

# Testing times

The use of online psychometric testing in recruitment is on the up, says Trevor Merriden, but employers need to be aware of all the pros and cons if they are considering this method

There are still some people around who view psychometric testing with the deepest suspicion. At the extreme edge of the 'doubt spectrum' lie those who believe that psychometrics is a sort of pseudo-science of limited help to the important business of recruitment. Much more common, however, is a mild caution with which employers and employees alike approach the subject. The caution is understandable but there are strong forces underpinning the growth of psychometric testing and, in particular, its use online.

The biggest of these, unsurprisingly, is the cost of hiring. The increased profile of the HR profession in recent years has had much to do with spreading tentacles of employment law and the subsequent expense of time and money in getting rid of unsuitable staff. Then there's the cost of staff you don't want to leave, but who invariably do. According to the CIPD it takes £10,000 and four months to fill a senior post these days. The increased cost in terms of both money and time has become a concern for business leaders and HR departments. Consequently, far more attention has been placed on the need for organisations to make sure that they are at least hiring the right people in the first place, without breaking the bank.

## The state of the market

The testing market as a whole is certainly on the up. In 2006, the CIPD estimated that the percentage of businesses using tests for specific skills, general ability, literacy/numeracy and personality or aptitude was significantly up on the previous year. Within the bigger picture, there has been a big increase in psychometric testing, particularly

## Remind me again about... psychometric tests

The term 'psychometric' testing is often interchanged with 'occupational' testing or 'psychological' testing. The tests, which are systematically scored and administered, are used to measure individual differences (for example in personality, aptitude, ability, attainment or intelligence).

Tests are used for a number of purposes, but the most common is in recruiting individuals into an organisation. The method has been around for more than 50 years, but there has been a significant rise in test use in the last decade. As the use of psychometric testing software has spread and the selection

process becomes ever more complicated, testing has assumed a more and more prominent role for a number of organisations. General ability assessments, for example, are carried out in 40% of the UK organisations surveyed while personality assessments occur in 36%.

Most tests are designed and developed by occupational psychologists and the information gained allows employers to compare their candidates against the scores of a 'normal' population of similar people.

Source: CIPD

those online, says Ali Gill, founder and managing director of Getfeedback. 'It's been a while in coming but there has been noticeable pick-up in the amount of testing in the past year. We are getting closer to the tipping point.' In 12 months' time, she thinks, the use of psychometric testing for many organisations will become more mainstream. At that point, she says, 'it will start to be unacceptable for an organisation not to do some form of online psychometric testing'.

John Hackston, managing consultant, research and development at OPP, agrees with Gill on this point. OPP has found a big pick-up in psychometrics online. Clients are demanding increasing ease of access and because of its client base there is an international dimension with similar psychometric tests being applied across different countries and in different languages.

There is also a big emphasis now, Gill and Hackston agree, on shorter tests than used to be the case. Hackston says: 'Generally speaking, more questions would imply a greater reliability of test

results but there is an impatience on the part of the clients administering the tests to get results quickly and of course a general impatience among those completing the tests.' Although you might argue that those who really want the job would take the time to do the test, a slow laborious test can only reflect badly on the employer.

