

Best Practices in Assessments Drive Performance, Development and Retention

By Dan Harrison, Ph.D.

Assessing people for jobs is the most important task of any organization. The quality of assessment ultimately determines the performance of new hires as well as the ability of the organization to effectively develop employees. It affects every important aspect of the organization's success including management effectiveness, sales volume, customer retention and productivity. Assessment is not merely one of the functions of the Human Resource Department. It is the essential foundation for talent acquisition and talent management.

High quality assessment used at the point of hire enables you to have the greatest impact on performance and productivity in your organization. High quality assessment of applicants during the recruitment process results in less time and money spent on training and developing employees. This enables management to focus on important strategic issues. Good assessment minimizes training costs, minimizes losses due to poor decisions, minimizes the high cost of employee turnover and minimizes losses due to poor teamwork.

Effective assessment also provides significant benefits for employee development. Assessing existing employees makes employee development much more efficient and effective. Good assessment can enable employees to clearly understand their performance in relationship to the job requirements. This can be a great boost to employee motivation. It can also provide managers with a means of pinpointing the development areas that will provide the greatest impact on performance. Harrison Assessments™ (HA) even goes a step further by providing managers and coaches with effective tools for encouraging and enlisting top performance as well as providing guidelines for developing specific job success behaviors. In addition, reports also help employees to better understand how to apply their strength for their career development. These are key areas that promote talent retention and motivation.

Formulating the success factors for the specific job

The first challenge of effective assessment is to fully understand the job and formulate the success factors. Without a clear understanding of the job and the job success factors, behavioral assessment cannot be effective. It is essential to understand the tasks performed, the responsibilities, the key performance factors and the requirements you think relate to effective performance. The factors to be used for assessment in most cases are merely our best guess at what will enable good performance. These factors should be considered as a hypothesis to be verified by actual performance data that should be collected and used to re-evaluate the job requirements. I will go into more detail on this later.

Assessing a person against job factors is much more challenging and much more complex than merely assessing a person. It is essential to determine the key success factors for the specific job, including how important each of those factors are in relationship to each other. In addition, it is essential to determine how having different levels of a job success factor affects the overall performance. This is a complex process requiring sophisticated calculations, which can best be achieved through computer technology.

There are two basic categories of job requirements: Eligibility and Suitability. Eligibility factors include previous experience, education, certifications, skills or abilities. Suitability factors include attitude, motivation, integrity, interests, work preferences, fit with the company culture and fit with the manager.

Assessing Levels of Eligibility

Many organizations assess eligibility factors by setting minimum requirements. However, few organizations actually systematically formulate eligibility factors in order to systematically score each applicant's levels of eligibility. It is not enough to ascertain that the person meets the minimum requirements. All that does is eliminate the people who don't meet the requirements. It does nothing to assess the remaining people who do meet the requirements. Therefore, it is essential to quantify each candidate's **level of eligibility**. This is the only way in which you can effectively compare candidates to each other and to integrate the eligibility score with the behavioral score.

First, you need to determine what the eligibility factors are. For example, you may require previous experience in the same job, previous experience doing similar tasks that the job requires, certain educational levels, or skills such as typing speed or the ability to use software packages. List all the factors and then weight them according to how important they are. Then score different levels of each factor. Don't just list your minimum level required—score each level. For example, if you are looking for previous experience in the same job, and you set your minimum requirement for 2 years experience, you may want to score that factor in the following manner:

Eligibility <u>can</u> the person perform	Suitability <u>will</u> the person perform
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- Less than 2 years – reject candidate
- 2 years – give 50% for this factor
- 3 years – give 70% for this factor
- 4 years – give 85% for this factor
- 5+ years – give 100% for this factor

By using gradient scoring, you are able to quantify the person's experience and obtain a score.

You can then calculate the total eligibility score by weighting the factors and multiplying the person's score by the weighting. For example, if the person had 4 years of experience and you weighted this factor as 20% of the overall, you would multiply 20 (the weighting) by .85.

