

## But can it make coffee

**By Stuart White**  
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I have said it a thousand times - it's nothing short of bizarre how little real time we allocate to trying to predict performance in the workplace when you consider the cost of getting it wrong. I am forever arguing the need to take interviewing to a more professional level. For far too long, companies have viewed selection as 'soft' business issues. Oftentimes line managers seem so blind to the negative financial impact on the organisation that they can't even be bothered to arrive for the interview saying that HR can do it, as though HR can possibly have that technical or insider input that only an experienced practitioner can.

However with employee wages and benefits comprising the biggest slice of the operating cost cake, anything less than an effective strategy in the area of recruitment is simply managerial negligence. Not to mention the obvious colossal screw-up there is when you put some crazy or incompetent person into a role they aren't suited to.

I think we have this mental picture of the interview as a chat about....anything you feel like half the time. Questions like what hobbies do you have, how do you feel about this that and something else are all asked even when they're utterly irrelevant and don't make sense...Interviews must be about predicting the future. You have a candidate in front of you and you are trying to project how they will fit in and what their contribution will be like while in your workplace. Consider how much time and effort goes into buying photocopiers, printers and other expensive fixed-asset resources yet so little attention is given to the recruitment of personnel. How would you feel about purchasing a photocopying machine for P250 000 if you were unsure of its ability to perform to your expectations? You wouldn't even buy it unless you could see it work and evaluate the quality of the copies which it makes, would you? Yet many companies will easily invest that amount per annum on a manager without testing their managerial capability and potential.

Globally, organisations and jobs are becoming more complex than ever before. A few years ago there was no mention of person-job matching, leadership pipelines, competencies and succession strategies, not to mention recruitment and selection litigation cases against employers. Now the stakes are higher and the room for error smaller, and gone are the days that the job interview alone provides you with all the needed information on who's going to be your next right hand man/woman.

Structured interviews and for that matter unstructured interviews and psychometric testing all slot in under the broader category of occupational assessment, defined as the process of gathering information on people and jobs/organisations in order to match the two and predict future performance.

An intervention aimed at measuring certain areas, which is standardised in terms of its content, administration, scoring and interpretation, and which can be measured by a numerical scale is essential. In most countries, including Botswana, occupational assessments are legislated under the heading of employment practices and the aim is to ensure fairness in the selection of candidates for roles. In psychological assessment there is an unwritten rule that one should never use a single instrument in isolation when making decisions regarding people, but in my experience many corporations even today are using the job-interview as their only source of information in making final decisions that one way or the other change lives, and in some cases affect the performance of entire organisations – unfair to the candidate but equally unfair to themselves.

Science and practical experience show that the job interview in isolation does not have strong predictive power which leaves a lot of room for recruitment errors to take place. Who's governing the validity and fairness of the job interview conducted by the engineer, the project manager and the HR officer, how much is this interview costing your organisation? (take their salaries per hour and multiply with the number of candidates to get a rough estimate), and what value are you getting for this investment? How many unsatisfactory hires and how much talent is turned away on the basis of one unstructured and unfocussed interview?

I am yet to come across one line-manager or for that matter one HR professional who doesn't experience the selection process as challenging, largely because we tend to base our selection strategy on CV screening and interviews, which scientifically have been shown to be amongst the lowest indicators of job success and leave us without the needed information to confidently differentiate between candidates. More and more organisations are turning to other forms of occupational assessment to complement their selection process. Recent developments and improvements, specifically in psychometric testing are assisting local organisations with cutting-edge technology and instruments enabling them to make better people decisions. So why aren't we using it enough in this part of the world? It's an exciting field.

During the last quarter of the 20th century a wide range of psychometric instruments were developed to assess an individual's personality, motivation competencies and perceptions of organisational culture. However, the assessment measures were quite separate and, consequently, the time involved in completing them considerable.

The use of technology in the development and delivery of assessment was very limited with open, unsecured access to online measures. Measures of distortion, such as the 'social desirability' scales included in personality measures, in truth often did not pick up distortions where candidates who, had they wanted to fake, could do so on specific scales when offered the opportunity to rate themselves favourably. Historically there was also a poor interface between individual and corporate data. For example, measures of individual style and organisation culture were based on quite different models and concepts, making analysis, synthesis, integration and comparisons of individual and corporate data difficult.

But methodology and technology have moved on in leaps and bounds over the last decade and now it's time to wake up and embrace this brave new world of HR testing tools and assessment techniques. Psychometric assessment is to HR what DNA is to criminology – hard and fast answers, rather than gut feelings and guesswork. Even after 7 years of formal studies, for almost all registered psychologists being regulated and guided in use, application and interpretation of psychometric tests by bodies such as the American Psychological Association, the British Psychological Society and, closer to home, the Health Professions Council of South Africa are part of a normal working day so you are guaranteed to remove the uncertainty and replace it with consistency and accuracy. That way your new recruit might just give you as much value-for-money as that state-of-the-art biz hub machine it took you all year and 4 Board meetings to finally decide on.

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