

## Introduction

Everything is now happening online, including psychometrics. The use of online assessment for selection and development has grown considerably in recent years, with a recent CIPD survey showing a rise from 6 per cent of recruiters using online assessment for some positions in 2002 to 25 per cent using them in 2006.

The benefits of online assessments are many, though the main benefits relate to accessibility. Assessments can be taken from anywhere with internet access, at a time that suits both the organisation and the respondent, without the need for organisations to administer and manage time-consuming and expensive assessment sessions to which respondents have to travel. All this accessibility makes good business sense.

From a recruitment perspective, online assessment also has potentially significant advantages. Recruiters typically start the selection process by screening application forms or CVs. Whilst valuable for understanding some elements of applicants (e.g. relevant experience), their overall ability to predict successful job performance is limited. Ability or aptitude tests, on the other hand, have consistently been shown to be one of the best single predictors of job performance and success on job-related training courses. Having this information early on in the recruitment process therefore gives recruiters significantly more relevant information on which to base their initial selection decisions. This again makes good business sense, both in terms of efficiency and cost.

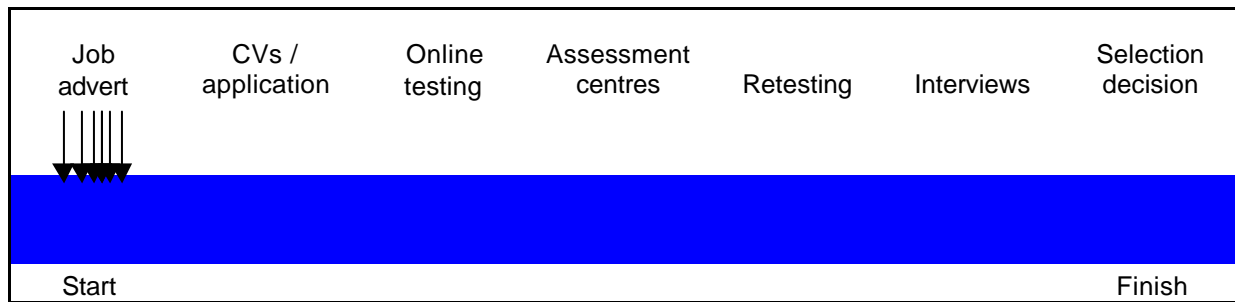
The rise in online assessments for selection has been mirrored by a similar increase in their use for personal and team development, and for conducting organisational surveys. The benefits are similar to those for recruitment, essentially allowing greater flexibility in when responses are collected. In both cases, but particularly for personality-related assessments when complex processing of results may be involved, online assessments also save substantial time in scoring and generating reports.

## The validity issue

The major shadow hanging over online assessment is the issue of the validity of the results – the ‘Who’s out there?’ question. Firstly, it is important to recognise that this question, along with many others that are raised about online assessment, is not new. Nor does it apply just to online assessment. Even with supervised assessment, candidates can get others to take assessments on their behalf, though clearly unsupervised assessment makes this easier. A second point to note is that validity concerns have primarily centred around ability or aptitude tests used for recruitment purposes, rather than personality assessments. There are, however, threats to the validity of online personality assessments, though these are not so widely recognised.

No data is available on the proportion of assessments that are taken by someone other than the intended recipient, though it is likely that the scale of this issue is overestimated. Regardless of how frequently deception may occur, however, there are a number of relatively easy ways organisations can use to reduce its likely impact.

The most frequent way to increase validity in online testing is to establish an ‘honesty contract’. Simply, test-takers agree that all information they provide as part of the selection process is truthful, including their test results. Statements to this effect are used as standard by most organisations. In the same way that organisations may check on data provided by applicants (e.g. asking to see copies of exam certificates or following-up specific claims with referees), an honesty contract can include the option to retest candidates at a later stage in the selection process. So, for example, if an ability test is used to screen out lower scorers during a first sift, all applicants who make it to a later stage in the selection process may be re-tested on an alternate version of the test, as illustrated below. The intention is to dissuade applicants from cheating when taking an online assessment, as this will be discovered when they are subsequently re-tested under supervised conditions.