This would give the candidate 17 points out of 20 for this factor. After calculating the score for each of the factors, you

would then add up the points for all of the factors to obtain a score out of 100 possible points.

Organizations hire people for their eligibility and then try to develop their suitability

... and in many cases fire them for their lack of suitability.

Assessing Levels of Suitability

Suitability factors are much more difficult to assess. It is difficult to determine which suitability factors relate to job success and even more difficult to determine the impact of different levels of the suitability for each factor on job success. However, doing so is an essential part of job assessment. For most jobs, **suitability factors are about 50% of the job success factors**. Therefore, effectively measuring suitability is an essential part of assessment. It is best to rely on a system that contains significant previous research regarding suitability factors and their impact on performance for different job types and for different jobs.

Suitability factors are behavioral and are much more difficult for people to change.

This makes it even more important to accurately assess behavior during the recruitment process. The importance of assessing behavior during recruitment is evidenced by the fact that most organizations hire people for their eligibility and then try to develop their suitability. And in many cases, they fire them for their lack of suitability. Since behavior is fundamentally more difficult to change than eligibility, it is better to hire people who already have the suitability for the job.

To illustrate, here are some examples of job behavior factors that could be relevant to a specific job. These are just a small sample of more than one hundred important behaviors that could relate to job success.

- What types of things will an applicant or employee accomplish or put off?
- What motivates them?
- How will they communicate, influence and lead?
- How well they can handle autonomy, freedom and responsibility?
- How much initiative will they take?
- How much will they persist when faced with obstacles?
- How innovative will they be?
- How much will they accept and respond appropriately to feedback?
- To what degree will they become autocratic, dogmatic, dictatorial or controlling?
- How much will they resist change and/or be rigid?
- What behaviors will they exhibit under stress?
- How much will they be blunt or harsh in their communications?
- How much will they tend to be blindly optimistic, impulsive, illogical or easily influenced?
- To what degree will they avoid difficult decisions?
- How well will they organize and handle details?
- How much will they be scattered or chaotic in their approach to projects or planning?
- How much will they seek to learn, grow and excel?
- What kind of recognition do they need?
- As a leader, how well will they provide direction?
- How well will they enforce policy and standards?
- How likely are they to steal?
- How well do they handle conflicts?
- How reasonable will they be when assessing the value of their contributions to the company?

Using Interviews to Assess Job Behavior

In the past, interviews have been used as the primary means during recruitment to determine job behavior. However, even if interviewers are extremely intuitive, there are many reasons why accurately assessing job behavior at an interview is nearly impossible.

1. Interviewers do not have access to a real behavioral success formula. There are dozens of behavioral factors that either promote success or inhibit success for any one job. Interviewers rarely have access to a job formula that identifies the behavioral success factors, formulates how different levels of these success factors impact job performance, weights the success factors against each other and calculates an overall behavioral score based on the formula.

2. Even if the interviewer did have access to such a formula, the interviewer would need to accurately assess specific levels of each **applicant's behavior for each of the job success factors**.
3. Some people are very **skillful at being interviewed**. However, this skillfulness usually does not relate to job success. Therefore, skillfulness of the interviewee usually confuses the assessment rather than supporting it.
4. The interviewee aims to tell the interviewer what he/she thinks will be viewed as the **best response**. The interviewer aims to determine how much of what the person is saying reflects real behavior and how much is related to just trying to get the job. This in itself is extremely difficult to resolve in the short period of the interview.
5. **Interviewers are biased**. Research clearly shows that interviewers routinely give favorable responses to people who are similar to themselves, and less favorable responses to people who are different from themselves. This problem is compounded by the fact that most interviewers are interviewing people for jobs that they would not be doing themselves. In the end, the result is very likely to come down to how well the interviewer likes the candidate rather than how well the candidate fits the behavioral requirements of the job.

