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Psychometrics for graduates

Every year when students graduate from university there are those who know how and where they want to build their chosen career. Some have already secured jobs and some have yet to embark on a serious job search, preferring, perhaps, to extend their studies or to travel for a while.

Others are less certain. Some of these may have been enticed, during campus presentations, in to applying for any number of graduate openings among big-name employers. How do they know whether they have made the right decision? Some may be simply confused. For years they have moved through the education system, heads down, progressively pairing down their subject areas until they have a clear area of expertise. But suppose they got it wrong?

My eldest son is about to take his final examinations in the belief that he made the wrong choice of degree. For the last three years he has been studying economics. Not unnaturally, most of his fellow students are looking at jobs in the financial sector but my son wants to work in a creative business such as the film industry.

“Some people I know are just getting a job that pays well as a means to an end. They don’t want to do the job but that doesn’t seem to matter much to them. I know others who go in to a certain career to keep their parents happy,” he says.

As a parent I feel some responsibility because I, like his teachers, had advised him to get a good degree and worry about something like film school later. The temptation now, is to intervene again, but that would be unwise. His future choices must be his own. Ambitious parents can become far too influential in their children’s career path when young people need space to find themselves.

The point was made last week by Charles Johnson, director of Competence Assurance Solutions. Mr Johnson is also a member of the advisory board of Cambridge Occupational Analysis, a company that provides career advice to students in universities and the private education system.

“The single biggest issue we have to deal with,” he says, “is parents trying to force their kids down particular career routes when their children are not interested doing a particular job.”

I had contacted Mr Johnson because he was one half of a co-authored article that appeared some 14 years ago casting doubt on the use of personality tests for predicting job performance. The other author was his then colleague, Steve Blinkhorn, chairman of Psychometric Research and Development, a St. Albans-based consultancy that also, among other things, now provides career

advice for students using an online psychometric instrument, CareerDemon.com.

Their article all those years ago in Nature magazine caused controversy among occupational psychologists when they accused some test operators of using a pseudo science that “bamboozles an unsophisticated public.” In a later article they said they could find no evidence of a personality test used in job selection that could be linked to later job performance.

The criticisms were made before the internet allowed test developers to expand vastly their test-user databases and research opportunities. So had anything happened in the interim, I wondered, to change their minds? Apparently not.

“Quite a lot has changed in the intervening years. Research has improved and people have been able to check out what was really going on. Now both the British Psychological Society and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development state in their guidelines for the use of psychometrics that personality tests should not be used on their own for making recruitment and selection decisions,” says Mr Johnson.

There is a good reason for this. Personality tests are self-reporting questionnaires. They rely on the person taking the test to respond honestly when they tick the boxes against various propositions. One difficulty is that people do not necessarily know themselves that well. This is why personality testing may be useful for students outside the recruitment process when they are seeking to find a career fit for their skills and personality.

Testing is useful at this stage because there is little incentive for a student to cheat on a test. But they may be tempted to manipulate their responses when tested for a job. Personality questionnaires do not tend to recognise an individual’s ability to role-play. We can all adapt unnatural responses when the occasion demands, such as fake sympathy for a departing colleague and that self-preserving reserve adopted on the daily train commute.

The tests do not assume that ambitious candidates may be ready and able to adopt whatever characteristics they perceive a role demands. Whether candidates can sustain these behaviours once they get the job is another matter.

Another deceiving feature is the stylistic use of positive outlines in test outcomes. You can’t fail these tests but you might fail to be selected depending on your responses. “Typically they say there are no right or wrong answers but that would seem to conflict with people who are going to look askance at certain personality characteristics,” says Mr Johnson.

Mr Blinkhorn’s continued scepticism is as robust as that of his former colleague. “There is a very moderate correlation between measures of conscientiousness and tenure in certain sorts of jobs,” he said. “Apart from

that they can usually pick up certain disorders such as Asperger's syndrome but these affect quite small proportions of the population.

"I can lecture for an hour without notes. I spent 14 years doing that. But it doesn't mean that I like to do that all the time. You negotiate with your own temperament and sometimes you develop different selves and interact differently with different people. The derivative of personality, the word *Persona*, after all is Latin for a mask."

Mr Blinkhorn equates the approach of some tests as "the equivalent to rifling through someone's underwear drawer. It's a bit sneaky."

In fact delving among underwear drawers and the rest of the bedroom may be effective ways of assessing character according to *Blink*, the latest book by Malcolm Gladwell, author of the best-selling *Tipping Point*. He cites research by Samuel Gosling, of the University of Texas, Austin, that measured a group of students across what are referred to as the "big five" dimensions of personality: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness to new experiences.

The friends were able to rank the students pretty accurately on the same dimensions. In his next exercise Mr Gosling used strangers who he asked to rank people on the basis of what they could see in the students' bedrooms. The friends' descriptions were better than those of the strangers on two dimensions – extraversion and agreeableness. But on the other three traits, the strangers were closer to the mark.

"What this suggests is that it is quite possible for people who have never met us and who have spent only twenty minutes thinking about us, to come to a better understanding of who we are than people who have known us for years."

A glance at my son's bedroom leads me to one observation: he should look for some work in a jungle. He will feel comfortable there.

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