

recruitment

Chapter 2: Recruitment

This chapter looks at the strengths and weaknesses of the methods used to select people for recruitment, promotion, training and redundancy, including interviews, assessment centres, work sampling, curricula vitæ, psychometric tests and handwriting analysis. It warns of the dangers of subjectivity and not being clear about what is needed. It touches on selection for potential, and on the radical approach of random selection.

There had been a showy addition to Mr Oates' furniture since Guy Crouchback's last visit; an elaborate machine of more modern construction than any permanent exhibit in the room commandeered from the Museum.

"What have you got there?"

Mr Oates made a little grimace of gratification.

"Ah! You have found my tender spot. You might call it my pet. Absolutely new. It's just been flown in from America. It took 560 man-hours to install. The mechanics came from America, too. There isn't another like it in the country."

"But what is it?"

"An electronic personnel selector."

"Have we any electronic personnel?"

"It covers every contingency. For example, suppose I want to find a lieutenant-colonel who is a long-distance swimmer, qualified as a barrister, with experience of catering in tropical countries, instead of going through all the records I just press these buttons: one, two, three, four, and..." There was a whirring noise from the depths of the engine, a series of clicks as though from a slot-machine telling fortunes on a pier, and a card shot up. "You see – totally blank – that means negative."

"I think I could have guessed that."

"Yes, I was illustrating an extreme example. Now here" – he picked up a chit from his tray – "is a genuine enquiry. I've been asked to find an officer for special employment; under 40, with a university degree, who has lived in Italy, and had commando training – one, two, three, four, five –" whirr, click, click, click, click, click. "Here we are. And that is a remarkable coincidence."

The card he held bore the name of A/Ty Captain Crouchback G., RC, att. HOO HQ. Guy did not attempt to correct the machine on the point of his age, or on the extent of his commando training.

"I seem the only one."

"Yes. I don't know what it's for, of course, but I will send your name in at once."

Sword of Honour, Evelyn Waugh, 1961

Key message of this chapter: Selection methods for recruitment, promotion, training and redundancy have been robustly evaluated. You cannot expect always to get your decisions right, but you can be confident whether the methods you are using are good ones or bad ones.

Whether in the private, public or third sector, all organisations exist to deliver goods or services, of one sort or another. For this, they need productive assets, and

increasingly these are not buildings and machines, but people – enough people, of course, and not too many, but also, crucially, people with the right skills.

*Recruitment:
general*

We get the skills needed for an effective organisation by getting in the right people (and sometimes getting out the wrong ones), or else by training and education. And at the individual level, staff can be moved, or adjustments made to the shape of jobs, so that each role fits its occupant better. But recruitment is where it all starts. In tight labour markets the problem is finding candidates for jobs, and employers may have to take what they can get¹⁴; but more often the problem is selection.

Unfortunately, we are not good at selection. It is fair to say that we have not advanced beyond the situation described in a major report twenty-five years ago which condemned our complacency, remarking that the methods we generally use give too much weight to subjective judgements which are unreliable and inconsistent: and observed that by taking on a new recruit, a line manager is too often making a public statement of faith in that person which must then be defended at all costs, however poorly they perform¹⁵. This is not because psychological science has failed. It is because we do not use it¹⁶. And that is a pity, since selection is actually the area of people management

¹⁴ Keep E and James S, 2010, *Recruitment and Selection – the Great Neglected Topic*, SKOPE Research Paper No. 88, ESRC Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance, Cardiff University & University of Oxford, p 5.

¹⁵ Bevan S and Fryatt J, 1988, *Employee Selection in the UK* (IMS Report no. 160), Institute of Manpower Studies, Brighton, p 66.

¹⁶ And, as it has been pointed out, “There is a depressing reluctance, which seems to be common across contemporary UK social science, to ignore work if it was undertaken more than a few years ago. A great deal of very useful research on recruitment and selection was undertaken in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, but has vanished from sight and citation. This is unfortunate. Some of the data it reports may no longer be relevant (though it can offer interesting contrasts with conditions today), but many of the typologies, models and analytical frameworks and perspectives generated in these forgotten studies remain valid and useful.” – Keep E and James S, 2010, *op. cit.*, p 2.

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where we have some of the best scientific answers about what really works, and what does not.

In selection there is an elementary need, to begin with, to be crystal clear about the content of the job you want to fill. If you're not, then you really have no basis for deciding what sort of person can do it and what sort can't (though it's surprising how many people fudge this simple question¹⁷). Remember too that once you employ someone it will often be difficult and costly to get rid of them, so getting it right is important: this is a decision which you *must* give care and effort to, whatever the level of the new employee. If you go looking for "someone who is good at writing Excel scripts", when what you really want is someone who can produce a spreadsheet to automate the monthly sales projections, the task may need someone who can negotiate carefully with the admin staff who are doing the job at the moment; the danger is that you will appoint a geek who will get up their noses, and cause his line manager endless bother and heartache.

