

PAST PROGRAM
Employment Testing
by William Ruch

Employment testing has a long history. The earliest testing program is reported for the year 2200 B.C. when the Emperor of China examined his officials every three years. Modern testing got its start at the beginning of the twentieth century with the development of the Binet Intelligence Scale which was used to predict students' ability to learn school subjects. Sixty years of research and the requirements of vast labor mobilization during two world wars brought testing to the present state of development.

Most companies use tests in screening applicants for employment. In a survey conducted by Psychological Services, Inc. in 1963, 84% of the responding companies said they used tests. General intelligence tests are most often used; these are a direct outgrowth of the original Binet Scale. A person's score on such a test is determined primarily by his verbal and reasoning ability, and his ability to deal with numerical material. Another widely used type which is becoming more and more popular, is the multi-aptitude test battery. It is more specific than intelligence tests; rather than combining various abilities into a single score, a separate score is obtained for each factor. For example, the verbal, numerical, and reasoning factors would be measured by three separate tests. Other multi-aptitude tests measure space visualization, perceptual speed, memory and fluency. The multi-aptitude tests generally are more reliable in predicting how well an applicant will perform on the job, because only those tests relating to the job are used.

Although tests are not perfect, they do assist an employment interviewer in making more valid hiring decisions. In one study of key punch operators, 69% of those passing the tests were rated by their supervisors as above average in job performance, whereas only 33% of those failing the tests were so rated. In a study of sales representatives 77% of those passing the tests were rated above average whereas only 39% of those failing the tests were above average.

But caution must be exercised in using tests, particularly on minority group members. In the case of Leon Myart versus Motorola, the Chicago FEPC hearing examiner ruled that general intelligence tests are discriminatory because they do not reflect and equate the influences of culture. Due to these factors, the "heretofore culturally disadvantaged groups" will not perform as well on the tests. Although this decision was later reversed in court, it set off a wave of controversy throughout the country.

The most controversial tests are the so-called personality tests. These measure such things as drive and energy, sociability, dominance, economic motivation, persuasive interest, clerical interest, and mechanical interest. Technically, these are not really tests because they have no "right" or "wrong" answers. They are more correctly called personality inventories. They tell us what types of activities a person will enjoy and how well he will be able to utilize his knowledge and skills. Much has been written in the last few years concerning the validity of these inventories. Journalists Vance Packard in "The Organization Man" and Martin Gross "The Brainwatchers" claim that personality inventories are virtually useless. Furthermore, the probing questions constitute an invasion of privacy. The truth is, however that when these are used properly by professional psychologists they do give an indication of how well a person will perform on a particular job.

Tests are sometimes used as part of an employer's promotion procedure. A few contracts spell out when and how tests may be used, but typically the language on this issue is rather vague. The evaluation of an employee for promotion is a different matter than the evaluation of a job applicant. The employee has already built up a record with the company in such things as performance, absenteeism, tardiness, and disciplinary action. His seniority reflects stability. If he's been around for several years he is obviously not a job-hopper. Also, it is often felt that management has incurred an obligation to the more senior employees, that long seniority alone is reason to promote. However, a person's seniority and work performance are not necessarily good predictors of how well he will do on a high level job. One method used in the past, with the concurrence of labor and management, is to assign points for both seniority and test scores.

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