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Personality Assessments Can Facilitate Job Success

By Deanna Hartley

Several decades ago, psychologists used clinically based personality questionnaires — designed to measure pathology or abnormal behaviors — in the workplace to try to predict job success, said Dr. Hennie Kriek, president of SHL Americas, an assessment and consulting service provider.

The late 1980s saw a movement to increase the relevance of these types of tests by adapting personality-based questions for the world of work.

"It's like typical behavioral questions [employers] would ask in interviews, but you can give [them] to somebody online even before they get to the final interview," Kriek said. "[This] allows [employers] to have a lot of information in a structured format during the interview to see how an individual would fit in different roles."

Kriek discussed the importance of a person-job match: studying the job role on the one hand and identifying specific personality attributes and competencies on the other.

"Once you understand the specific strengths of the individual — leadership, analysis, persuasive selling skills, networking — and match that with the requirements of the organization, then we can get a good picture if this individual will be successful in this position or if it will be a poor match," Kriek said.

Sharon Birkman Fink, president and CEO of Birkman International Inc., explained that lack of a good personality assessment could turn even the best promotion into a potential disadvantage for the company. For example, this might happen if an employee is thriving at his current job and is promoted to a sales position when he hates sales.

Personality assessments come into play because one size does not fit all, Fink said. **"People often ask, 'What [should] a CEO look like?' And there are certain common denominators, but there are also great differences based on the type of company, size of company and the industry the person is being asked to lead."**

"Someone who's an excellent leader of a manufacturing plant may not be a great dean at a university,"

she said. **"A person's key interests say a lot about where their fulfillment and passions are going to be. That — combined with a lot of the personality traits [and] temperament — [will] give you some big clues as to where they're going to be strongest if indeed they take on the leadership role."**

Personality assessments provide insight into an individual's leadership style, temperament appropriateness to a particular assignment and comfort level in groups.

"If you align [an employee's] interest and temperament with the job description, your probability of succeeding in the long term goes astronomically up, [which is good for] retention," Fink said. **"It's using the tools that are available to do a better job of hiring and career pathing a person through the organization as they evolve as human beings."**

Len Benckenstein, chairman and CEO of Southwest Electronic Energy Corp., requires all employees to take the Birkman test — a well-known personality test that looks at workers' motivations — and tries to determine if their interests and underlying needs are compatible with their job descriptions.

For instance, those working in the assembly area for the company — a specialty battery-pack manufacturer and designer — must have mechanical and scientific interests. Similarly, people in administration need to have clerical and numerical interests, as well as some literary interests, he said. "If I can find a person with those interests, they're going to love that job. It'll be a passion for them, and they'll do well," Benckenstein said.

As Fink put it, when it comes to personality assessments, there's no right or wrong, good or bad. **"You don't plant a cactus where the ficus are going to grow and then expect it to thrive,"** she said.