Many interviewers profess insights into a person's personality and certainly some of them are quite perceptive. However, predicting job success is an entirely different matter. It is not sufficient to identify a particular quality of a person. Rather, the interviewer must be able to accurately assess the magnitude of each of dozens of qualities in relationship to a complex formula of behavioral requirements for a particular job. This is nearly an impossible task without the aid of significant research and tools.

Assessment research shows that interviewing has a very moderate ability to predict job success. However, this doesn't mean that interviewers can predict job behavior. The moderate ability to predict job success comes as a result of exploring the candidate's previous experience and job knowledge. Remember, the interviewer is normally discussing the resume in relationship to the eligibility requirements. This is very useful and does provide some ability to predict job success. However, the moderate ability to predict job success is a result of assessing job eligibility rather than an indication that the interviewer is predicting job behavior.

If you doubt my assertion, I suggest you try the following experiment. Have your interviewers conduct the interview without ever seeing the resume and without discussing past experience, education or skills. Then have them write down their job success prediction. Later, you can compare this prediction to the actual job success. In fact, conducting interviews in this way would be so difficult that I doubt anyone would even attempt it.

In comparison, an effective job behavior assessment can obtain a moderate level of predictive accuracy for job performance on its own, without any knowledge of eligibility or any interview. This is a significant achievement because the eligibility has not been factored into the prediction. However, the value of job behavior assessment is much greater than simply its ability to predict job success on its own. By using an effective job behavior assessment at the interview, the interviewer obtains the tools to transform the interview into a genuine discussion about the person's real fit for the job as well as the person's likely level of job satisfaction. This process further increases the ability to predict job behavior. By combining this with a systematic assessment of eligibility the ability to predict job performance is increased even further.

Job Behavior Assessments As Compared To Personality Assessments

Personality Assessments have been available for about 60 years. Some of them have obtained a great deal of validation research. However, it is important to understand that they are not actually job behavior assessments and such validation is not relevant to job performance. In most cases, the validation simply means that the assessment favorably compares with other means of assessing personality. Many people are fooled into thinking that this large amount of research indicates that they are useful tools for job assessment. In fact, many of those assessments specifically state that the instrument does not predict job performance. It makes no sense to use an assessment for job selection that was never designed for the workplace and has no ability to predict job performance. Some people say that they can effectively use personality assessments for employee development. However, this also makes no sense. The main point of employee development is to improve performance and if an assessment does not measure the things that relate to performance, how can it significantly help to develop employees?

What Are the Key Factors of an Effective Job Behavior Assessment?

Based on 20+ years research in job behavior assessment, there emerges several key factors that enable a behavioral assessment to effectively predict performance. These include:

- The ability of the assessment to measure more than 100 traits
- A questionnaire that is work focused
- The ability to detect false answers and to pierce self-deception
- Performance research that is used to create a job success formula for specific jobs
- Reports that are job specific, numerically quantified and easy to understand.
- The ability to weight and integrate eligibility and job behavior assessment scores

a prediction of success with greater than 80% accuracy

Measuring a Sufficient Number of Traits

It is not practical to develop a separate behavioral assessment for each job or even each job type. Therefore, nearly all job behavior assessments assess people using one questionnaire and then try to evaluate the answers for different jobs. However, our research has shown that less than 25% of the traits measured in a behavioral questionnaire relate to job success for any one job. Therefore, to be effective, a job behavior assessment needs to measure many different traits in order to have a sufficient number of traits that relate to job success for any one given job. Most behavioral assessments measure only 10 to 30 traits. They try to overcome this problem by measuring norms of different types of jobs. For example, they do research that identifies managers as having certain traits. This is merely a distraction from the real purpose, which is to identify the traits that relate to performance. There is no benefit to hiring people who fit the profile of an average manager, especially when more than 75% of the traits are completely irrelevant to job performance. I have helped thousands of companies assess employees and have never had a single customer that aims to hire average employees. They would be very unhappy if they knew that three quarters of the assessment criteria was completely unrelated to job success.

