

## **Cultivate a New Appreciation for Online Screening Tools**

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It isn't uncommon for employers to receive more than 500 applications for a single job. Many companies have databases containing more than 1 million resumes.

To manage these huge volumes, companies increasingly are using online staffing-assessment tools to screen and select candidates. These questionnaires and tests allow companies to sort through hundreds of applications rapidly to find the 10 or so candidates who appear to have the greatest potential for success.

Online assessments are used to help hire employees ranging from hourly retail clerks to senior managers. They take a variety of forms, from straightforward questions about skills and qualifications ("How fast can you type?" or "Do you have an M.B.A.?",) to involved simulations and assessments of personality, ability and interests ("Do you like to take risks?").

Some consist of a dozen multiple-choice questions and can be finished in less than 10 minutes. Others contain hundreds of questions and multiple sections and require 60 minutes or more to complete. The design and length depend primarily on what they're designed to measure and how the results will be used. There's no single best type or ideal length -- some simply take longer than others.

After five years of working with online assessments, I've yet to find many people who look forward to taking these tests. It is easy to understand why -- job hunters might not like answering long lists of questions solely for the purpose of being evaluated by a computer to determine if they're a good or bad fit for a particular position.

Yet, more than 50 years of personnel-selection research indicate that when properly used, these tests greatly increase our chances of ending up in the right jobs. This is largely because, unlike evaluations made by people, evaluations made by machines aren't influenced by idiosyncratic and largely irrelevant facts, such as whether you look like the hiring manager, went to the "right school" or come from the same hometown as the chief executive officer.

If properly designed (and sadly not all are), assessments improve the accuracy of hiring decisions. This isn't surprising when you consider the alternatives -- for example, having a recruiter evaluate your resume with a five-second glance.

They also speed up the staffing process. Instead of waiting weeks to hear from an employer, your application may be evaluated within minutes. Many systems automatically mark qualified applications as "high potential" and immediately notify the recruiter or hiring manager. Some systems send job seekers an e-mail notifying them whether they fit the position, so that they can plan their search accordingly.

So what's the best way to respond if you are asked to take a test or complete a structured questionnaire as part of the hiring process? As someone who builds these tests, I recommend the following:

1. Respond positively to the request. When a company asks you to complete an online assessment, what it indirectly may be saying is, "We take staffing seriously." The use of assessments means that the company has devoted some level of internal resources to defining what it takes to succeed in the job. In other words, the company recognizes that people are important to its success, and it's serious about making sure the right people are in the right roles.

Don't respond with the attitude that you're too busy or important to complete the assessment, or that you think it's a waste of time. At best, you'll come across as a prima donna who thinks he or she is too important to follow the company's policies. At worst, you'll be perceived as someone who's trying to hide something. Either way, these aren't characteristics companies typically associate with good candidates.

2. Don't be afraid to ask about the assessment. You should view assessments as an additional source of information about the company and the job. Feel free to ask why the company decided to use an assessment, what it measures and how the results will be used. Pose your questions so they come across as reflecting an open-minded curiosity toward the company's approach toward staffing and how it thinks about people in general. Guard against asking questions that might make you appear accusatory, skeptical or defensive toward the company's decision to use assessments.

3. Approach the assessment in the same way you'd approach a job interview. The results of the assessment will be used to evaluate your match with the job. Take it seriously. Schedule adequate time to complete the assessment in a quiet, distraction-free environment. Be thoughtful in your answers.

If asked questions that have a clear right-or-wrong answer, put in the mental effort to make sure you answer them correctly. Follow any instructions regarding suggested use of scratch paper, calculators or other reference materials.

4. Be honest. Your goal in taking an assessment should be to provide a realistic picture of your strengths and limitations. Don't purposefully fake your responses in an effort to look good. A lot of assessments can detect faking, and purposefully distorting your answers may seriously damage your efforts to get the job.

There's little value in selling yourself into a job to which you're ill-suited. If an assessment asks, "Do you find it easy to stay calm in tense situations," and you know you have difficulty managing stress and anxiety, don't answer "yes." You'll only be setting yourself up for failure. There's little value in being hired merely to be fired.

5. Don't be humble. Be honest, but don't be overly self-critical. Play up your capabilities and accomplishments. For example, if you have excellent math skills and are asked, "Are you an expert at working with numbers?" don't hesitate to say "yes" even if you don't have a degree in math. Use the following approach when providing self-evaluations:

a. Think of specific examples of things you've done that relate to the question. For example, if you are asked, "How much experience do you have leading teams?" take a few seconds to think of what you've done that involved leading teams. Focus on what you personally did that demonstrates your skills and capabilities, without worrying about formal titles and roles such as whether you were designated the "team leader."

b. When responding to questions that ask you to rate your performance, compare your experiences to things you have seen others do. Use this comparison as the basis of your self-evaluation. For example, if asked, "Are you an expert in Excel?" think about whether the ways you've used Excel in past jobs were more or less advanced than the ways your co-workers used it.

Be careful to compare your skills against those of other likely candidates for the job. What constitutes expertise in Excel is likely to be different for receptionists than for database administrators.

c. When making your final evaluation, think about how you'd respond if you were asked to justify your self-rating in an interview. Could you effectively explain why you consider yourself an "expert" at something?

The goal of a job hunt isn't simply to find a job, but to find a job where you'll be successful. These steps may not increase the likelihood that you'll "pass" every online assessment, but they'll increase the chances that you'll sail through assessments used for jobs that you're well-suited to perform. Online assessments may never be something you enjoy, but if approached correctly they can help you achieve a more successful career.

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