

White Paper: Candidates' Attitudes Towards Psych Testing and Cheating

Online psychometric testing is becoming more and more frequently used by organisations as part of their selection and development processes for potential and current employees (CIPD, 2006). Nonetheless, despite the high prevalence of such assessments, debate still rages over whether candidates cheat when completing unsupervised online psychometric assessments. How do you know that the person that is supposed to be doing the test is really the person who completes it? Do candidates really try to 'fake' personality assessments to create a favourable impression? And if so, how can we decrease the instances of such occurrences?

Previous research has focused on the experiences of students and recent graduates who have completed unsupervised online abilities (verbal, numerical and conceptual reasoning assessments), and has largely come out of the UK (Hughes & Cubiks, 2007). Results from such studies indicated that 12% to 16% of respondents reported having cheated on an abilities assessment, either by getting friends or relatives to assist while completing the test (5%), getting hold of the test questions in advance (4%), practicing the test under a pseudonym prior (4%), and 2% had attempted to circumvent the technology used to deliver the test (Hughes & Cubiks, 2007). Additionally, 27% indicated that they knew at least one other person who had cheated.

To our knowledge, researchers are yet to investigate the attitudes of candidates towards psychometric testing and cheating at a global level. Furthermore, candidates' attitudes towards assessments other than abilities tests and the views of general employees as opposed to graduates have not been explored to a great extent. Therefore Psylutions developed a survey to ask candidates directly about their attitudes towards all psychometric assessments, including their thoughts on cheating and its prevalence. This survey and the subsequent results are designed to explore key trends in the application of psych testing for selection and development in the workplace.

research

Method

Psylutions' survey was completed from March through to June 2011 and participation was voluntary and anonymous in nature. 286 participants responded to the survey, including 205 who indicated that they had completed some type of psychometric assessment in a work context. With an even gender split (52% female, 48% male), most participants had an undergraduate (42%) or postgraduate (40%) degree and were employed full time (60%). Whilst the majority of participants were from Australia (74%), a number of individuals from other countries (including the UK, America, Malaysia, Lesotho, United Arab Emirates, Russia and South Africa) also completed the survey (26%). Notably, a significant number of Generation Y (born 1980 – 1995: 47%) participated in this research as opposed to the other generations (Generation X born 1965 – 1979: 36%, and Baby Boomers born 1946 – 1964, 15%). Most participants indicated that they had completed their psychometric assessment as part of a selection process (59%) as opposed to development (32%), with the most commonly completed assessments overall being personality/work style preferences (16.5%), and abilities assessments (verbal 15.7%, numerical 15.9% and conceptual 15.1%).

Results and Discussion

Of those who indicated they had completed at least one psychometric assessment, 91% indicated they had completed a psychometric test in an unsupervised environment compared to 64% who had completed an assessment under supervised conditions at some stage. Furthermore, of those that had completed a psychometric assessment, 36% had never completed an assessment whilst being supervised. This suggests that there is a trend towards online, unsupervised assessments. The majority of respondents reported that they were aware of how the information from the testing would be used (72%), whilst 20% suggested that they were not clear on how the information would be utilised. Furthermore, 57% indicated that they received feedback on their results (of which 63% found to be accurate of themselves, and only 8% found the results not to be accurate at all), whereas 24% were not aware that feedback was available and 2% did not want feedback. Together these points indicate that further improvements could be made to the candidate management process, and emphasise the importance of ensuring that organisations have informed consent from candidates, and that candidates are given accurate feedback by a psychologist. The level of perceived accuracy of their results by candidates could also have been affected by the type of assessment they completed, as whilst they seem to agree more often with their personality/work style preferences results, they are often pleasantly surprised or disappointed with their abilities results.

In terms of the stage of the selection process at which psychometric testing was used, 23% of respondents indicated that they were tested after submitting their application form or resume. As this is quite early in the selection process, it is likely that this may have been an abilities assessment that was used as a screening tool for volume recruitments such as graduates, particularly given the large number of Gen Y respondents to this survey. Additionally, 21% of respondents reported that they were tested before the first interview and 19% between the first and second interview. At these stages, it is possible that personality/work style preferences assessments were used to prepare more targeted interview questions that focused on probing their areas for further development in relation to the role for which they had applied. Psylutions, and best practice, recommends using psychometric testing between first and second interviews where possible in order to best utilise the data to support the interviewing and selection processes overall. Alarming, 16% indicated that testing was the last stage before job offer. This approach can often give the impression that a candidate has 'failed' the psych test if they do not get the job, and risks damaging the reputation of psych testing in the selection process. Furthermore, it does not give organisations the opportunity to further tap into any of the data from the testing in order to explore the results further with the candidate, thereby ensuring a more well-rounded and better informed selection decision.

