NHS
Health Education England

Values Based Recruitment

Guidance for using Personality Tests for Values Based Recruitment

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Acknowledgements

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Overview

The following guidance is designed to highlight key considerations NHS employing organisations and admissions staff within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) may need to take into account implementing a personality test for use alongside a selection process. It is intended to be used as a guide to assist with the planning, development and implementation of selection activities whilst recognising the need for individuals to tailor their approach to meet the needs of their own organisation.

It is recommended that utilisation of recruitment methods for assessment of values need to be considered with regards to the national core requirements, as set out in the national VBR framework. This recommends that an individual structured interview (including Multiple Mini Interviews) to assess values must be conducted as part of the overall recruitment process to effectively recruit for values. This may occur in isolation or as part of a wider process such as a selection centre or in conjunction with a screening method such as an SJT.

See the **HEE website** for more information about the national core requirements and to learn more about structured interviews.

Summary

- There is evidence to show that personality tests designed to measure the well-established Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality can be valid predictors of some real-world behaviour.

- There is a complex relationship between values and personality, and therefore the extent to which a given personality test can be used as a proxy measure for values should to subject to careful consideration. The evidence base for this is still in its infancy.

- Common concerns relating to personality tests are that they are more susceptible than other selection methods to applicants deliberately presenting themselves in a socially desirable fashion. The chance of applicants 'faking' responses in this way is likely to be greater if applicants believe that the test results are being used to make selection decisions.

- It is recommended that personality tests are used in combination with other selection exercises rather than in isolation when making selection decisions. Therefore, personality tests can be useful at attraction stages to help applicants self-reflect on their suitability for a role or they can be used to help drive more focused questioning during a structured interview.

- There are a wide variety of 'off-the-shelf' personality tools available, some of which can be mapped to existing competency frameworks. The choice of tool should be made by an individual appropriately trained to interpret the technical information provided by the test published. Particular consideration should be given the reliability and validity of the test as well as the available norm groups against which applicants' scores will be compared.

- The use of psychometric instruments such as personality tests can be costly if a fee is paid for each applicant who completes the tool, or if an external supplier is required to provide feedback to applicants in the absence of appropriately qualified individuals within the organisation.

What is a personality test?

A personality test is a type of psychometric test which is designed to assess an individual's preferences against particular traits or personality types. Personality tests usually present the applicant with a series of statements about their preferences and ask them to rate the extent to which each statement describes them. In this respect, personality tests rely on the test taker self-reporting. Personality tests tend to present items in one of two response formats; normative or ipsative. In the normative format test takers are asked to rate a series of statements and for each indicate the extent to which they agree that this describes them. In this format, the test taker could rank multiple items the same way. Figure 1 is an example of a normative response format.

Figure 1 Example personality test item – normative (rate all) response format

	Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**Neither Agree nor Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**
I find it easy to get to know people	⊗	○	○	○	○
I enjoy spending time by myself	○	○	⊗	○	○
I can be relied upon to be punctual	⊗	○	○	○	○
Others describe me as easy going	○	○	○	⊗	○

Ipsative response formats on the other hand force a choice between items. For example, test takers might be presented with small groups of items and asked to decide which of the items is most like them and which is least like them. In this format, only one item within each set can be selected as 'most' and only one as 'least' and this therefore forces a choice between the items. An example of an ipsative response format is shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 Example personality test item – ipsative (forced-choice) response format

	Most like me	**Least like me**
I find it easy to get to know people	○	○
I enjoy spending time by myself	○	○
I can be relied upon to be punctual	⊗	○
Others describe me as easy going	○	⊗

Personality tests can be administered either via a computer or in a paper/pencil format. Increasingly the tests have the option to be administered online. Those which are computer based/online can be automatically scored and often a profile can be instantaneously generated based on the test takers responses.

The scores usually present how the test taker compares to others within a particular population on each of the traits/domains which are measured. This population is referred to as a 'norm group'. Often it will be possible to select from a range of different norm groups (i.e. professionals in senior management positions, graduates or administrative/clerical staff grades) so that the test taker's responses are compared to the most relevant population.

