

Are Workplace Personality Tests Fair?

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Recent *Wall Street Journal* Article Highlights the Need for Qualified Psychologists' Expertise When Organizations Consider Workplace Testing

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Sometimes the only thing trickier than finding the right talent for an organization is deciding how to identify it.

A recently published article by the *Wall Street Journal*, "[Are Workplace Personality Tests Fair? Growing Use of Tests Sparks Scrutiny Amid Questions of Effectiveness and Workplace Discrimination](#)" (Sept. 29, 2014), explores some of the pitfalls organizations can encounter when using personality tests to screen job candidates—and highlights the importance of utilizing qualified testing professionals for such important work.

Three I-O psychologists who are prominent members of SIOP were used as sources for the *Wall Street Journal* article. SIOP discussed the article with them as well as some of the feedback that has come from SIOP members since the article was published.

Based on the large number of organizations using personality tests as well as the number of comments to the article, it is clear that this topic is worthy of further discussion. SIOP believes it is paramount for companies to understand the legal and organizational implications of testing. Workplace tests can be a powerful tool, but they must be created and implemented by qualified professionals in order to reap their benefits.

This is a very complex issue dealing with job analysis, validity, and the ROI of workplace testing. SIOP, as a society that promotes evidence-based management, would like to expand on some of the information put forth in the article.

First, it is important to distinguish between medical—or clinical—personality tests and personality tests that are designed specifically for the workplace.

Clinical personality tests are designed to diagnose mental health conditions whereas workplace personality tests focus on work-related personality characteristics.

"I think the article, including my conversation with the authors, is more critical of clinically oriented personality measures as opposed to measures developed for the workplace," explained SIOP Fellow **Frederick Morgeson**, who was interviewed for the *WSJ* article. "Measures not developed for organizational use, or that come from a more clinically oriented perspective, often have unusual or personally invasive items, much like some of the items discussed in the article. These are questionable from both a legal defensibility and job-relatedness standpoint."

Morgeson, Eli Broad Professor of Management in the Eli Broad College of Business at Michigan State University, said his personal view is that personality assessments are helpful, particularly if they are developed to measure important job-related aspects.

"For example, in a hospital, it is undoubtedly important for nurses to be compassionate and empathetic. These are aspects of personality that a hospital would be advised to measure before hiring nurses," he explained.

The differences between clinical personality tests and workplace personality tests were most recently highlighted in a paper published in SIOP's scientific journal *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*.^{*} SIOP Fellow **Deniz Ones**, a coauthor of the paper, who was also interviewed for the *WSJ* story, notes that employment decisions should be based on work-relevant characteristics, and this includes normal adult personality measures used in work settings.

"Predictive value and usefulness of personality tests are maximized when the personality tests used in assessments distinguish among individuals in the normal range of personality rather than in the medical range," she explained.

When I-O psychologists design workplace personality tests, they are looking for characteristics that are specifically related to the job. These professionals take great pains to ensure they are following the law in regards to protected classes by designing tests that do not have an undue adverse impact on any one group and that do not illegally gather protected information about applicants, such as mental health data that are not pertinent to the job.

Second, it is important to distinguish between *personality* testing and workplace testing as a whole.

Personality tests make up only a portion of workplace testing, which can also include cognitive abilities tests, skills-based tests, and physical aptitude tests, among others. In many instances the *WSJ* article conflates the two, such as when referring to Whole Foods Market Inc., which "stopped using the tests in 2007 after managers noticed that workers who cleared the personality-screening process sometimes lacked basic food-preparation skills." Because a personality test is not a skills test, it makes perfect sense that it would not screen for basic food-preparation ability.

This is precisely why I-O psychologists frequently advise companies to use personality tests in tandem with other tests and screening methods when making hiring decisions.

"One of the challenges in using personality in hiring is figuring out exactly how to best measure personality-oriented information," Morgeson said. "I believe that a combination of assessments focused on the key behaviors underlying a given personality dimension is the best strategy. For example, you could administer a self-report personality test that focused on specific job-related behaviors followed by a structured behavioral interview that would explore and probe around those behaviors. This would be one way to effectively measure personality and job-related competencies that would be organizationally valuable and legally defensible."

Third, it is important to make a distinction between tests bought "off the shelf" or provided by unqualified nonscientists and those created, validated, and performed by highly qualified professionals, such as SIOP's members.

"Just as with any other product, there are professionally sound personality tests and those that are created and marketed by less than scrupulous vendors," explained Ones, who also serves as Hellervik Professor of Industrial Psychology at the University of Minnesota. "The former unfairly bear the brunt of the criticism for the products that are put out by the latter."

The science behind personality tests developed by I-O psychologists is extensive and well-documented in scientific literature. Generally speaking, personality tests are based on what is known as the Big Five Model, which has been extensively researched and for which robust dialogue and study exists today.

