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This is getting personal

BY JULIAN KESNER

Agatha Capacchione was 23 and willing to do anything to land a full-time job at fashion house Salvatore Ferragamo - even when asked to complete Talent Plus, a 90-minute telephone personality test.



Hands Schuh NEWS

"They ask you a multitude of questions, and you can't ask them questions back," remembers Capacchione, now a 26-year-old publicist at Missy Farren & Associates. "One of the questions was, 'What's the favorite part of your day?'" They're trying to see how you interpret it."

Agatha Capacchione, now at Missy Farren & Associates, once aced a Talent Plus test for a job at Salvatore Ferragamo.

Capacchione even received a Talent Plus certificate after the session. "You hang it on the wall by your desk," she jokes.

Loaded questions are everywhere these days, with more companies using personality tests in their hiring processes than ever before. The nonprofit Association of Test Publishers (ATP) estimates that such surveying has grown by 10%-15% annually over the last three years, which some consider a conservative estimate.

"Our business has been increasing 30% a year since we got going in the late '80s," says Robert Hogan, Ph.D., president of Florida-based Hogan Assessment Systems. "The last two years, it's actually doubled."

Miscast as a hire authority

Most personality tests are not over the phone but in written or online format, using true/false or yes/no questions, value rankings and more. Arguably the most renowned personality test is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), which categorizes subjects into one of eight psychological "types" based on the theories of the late Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung.

But Myers-Briggs is actually intended only for evaluation of current employees,

not hiring new ones. "CPP has a policy of not endorsing the use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator for use in selection or hiring purposes," says Leah Walling of CPP, Inc., the MBTI's publisher. "We do get very sensitive about MBTI being mentioned in any context of selection."

Health-care human resources executive Erica Kreiswirth, 28, has taken the MBTI twice, once in high school and once at her current job. "The whole H.R. department took it," she recalls. "It was for departmental bonding, and just to get to know everyone's personalities better. I find it accurate for myself, and with different people, as I've gotten to know them, it does explain a lot."

So what tests *can* companies use for hiring? Industry veterans like Hogan admit it can be difficult to wade through all the choices.

"The people in my profession are meatheads," he says bluntly. "There are probably 2,500 test publishers in the United States, and only three or four of them are legitimate. The rest are just peddling snake oil. The definition of 'legitimate' is providing real, verifiable evidence that the scores on the test are associated with performance on the job."

One popular test, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), was recently challenged in the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on another front. The court ruled that the written survey was tantamount to a "medical examination," making it a violation of the Americans With Disabilities Act.

But Michael Stevens, an employment lawyer at the D.C. law firm Arent Fox, cautions that New Yorkers could still be given this survey by current or potential employers - for now. "To my knowledge, there hasn't been a decision by the 2nd Circuit, which is the federal appellate court in which New York is located," he notes, adding that "it would not be unlikely if someone were to challenge [the MMPI in the 2nd Circuit]; there are creative plaintiffs lawyers out there."

Legal issues aside, cost offers an equally big migraine. Prices run from \$50 to \$5,000 per employee, depending on job level and testing volume. That's too pricey for most New York small businesses, which is why employers like Dan Rafalin, co-owner of SoHo restaurant Public, have devised their own testing methods.

Practical approach

"I like to ask situational questions to see how people think on their feet," says Rafalin, who has endured "very little" turnover at Public. "I also like to focus on what they like to do with the food business outside of work."

Rafalin wrote his NYU master's thesis on restaurant hiring practices. "I went to about 25 different restaurants and asked if they had a set of questions for potential employees," he says. "No one does. People just don't take it as seriously but, in the restaurant industry, they should, because there's so much cost involved."

At the other end of the spectrum are corporations that go well beyond surveys and hire Pittsburgh-based DDI International to create workplace role-playing simulations called Assessment Centers.

"It allows you to see the difference between a good talker and good doer," says Bill Byham, Ph.D., DDI's chairman and CEO. "I always think about it as the way of screening out the MBAs who make good grades - they can tell you what they should, but you put them in charge of some people and they're not really good at all."

DDI is putting British athletic coaches through such ringers to help pick coaches for the country's 2012 Olympic team.

If there's one thing everyone agrees on, it's that personality testing should be one of many tools in screening job candidates.

Still, Capacchione's "favorite part" of her day was a bulletproof response.

"I said 'lunch,' " she recalls, "and I got the job."

Quickie quiz

Shane Frederick, a professor at MIT's Sloan School of Management, recently devised a three-question test that he claims is all employers need to assess a potential employee's decision-making capabilities. Tip: Avoid impulsive answers and think them through.

1. A bat and a ball cost \$1.10 in total. The bat costs a dollar more than the ball. How much does the ball cost?
2. If it takes five machines five minutes to make five widgets, how long would it take 100 machines to make 100 widgets?
3. In a lake, there is a patch of lily pads. Every day, the patch doubles in size. If it takes 48 days for the patch to cover the entire lake, how long would it take for the patch to cover half of the lake?

(Answers: 5 cents, 5 minutes, and 47 days)

Four stars

Four personality surveys and tests were described as "reliable" and/or "reputable" by at least two or more of the industry members interviewed for this article. They are, in random order:

Hogan Personality Inventory, from Hogan Assessment Systems (www.hoganassessments.com)

California Psychology Inventory (CPI 260), from CPP Inc. (www.cpp.com)

16 Personality Factors, 5th Ed. (16PF), from Pearson Assessments (www.pearsonassessments.com)

NEO Personality Inventory, Revised (NEO PI-R), from Psychological Assessment Resources (www.parinc.com)

Please note this list is not comprehensive and is offered merely as a sampling.

NYU professor and organizational psychologist Ben Dattner, Ph.D. (www.dattnerconsulting.com) was instrumental in providing test overviews and contact information.

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