking a registered organisational psychologist.



“But if they [a provider] can’t provide a technical manual that would be a concern for me if I was a HR manager,” says Kohl. “So that would eliminate a lot of the tests that are available on the internet because that information is not there and if it’s not there you wouldn’t use it.

“No matter how much you might like the test yourself and think it’s good – if you can’t justify the use of that and present any evidence that it does actually measure what you say it measures then you can’t justify rejecting somebody for a role if that’s part of your process. And you don’t even have to say that’s why you made your decision, but the fact that it’s part of your process means it can be criticised and you can be at risk,” says Kohl.

There have been a number of incidences in the US where candidates have successfully sued employers for discrimination due to their use of psychometric tests. There is nothing to say similar cases will not arise in Australia and according to Kohl HR departments must protect themselves against such incidences occurring.

“Really you don’t want to be the first HR manager that goes to court,” he says. “And there are just some basic procedures that would keep you safe and one of them would be to make sure you wouldn’t reject someone based on psych results, you would use all your information to make a much more balanced decision.”

Kohl says that the one thing HR should never talk about in relation to psych tests is failure. The psych test is just an evaluation of somebody and you can’t fail it. You may fail to be the most suitable person for a particular role

but you can’t actually fail it and that’s one of the most important things for HR to remember.

#### How to prepare for a psych test

Psychometric tests measure something that is fundamental about you so it’s evaluating who you are, what your problem solving ability is like and what your natural behaviour is like. So according to both Kohl and Curtis the way to prepare is to have a good night’s sleep, relax, go into the test and be yourself.

Having said that, if somebody has never done one of these tests before they can be quite anxious. Therefore getting some exposure to tests, do some practice and get familiar with them can help.

“It won’t help get the questions right but it will let you feel more in control and allow you to do your best,” says Kohl.

“It’s measuring your fundamental abilities so you can’t really prepare, it’s something intrinsic – like measuring your height or your eye colour.

“Short term practice probably won’t help much,” he says. “For example in verbal, if you’re always reading books you’ll probably do a bit better than somebody who doesn’t. But if you’re doing a test next week – reading War and Peace between now and then I doubt will make any difference. It’s more a long term thing, and the idea of cramming for it is not a good idea.

“Get familiar, know what the experience is going to be like, be relaxed and be confident about who you are and express yourself as best you can. That’s the best result overall.”



#### TESTING POSITIVE – TIPS ON CHOOSING THE RIGHT TEST

- The provider has an organisational psychologist inhouse
- If they are endorsed by the Australian Psychological Society (APS)
- A local provider so comparison groups are relevant
- Normative data is valid and relevant
- Has a technical manual stating the reliability and the validity of the test

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