



# Guidelines to Promote a Positive Candidate Experience with Employee Assessments

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## **20 | 20 SKILLS ASSESSMENT**

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**Abstract.** – It is not uncommon for applicants and incumbents alike to perceive employee assessments as adversarial exercises. Indeed, test results are traditionally used for the blanket de-selection of candidates. On the other hand, positive experiences with assessments occur when an employer uses feedback as constructive information to understand – and if the candidate is hired to build on – an individual’s strengths. This progressive coaching-type approach to employee screening and selection is welcomed by candidates and helps boost a company’s public and professional image.

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*I went through an employee assessment in applying for a job...some years ago. I was on the phone for 2½ hours, was asked what seemed like the same 20 questions about 10 different ways and was informed that I failed miserably after enduring this ordeal. It was an insulting and, from my perspective, a poor hiring decision to use this tool. I feel these tests are onerous and create an adversarial relationship between the candidate and the prospective employer. They also weed out a lot of people who would perform well if given the opportunity.*

~ “Markus,” email to J. Houran (February 21, 2007)

This unhappy and disillusioned candidate is not alone; many people are wary of employee assessments<sup>3</sup>. In fact, the concerns are understandable given that many “employment tests” seem neither to be designed nor used correctly<sup>2</sup>. The psychometric quality of the test in the above quote has been criticized by measurements experts, but it sounds like Markus’ deeply negative experience was due in larger part to its incorrect use.

**My position is that no piece of paper should be used alone in making an HR decision -- be it a resume, a reference letter or an assessment report.**

Best practice due diligence on candidates is a broad process involving assessment, structured behavioral interviewing and proper reference checking. A hiring or promotion decision should be based on the collective information the process reveals, as opposed to being dependent on any single source of information. To learn more, see: <http://www.2020skills.com/asts/Candidate%20due%20diligence.pdf>.

Therefore, assessments used as a part of a balanced and constructive due diligence and training process yield outcomes that are *supportive*, not adversarial. Specifically, employers can use assessments to identify better an individual’s unique skill set, to help establish where a candidate best fits in a company, as well as how to support a new hire once in a position.

## Using Assessments Realistically

Despite their potential power and value, all assessments have limitations. Hiring and training professionals need to have realistic expectations about what types of information assessments can and cannot deliver. The benefits and limitations of a given assessment product are based on its technical and theoretical foundations. Below are some important points to remember in this respect:

- Assessment feedback derives from mathematical extrapolations of behavioral data. As such, feedback reports describe statistical predictions of what attitudes and behaviors a given test taker will likely exhibit. Mathematical models are consistently more valid than subjective observations, but even the finest assessments are never 100% percent accurate 100% of the time. Consequently, it is recommended that information from assessments be augmented with other processes of due diligence whereby a person's experience, education, qualifications, competence and trainability can accurately be assessed in a larger context. This may include structured behavioral interviewing, proper reference checking and applied skills testing. For more information see: <http://www.2020skills.com/asts/Candidate%20due%20diligence.pdf>.
- The validity of a report is limited by the reliability of the test taker's responses. Test takers may answer assessments unreliably for a myriad of reasons: lack of motivation or interest due to less than ideal testing conditions or test taker's mood, fatigue from answering a long set of questions, an attempt to answer questions in a socially-desirable way or difficulty understanding particular questions for linguistic reasons (e.g., when English is not the test taker's first language).
- All test scores are statistical estimates. Thus, each score is accompanied by its margin of error (also called a confidence interval or standard error). However, properly constructed employee assessments provide information on the statistical reliability of a particular test taker's test scores, as well as measure the degree to which a test taker seems to be answering the assessment truthfully.
- Finally, the quality of an assessment (and hence the value of its feedback and application) is associated with its methodological and statistical principles:

***Self-referential vs. normative instruments.*** Some employee assessments provide feedback based simply on how a test taker perceives him or herself. In other words, these instruments describe individuals only in a *self-referential* way, i.e., against themselves. Examples of self-referential instruments are the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the DiSC assessment, PAPI and Predictive Index. By contrast, *normative instruments* are *inter-individual* because they describe test takers against a reference group. This approach is significantly more valid than the self-referential approach. For example, the 20|20 Skills™ assessment is a normative instrument.

