



Workforce

# Recruiting right

**Tim Dixon** looks at two pre-employment strategies developed by psychologists to help employers choose the best person for the role, first time.

**Careful selection:** Because Hammond Care's Southwood facility was based on a new model, it was especially important to find the right staff.

For many managers recruitment is a daunting task. It can be difficult to gain a proper understanding of a candidate, when sizing them up from across the table in the tense environment of an interview room. But for most managers, it is one of the most important functions of their role.

According to Bob Joss, the CEO of Westpac for much of the 1990s: "Hiring good people is the single most important thing a manager can do."

When the person in question is going to be responsible for the care and wellbeing of frail and vulnerable older people, the ability to understand what he or she is really like, is even more important. Despite this, the selection process is often left more to good luck than good practice and when this happens, things can go wrong.

Surveys conducted across a range of industries and organisations by Australasian recruitment company, Chandler Macleod show that one out of three new recruits would not be re-hired if the employer had known more about them during the recruitment process.

"Anyone who has any experience of hiring will know about this," says Dr Ken Byrne, a psychologist with recruitment firm, Self Select. "A person may look really good in an interview and say all the right things but in a few month's time, it's as if they have had a personality transplant."

And getting it wrong can be costly. Further research from Chandler Macleod suggests that the difference in output between a top performer and a poor performer in the same position is equal to 80 per cent of the mean salary for that position each year. In other words, if the average salary for a position is \$40,000, the difference in output between a poor performer and good performer will be \$32,000.

While these figures are concerning, psychologists have developed a number of techniques which they say can be used to help identify the core abilities, motivations and behaviours

Excellent	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Good	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fair	<input type="checkbox"/>
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of potential employees. Used properly in conjunction with conventional interviewing techniques and reference checking, they aim to remove the guesswork from recruitment.

### BEHAVIOURAL INTERVIEWING

Behavioural interviewing is a method that has been evolving over the course of the Twentieth Century. At first it was mainly about using hypothetical questions – “What would you do if...?” – but around the 1970s, researchers discovered that questions about specific past events – “Tell me about a time when...” were more indicative of candidates’ future performance.

Irving Stackpole who consults to healthcare providers and nursing homes in the USA and the UK says the ‘behavioural event’ technique is especially useful for understanding the way a caring professional works.

“Simply asking a set of “Tell me about a time when...” questions doesn’t mean you are using behavioural interviewing techniques.”  
Paul Clifford

**Above: Southwood-** The management have made recruitment a priority and psychometric testing plays an important part in that process.

“The two characteristics that are most relevant and salient for people working in a caring capacity are empathy and reliability; a real measure of empathy and reliability is past performance; and the best measure of past performance is behaviour-based interview methods,” he says.

“So, for example, when you are interviewing a prospective employee and you are asking them about their ability to empathise, you should ask them to give you an example of a situation where they had to demonstrate empathy in difficult circumstances. Usually, the candidate will begin by spouting a platitude, like ‘I love working with older people’. If that occurs, it is the interviewer’s role to say: ‘That’s good – but can you give me a specific example’. If you keep using probing questions, it will become apparent if someone is not telling the truth.”

While it may sound simple, this is the point where behavioural interviewing is most likely to go wrong. According to Paul Clifford, a psychologist and HR Consultant with Link Consulting, many people who claim to be using behavioural interviewing techniques, do so poorly.

“When a candidate goes off on a tangent, it takes a certain degree of skill to detect that they are not on the right track and then to interrupt them in a way that doesn’t lose that sense of rapport. Often interviewers consider it rude to interrupt and they worry about maintaining the flow and energy of the interview so they just let the candidate talk about irrelevant topics without finding out what they need to know.

“It does require a certain amount of skill and a high degree of interaction with the candidate that you don’t have in a traditional interview. Simply asking a set of ‘Tell me about a time when...’ questions doesn’t mean you are using behavioural interviewing techniques.”

Another common mistake with behavioural interviewing is inadequate preparation and consistency, says Clifford.

“Behavioural interviewing needs a structured approach. Before you begin, you have to select five or so key competencies that you want to find out about all the candidates. Then you develop a series of questions around those competencies and ask those same questions to each of the candidates in the same manner.”

### IN THE FIELD

Hammond Care’s dementia specific Southwood facility in Sydney’s southwest uses an unconventional model of care. Made



Paul Clifford

up of six self-contained cottages that operate as households, its staff all cook and clean as well as providing care. In contrast, the Sinclair nursing home it replaced when it opened last year was a typical nursing home of the 1970s.

To ensure that the staff at Southwood were suited to the new model, the organisation developed a highly targeted recruitment process which was open to all existing Sinclair staff and then to outsiders.

"An interview certainly gives you an indication of what a candidate is going to be like," says Hammond's regional manager, David Martin. "But we wanted to experiment with other assessment methods."

In a two-hour interview process, candidates went through three different assessments aimed at identifying their behaviour patterns in a range of circumstances. The first component was a 20-minute, ten-question 'behavioural event' interview.

"We also put in some clearly flagged hypothetical questions which is a little unusual – but we felt it was a good indicator of how people think on their feet and apply common sense."

The second element was a written exercise in which candidates were given 15 minutes to answer four behavioural-event and hypothetical questions. It also gave an idea of the candidates' reading and writing skills for documentation purposes.

Last of all was a team exercise in which groups were asked to respond to a hypothetical situation, such as landing on Mars.

"Through all three assessments, we wanted to see how they interacted, how they expressed themselves and how they solved problems," says Martin.

### PSYCHOMETRIC TESTING

Psychometric tests used in recruitment are usually either personality tests – which measure a person's emotions, attitudes, social interaction and preferences – and aptitude tests which measure general mental ability or test for specific skills (see box below).