In order to effectively measure job success, job behavior assessments must measure at least 100 different traits and each job needs to have a formula or template of at least 20 traits that relate to performance. In addition, each trait must have its own formula regarding how different degrees of that trait impact performance. Finally, each trait must be weighted against the other traits according to its impact on performance. That is why the Harrison Assessments system measures 156 traits and is built on a body of research that relates to job performance.

The need to measure more than 100 traits creates a great challenge for job behavior assessments. Measuring more than 100 traits would normally require more than a full day of testing. However, in this age of talent competition, few applicants are willing to spend a full day for one job application. Harrison Assessments has overcome this problem by creating a high tech questionnaire in which there are 16 groups of 8 statements. In each group, the 8 statements are ranked against each other. In addition, each statement appears in 2 different groups, enabling the computer to cross-reference all of the answers against each other. By comparing each statement to every other statement on the questionnaire, a total of 8103 comparisons are obtained. This is equivalent to 2,701 multiple choice questions and more than a full day of multiple choice testing!

Work Focused Questionnaire

One of the most obvious but often overlooked issues about job behavior assessment is having a questionnaire that focuses on work-related issues. Job-related questions are much more effective because they focus on the goal of job assessment rather than requiring a step of personality measurement that then has to be interpreted in terms of job behavior. Consequently, they are much more likely to predict job success. Having the questions more focused on job-related issues also provides the benefit of making the assessment more easily transfer across cultures. Generalized personality questions nearly always have culturally influenced significance that makes answers to such questions quite different across cultures. If that is the case, any research related to job performance is not likely to be transferable across cultures.

Overcoming self-deception and/or intended deception

One of the biggest challenges of any behavioral assessment is to determine how truthfully the person has answered the questions. How can an assessment determine if the person has given truthful answers? Many personality assessments attempt to determine this by offering to answer seemingly opposite options along with an additional answer option called "in between." If there are too many answers of "in between," the results are considered invalid. While this may provide a slight indication of answer reliability, it is an extremely weak method. In many cases the most truthful answer may in fact be "in between." Therefore, this method is not reliable. There are several important interconnected ways to overcome the problem of untruthful answers. First, it is best to provide answer options that need to be ranked rather than rated or scored. Forced ranking requires the person to designate their priorities.

Do you remember in the previous section about HA using computer cross-referencing to reduce the time required to complete the assessment? HA uses the same cross-referencing to determine if the person's answers are consistent with themselves. If a person answer untruthfully when ranking a large number of statements, it is extremely difficult to maintain a high level of consistency. Even if the person were to remember all the rankings exactly, it would still be difficult to meet or exceed the consistency score because the statements are ranked against different statements each time.

To maintain consistency the person would have to mentally perform thousands of cross-references. If the answers are more than 10% inconsistent, HA considers that either the person has not paid sufficient attention to the answers or has deliberately attempted to deceive the assessment. In either case, the results are not considered valid. HA have further mechanisms that prevent and detect deception.

The questionnaire only includes statements relating to positive behaviors. Therefore, all of the statements are generally perceived as desirable. In addition, even if the person attempts to give the desirable answer, their own behavior patterns dictate which answers they consider desirable. For example, if a person tends to be very frank and direct, they will consider this tendency to be their virtue as well as a desirable answer.

The HA system includes a further layer of lie detection by analyzing the paradoxical relationships between the behavioral tendencies. Through such analysis, negative behavior patterns can be determined without asking any negative questions and without the person having the slightest awareness that they have revealed their negative behavior. If the person attempts to deceive the assessment, the negative behavioral patterns will become more exaggerated, making them appear as poor candidates.

Job Specific, Numerically Quantified and Easy to Understand Reports

If a behavioral report simply describes the person's behavior or personality, each interviewer or interpreter will ascribe their own meaning to the behavior or personality trait, usually based on their own bias rather than a formula of job success factors. This seriously detracts from the benefits of job assessment. The report must be focused on the specific job requirements and provide an overall score related to the suitability of the person's overall behavioral patterns in relationship to the specific job. This must be such that it is easy to understand and not left to the interpretation of the person reading the report.