***Classical test theory vs. modern test theory.*** Most employee assessments on the market today are constructed and validated using classical test theory, which essentially treats all assessment questions as equally weighted “points.” The assessment consequently provides a total score that is the sum of those points. This approach has been outdated since 1960<sup>1,2</sup>. Today, test and measurements experts rely on modern test theory, which can provide unbiased, scaled scores for test takers<sup>1,2</sup>. Modern test theory is the same gold standard statistics used in such well-known assessments like the GRE, MCAT and LSAT. This approach can identify and remove response biases related to age, gender, cultural background and employment level of the test taker. In other words, these statistics can detect “real” effects from response biases and other sources of error. Besides greater technical precision and the protection of meeting legal requirements, modern test theory also yields richer information and insights about test takers that traditional approaches miss<sup>2</sup>.

Interested readers are encouraged to consult the article “State-of-the-Art in Measurement in HR Assessment” for an in-depth discussion of these methodological and statistical principles. The article can be viewed and downloaded at:

<http://www.2020skills.com/asts/State-of-the-art%20in%20HR%20assessment.pdf>.

## **Managing Expectations**

People hate “not knowing,” because they are hardwired to seek control of their environments. Thus, satisfying curiosity and gaining understanding are often strong and powerful motivators. Employee assessment reports are the confidential property of your organization. Accordingly, please refer to your company’s policies and procedures (or legal counsel) to decide when, and under what circumstances, to show or to provide copies of assessment reports to test takers.

In our experience, many companies include copies of the assessment reports in employee files, but many do not show or provide copies to candidates unless they explicitly request it. From our perspective, there is nothing wrong about sharing reports with candidates during or after a job search, as long as you emphasize two crucial points to test takers:

- The employee assessment was just one of many sources of information used in the due diligence process, and the final results did not depend on the report alone.
- Test takers should be debriefed by someone *trained* to interpret the assessment report. Without this foundation, test takers can easily misinterpret some or all of the report and come away with a negative impression of themselves, the assessment process or the hiring company.

## “Surprising” Assessment Scores

There are several reasons why a candidate’s scores might be lower or higher than s/he expects or that others might anticipate from the candidate:

- **Limited introspection skills.** Untrained individuals are characteristically poor at self-assessment. Often how a person sees him/herself is neither entirely consistent with how others see him/her nor how that person really is when evaluated objectively.
- **Narrow definitions of concepts.** The definitions of personality or competency variables measured by assessments are usually backed by complex, academic models. That is, definitions of traits tend to be broader or more comprehensive in scope than lay-definitions of these competencies. Thus, there can be disagreement in the two definitions.
- **Objective vs. subjective measurement.** People rarely participate in objective, standardized assessments. These are assessments whereby a person’s scores are fairly and rigorously compared to a representative and unbiased reference group. Instead, people are more familiar with self-referential tests that deal with simple “raw score sums,” percentiles or averages and which ask the test taker to indicate merely how he/she perceives himself.

It can be challenging – even uncomfortable – to review what appears to be a “negative” report with a test taker or with a higher authority at your company who especially likes a given candidate. Below are some tips and guidelines for easing this task.

## Communicating Assessment Results to Test Takers

- *First*, ask the test taker some probing questions about what s/he thought about the assessment process – listen for any indications which could suggest that during the assessment the person was not feeling well, was rushed or distracted or became fatigued or disinterested. Also, probe to make sure that the person did not experience any subtle technical issues that could have caused frustration. Any assessment or test taking process (even personality assessments) is influenced by state variables such as a person’s current health or recent personal and professional experiences. Even seemingly trivial factors like background noise levels or whether the test is taken online or offline can make a substantial difference.
- *Second*, ask the test taker probing questions about what s/he thought about his/her own performance on the assessment. The goal is to determine whether the test taker thought s/he did poorly or well, or voices any objections to the specific testing process. You are assessing what are the test taker’s expectations with

respect to his/her results so you can know up front if there is a substantial discrepancy between how a test taker perceives him/herself and what an objective assessment says about the individual.