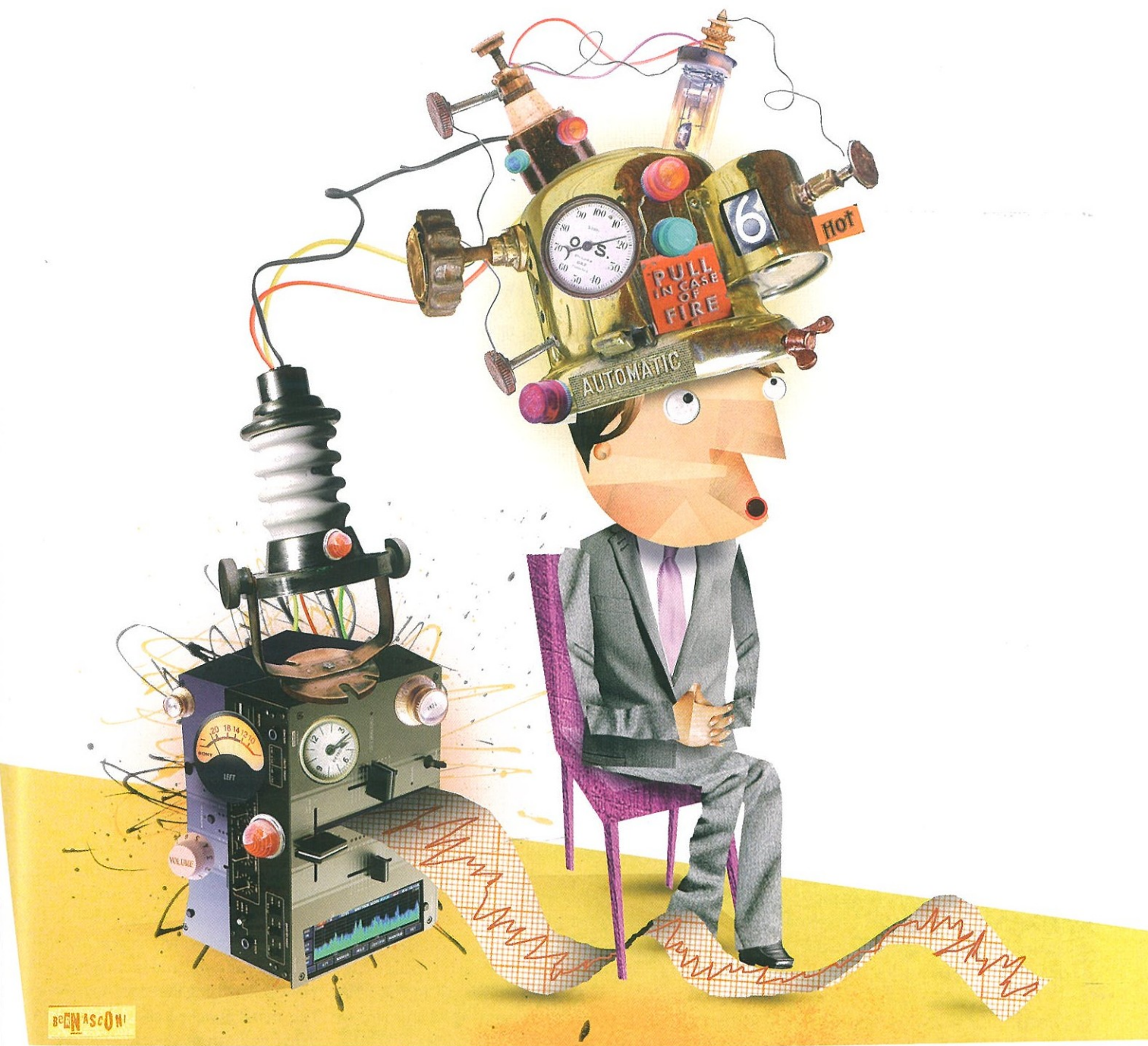
## Is testing for you?

Even if your business is one of those thinking about introducing or increasing psychometric testing, there are important things to think about before getting involved, say the experts. The first of these, in the opinion of Richard Alberg, chief executive of PSL, is to ask yourself whether you just want a standalone test or have it integrated with a bigger recruitment offering. He likens it to the way the customer sees a credit card transaction. 'To the customer it seems seamless. You put your card in, key in your PIN and walk away with your petrol or whatever. But to the vendor, there's the issue of the technology, the software, and the relationship with

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## Superdrug **Nine personality traits**

Superdrug has been through significant change in recent years. There's been a store rebranding and expansion programme. But what it needed to do was to get suitable store managers in place to make the most of its infrastructural development. In the past, recruitment to this role was done through agencies, internal notices or the local press. But in 2004 Superdrug introduced an online recruitment system. It was popular – too much so, with 40,000 applications for its store manager positions at the time.

So Superdrug approached PSL, who recommended **the use of a personality questionnaire to help them sift candidates to find their ideal 'extroverts with an eye for detail as well as passion'**, according to Caroline Shine, regional HR manager at Superdrug. PSL interviewed over 200 store, area and HR managers and produced a bespoke questionnaire for the company.

Delivered online, the questionnaire comprises nine personality tests, including openness to

change, leadership, influence, people focus, detail and quality focus and resilience. What comes back to the company is a four-page colour-coded report that gives a breakdown of competencies and a list of probing questions to be asked in a subsequent interview. Says Shine: 'These questions really help the area managers to conduct more in-depth interviews because they are not questions you would immediately think to ask and this ensures that they home in on exactly the right areas.'



## Things to consider

- Is it appropriate to use a psychometric test at all?
- Will it provide any additional relevant information?
- Are there sufficient resources to justify its use?
- Are tests relevant to the job/person specification?
- At what stage should tests be incorporated into the decision-making process?
- How will the results be used?
- What weight will be given to the tests when it comes to decision-making?
- What will the policy be on confidentiality?
- What will the policy be for giving feedback?
- How and where will test results be stored?

