

WORKING

WEDNESDAY

EMPLOYMENT CLASSIFIED INSIDE

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How well would you do?

The following are sample questions a job candidate can expect as part of the written portion of most psychometric tests.

1. What is the next letter in the sequence?

O...T...T...F...F...S...?

- A. S
- B. T
- C. O
- D. F
- E. Impossible to tell

2. Evil is to Doom as Live is to:

- A. Breathe
- B. Happy
- C. Mood
- D. Expire
- E. Feeling

3. If BACON = 35, what does EGGS = ?

- A. 28
- B. 32
- C. 35
- D. 38
- E. 41

Psychometric testing

By Rebecca Theim
Special to the Tribune

Whether interviewing for a sales clerk post or an executive-level position for a Fortune 500 company, job seekers in today's glutted labor market should prepare for a nostalgic return to a teenage rite of passage: an assessment test.

Pre-employment psychometric testing—which purports to measure everything from a candidate's aptitude for a specific job to his or her honesty and ability to manage anger—is on the upswing, test consultants, researchers and company representatives report.

"We've long understood that things other than ability can make or break an employee," said Brian Stern, vice president of consulting for the Americas' division of the SHL Group, one of the world's largest pre-employment test administrators. "For a while, it was out of favor to measure the soft stuff—the ability to work well in a team or communicate well or manage stress—but we know those traits can be just as important to job success as education or specific job skills. And over time, we've developed ways to accurately assess for such attributes," he said.

Long a mainstay in the United Kingdom—where several of the United States' largest testing companies got their start—one-quarter to one-third of U.S. companies now administer some sort of pre-employment test, according to recent surveys by the Society of Human Resource Management and the Careers

More companies administer pre-employment screening to assess a job candidate's aptitude, honesty and even personality

'Now even mom-and-pops are thinking, "Hey, we should check this person out before we allow them into our company."'

— Dean Suposs, general manager of Avert, a human resources services company

section of Internet site Yahoo. Factors as varied as growing concerns over workplace security and the need for a convenient and inexpensive way to winnow today's deep candidate pool are fueling the tests' popularity.

"We've definitely seen a steady increase in their use in the past 20 years," said Edward Hoffman, a New York-area clinical psychologist and author of "Ace the Corporate Personality Test" (McGraw Hill, \$15.95) and "Psychological Testing at Work" (McGraw-Hill, \$16.95).

A pre-employment test can be as different as the job for which it is being administered. For sales clerk positions, it may consist of a 20-minute multiple choice, pen-and-pencil test that gauges candidates' honesty, per-

sonality and other traits valued in retail and customer service roles.

For a managerial or executive level post, the evaluation can consume an entire day. It may include an in-depth personal interview with a psychologist, cognitive tests similar to college or professional school entrance exams, a "personality inventory", questionnaire and simulations—observed and evaluated by psychologists—in which candidates assume roles they will be expected to fill if hired. "For positions paying \$150,000 and above, you'll definitely see this type of testing," said Helen LaVan, a professor at DePaul University's School of Management.

While employers are prohibited from asking questions that

violate anti-discrimination laws—including queries related to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or religious beliefs—legislators and courts have given companies wide berth in how they assess prospective employers, including the use of such tests, said Michael D. Karpeles, a labor lawyer with the Chicago law firm of Goldberg, Kohn, Bell, Black, Rosenbloom & Moritz, Ltd. And while candidates always have the option of declining to participate in an assessment, doing so usually eliminates them from further consideration, experts said.

A major impetus fueling pre-employment testing is companies' growing concerns about workplace security, integrity and crime. An analysis of the 1.8 million background checks conducted in 2000 by Avert Inc., a human resources services company that conducts pre-employment tests and background checks, found that almost one-quarter of applicants misrepresented their employment or educational records, 13 percent

4. What are the missing letters?
ACKMMO
GIIKCE
QSOQ?
A. CK
B. QM
C. EG
D. AG
E. IS

5. What is the missing number?
17...13...11...?...5...3...2
A. 9
B. 7
C. 6
D. 8
E. 10

The remaining questions should be answered with one of the following:
A. Strongly Agree
B. Agree
C. Neutral
D. Disagree
E. Strongly Disagree.

1. I have never disappointed anyone.

2. I know many people who work themselves too hard.

3. Most people are honest.

4. It must be admitted that almost everyone fantasizes about destroying equipment at work.

5. Sometimes I don't feel able to handle all my work responsibilities.

ANSWERS

■ To check your results turn to PAGE 4

TESTING: Honesty still best policy

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wouldn't be rehired by a previous employer and 6 percent had recent criminal records.

