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THE JUNGLE | Focus on Recruitment, Pay and Getting Ahead

## Applicants' Personalities Put to the Test

BY TODDI GUTNER

**A**RMED WITH AN M.B.A. from Arkansas State University, 24-year-old Dana Lund figured she had what she needed to succeed at her new job in the sales-training program at **Acxiom Corp.**, a global interactive marketing firm.

But it wasn't until she took the Birkman Method personality assessment test—a 45-minute assessment to identify an individual's work style and behavior—that she really got the tools she needed. The Little Rock, Ark.-based Acxiom requires nearly every new employee to take the 298-question test. Ms. Lund, who joined the company last year, says she quickly learned she worked best by planning a task step-by-step, being creative and having time to reflect. "It has helped me to learn how to interact better with work teams and to leverage my strengths in the workplace," she says.

Many young people are facing this extra hurdle. These days, more than 80% of midsize and large companies use personality and ability assessments for entry and midlevel positions as either pre-employment or new-employee orientation tools, says Scott Erker, a senior vice president at **Development Dimensions International**, a global human-resources consultancy. These assessments have been widely used in retail positions but are quickly spreading to other industries, including finance, technology, health care and operations.

Ultimately, these tests aim to help a company hire a specific type of person for a job that might require particular traits—or conversely, to rule out traits that are likely to lead to job failure. "Companies understand that the right personality fit is a critical criteria for good performance," says Mr. Erker. Getting that fit right reduces turnover costs—typically one year's salary—required to recruit and train each professional.



"You can reduce turnover up to 50% with the right pre-employment assessment," Mr. Erker says.

What's more, companies are using them to screen candidates as they apply; candidates won't even get an interview unless they reach a certain score or result.

That's how Murrel Karsh, president of **Windy City Fieldhouse**, uses a test that measures attention to detail to hire for the team-building and corporate-event company. In the past three years, more than 100 applicants have been required to take the test, which asks takers to do things like do a count of the letter "l" in a three-sentence paragraph to measure how carefully a respondent works. The test, provided by Roswell, Ga.-based **PreVisor**, has done its job. Mr. Karsh says he has found that people who have results below a certain score don't do well on the job.

While you can't study for a personality assessment, there are some things you can do to get a leg up. First, do your homework to understand the job and the organization, says Mr. Erker. "The criteria used to score the test is linked to the job being filled," he says. Try to find out which assessment is being used and then research how and why

companies use it. That will give you insight into the company and the particulars of the job.

If the job you're applying for has a high customer-service requirement, for example, then it's likely that the test will try to determine whether you have those personality characteristics that are necessary to deal with people of all temperaments and the patience to solve problems on a continuing basis. If that's not you, you might not want to continue your application.

It might be tempting to study up on what kind of answers you should give to score well, but experts caution against doing so. "Don't try to psych out the test," says Jo Bennett, a partner at **Battalia Winston**, an executive recruiting firm in New York. Be honest and open in your answers. If you lie or try to manipulate your answers to land a job that doesn't fit you or your personality, you're more likely to be miserable at work. If you land a job and then try to fudge a work-style assessment, you could find yourself misunderstood by your boss.

Matt Rion, a 29-year-old marketing and operations manager at **Windy City Fieldhouse**, was a

bit anxious when asked to take the attention-to-detail test a few years ago. "I didn't really know where the assessment factored into the application process," says Mr. Rion who now administers the test himself. "I understand now that we just want to make sure that someone has the capability to do the job."

Results of the pre-interview assessments aren't generally shared with job applicants. But if your assessment was given after you agreed to take a job, the results of the test are typically shared.

Ms. Lund, now a client-relationship manager with Acxiom, not only learned she was a planner in her work style but also what that meant: She tends to be very organized and needs to know well in advance what needs to be done to complete a job.

The Birkman test also gave her insight into her co-workers. Results are given on a four-square matrix attached to a color: green (communicator), red (problem solver), yellow (detailed scheduler) and blue (planner). At Acxiom, everyone wears their Birkman colors on a badge. If Ms. Lund is working with a communicator she says she knows she will need to provide a lot of information to that person, or if her work partner is a detailed scheduler Ms. Lund knows she needs to be very specific.

"We see the assessment as an opportunity for our professionals to better understand themselves," says Debbie Pyle, human-resources training and development leader at the company.