An example selection process with successive selection stages, including online testing and retesting after the assessment centre

A related but alternative approach is to position any online assessment as a self-screening exercise. By, for example, explaining to applicants that a job requires a high level of numerical reasoning ability and those who attain less than the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile on a numerical reasoning test are unlikely to succeed at the job or later stages of the selection procedure, organisations can introduce a self-screening element to the selection process. Though some applicants with lower scores will still continue with their applications, as an online assessment is positioned as providing feedback and not as a hard criterion that must be passed, the motivation for cheating is eliminated.

Ultimately, the approach that an organisation takes to online assessment needs to be consistent with their broader assessment strategy. In situations where it is necessary to conduct mass screening of a large volume of applicants online assessment is very effective, particularly when applicants may be geographically dispersed. Online assessment can also be effective in collecting information from individuals, particularly as part of a process such as an individual audit, team building exercise or coaching when it is coupled with personal contact. For more senior positions, specialist areas where the applicant pool is likely to be small or internal recruitment, online assessment may not be so appropriate, at least until personal contact has been made with the applicant. The efficiencies of online assessment must be weighed against its potential for minimising personal contact, opportunities for relationship building and threat of depersonalising an assessment or development experience.

The validity of personality assessments and similar tools that do not have 'right' answers is assumed to be less affected by administering them online in unsupervised environments. What questions have been raised have centred more around how the online experience may affect the profiles the respondents report. It has long been recognised that mindset and expectations can affect personality profiles. Much effort has gone into the development of faking scales and related measures to detect deliberate distortion, but mindset can be more subtle and in some cases non-conscious. Though the extent to which non-conscious distortion can be controlled is debatable, whether administered remotely online or in person, good administration is key to maximising validity for personality and related instruments (see below).

One unexpected finding from the research into online administration is that some respondents may be more open and honest under unsupervised conditions. Remote assessment may therefore result in some respondents revealing things about themselves they would be reluctant to when faced with an assessor. Such findings have, however, been modest, so are unlikely to impact significantly on validity.

## Making the most of online opportunities

Regardless of when online assessments are used and how they are positioned, the most effective way of ensuring their validity is through proper administration. This applies to ability tests, personality assessments or other online questionnaires, whether they are taken for selection or development. It is all too easy to send out brief details asking respondents to go to a certain web address, enter a set of codes and complete some online assessments. Anyone can do this, though it misses completely the importance of good administration in the assessment process – a competency that is given considerable weight in the British Psychological Society's Level A and B training courses.

Good administration means that the respondent understands why they are being asked to take the assessment, how it fits into the broader selection or development process, and the specific nature of the assessment itself. The key outcome of good administration is getting 'buy-in', where the respondent is committed to and motivated for the assessment process. Good administration also emphasises the two-way flow of information. An organisation wants to find out more about respondents, but respondents should also see the assessment experience as an opportunity to find out more about themselves and, in the case of selection, whether the organisation is one that appeals to them as a prospective employer. The use of

assessments as self-screening tools, as mentioned above, is another example of how they can be positioned to provide feedback to the applicant.

Before introducing online assessment, make sure you have asked and answered the questions below, many of which apply to both paper-based and online assessment. Whilst these questions have been phrased from the perspective of selection, they are also applicable to development.

- Have we identified the best assessments for the job?
- Where in the selection pipeline are the assessments going to be most effective (considering likely number of applicants, validity of assessments and desired number of applicants progressing to the next stage)?
- Given the answer to the above question, where do we want to use online assessments and where paper-based assessments?
- Have we ensured that respondents are adequately briefed about the assessment process and its purpose?
- Is the actual administration of the highest quality, whether online or face-to-face, and is the respondent fully supported through this process?
- How will the respondent receive feedback, whether successful or not?
- Have we made adequate plans for the collection of data to ensure the ongoing validity of our assessment methods?

## **Conclusions**

Online assessment is a powerful and potentially very efficient tool that can be integrated into recruitment and development. Like all tools, however, it needs to be used appropriately to get the best from it.

The need to be cautious about the validity of assessment data is only right. But there have always been many threats to this validity – effective recruitment and development is about getting the right balance between the validity of the assessment data, and therefore the decisions that are based on this, and the costs of the assessment process. To do this requires a consideration of whole selection or development pipeline in a broader organisational context. Only by taking this perspective can the use of online assessments, along with all other assessment methods, be effectively integrated into organisational practice.

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