The report which is generated will usually provide some information to aid interpretation of the scores or profile, for example, describing the typical behaviour of individuals that receive this score. Often separate reports are produced which are designed to be shared with the test taker to provide them with some feedback on their responses and associated personality profile. Care should be taken in distributing such reports to test takers and this should be accompanied by a feedback session with an appropriately trained individual (see section below on feedback).

What is the evidence base for personality tests?

The last thirty years have seen a substantial increase in the use of personality tests in personnel selection for a broad spectrum of job roles. Over several decades of research, personality researchers have agreed on the Five Factor Model (FFM) as a universal taxonomy of personality traits. The FFM is based on the following five factors or traits:

- *Extraversion* (i.e. outgoing, sociable, impulsive)
- *Emotional Stability* (i.e. calm, relaxed)
- *Agreeableness* (i.e. trusting, cooperative, helpful)
- *Conscientiousness* (i.e. hardworking, dutiful, organised)
- *Openness to Experience* (i.e. artistic, cultured, creative)

Research demonstrates that personality tests based on this FFM can predict some aspects of real world behaviour more so than knowledge-based assessments[1][2]. However, there are also limitations to personality tests which are important to be taken into account. Some of these important limitations are discussed below:

Within the literature, one of the most prevalent concerns about using personality tests within selection relates to the extent to which test takers can purposefully present themselves in a favourable light in order to successfully move through the selection process. As personality tests rely on self-report, a test taker could deliberately answer questions in a particular way in order to present them self in a certain manner which may not necessarily reflect their true

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[1] Ferguson E, James D and O'Hehir F et al. (2003). Pilot study of the roles of personality, references, and personal statements in relation to performance over the five years of a medical degree. *BMJ,* 326(7386), 429-432.

[2] Lievens F, Coetsier P and De Fruyt F et al. (2002). Medical students' personality characteristics and academic performance: A five-factor model perspective. *Medical Education*, 36, 1050-1056.

preferences. There have been a number of studies exploring this issue of individuals 'faking' personality tests with mixed results. Some researchers suggest that even if faking does have an effect on the validity of the test, it does not remove validity entirely. Tests can also be carefully constructed in order to minimise faking and many tests now include a social desirability scale. This is a measure of how likely it is that the test taker has tried to present themselves in a particularly favourably manner.

Whilst personality tests can vary in terms of the number of questions which are presented, the questions included will generally have been selected based on in-depth statistical analysis which demonstrates that they are a valid measure of a given construct (for example, conscientiousness, empathy). For this reason, most personality tests will tend to present all test takers with the same questions (although they may be presented in a different order). This has particular implications for test which are taken in an unproctored (or unsupervised) setting as there is an increased risk of test items being leaked giving some test takers the opportunity to see the questions in advance and potentially "rehearse" their responses.

A further issue for consideration when using a personality test in selection is applicants' reactions to completing the test. Depending on the wording of the items asked, some tests may appear irrelevant to the target job role and therefore applicants feel uncertain about why they are being asked to complete this or uneasy about how the information may be used. It is therefore important that the questions asked make sense in relation to the role being applied for (face validity).

Overall, the evidence suggests that personality tests are most appropriate to be used in combination with other selection exercises rather than in isolation when making selection decisions. Therefore, personality tests can be useful at attraction stages to help applicants self-reflect on their suitability for a role or they can be used to help drive more focused questioning during a structured interview. Personality tests can also add particular value in a development context once an individual has been selected into post.

For a more in-depth summary of the evidence-base relating to personality tests please see the **VBR literature review** available on the **HEE website**.