It is also important not to over-specify the content and requirements of a job. For one is not always looking for the "best" candidate. People who are too good for the job will soon become demoralised and disruptive: one study mentions a successful retailer who in the end found it best to give aptitude tests to applicants for shop assistant jobs, then to appoint the candidates scoring *lowest* in the tests, on the grounds that the jobs were so limited and tedious that anyone with any real ability would soon become bored and leave¹⁸.

¹⁷ As the engineer Steve Hoddell has remarked, "It is a salutary thought that working to rule is a powerful tool for unions to use to put pressure on employers. Since this merely involves doing the job as specified, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that whoever specified the job did not do it particularly well".

¹⁸ Beynon H, Grimshaw D, Rubbery J and Ward K, 2002, *Managing Employment Change – the New Realities of Work*, OUP, Oxford.

Fashions in selection methods come and go, an important reason being that, even though our knowledge is comparatively good in this area, all the same no process is anywhere near foolproof. Hence – just to side-step for a moment – it is worth paying attention to what colleagues think: if for some reason they have a prejudice against a certain method, they may mistrust an appointment made through it, and this may get the appointee off to a poor start which is never recovered.

But some methods of assessment are certainly better than others. And there are those that are much worse. Thus, there is no decent evidence that handwriting tests work at all, for example. Or age. Or astrology. Or the size of a candidate's ears¹⁹.

Usually there are three ways of assessing people for employment: *interview*, *work sample* and *psychometric tests*. All of these have variations, and all have costs. Often the most reliable results come by combining them, since, while none of them is particularly accurate, the ways they are defective are different, so that one may compensate for the weaknesses of another²⁰.

Studies have found that in selection a simple interview tends to be little more than one-third more successful than random²¹. This is hard to believe, because we all think we

¹⁹ “Psychological consultant Dr. John P. Foley Jnr. of New York City relates that a top executive of a client company confided to him, ‘John, a good executive should have big ears’. Dr Foley added that he immediately noticed that his informant had ‘pretty big ears’.” (Packard V, 1965, *The Pyramid Climbers*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, p. 107). On age, see now Inceoglu I, Segers J and Bartram D, 2012, “Age-related differences in work motivation”, *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 85, 300–329.

²⁰ This is the basis of the “assessment centre” approach used now in many selection processes, especially for graduates, for management roles and in the public sector.

²¹ The main reason is presumably that any scoring systems used are ultimately subject to the human biases of the people assessing the candidate (Brown P and Hesketh P, 2004, *The Mismanagement of Talent*, OUP, Oxford). This can be improved a bit by good structuring of an interview, but nevertheless is no more effective, and rather

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are fantastic judges of people and can sum them up at a glance. That isn't true, and we need to go on telling ourselves this, even though we do get so very flattered by being in the interviewer role which seems to tell us that it is.

*Recruitment:
interview*

You can improve the effectiveness of an interview process by using more interviews or interviewers (perhaps including potential team members), training the interviewers and structuring the interviews sensibly, and establishing very clear criteria against which to make the decision.

Interviews tend to discriminate against nervous candidates for jobs, especially when stress is not a big issue in the job itself. But, unlike other assessment processes, they do enable you to assess the emotional chemistry of what it would be like working with this person. And my private guess is that, where recruitment is for a particular post (rather than, say, a trainee grade in a big firm), a significant proportion of decisions are in fact swung by the reaction of the line manager at the interview. Though it ought to go without saying that it is important to avoid appointing people simply on the basis that their "face fits".

There is a fashion at present for competency-based interviewing, which means asking people to describe in detail how they have behaved in the past in specific situations which could come up in the job. This is a good method, and in principle it does improve the success of interviewing, so that you are around 50% more likely than random to find someone who can do the job well²².

more expensive, than the simple use of biodata (e.g. studying someone's *curriculum vitae*) – Schmidt F L and Hunter J E, 1998, "The Validity and Utility of Selection Methods in Personnel Psychology: Practical and Theoretical Implications of 85 Years of Research Findings", *Psychological Bulletin* vol 124 no 2 pp 262-274; see also Robertson I T and Smith M, 2001, "Personnel Selection", *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, vol 74 pp 441-472. On biodata see further page 16 below.

²² Rynes S, Barber A, and Varma G, 2000, 'Research on the employment interview', in Cooper G and Locke E (edd.), *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Linking Theory and Practice*, Blackwell, Oxford.

But success using it does depend on your being good at identifying relevant situations, and the candidate not freezing up through nerves. And more seriously, even when the candidate has all the right skills to deal with the situations you challenge them with, they may not have met those situations in the past, whether because they haven't yet done that sort of job, or because you just happen to pick particular incidents which they never experienced. If this is the case, then they are likely to fail the selection process, even though they could do the job really well. That may be a price you're happy to pay, because of the risk of employing the wrong person. But if there's a shortage of good candidates, then competency-based interviewing may be cutting off your nose to spite your face²³.