"Employers are more conscious now about looking at all aspects of a prospective employee," said Dean Suposs, general manager of Ft. Collins, Colo.-headquartered Avert, which has seen a twentyfold increase in new business since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. And while such tests have been standard at large companies for years, "now even mom-and-pops are thinking, 'Hey, we should check this person out before we allow them into our company.'"

Can candidates prepare for a psychometric test? Yes and no, experts said.

"You can prepare yourself for what to expect and practice the sort of questions you are likely to encounter," said Mark Parkinson, an occupational psychologist with the London-based testing and career consultancy Bluewater Partnership and author of "How to Master Psychometric Tests" (Kogan Page Ltd., \$12.95).

"Generally, people do better when they have practiced or read books on test-taking because they are less anxious."

Whether candidates should seek to present themselves in a more favorable light—known as "social desirability" in psychological parlance—is open for debate. All professionally developed psychological tests have "lie scales" designed to identify dishonest answers. (Example: "I have never hurt anyone's feelings.") Get tripped up by a test's "lie scale" and your score suffers.

"Answered honestly, these tests are good predictors of job performance, but the question then becomes, 'What constitutes answering honestly?'" said Rick Frei, an organizational psychologist with Philadelphia's Temple University who has researched such tests' ability to predict job performance. "There are some questions that, if you answered honestly, would raise serious questions about your intelligence or political savvy, which are traits that are also obviously important in the workplace."

Most experts, however, counsel test-takers that honesty is indeed the best policy. Being honest protects you from getting caught by the "lie scale" and ensures you don't end up in a job for which you're ill-suited and at which you'll likely be unhappy or unsuccessful.

Other tips experts offered include:

- Practice, but don't go overboard. Find a few books or Internet sites devoted to the topic.

- Learn as much as you can in advance about the job, hiring company and structure and content of the test. "The best preparation is to have an understanding of what the job entails, because for all their sophistica-

'Answered honestly, these tests are good predictors of job performance, but the question then becomes, 'What constitutes answering honestly?'

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tion, these tests are 'fake-able,'" said DePaul's LaVan. "If you understand the job and the qualities the ideal candidate is expected to have, you're better able to inject those qualities" into your answers.

- Arrive well rested.

- Clear your mind. "Think about what you do best and what you love to do," said Richard Boyatzis, a professor at Cleveland's Case Western Reserve University and co-author of "Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence" (Harvard Business School Press, \$26.95). "Part of the preparation, in a Kung Fu sort of way, is to center yourself."

Although a pre-employment test may fill even the most test-savvy job seeker with anxiety, companies and researchers insist that they benefit employers and employees by matching the right person with the right job.

"Used professionally and compassionately and in concert with other candidate selection tools, these tests can be very useful and benefit a candidate as much as a company," Boyatzis said.

So, did you ace it?

1. The letters are the first letters of the numbers: one, two, three, four, five and six. Because "seven" would be the next word in this sequence, (a) is the correct answer.

2. "Evil" is the reversal of "Live" and the reversal of "Doom" is "Mood," or answer (c).

3. Each letter's numerical value is its position in the alphabet (A = 1, B = 2, C = 3, etc.) That means BACON = 35 and EGGS = 38, or (d).

4. The square is composed of pairs of leap-frogging letters. The only answer that follows this pattern is (c).

5. This is a series of descending prime numbers, so the correct answer is (b).

Questions like the ones below are part of a test's "lie scale," which assess the test taker's honesty in answering the questions. Watch for questions that use absolutes like "never," "always," "all" or "none."

1. Because all people have disappointed someone at some point in their lives, "strongly disagree" is the proper answer.

2. Ideal candidates believe hard work is desirable and enjoyable, so "strongly disagree" is the best answer to this and similar questions.

3. Because psychologists have generally found that honest people believe others are also honest and dishonesty is an anomaly, "strongly agree" is the best response to questions about the veracity of your honesty and your expectation of it in others.

4. Workplace sabotage is such a growing concern for employers that "strongly disagree" is the only acceptable answer.

5. A sign of poor stress tolerance is loss of self-confidence, so "strongly disagree" is the best answer.

Sources: How to Master Psychometric Tests (Kogan Page, \$12.95); Ace the Corporate Personality Test