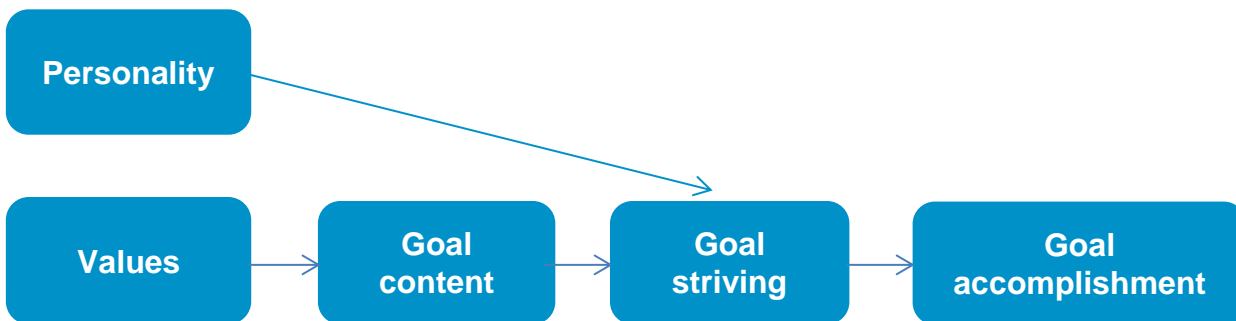## What makes a personality test values based?

Personality and values are often grouped together to describe aspects of a person which are likely to affect their job performance alongside their knowledge, skills or competencies. Values and personality both describe components within each individual, and both are believed to impact on behaviour, decision-making, motivation, attitudes and interpersonal relations yet there are also important differences. Personality can be referred to as enduring dispositions, and values as enduring goals . Whilst personality represents the behaviours that come most naturally, values reflect an effort (a choice) to behave a certain way. Values include an evaluative component lacking from personality. Values relate to what we believe we ought to do, while personality related to what we naturally tend to do. Personality traits do not conflict with one another (i.e. one can simultaneously express the personality traits of

conscientiousness and extraversion), yet values do conflict, as some may be pursued at the expense of others.

Within the literature it is proposed that values and personality have different influences on difference motivational processes, where values primarily impact the goals that individuals choose to pursue (goal content), while personality traits (especially conscientiousness and emotional stability) primarily impact the amount of effort or persistence that individual exhibits in pursuit of those goals (goal striving) . In this respect, both values and personality contribute to behaviour but in different ways. The model presented below illustrates this:

Model of relationship between personality and values on outcomes (Parks & Guay 2009)

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┌──────────────┐
│  Personality │ ─────────────────────┐
└──────────────┘                       ↓
┌──────────────┐   ┌──────────┐   ┌──────────┐   ┌───────────────┐
│    Values    │ → │   Goal   │ → │   Goal   │ → │     Goal      │
│              │   │ content  │   │ striving │   │ accomplishment│
└──────────────┘   └──────────┘   └──────────┘   └───────────────┘
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This relationship between personality and values and the distinction between the two is important to consider when using a personality test for values based recruitment (VBR). Personality tests are best used in combination with other selection methods (for example a values based interview) as they can help to prompt specific areas of questioning which can lead to a fuller exploration of the applicant's values. For example, an applicant who is shown to be highly conscientious could be asked about what goals they have recently attempted to accomplish and why. An applicant who is shown to be highly extraverted could be asked about the types of people they most enjoy spending time with and why. In this way the personality profile serves as a starting point for further discussion/exploration rather than to be taken as a measure of the applicant's values itself.

Key considerations for implementing a personality test for VBR

When looking to implement or refine structured interviews within an organisation, there are a number of key considerations to be aware of. Recognition of such considerations will enable the delivery of an effective VBR approach.

Choosing a test

- There are a variety of different personality tests available from a range of established test publishers. Many of these tests are 'off-the-shelf' (i.e. the questions, scoring and reporting functions have been pre-developed and the questionnaire is ready to be used).

- As with any psychometric instrument used to make or inform selection/assessment decisions, the test should have been subject to analysis which assesses the reliability, validity and fairness of the tool. This information will usually be presented in a technical report which is available from the test publisher.

- An individual(s) appropriately trained in psychometric testing[3] should be responsible for selecting a test based on the available technical information. This individual should also be responsible for determining how the selected tool is implemented and providing recommendations about how the results should be used.

- In some cases an existing 'off-the-shelf' tool can be tailored to meet the specific requirements of a particular organisation or job role, for example, the target domains can be mapped to a particular competency framework. However, it is important to remember that just because a domain/construct can be theoretically mapped to an alternative construct (i.e. agreeableness to 'compassion'), this does not automatically mean that the test is a valid measure of that alternative construct. Further validation evidence would be required to establish this, for example by analysing the extent to which test-takers with high scores in agreeableness are more likely to demonstrate the skills described under the 'compassion' competency domain.

