

Putting candidates' credentials to the test

From basic checks on spelling and numeracy to more sophisticated testing of managerial tasks, skills testing can add value and enhance reputations.

By Sarah Coles

Everybody lies on their CV. They might say they can programme in C++ or use Sage or they can type 100 words a minute, and if you take their word for it you can waste time and damage your reputation by sending candidates who can't do the job," says Laurie Dobson, managing director of testing company ISV.

Skills tests have a clear role in establishing whether these claims are true. However, there's a huge range of them, from basic skills to more sophisticated job tests; a variety of analysis tools; and just as many different costs and charges. So if this is going to be more than a box-ticking exercise, it pays to think carefully when selecting a partner.

The first consideration is what you want to get out of it, and therefore what you want to assess. Martin Reed, chairman and chief executive of testing firm Thomas International, says: "If you want to use it as a predictor of performance, you need to be clear what you are testing and why." On a basic level, this can mean checking a candidate's ability on computer packages, or testing spelling and numeracy. These standard questionnaires make up the majority of the market.

However, there are sophisticated ways of using them. Jeremy Pemberton-Pigott, managing director of testing company PreVisor, says: "We do a job analysis to crystallise the top five or six competencies needed for the job within this organisation. Then we put together a test for just these competencies." Other organisations will package together assessments covering the key competencies for typical roles. Skillsarena, for example, has a call centre package. So it's worth asking potential partners whether they have a package for your key accounts, or whether they can put one together.

These standard tests have also become more sophisticated, including graphics, video and scenarios. Pemberton-Pigott says: "We have been developing simulations. So, for example, we do one for team leaders with an email inbox exercise they need to work through. While they are doing that, video footage of an interpersonal issue appears for them to deal with. The objective is to make it as realistic as possible." The various providers put emphasis on different types of tests, so it's important to delve into the developments your chosen provider is focusing on.

Beyond the standard tests, others can be more tailored. Some allow bespoke questionnaires to be created from a database. Skillprover, for example, is an IT testing company, and allows users to mix questions just from the ASP.Net family (C#.Net, VB.Net, ADO 2.0, SQL Server Development).

Others allow companies to add their own questions, or put together a test from scratch. Martin Stanton, managing director of test company Business Dynamics, explains: "We had a client recruiting for a stationery warehouse. They needed to establish that candidates understood stationery, knew about health and safety, and knew the local geography for deliveries. We created a questionnaire that covered them all and could be taken online." Stanton's approach is similar: "We design them with the client. We sit down with a topic expert and decide the questions, then we code it into the system."

Kevin Beales, managing director of The Test Factory, says this has an additional advantage: "Allowing an agency to get the client to create questions helps them engage with the line managers as well as the HR team." Even those offering standard tests may well have functionality to add extra questions, so recruitment firms that have clients with very particular needs need to ensure that a potential partner can build these in.

The providers also offer a range of analysis tools, so it's worth ensuring partners have the types of

breakdown you are after. Skillprover, for example, can measure results against the database average. It will report how long the candidate took and if they ran out of time. In addition, reports will indicate if some sections were answered too fast — which could mean they were guessing. This degree of analysis isn't unusual. Beales explains: "You can look at the individual and how they performed, down to how long they spend on each question and how they compare to other candidates and to people who have been recruited previously." Dobson adds: "You can compare candidates against each other and against a standard score. We are developing regional benchmarks too." Some systems also allow filtering by key answers. So, for example, Dobson says: "You can ask questions that the client says are central to the role, such as do you have a driving licence? That way, they only see the results of people with a driving licence."

It's also important to find out if the test is available on a fixed PC or online. Reed says: "Online assessment is growing

Putting candidates' credentials to the test

From basic checks on spelling and numeracy to more sophisticated testing of managerial tasks, skills testing can add value and enhance reputations.

By Sarah Coles

exponentially. It grew 700% in the last two years." Beales agrees, and adds: "It's obvious that candidates are more au fait with online recruitment and things like job boards. You can create a URL, and you can put it in the jobs board."

However, once you go online it's worth asking about safeguards. Some providers, including Skillsarena and ISV, produce randomised tests. Pemberton-Pigott says: "We have a randomised item bank. If people are doing insecure testing it's a way to stop them being able to post tests online for colleagues and friends to practice. We can build banks of questions of a similar type and style, and have a randomiser, which grabs questions from each set and puts them together. It means one individual can get a completely different test from another, but they are comparable. So if you apply as Joe Bloggs and then again as yourself, it won't help because you'll have a completely different test." Others use timers to check for cheats.

The added functionality can be a useful differentiator. However, often it's the administration issues that are make or break. Dobson surveyed his clients and found out that after cost, the ease of use and administration was the top priority. It's particularly important to check whether a test can be integrated with other systems. Pemberton-Pigott says that some systems are developed with integration in mind: "We're integrated into applicant tracking systems and we have the technological structure to link into HR systems, for the end client too."

Of course the key consideration, particularly at the moment, is cost. Charges tend to be structured either on a pay-as-you go basis; by buying tests in bulk; or by paying for a licence on an annual basis. Dobson says: "We try to be as flexible on costs as possible. Clients can buy a number of credits at £12 each, plus a set up fee of £50, that can work for smaller recruiters. Alternatively, they can buy a PC-based test for £325 a year, which can sit in the corner of the office and be used for things like word, excel, typing and data entry. Then there's FastPath online testing for £110 or £150 a month, or much lower for volume sales, which allows unlimited use."

Reed takes a licencing approach for standard questions: "They will buy a licence, which will cover them whether they do 100 or 500,000 tests." Alternatively he does a per-test charge for more behavioural or tailored tests. He says "Most recruitment companies want to pay £1,000 and have unlimited use. I'd question whether that approach will provide a tailored solution

for each of their clients, or whether they're just ticking a box saying they offer skills testing."

What constitutes the right answers to questions of cost, sophistication, tailoring and integration will depend on what you want to be able to offer clients, and what you're willing to spend. Pemberton-Pigott says: "Traditionally firms preferred to buy off-the-shelf, but increasingly recruitment process outsourcing is a long-term relationship, so recruiters want to add value."

Choosing the right partner is about finding the one with the right balance of functionality and cost. It may be about adding value or covering your back. Skills testing can do both; it just depends on your ambitions.

Skills Test Case Study

PreVisor is planning to launch a test next year that measures a person's propensity to work from home effectively.

Managing director, Jeremy Pemberton-Pigott, explains: "Partly as a result of the credit crunch, companies are looking at saving money and costs. Encouraging call centre homeworking seems like one answer. But not everybody is ready to work from home. Some people are relaxed and efficient, but others find it stressful. This test will get to the bottom of whether an individual is cut out to work from home."

The test will assess how an individual can handle ambiguity and risk-taking, how intrinsically motivated they are, how autonomously and proactively they can work, how good they are at creating their own structure, and separating work and home life. It will also investigate how comfortable they are with social isolation. These key characteristics were identified through interviewing remote call centre workers about what they thought was important for the role.

The test will include questions such as: True or false, I work harder when my supervisor is there. True or false, it is important to be recognised for your hard work.

The test is in the trialling stage at the moment, and clients are being encouraged to use it alongside other call centre tests on an experimental basis.