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## **Selecting for type**

Walking to work, I used to pass a motto set in stone above the door of Kirkaldy's Testing and Experimenting Works that said: "Facts not Opinions". David Kirkaldy, the scientifically minded Scot who established the works in 1866, was sure about that.

Kirkaldy pioneered the standardised testing of materials used in big civil engineering projects. Steel used in the Sydney Harbour bridge was tested at the works. The workshop closed down in 1974 and has since been turned into a museum.

If Kirkaldy were alive today, I wonder if he would be so certain about his conclusion. The world these days seems to run on the strength of opinions. Maybe this explains why the testing of personality, as much as ability, is becoming so popular in selection. It is not enough any more simply to know things. Today we are expected to demonstrate a whole range of personality traits, such as interpersonal skills, creative thinking and persuasiveness, that can be matched to various jobs.

As faith in educational certificates has been undermined by the achievement of ever more successful results, there has been renewed interest among recruiters in various forms of psychometric tests. Headhunters have come relatively late to the field - psychometric testing has been around for nearly 90 years - but as the recruitment business seeks to broaden its offering, the introduction of testing is becoming increasingly commonplace.

Headhunters have traditionally not been impressed by the idea of testing. Theirs is a relationship business. They tend to talk about chemistry and "fit" and like to judge job candidates by their record. But the bigger organisations have been changing their tune, recognising that psychometrics might give them a competitive edge.

This is good news for test designers because the headhunters, with their extensive databases have a wealth of material for undertaking comparative studies. Just such an arrangement between Korn Ferry International and Decision Dynamics, a test design business run by Michael Driver and Ken Brousseau, two test developers based in southern California, has led to the creation of a Korn Ferry assessment tool that claims to match a candidate's management qualities with particular job requirements. Last week I gave it my own test.

This is not the first time I have undertaken a psychometric test. A few years ago I discovered I was an INTP (a reserved type who likes to theorise about things) when undertaking the Myers Briggs Type Indicator personality questionnaire. In the test shorthand, the I stands for introversion, N for intuition, T for thinking and P for perceiving. Another test, the 16 Personality Factor questionnaire, came up with similar findings. It also revealed a strong leaning towards non-conformity.

Korn Ferry found what they decided was an entrepreneurial and inquisitive streak. Given my career background, it had matched the results against two possible occupations, that of a consultant and that of a public relations manager. The consultancy map seemed to fit pretty well but the PR map was completely at odds with my results. Apparently I would not be prepared to say nice enough things about my clients.

Korn Ferry pointed out that the tests are designed to provide only part of the picture of any potential candidate. But when added to biographical information and career and educational details in the overall assessment, says Marc Swales, managing director of its management assessment practice in Europe, the results can be useful in piecing together the different aspects that make an ideal job fit. The way that job candidates are being selected today is beginning to resemble the assembly of a complex human jigsaw. Once, it was sufficient to give the piece a good thump and it went into place. Not any more.

Is this all good news? As UK universities consider the use of psychometrics, under pressure from the government to demonstrate they are selecting students on merit, Robert McHenry, chief executive of Oxford Psychologists Press, has warned that too rigorous use of personality testing, which might identify only a narrow field of personality types, could wreck the diversity that all organisations need if they are not to produce executive clones.

"Companies often find that people with more unusual personality types, such as creatives, are harder to manage, yet they are essential to a balanced and innovative workforce," he says. "On the one hand universities are trying to widen the net by making selection fairer; on the other, they risk making it smaller. It's essential that a cross-section of different types of people are selected. If this is not the case, we risk creating a bland future workforce."

The same risk could be applied to companies. In the documentation supplied to me by Korn Ferry it is clear that its management assessment tool can be used to identify those in work teams who are ready for or resistant to change. What happens to the resistant ones? Do they get fired? Or are they subjected to a higher level of indoctrination and persuasion?

Suppose that whatever change is being proposed is not a good idea and that one or two experienced people in these teams have realised that. They could be important assets to the business yet they will be labelled as "flat earthers" or difficult people.

You do not need a personality test to identify the sycophants and politicians in a boardroom or in a team. At the very time when the Higgs report on corporate governance is trying to create conditions for a more questioning atmosphere in boardrooms, we have developed selection methods that can sift out such people for the sake of harmony.

Personality tests can be fun for those undertaking them because it is impossible to fail them and the results are always couched in positive terms designed to give us a warm glow. But there is a darker side to their use. It seems clear to me that my own results reveal a prime candidate for the awkward squad. Anything that turns up the word "entrepreneurial" is going to sound alarm bells for big employers.

Work is not about facts alone. Nor is it about cramming for exams (there are so many examinations nowadays that children are learning the answers at the expense of the questions). But I would have reservations about extending personality testing into the university system. The tests' increasing sophistication is both an asset to recruiters and a danger. It seems clear they can find the ideal individual. But what happens when that ideal changes, when opinions become as valuable as facts?