

PERSONALITY TESTS WITHOUT PEOPLE



HyperText*

Mech Warrior 2 A very popular and murderous computer game that features gangs of robots trashing everything that crosses their paths.

Psychometrics The study and measurement of mental states, mental processes and the relationships between them.

From SYTE 1

"People are complex and hard to reduce to a set number of dimensions, but Selector focuses on specific behaviours we know are related to success or failure in the workplace," McGregor says.

His motivation to develop the product came after he wrote an adaptive maths program for the Dick Smith System 80, one of the first computers.

An adaptive program adjusts the level of difficulty to monitor performance, so making the person work harder.

"I'd been involved with the US, Australia, England and Canada in looking at testing, and I expected they would produce stuff, but nothing happened."

So McGregor did it.

While several recruitment consultants express scepticism about the absence of a human monitor and result interpreter, McGregor is sanguine.

"If the person has no knowledge of psychometrics, then they can just work off the report, which gives a profile of scores that relate to norms (how you fare against the statistics of the 5000 database assessments in the computer)," he says.

"If they are trained, then they can take the report further through interpretation."

Chris Symonds emphasises that Selector is a selection tool, and is not meant to be used to make a final decision. "It is to help the consultant make the final decision. It says this person is X, Y or Z."

Phil Kerry, managing director of Dunhill Management Services, which uses OPQ and a range of profiling assessments, says a number of questions need to be asked about the assessments in Selector's database.

"What people were tested for the 5000 assessments? Because a CEO's role is very different to that of a factory worker, there can't be any basis for comparison. I would question the thinking around that sample."

While Kerry says Dunhill spent a lot of time researching different tests before choosing OPQ, he doesn't believe there is one definitive test.

"There are a whole variety of things, depending on the job, so you need to put together a different number of tests. What OPQ does is highlight the competencies needed for a role."

Michael Markiewicz, managing director of Hamilton, James and Bruce — which also uses OPQ — wonders how keen candidates will be to do a test that only focuses on negatives.

"There is some hesitation with senior people to do these things anyway, because they feel they have proved themselves."

"If (the test) brings out negatives, they may feel it will be held against them. If the job doesn't work out, or be used as a negotiating tool to reduce their salary pack-

age. I would also want to know the weakness of the people I will be working with, if they know mine."

Nick Waterworth, managing director of Michael Page Recruitment, says his company uses paper-based tests only, but is investigating computerised tests. "We would get one if it was more efficient and accurate than what we use now."

Helen Crossing, from Helen Crossing and Associates, is another who disagrees with Selector's emphasis on "negatives".

"You can always rip people to shreds, but you need to look at the constructive, positive attributes of people because these are the things people work off," she says.

Crossing, an organisational psychologist who specialises in the assessment of senior management within the banking, finance and computer industries, is concerned at the "speediness" of Selector. She says a comprehensive approach should be taken when assessing people.

"This willingness to purchase tools to

'Selector focuses on specific behaviours we know are related to success or failure in the workplace'

understand people and come up with a profile is insulting.

"People should be worried that this will be used to make significant decisions about their careers and their lives."

"However, it's very hard to assess a test or something like this unless you have access to research data. It needs to be in the market so other people can validate it."

In regard to the elimination of psychologists, Crossing is naturally wary. "Psychologists need to be involved, you need to see someone to assess them. Work attitudes can be found through testing, but you can't get around talking with someone."

"We assess people and use a range of tools, including interviews which are thorough and lengthy and can take up to a day. At a senior level you need to find out about their work style, their leadership skills, ability to implement and business understanding," Crossing says.

"One test can't do all that. You need time with a person to really understand where a person is coming from. The less time you spend, the more wrong you can be."

Crossing is positive about is the "lite" Internet version. "People are curious to know about themselves, and it is fine for that. No harm can be done there, it's valid and useful. The important thing is understanding the tool and using it in the right context."

Prepare to be analysed

MEREDITH WALSH gritted her teeth and sat for the Selector test. Here is her diary of the experience.

Selector asked me to complete a range of IQ, interest, health, personality and competency tests. The idea is that the general public can download it, and a more comprehensive version will be used by recruitment agencies for selection.

The system looks really posh. Nice graphics, easy to follow, a banquet of bits. It seems to be a cross between Mech Warrior 2, an information gatherer that picks you up if you enter employment and study history dates that don't make sense, and a test.

First task: let's find out what I like to do in the world of work.

I knocked off the 100-item Interest Inventory in five minutes. You have a five-point scale to respond to a series of activities. It is obvious what I do and don't like!

I'm feeling relaxed. But then, the medical and alcohol section comes straight after!

"How many of these symptoms have you experienced in the last week?"

Answer YES or NO to a huge list, followed by an intrusion into my drinking behaviour.

Believe me, I was just as embarrassed responding to the computer as I am talking to my local GP about my bowel habits.

Later, the screen flashes the cur message: "ABOVE AVERAGE MEDICAL SYMPTOMS".

"This is really in your face! What am I supposed to do with that information? Worse, I was advised that the candidates who sit the tests are not given their results unless they pay for them, or the recruiting firm decides to make them available.

I could be tortured for weeks about the implications of saying yes to symptoms.

I was very peeved that the computer

didn't ask me about my medical history, or whether the previous week had been unusual in any way. What if I miss out on a job because they think I am one sick puppy, and there is a perfectly reasonable explanation?

Then again, would savvy job-seekers really admit to any of these symptoms?

Next section was IQ: verbal, spatial, numerical, etc. Enjoyed doing the verbal and felt very comfortable. But I couldn't really answer any of the numerical or spatial questions, except the easy sample question.

I started to feel anxious and bored, so I skipped to something I wanted to do. Had a fabulous time doing lots of problem-solving in-tray activities.

The aviation simulation activities were great fun, but it made a real mess of tracking — it was obvious that I should never consider a job as an air traffic controller!

I was amused, but what if I had been humiliated or devastated? How would the computer help me to cope?

I am left wondering about the implications of downloading this software for general consumption.

I could be sitting home alone and get really depressed after doing this exercise. I would like help if I was confused or misunderstood the feedback. I don't think the computer would notice that I was thinking dark thoughts.

Alternatively, in the absence of counselling support I might just say, "Oh, yeah," but not do anything with it.

I can understand that the method is more accessible and cost-effective interpretation and debriefing by a trained professional, but it seems to raise some tricky questions.

What if someone took this material the wrong way? Does it trivialise a serious service? Have they thought about this? Maybe the final version will address these questions.