I-O psychologists who work in the testing industry are well aware that their tests must be valid and reliable in order to withstand legal scrutiny, if challenged. Tests developed by I-O psychologists undergo intensive research and must meet rigorous standards before being used. In fact, SIOP and the American Psychological Association (APA) have principles that govern the research and practice of I-O psychologists, such as APA's *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* and SIOP's *Principles for the Validation and Use of Personnel Selection Procedures*. SIOP members also rely on guidance from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission when creating tests.

"The distinctions are important, as workplace personality measures cannot be used—and are not useful—in making clinical diagnoses," added Ones. "Per published EEOC guidance, workplace personality tests do not constitute medical exams."

Personality tests are not one size fits all. To be effective, tests should be developed or implemented to meet organizational and job-fit criteria. Many of SIOP's members are hired by organizations to analyze job duties and skill requirements and craft custom tests for the organization's specific needs. Others put together employee staffing systems that utilize well validated, off-the-shelf tests that address work relevant employee characteristics.

A well-prepared, valid test and testing process can also help companies avoid costly legal action and settlements, such those perpetuated by Roland Behm, the retired lawyer who filed the EEOC complaints in the article on behalf of his son. (**Note:** Although it is not mentioned in the *Wall Street Journal's* article, SIOP feels it is important to note that Mr. Behm lists his job title since July 2011 on LinkedIn as "Principal, Alembic Solutions, LLC." This organization is described by him as "an interdisciplinary group of professionals challenging the use of pre-employment personality testing and other elements of workforce science and talent analytics.")

Considering all of this, SIOP sincerely hopes organizations realize the importance of utilizing the proper expertise when developing their workplace testing procedures.

SIOP Member **Ken Lahti**, who also served as a source in the *WSJ* article, said he thinks articles like these help remind I-O professionals that they should strive to use the best science possible when constructing workplace tests.

"I do think we should seek to learn from the feedback that some tools, particularly personality instruments written decades ago, may use language that is not overtly business or workfocused," explained Lahti, who serves as vice president of Product Development and Innovation at CEB. "That opens us up as a field, as assessment professionals, to some common sense criticisms about face validity. These questions may have high construct loadings and may be completely justifiable, but that doesn't mean it is savvy or a good idea on our part to keep them in there."

Lahti said he hopes I-O psychologists will take any criticism in the article in a constructive manner.

"I hope this will push us to be more clever, more thoughtful, more innovative as a field trying to meet both scientific and prediction objectives while also managing applicant and test-user experience a bit better," he added.

If nothing else, the *Wall Street Journal's* article highlights the importance of using the appropriate professionals for workplace testing. I-O psychologists are uniquely qualified to meet this need, and we believe they can help organizations benefit from valid, reliable, legally defensible tests that have been scientifically proven to work.

President **Jose Cortina** encourages members to view the exposure of I-O psychology on such a widely read platform as the *Wall Street Journal* in a positive light.

"While we certainly wish the reporters had taken more time to discuss the documented usefulness of personality testing as well as the painstaking care that qualified I-O psychologists take to ensure such tests are valid, reliable, and legally defensible, I think we should nonetheless be proud that three of SIOP's members were looked to for their expertise in this area and quoted in such a heavily researched cover article," Cortina said.

SIOP continues to work hard to represent I-O and our members to the media, politicians, and the general public so that they are aware of the important contributions I-Os make to organizations, business, and society. This is **not the first**—or the last—time SIOP and I-O may be misunderstood, but there are steps SIOP members can take to help represent I-O in an accurate, positive way:

- **When being interviewed by a reporter, keep in mind they may know very little about the field of I-O psychology.** Reporters often cover a variety of topics and operate on tight deadlines, so they may have very little time to learn what they need to for a story. It is important to speak clearly and avoid jargon or overly technical language that a non-I-O psychologist might not understand. Try to pause frequently when speaking and offer to clarify anything you think the reporter finds confusing.
- **Utilize the educational resources SIOP provides on our website.** Refer the media to the resources on the SIOP Students tab, such as "**What's in a Name?**" "**Psychology at Work**," and our **free webinars**. You will also want to refer them to our **brochures page** for general information about I-O. If you feel that you cannot provide the information the reporter is looking for, we encourage you to refer the reporter to the SIOP Administrative Office, which can be reached at (419) 353-0032.
- **Maintain a respectful demeanor and understand that sometimes mistakes are made.** Even after doing everything you can to be clear and informative, you may find that articles sometimes still contain errors. The reporter may have made an honest mistake or changes may have been made by editors down the line. Sometimes newspapers may edit certain aspects of a story to fall in line with their grammar and style rules. If you find that there is misinformation in an article, contact the reporter and explain the situation in a respectful manner. Legitimate publications want to ensure they are accurate and may print a correction, retraction, or follow-up. Regardless of the response, maintain a professional attitude. It is important for SIOP to nurture positive relationships with the media, and SIOP members are the ambassadors of our brand!

Any media-related questions can also be directed to SIOP Communications Manager Stephany Below at sbelow@siop.org.