- *Third*, reiterate to the test taker that the assessment is not about “right or wrong” responses. Explain that the purpose of the assessment was to gauge *the individual’s relative areas of strength and areas for potential growth* as related to job performance. Keep in mind this is not merely related to general job performance. A discussion of an assessment result is most relevant when it is related to a specific job description. Also, establish the expectation that almost everyone has areas of limitations and knowing these areas provides test takers with valuable information for personal and professional development. Refrain from labeling outright any low scores as “weaknesses;” it is more accurate to refer to low scores as “potential areas for growth.” It is even more accurate not to impose any value judgments on especially low or high scores. There can be negative or positive reasons or motivations for why a candidate can score low or high<sup>2</sup>. What looks like a weakness might actually be a manifestation of another strength the candidate has. Likewise, too much of a good thing (even positive traits) can sometimes be a deficit, e.g., creativity, ambition or competitiveness. Consequently, hiring and training professionals have the responsibility to explore the “why’s” that might underlie a candidate’s scoring patterns. For hiring and training professionals, learning this same information helps assist employers with supporting and training new hires in their positions.
- *Lastly*, begin with an overview and then gradually lead to a discussion on important details. Point out the test taker’s relative areas of strength, followed by the areas of professional development. Ask the test taker questions throughout the discussion to ensure that s/he understands the information you are conveying. The goal is to create a dialogue in which you and the test taker are jointly exploring issues and making sense of scoring patterns. Done properly, the debriefing session is more like a partnership than it is a teacher-student relationship.

### **A Final Key Point: Test Takers are Customers**

The way HR departments use assessments with candidates reflects on the company’s public and professional image. Candidates are always potential internal customers of the hiring company, but after bad experiences you can bet those candidates definitely will not be external customers. The tips and guidelines outlined here are intended to help ensure that candidates enjoy a positive outcome with an assessment – irrespective of whether that person is hired or not.

No discussion of assessment and professional development is complete without addressing one last issue. This question is posed to me frequently and perhaps you have pondered it as well, “When it comes to advancing a career, is it better for people to fix their weaknesses or simply capitalize on their strengths?” This is a complicated question.

First, the research is clear that most individuals *can* learn skills necessary for success in the service-hospitality industry. But my preferred answer to the question is one that promotes self-reflection – specifically I would ask in return, “Which approach feels more natural to you?” The following series of rhetorical questions can help you simplify and understand the issues involved:

- Do you really have a significant weakness?
- If so, are you motivated to overcome it?
- If *yes*, do you have the time, patience and energy to overcome it by mastering the skill you lack?
- If *no*, do you have the time, patience and energy to build a structure (habits, routines or a supportive team) around yourself to offset the limitation?

Aside from some behaviors that are definitely unacceptable in today’s business environments, I generally do not believe that people’s skill sets need to be “fixed.” Rather, it seems more productive for individuals to be supported by employers who understand and build on their employees’ skill sets. Therefore, forced to give a clear “cut and dried” answer to that original question my response would be, “Capitalize on your strengths.” But before you or any employer can do this, it is imperative to assess and understand what strengths an individual has and where untapped, raw talent lies. This coaching-type approach to utilizing assessments is constructive and supportive for both the hiring company and the applicant. It was unfortunate that Markus was not treated this way. The truth is that candidates do not really fail assessments. Rather, it is the improper use of assessments that fails everyone.

## About the Author

**James Houran** holds a Ph.D. in Psychology and recently joined HVS to head the 20 | 20 Skills™ assessment business. He is an 18-year veteran in research and assessment on peak performance and experiences, with a special focus on online testing. His award-winning work has been profiled by a myriad of media outlets and programs including the Discovery Channel, A&E, BBC, CNN, NBC's *Today Show*, *Wilson Quarterly*, *USA Today*, *New Scientist*, *Psychology Today*, Forbes.com and *Rolling Stone*.

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