



## ***Navigating the maze of psychometrics***

*Cognitive ability is a vital component to the talent management equation. Paul Englert, international director of marketing at Psytech International explains how to use psychometric data to predict and, ultimately, manage talent*

Identification of future leaders is the entry point into a talent pipeline and to identify this talent it is essential to know how to bring out the best in them.

To help measure individual differences, diagnostics can aid managerial nomination and psychometric assessment is acknowledged as an effective form of diagnostics.

Psychometric assessment is a method by which an individual's cognitive talents can be estimated and their preferences for behaviour revealed. Both cognitive ability and preferences must be assessed to discover a person's potential. The question is how can psychometrics help identify and manage talent to enhance an organisation's talent management strategy. And how can it be used to identify and develop your future leaders?

### Cognitive ability assessment

Cognitive ability assessments examine how a person solves different types of problems, such as verbal tasks, or numerical tasks, as well as their speed of processing information. This is different from an aptitude measurement that looks at a person's aptitude for a particular task, such as policy writing, typing or computer skills.

Cognitive ability is a vital component to the talent management equation. These kinds of assessments are like 'fitness tests for the brain'. They provide a snap shot of a person's cognitive ability, which is a guide to how quickly a person can pick up new tasks, how they will respond to training and, in layperson terms, how cognitively quick they are. This is different from aptitude, which has a more narrow focus on a particular task.

When looking at talent and leaders we are often seeking to 'discover potential'. It could be argued that cognitive ability is far more important than aptitude as we are aiming to know what a person is capable of rather than what they have done. Cognitive ability

assessments (like the 'a' standard graduate or general test battery) not only look at past learning (or 'crystallised intelligence') but also the ability to solve problems outside of prior learning (fluid ability). This fluid intelligence is as vital for talent management as cardiovascular fitness is for most sports performance. It is a key component of what differentiates the talented from the not so talented.

### Preference measurement

So, how do personality and values impact on a person's talent? Preference measures are a group of psychometric assessments that assess a person's behavioural preferences. They are often clustered into two main areas: temperament or personality and values. Contrary to popular belief, these assessments do not measure how a person will act: they look at a person's preferences for behaviour. How a person will behave is a combination of their preferences and the situations they find themselves in.

In terms of talent management, preference measures help identify talent to be selected as well as removed from the selection process. Standard temperament measures, such as the 15FQ+ (Fifteen Factor Questionnaire), an occupational personality assessment tool, can be used to identify such areas as stress tolerance, anti-social behaviour, aggressive tendencies and low levels of conscientiousness. All of these tendencies are potential talent derailers for leaders. Their early identification can help organisations avoid making costly mistakes in inappropriate placements and promotions.

Traits that can be used to select talent include openness to ideas and a balanced approach to dealing with people. People who are more open are quicker to learn and are more able to adapt to the changing environments as they progress through an organisation to senior roles. Leaders are required to engage with people and understand

### Case study

The Museum of Transport and Technology in Auckland, New Zealand (MOTAT). Being a relatively small public sector organisation, MOTAT needed a talent management strategy that was both individualised and cost effective.

The solution: MOTAT designed a unique competency system that also encapsulated the values of the organisation into one coherent model. They then introduced psychometric testing and aligned this to the competency model. This ensured the framework for talent was also the framework for selection.

Rather than just using assessments transactionally, MOTAT have kept the data on file to correlate against performance over time. Moreover, the reports are used when someone is hired to look at how to better manage and motivate them for success.

The culmination of this approach is a fully integrated talent management system with psychometrics at the heart of talent identification.

them at a very human level. This requires an empathic orientation toward others and the ability to deal with other's emotions constructively.

Values and motives measures look at what individual drivers a person may have. Typical values tools such as the Values and Motives Inventory (VMI), examine various value sets such as intrinsic values and external motivators. Alignment of a person's values with those of the organisation is vital for talent to flourish. The motivators or rewards must also be aligned to allow talent to shine. Tiger Woods will, for example, always raise his standard and fulfil his talent in major tournaments such as the US Masters because the reward is aligned to his goals. The money is not the main reward, it is the desire to win majors.

## Get the best out of psychometric assessment

Data is the key to understanding talent. Too often psychometric assessment is conducted as a transactional service rather than a strategic initiative. This is nowhere more damaging than in the area of talent management. To understand talent, organisations must take a learning and explorative approach to the way they use psychometric assessments to predict future performance of leaders. This explorative approach will ultimately involve data analysis.

Psychometric assessments provide a wealth of data on people. This data can then be correlated to business outcomes related to talent such as:

- Promotion: What traits do those that get promoted in the organisation tend to have?
- Management: What traits and combinations of traits do our successful leaders display?
- Tenure: What is the personality make-up of those who remain in the organisation a long time?

All of these questions can be answered through data analysis. Psychometrics can capture this data to achieve a more scientific approach to talent management and a leadership development strategy.

Talent management is a system and much like any other system the strength of the whole is dependent on the connection of the parts. If one element

is lacking, the capacity of the system to perform is greatly reduced.

A good example of this is physical improvement. At a very basic level this system consists of three parts: eating, sleeping and exercise. If any one part of the system is lacking the outcome (physical improvement) will be hindered. If one eats and sleeps but does not exercise it is unlikely they will improve their body composition. Likewise, if one exercises but does not allow the body time to rest physical health may be hampered rather than improved.

The same is true of talent management. Psychometrics may provide the best diagnostics in the world, but psychometrics will not stop performance of the best talent being affected by a dysfunctional manager. Likewise psychometrics may be able to accurately identify a person's development needs but unless there is a training intervention the benefit of the psychometric is minimal.

### The future

People will become more sophisticated in the way they think about talent management. Organisations will maintain people metrics in the same way that they keep financials and will have the data to start to quantify not only what talent is but also what interventions actually work to allow talent to be realised.

The ultimate benefit of psychometric testing for talent management is the strategic advantage it provides to understand how to predict and manage talent. Psychometrics are not a magic potion but rather a tool that when used well can be a key ingredient to the success of any talent management strategy. ■



### Top Tips

- Think strategic not transactional: use the data, not just the report, from psychometric tests to understand talent across your organisation better.
- Use cognitive tests that measure fluid thinking. Remember you are looking to discover potential not just what a person can do at present.
- Personality assessments identify behavioural preferences; what a person will actually do is a mix of their preference and the situation.
- Think systems. Psychometric tests work best when they are part of a complete system to solving people problems.
- Psychometric tests will help your organisation both screen in as well as screen out.
- Psychometric assessments ultimately provide a valid and reliable way of identifying talent and are therefore a key part of any talent management strategy.