A potential difficulty with completing assessments online is the possibility of technical issues that could impact upon the test taker. In our survey however, only 15% of respondents indicated that they experienced some type of technical issues whilst completing their assessment, with 48% of those suggesting that the issue did not affect their test taking experience, and 52% reporting that it did have some effect on their experience. It is not known however whether this actually effected their results, and if this was necessarily a negative effect. Compared to previous research (Hughes and Cubiks, 2007) which indicated that 32% experienced technical issues and 62% of those felt that this adversely affected their performance, our results are lowered, suggesting that technology may have advanced since 2007 and technical issues are not quite as prevalent.

Notably, the most common rating out of 10 for their psychometric testing experience was very high with a rating of 8 (26% of respondents), with 62% giving a rating of 7 or above, suggesting that the majority of participants had a positive experience of psychometric assessment. In fact, 61% of respondents agreed that they would use psychometric testing if they were employing someone, and 26% were unsure, indicating that perhaps further education around the use of psychometric testing and its benefits and limitations may be required for this group, or this may have been a reflection of their organisation's readiness and openness to such an approach. Additionally, 79% of respondents that had completed psychometric testing agreed that testing is a useful tool for selection and development when used correctly. This again emphasises the importance of using accredited psychologists who can assist with interpretation of the tools to limit the possibility that results could be misinterpreted and misused.

Cheating

One of the most controversial issues with regard to online, unsupervised psychometric testing is the potential for people to cheat on such assessments. For the purposes of this survey, we defined cheating as; 'lying or deceiving to create an unfair advantage, usually in one's own interests'. This could include misrepresenting yourself (ie, "faking good"), having someone else complete tests that you are required to complete on your behalf, having someone help you complete tests that you are required to complete on your own, or being given the answers to a test.

Previous research (Hughes & Cubiks, 2007) has indicated that approximately 12% of candidates cheat when completing an online psychometric assessment. Our research returned similar results, as whilst 31% of respondents reported to have considered cheating, only 10% indicated that they had actually cheated, suggesting that attitudes do not always result in behaviour. Interestingly, 69% had never even considered cheating on a psychometric test. Of those that indicated they had cheated, the majority reported to have cheated on a personality/work style preferences assessment (32%), followed by verbal and numerical reasoning (both 11%), values, motivation and sales assessments (9%) and finally abstract/conceptual reasoning and team assessments (7%). Given that previous research has focused on abilities testing and most organisations seem to be more focused on decreasing the likelihood of people cheating on unsupervised abilities assessments, our results suggest that more attention actually needs to be focused on personality assessments and minimising people's tendency to try to create a favourable impression by emphasising the importance of responding honestly, and using assessments with validity scales. These validity scales can determine the consistency with which a candidate has completed the assessment, theorising that those who try to create a positive impression or to respond in a particular way are likely to find it challenging to respond in a consistent way throughout the assessment, and are likely to return results that are less consistent than if they had responded honestly.

Furthermore, assessments that use both normative (ie, indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement) and ipsative (ie, out of 4 statements on a page, select which one is most like you and which one is least like you) items are able to compare the consistency of the ranking of items between the different types of methods. Other scales look at impression management, and relate to items within the assessment that if responded to positively, are likely to indicate that the candidate is not responding honestly and is trying to create a favourable impression (eg. I always keep my promises). Some assessments also examine the tendency of candidates to respond in a positive or agreeable manner to items, given that most people are not good at everything this may also indicate that they are trying to create a favourable impression. This is of particular importance as 38% of those who answered yes to cheating on a psych test indicated that they did so because they wanted to get the job, whereas other reasons that were given included creating a favourable impression or to present themselves in a particular way, or even to show how easy it was to cheat.

So when people do cheat on psychometric assessments, how are they doing this? Our research indicates that people are far more likely to attempt to create a favourable impression on an assessment (33% of respondents), as opposed to being given the answers (8%), having someone help them (5%) or having someone else complete the assessment for them (2%). Given that many employers are worried about whether the person completing the assessment is the person who is supposed to complete the assessment, our research suggests that there is only a very small percentage that are willing to hand over the responsibility for their assessments to someone else, and organisations should be more concerned about candidates trying to create a favourable impression on personality/work style preferences assessments.

When people have responded to a psychometric assessment in a manner that was not true of themselves, it was usually when completing a personality/work style preferences assessment (45%), again emphasising the importance of encouraging candidates to respond honestly, and using assessments with inbuilt validity and impression management scales.

With regard to the 8% that indicated they were given the answers to an assessment, this was most likely to be verbal or numerical reasoning (18% for each), abstract reasoning (15%) or a personality/work style

preferences assessment (15%). Given that personality assessments do not have right or wrong answers, it would be interesting to find out how people got these answers if they do not exist, or if they were given instructions on how to respond in a particular way for that role.