Applicants' perceptions

- Applicants' likely reactions should be carefully considered when deciding to use a personality test, especially as part of a selection process. It is important to review the questions asked to determine the extent to which these are likely to be considered relevant to the target role.

- Applicants may be anxious about how the results will be used to inform the selection outcomes and this should be made explicit to them in advance.

Test administration and security

- How and where the personality test will be completed is an important consideration. Unlike with other types of psychometric tests (for example, cognitive ability tests), personality tests are often untimed. Although they may be given guidance on the likely length, applicants should ideally be given an unlimited amount of time to complete the test. If the test is to be completed as part of a selection centre or assessment day this can have practical implications for timetabling.

- If the test is completed beforehand in an unproctored setting (i.e. online, in the applicant's own time prior to a selection event), then there is a greater risk that either the applicant may attempt to fake their results (i.e. through involving others or keeping a note of their responses), or that they may attempt to make a copy of the test questions to share with others (i.e. taking computer screen shots to post in an online

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[3] Information about the training provided by the British Psychological Society can be found here: http://www.psychtesting.org.uk/training-and-research/training-and-research_home.cfm

forum).

- With any test, once items are leaked in this way the quality of the test becomes compromised as it is more likely that individuals will have had time to consider or rehearse their responses, which is likely to impact on the reliability and validity of the results.

Integration with other selection methods

- It is important to consider in advance how the information from different sources will be used to inform the selection decisions.

- Whilst the evidence base in relation to personality tests in selection is still emerging, particularly in relation to using personality tests to assess for values, it is recommended that personality tests are not used to make selection decisions in isolation, but are instead used alongside other methods.

- A personality test may be used as part of the attraction stage, encouraging potential applicants to reflect on their suitability for the target role. In order to facilitate such reflection, materials should be provided explaining how and why the traits measured are relevant to the target role. Furthermore, in order to encourage honest and open responding, it should be made clear to the test taker that the results will not be used to determine whether or not they are put forward to the next stage in the selection process.

- Another way to integrate a personality test into the selection process is to ask all applicants that are invited to interview to complete an appropriately selected tool. The profile can then be used to prompt specific questions during the structured interview. In order to do this effectively, it is important that interviewers are trained and provided with appropriate guidance to interpret the results from the personality test and used these to inform questions. Consideration should also be given to how asking questions based on an applicant's specific personality profile can be balanced with maintaining a degree of consistency to the questions asked.

Feedback

- By their definition, personality tests relate to traits which are fundamental to an individual's character and identity therefore feedback should be delivered sensitively. The test taker should also have an opportunity reflect on and discuss their profile. It is therefore best practice to ensure feedback is delivered by an individual trained in interpreting the results from the specific test.

  - Consider how and when the feedback will be delivered. For example, will this be part of the interview process or will it be discussed separately? Will the test taker be provided with a feedback report which they can take away?

Example case studies

City University London has been taking part in the development of a personality test which is specific to **healthcare roles** (the Cambridge Personality Styles Questionnaire or 'CPSQ').The test is based on the establish Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality and the response format includes a combination of both normative and ipsative scales which increases measurement accuracy and validity. As the test is still in development, the results are not yet being used to inform selection decisions. However, following appropriate validation evidence, the intention is for the test to be used in conjunction with literacy and numeracy tests, the personal statement and the outcome of the interview process.

Buckinghamshire New University is supporting the development of a personality test which has been specifically developed for **nursing roles** (the "Nurse Match" instrument). This is based on comparing an applicant's personality profile to the established profile of professional practitioners. The test is still in development and therefore data gathered from BNU will inform the ongoing analysis. However, the aim of the tool is to facilitate the exploration and measurement of professional identity in both experienced nurses and nursing students.

University College Hospitals London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust uses a personality test to inform the values based interview used for the recruitment of **Medical and Dental consultants**. This is one part of broader initiatives to embed values across the organisation.