Source: Adapted from CIPD

the suppliers of these, not to mention the credit card. The client needs to think about whether they really do mean psychometrics and nothing much else.

Hackston agrees that one has to look at the bigger recruitment picture: 'You have to realise that psychometric testing is a solution to a particular recruitment issue and not an end in itself. There is a tendency sometimes to use things with enthusiasm before you know what you are using them for.' When it comes to recruitment, he adds, there needs to be clear evidence that psychometric testing is a consistently good way to predict the workplace performance of the candidate.

Cary Cooper, professor of organisational psychology and health, Lancaster University, has some sobering advice on this score: 'What is scaring some HR

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people is a tendency to overplay the role of psychometrics in recruitment assessment. No one in their right mind should think that it is the whole answer, but it is certainly part of the answer. It would be stupid not to use it as part of some wider assessment centre that also involved individual and group interviews and when it's appropriate, some sort of practical tests, but I would also be stupid to use it on its own.' No one has invented a test that is 80%-90% predictable of performance by itself, says Cooper: 'Until that happens, it will always be part of a wider set of testing procedures.'

The one thing you don't do with psychometric testing, therefore, is to simply choose for the job the man or woman who comes outtop. It's not necessary to pick the best but just to rule out those who fall below a certain standard. 'There is no doubt,' says Cooper, 'that the more different ways there are to measure a candidate the more effective the whole recruitment process will be.'

Then there is the 'psychometrics as a cultural filter' concern, where testing is seen as merely restricting employers to the most 'right thinking', cloned employees. After all, we must all have worked with mavericks who are brilliant at their jobs but unconventional in other aspects of their social behaviour. In the process of looking for wider cultural values and 'our sort of people' through psychometric testing, it may be that good candidates with specialist characteristics and skills will be overlooked.

The cloning question becomes even more important when you look at the difference in employee suitability for specific roles. In testing for broader cultural values, you can start to miss the specific skills that may be required in a particular department of a business.

Take, for example, a sales department and an R&D department. At the risk of generalising, the latter is really cautious and analytical and wants to prove everything, while the former is keener

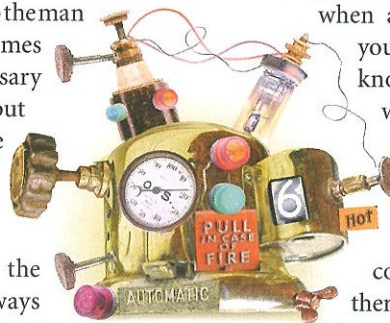
on taking risks and making grandiose claims. Hackston admits that this sort of cultural cloning is a danger but only if you don't control the process in the right way. 'Psychometric testing,' he maintains, 'can be a powerful method of recruitment but only if you know what you are looking for.'

## Awkward questions for suppliers

What are the awkward questions that you should be asking one's psychometrics supplier. Ali Gill has one: 'The one we get quite a lot is: "How does one test compare with another?" It's not an easy question to answer. We won't rubbish another supplier's test but you do need when answering to show yourself as sufficiently knowledgeable about what's out there, and a lot of psychologists themselves aren't.' At a recent conference Gill discovered that while there were around 1000 types of psychometric tests on the market, psychologists themselves struggled to name more than about 15 or 20 of them.

All of those suppliers we spoke to agreed that one crucial question was to ask whether the online psychometric testing tool has the approval of the British Psychological Society (BPS). Its standards are widely accepted, with testing vendors independently reviewed. Anything that does not have its kite mark attached should set alarm bells ringing immediately.

Another area of concern for clients is the extent to which they need to get their hands dirty in administering and interpreting the tests. The question, 'What training do I need?', is a familiar refrain. 'If you are told that there is no need for training,' says Hackston, 'then you should be worried.' The in-house person responsible for monitoring the tests doesn't need to be an expert, but should be prepared to ask questions about the validity and reliability of the tests and the significance of results. This will involve some basic understanding, even if the interface is easy to use. ■



## Questions to ask your test suppliers

Before selecting a test to use, businesses should ensure they receive satisfactory answers from the test suppliers to the following questions. If the answers are not available or are unsatisfactory then the test should not be used:-

- How reliable is the test as a measure?
- Does it really identify the attributes and traits which the supplier claims it does?
- Can suppliers prove that their tests do not unfairly disadvantage certain groups?
- What have been the previous reactions of test-takers?
- Has the test been used effectively in similar circumstances?
- Is the method of scoring appropriate to the purpose for which the test will be used?

Source: CIPD