

COVER STORY

Analysis put to the test

Many recruiters use personality assessments but others are sceptical, writes **Sue White**.

As anyone with a career coach well knows, it's possible to go into a career-planning session as a person and come out as a personality type. Although not if you're working with the organisational development consultant Ric Willmot.

"I'm qualified to run all those tests like Myer-Briggs [MBTI] but I wouldn't," he says. "I feel they limit ... seeing what people really are."

But within his profession, Willmot may hold a minority opinion. Psychometric tests are now commonly used by organisations as part of their recruitment process or career-development programs.

Cognitive tests compare candidates against a particular norm group (for example, managers with managers); personality questionnaires look at an individual's style of working, relating and social and emotional skills; and motivational assessments offer insight into what drives us on the job.

The director of Allworth Juniper and an organisational psychologist, Elizabeth Allworth, says: "They are called psychometric tests because they have a big database of information behind them and we know, generally speaking, how people will perform on the test. It means we can generally compare apples with apples."

So how common are these tests? "Most large organisations would use psychometric assessment of some kind. I've seen figures of between 40 per cent to 70 per cent," Allworth says.

"Some industries are less inclined [than others] – retail [industries] don't tend to use them, nor do smaller organisations, whereas pharmaceutical, FMCG [fast-moving consumer goods], finance and banking do."

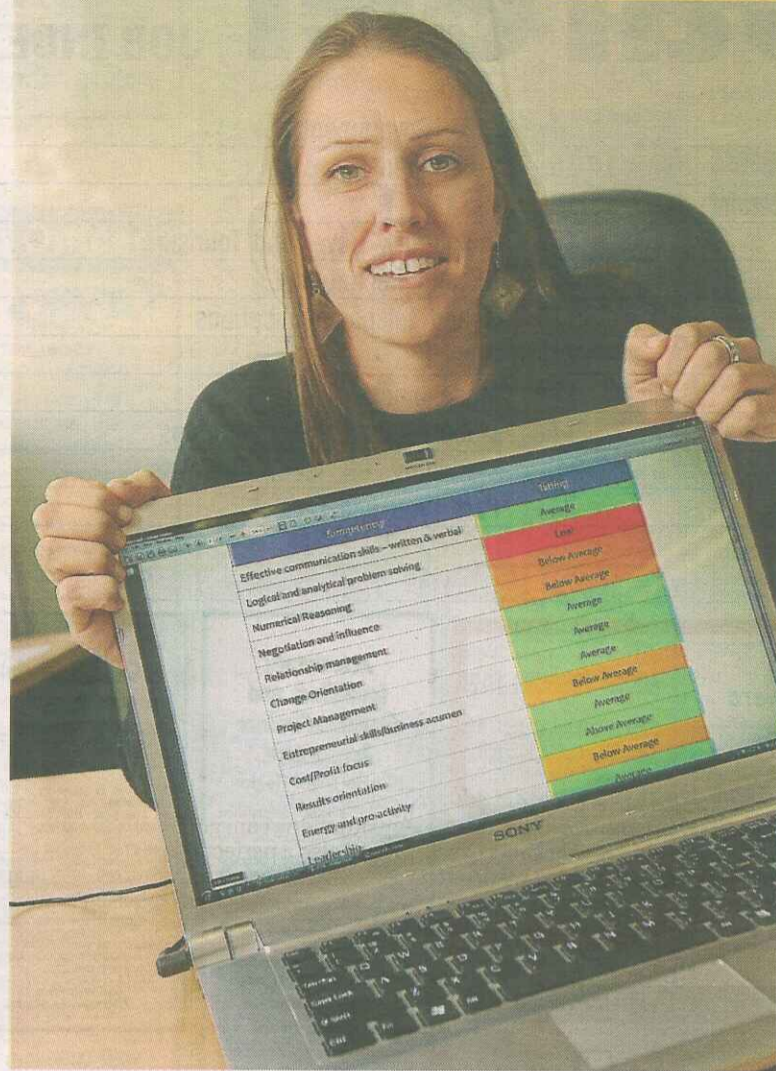
Part of Willmot's beef with testing is that it's often generic in nature. "I think most people use them because they're lazy," he says, although he says if they're administered by the right person at the right time, they can have some merit. Still, he'd rather see an organisation create a smart job advertisement that filters out the wrong people, rather than use testing to help find the right person.

Allworth says testing is valid when used as one part of a comprehensive recruitment process.

"It's very expensive to bring in somebody who doesn't perform well on the job," she says. "You've wasted money with the recruitment process and training time. It's a costly and messy business."

She says research into workplace testing – in particular the cognitive tests – shows they are valid predictors of success.

"It doesn't mean if someone



Results are in ... fibreHR's Lisa Spiden says tests are useful tools. Photo: Rodger Cummins

scores well on the test they'll do well on the job," she says. "But we're talking about general trends ... we know that those people who perform well on cognitive-ability tests do better on the job."

Of course, testing isn't foolproof, which is why psychologists use it mainly to validate interview impressions or home in on weaknesses instead of putting a tick or cross against a candidate's name.

"No matter how many tests we use, interviews we do, or how many reference checks we do, we'll never be 100 per cent accurate in our selection for positions," Allworth says.

"But [tests] add enough to validity to make it cost-effective

and reasonable for companies to do it."

She agrees there are some potential downsides.

"With online testing, there's the potential to get your best mate to do the test for you," she says. "[And from a candidate's perspective] if they're not feeling great on the day ... that can work against a candidate."

Willmot says tests requiring "forced choice" responses are easy to fake.

"You can go online, do it three or four times to get the hang of it and learn how to respond ... in a way you believe will give you the answers the person's looking for," he says.

The managing director of

fibreHR, Lisa Spiden, begs to differ. She says tests are harder to outsmart than many think.

"It'll show if you've been consistent in the way you've answered the questions," she says. "If people think 'I'm going for a sales job, I need to show I'm an extrovert', it will be able to show you've been inconsistent to try to sway the results in some way."

While faking your answers is an obvious no-no, Spiden says it's fair for candidates to learn what weak points such tests may be demonstrating, so they can address them more effectively in interviews.

She says many candidates don't realise they're often able to access the results of any testing done as part of a selection process.

"Often psych providers will provide free feedback to the candidate once the interview process is finished," Spiden says.

"Individuals can go back to the provider and see how they've come out."

Allworth says if you're thinking of changing career, it may also be worth giving motivational assessments a look-in.

"They provide you with a checklist of the type of organisation that might be good for you," she says.

Test results can help us see what we hold dear (perhaps money, career progression or nice colleagues) and choose our future employer accordingly.

"We all have needs and we can evaluate organisations we're looking at against those criteria," she says.

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