The 5% of those who cheated by having someone help them complete the assessment reported that this was more common when completing numerical reasoning (21%), followed by abstract reasoning (16%) and personality/work style preferences assessments (16%). As most people seem to generally find numerical reasoning more challenging than other assessments, it is not surprising of those that do cheat on these assessments that they get someone to help them out. Additionally, those who get someone to help them complete personality assessments may simply be getting a second opinion on whether their responses represent them accurately, or it could be to help them to create a more favourable impression.

From those who did cheat, 2% indicated they had someone else complete the psychometric test they were meant to complete, and this was more common when completing numerical reasoning (27%), followed by verbal and abstract reasoning (18%). Again, this may be a result of people finding numerical reasoning more challenging than others assessments, and that these assessments have a right or wrong answer.

If people do cheat on unsupervised assessments, it is often argued that they are only cheating themselves, and will be found out during further stages of the selection process, or will not last very long in the job as a result of not being a good fit for the role. Our survey results supported this, indicating that of those respondents who did cheat, 42% either were not offered the job or did not accept the job, an additional 21% left within a year, and 14% left after a year. Only 21% were still with the organisation at the time of the survey. Given that 77% either did not end up in the role or ended up leaving, this suggests that when people do cheat on a psychometric assessment they often end up not being a good fit for the role, either through self-selection, not being offered the role, or leaving the role.

When it comes to respondents' perceptions of whether other people cheat on psychometric tests, 95% indicated that they thought that others would cheat or were unsure if they would cheat. Only 5% thought that other people do not cheat. However, only 31% reported that they actually knew someone who had cheated on a psychometric test, and that person had mostly likely cheated on a personality/work style preferences assessment (20%). These results supports that there is a general perception that people do cheat on psychometric tests, however in actual fact it seems there are less people who cheat than what is generally believed. Given that only 31% of respondents know someone who has cheated on a test, and yet 95% believe that other people would cheat or are unsure as to whether they would or not, it appears that there a large number of people who believe that others cheat on psych tests for reasons other than their own personal experiences, and perhaps this is a result of the controversial nature of this topic and the perception that people will cheat that is often promoted in the industry.

Nonetheless, the majority of respondents (79%) indicated that they believed that psychometric testing is a useful tool for selection and development when used correctly, and 61% would use it as part of their selection process, with a further 26% reporting that they were unsure as to whether they would use it or not. This further emphasises the need for education and training around psychometric testing and its use, including its benefits and limitations.

Limitations of the Study

This study is not without its limitations. Firstly, the sample consisted largely of individuals working in HR, suggested that they are likely to be more educated and more experienced in psychometric testing than individuals working in other industries, however this does not necessarily mean that they support this approach or have a positive view of psychometric testing. Also, as the survey was self report, despite the questionnaire being anonymous, some individuals may have not been as honest with their responses given the sensitive nature of the topic, and it may have underestimated the prevalence of cheating. Regardless, our results seem to be largely consistent with previous studies.

Furthermore, it must be noted that this was an exploratory study and further research in the area is warranted.

Conclusion and Implications for Employers

These results suggest that there is only a small likelihood that people will attempt to cheat on psychometric tests, and if they do, it is more likely to be on personality/work style preferences assessments by trying to create a favourable impression, as opposed to cheating on abilities assessments which a number of test publishers seem to focus more strongly on. Therefore, Psylutions and best practice recommends that these assessments should be chosen carefully, with particular attention to any validity/faking/consistency scales inherent in the tool to try to minimise the probability that an individual will cheat on a test. It is also important to ensure there is informed consent from the candidate beforehand, and the importance of responding openly and honestly to the assessment is emphasised. It is also recommended that the results from the assessment are used in conjunction with results from all other aspects of the selection process in order to make a well informed selection decision. For development, it is critical to ensure that participants understand how the information is going to be used, as there is often a fear that the information could be used for purposes other than development, such as a restructure.

To ensure that the results of psychometric assessments are used correctly, it is crucial to use an accredited psychologist who can interpret the results more accurately given their vast training in such tools and how they can best be used, including what the results really mean and what the limitations of the tools are. Lastly, even if people do cheat, it is likely that they will not end up in the role, either through not accepting a job offer, or not being offered the role.

Please refer to Appendix A for graphical representations of results (www.psylutions.com.au/research.html)

References available from Psylutions on request (info@psylutions.com.au)

The logo for Psylutions research features the word "Psylutions" in a large, grey, sans-serif font. Below it, the word "research" is written in a smaller, yellow, sans-serif font. To the right of the text, there is a blue graphic of three interlocking puzzle pieces.