Performance Research

A job behavior assessment must be based on performance research. Since the assessment is applied to many different jobs, there needs to be research that reveals which behaviors relate to job success. Without such research, how can anyone know how to interpret the results in relationship to a particular job? As stated previously, more than 100 factors must be measured in order to find a couple of dozen factors that relate to job success for a specific job. Without research, there is no good way to find those factors and it is virtually impossible to determine how different levels of each related factor will impact job success. In addition, only performance research enables you to accurately weight the success factors against each other according to their level of impact on job success. HA has a large and ever expanding body of research related to success factors for a wide variety of jobs.

The research must include a sample of good performers as well as poor performers. If the sample only includes good performers, there is no way to determine which factors differentiate good performance from poor performance, how to formulate different levels of each success factor, and how to weight the success factors in relationship to each other.

Integrating Eligibility and Job Behavior Assessment Scores

Using assessments in a serial manner rather than an integrated manner is a frequent mistake that is made in assessment. For example, many people first eliminate the candidates who don't meet the minimum requirements and then assess the remaining or final candidates for job behavior. Then they select the candidates with the highest job behavioral score. However, this is not effective because it does not help you to see the overall picture relating the person's combined levels of eligibility and suitability. By scoring eligibility as recommended above, you can then combine the eligibility and behavioral scores. HA provides a facility for weighting each of the assessment types and then calculating an overall score.

Summarizing the Value and Challenges of Assessment

Effectively assessing both job behavior and job eligibility is the essential foundation necessary to hire, retain and develop top talent. Assessment needs to quantify levels of eligibility as well as job behavior. To do so, requires a job success formula for each component. Interviewing does not effectively assess job behavior unless it is conducted using a job behavior assessment. Effective job behavior assessment requires the ability to measure more than 100 traits, a questionnaire that is work-focused, the ability to detect false answers and/or self-deception, a specific job success formula derived from performance research and clear reports that do not require interpretation.

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Harrison Assessments meet all of the standards mentioned above, providing a powerful tool for assessment. It enables you to build a strong foundation for your talent selection, retention and development.

HA is the only assessment method that:

- Uses a full spectrum of behavioral assessments, including personality, interests, work environment preferences and task preferences.
- Uses a high-tech questionnaire equivalent to a full day of testing in only 30 minutes.
- Uses a technological consistency detector that provides an extremely reliable validation of the authenticity of the answers.
- Can be effectively applied without professional interpretation.
- Uses the power of paradox to decipher subtleties and complexities of personality related to job performance.
- Offers complete customization to specific job requirements.
- Offers a complete research database of success traits for different position types.
- Delivers cost-effective high correlation with actual job performance.

About BestWork LLC

Best Work is a management consulting practice targeting the unique challenges of today's organizations and leaders.



Carla R. Messer with Dan Harrison Ph.D. and Ava Harrison, VP for Harrison Assessments International during v.8 certification training in Chicago, June 2008

TruthSeeking™ validated methods targeting behavioral work traits for hiring, promotion and performance development. Integrated qualitative, quantitative and customer's-own instruments.

BestStuff™—proven approaches to turn B players into A players; high potential group training programs and individual performance coaching. Retreats, Keynotes, and Kick-Off Meetings.

Beyond Coaching™ traditional executive coaching boundaries dissolve as strategy, operations, human resources and organizational

development best practices come together. Beyond Coaching tackles the multi-faceted challenges of today's top leaders. Sessions weave peers, direct reports, and others in and out of the process as appropriate to achieve maximum results.

BestWork founder Carla R. Messer is expert-level certified with Harrison Assessments Intl. and is one of a few trainers qualified to deliver The Performance Advantage™ series of integrated leadership development training programs. She holds an MBA from The Ohio State University and a Master of Arts in Organizational Communication from Western Michigan University. She combines 15 years global consulting experience with executive corporate posts in sales, operations and distribution. Her client list includes Fortune's leading organizations and spans across industries from education to healthcare to professional services to manufacturing.