#### DIFFERENT TYPES OF PSYCHOMETRIC TESTS

- **Personality Scales:** measure an individual's motivations, emotions, attitudes and social behaviours and indicate how someone is likely to respond in a range of different situations.
- **Occupational Interest Inventories:** measure the degree to which an individual likes working in various occupational areas.
- **General Ability Tests:** also known as general cognitive ability tests, intelligence tests or IQ tests, they provide a measure of 'general mental ability'. General mental ability is a person's ability to see the relationships between objects, such as words, numbers or shapes and then use that information to solve various types of problems. While many other types of ability can be measured, these three (words, numbers and shapes) are often referred to as the 'building blocks of intelligence' as they provide a good indicator of one's ability to learn new skills and adapt to different situations.
- **Technical Ability Tests:** unlike the measures of general ability, these tests look at abilities specific to technical jobs. These tests still require the ability to see relationships between objects and then use that information to solve various types of problems, but the types of relationships, and the objects that must be reasoned with, relate to those encountered in technical settings.
- **Critical Thinking Tests:** measure abilities associated with professional and management roles including a person's ability to logically evaluate various forms of verbal or numerical information. They are applicable for jobs that require a person to make appropriate decisions or recommendations based on critical evaluation of available data.

This information was provided by Jackie Gordon, a consultant psychologist with Chandler Macleod.



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GETTING THE RIGHT RESULTS

In 2004 Dr Ken Byrne from SelfSelect was engaged by Glenview Home in Tasmania to conduct pre-employment profiling on job applicants. At the time, the home had 97 full-time employees and since then, another 105 have been recruited.

After they heard anecdotally that the strategy was working well, Dr Byrne and his colleagues decided to conduct a study to measure the effectiveness of their intervention. Using the home's records, the study evaluated the performance of each employee over their first three years in the job.

Since the pre-employment profiling began, clear hiring errors have dropped from 27 to 6 per cent; complaints about staff behaviour are down 30 per cent. And Glenview's workers compensation claims are now one and a half per cent below the industry average.

**Dr Byrne will be presenting the findings from the study with the Manager of Glenview Homes, Christine Dibley, at the ACSA National Conference in September in Adelaide. For more information, go to: [www.agedcare.org.au](http://www.agedcare.org.au)**



Dr Byrne says personality tests are particularly useful for finding out information that would otherwise remain hidden.

"Most organisations hire people for what they know. For example, a person might get a job because they have a Cert IV or they know how to fill out the application form. But once they're hired, organisations want to fire people for who they are. It's usually because some part of the person's personality doesn't match what they say.

"Profiling tools are designed to help us find out who this person really is. They can measure their ability to read other people, the person's work ethic, their emotional awareness and their ability to work cooperatively with others."

The type of testing used also depends on the type of position that needs to be filled. The more senior the position, the more intensive the testing.

"If a person is going to be in a management position in aged care, they need to be able to detect patterns, particularly clinical

patterns, among residents," says Bernie McCarthy from McCarthy Psychology Services. "When a resident has an infection, they will display signs of that and there will be changes in their behaviour over a period of days. And the ability to notice that is something that you can test for with certain intelligence tests."

Apart from senior executive roles, McCarthy says the health sector has generally been slow to adopt psychometric and intelligence testing. That's partly because of the cost involved; organisations can pay between \$50 and \$800 a head to evaluate prospective employees. But he says that when used properly, they can prove very effective.

"Ideally, these tests sit alongside the face-to-face interview. Once the interview has been done you then use the psychometric testing with your shortlist of the top three candidates. They are too expensive to use with everyone and that is prohibitive. But with a shortlist they can help to validate a decision or even differentiate between two candidates of apparent equal value when the differences aren't immediately obvious."

Most psychometric tests are now available as a series of multiple choice questions on the internet and are accessed using a supplied password, although some are still done on paper and scored by a computer.



Bernie McCarthy

IN THE FIELD

Trevu House in Adelaide has been using psychometric testing to screen applicants for management positions since the 1980s. Today they are given the 318-question Humm-Wadsworth Temperament Scale which tests for a range of characteristics from commercial attributes to dealing with stress.



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The high care home's CEO, Craig Brown has a background in human resources. Ten years ago he discovered a personality test for entry-level employees, which has since been incorporated into the facility's recruitment process. The CMYWorkforce (formerly WAS+) test measures work attitude, the balance between service and task orientation and basic intelligence.

"The use of these tools contributes to a reduction in selection errors and that's important because you're always better off hiring the best person for the job," says Brown. "It provides you with a little bit more information about a person than you get from their CV and interview. It also helps to carefully target questions about applicants to their referees, again helping to build an accurate picture of an applicant."

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Craig Brown



Above: Trevu House in Adelaide

"The other area these tests help with is targeting issues that can be discussed carefully with the employee when are employed. You can actually identify if a candidate has a need for coaching in one particular area and focus their professional development around that."

Trevu House's approach to psychometric testing has been part of a broader human resource initiative over the past seven to ten years, which has also included changes to staff development programs. And in that time it has seen a steady reduction in staff turnover.

"Once you make recruitment and retention a priority," says Brown, "you have to keep it a priority. You can't just say we did it five years ago and leave it there – you have to follow through with it." ■

#### WHAT TO LOOK FOR

When asking a behaviour based question, interviewers should look for a three-part response that follows the S-A-R principle.

- 1. Situation:** The candidate starts by explaining a set of circumstances that match the question.
- 2. Action:** The candidate then outlines what they did in those circumstances.
- 3. Response:** The candidate describes the outcome of their actions.

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