A practical point is that it is really important not to overload interviewers, since after a while making interview decisions they may start rejecting acceptable candidates²⁴. Other points about the interview process are that interviewers usually find it easier to decide to reject someone than to accept them, but that when they do decide to reject them they are more likely to be right²⁵. An average

²³ The technique, of course, discriminates particularly against young people with little work experience, which has led a number of employers such as Nestlé to prefer strengths-based interviewing (*Recruiting Young People: top tips for employers*, CIPD April 2013, p. 5), though this does not have such a strong pedigree.

²⁴ An interesting study has found that favourable decisions by judges hearing parole applications fell by half after about half a dozen cases, though a meal break restored initial performance: this was thought to be due not to simple tiredness but to decision fatigue: Danziger S, Levav J and Avnaim-Pesso L, 2011, "Extraneous factors in judicial decisions", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, published online 11 April 2011. The study has not yet been replicated, but suggests that similar bias may well apply to selection decisions in organisations.

²⁵ Springbett B M, 1958, "Factors affecting the final decision in the employment interview", *Canadian Journal of Psychology*, vol 12 pp 13-22; Bolster B I and Springbett B M, 1961, "The reaction of interviewers to favorable and unfavorable information", *Journal of Applied Psychology* vol 45 pp 97-103; Carlson R E and Mayfield E C, 1967, "Evaluating interview and employment application data", *Personnel Psychology* vol 20 pp 441-60 (both quoted in Peter B Warr, 1971,

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candidate interviewed just after an excellent one may seem poorer than in fact he is, though this is unlikely to be a serious problem²⁶.

And here's a final thought about choosing selection panels: a good liar may be better than a bad liar at spotting other people lying...²⁷

Work sample means that you give people a task that they would meet on the job and see how well they do. It is often thought of in terms of relatively straightforward skill tests: an admin officer might be asked to copy and bind a report or to type up some handwritten notes, a mechanic might be asked to change a set of brake pads or spot why an engine won't start.

*Recruitment:
work
sample*

But in practice it is used much more widely. This can be on a role-playing basis. A group of candidates may be asked to role-play a committee meeting, each given a certain objective, and scored not just against how well they achieve that, but also against how well they place themselves against the other players for any follow up (negotiation skills, avoiding rows, &c). Or candidates can be given an in-box exercise, where they are put in front of a computer and given a set of emails to reply to within a demanding time limit (maybe interrupted by a phone call from time to time), the responses then being scored according to pre-set criteria. Or an actor can be brought in to role-play a difficult

“Judgements about People at Work”, in Warr P B (ed), *Psychology at Work*, first edition, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, p 225).

²⁶ Carlson R E, 1970, “Effect of applicant sample on ratings of valid information in an employment setting”, *Journal of Applied Psychology* vol 54 pp 217-22; Hakel M D, Ohnesorge J P and Dunnette M D, 1970, “Interviewer evaluations of job applicants' résumés as a function of the qualifications of the immediately preceding applicants”, *Journal of Applied Psychology* vol 54 pp 27-30.

²⁷ Wright G, Berry C, and Bird G, 2012, “ ‘You can't kid a kidder’: association between production and detection of deception in an interactive deception task”, *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 6 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2012.00087>.

customer or other stakeholder, and the interaction observed and scored.

Again, it can be on a work-trial basis. This is especially common in the construction and hospitality industries, where a worker will be taken on briefly to do a task like bricklaying or sandwich-making, and confirmed in the job if they make the grade. Apprenticeships were the classic mode of this approach, and though those are now much less common in the UK than they were, a similar function is currently provided by the growing practice of internships²⁸.

Though some such assessments can be done on-line or using video-recordings²⁹, significant supervisory staff input is often needed, and time and cost may limit what is feasible in a particular case. But work sample, if good examples can be used, is one of the best ways of assessment. Studies show it is likely to be about two-thirds better than random³⁰. And it may be less likely to discriminate against shyer participants, who, if they can let themselves relax into the role-play, may lose their self-consciousness for a while. The higher costs of these methods are usually much more than offset by their greater accuracy.

Biodata – records of someone’s past experience or performance – can be seen as a rather different kind of work sample. They include traditional methods such as references, qualifications, personal recommendations³¹ and *curricula vitae*. More recently, the field has widened to

²⁸ See Keep E and James S, 2010, *op. cit.*, p 15; internships are of course criticised on equal opportunities grounds, and for similar reasons may not always lead to the best potential candidate being appointed.

²⁹ Anders G, 2011, “The Games They Make You Play”, *The Guardian Work supplement* 29 October 2011 pp 1-2, citing recent use by Amazon, Facebook, Citigroup, Société Générale and Genentech.

³⁰ Schmidt F L and Hunter J E, 1998, *op. cit.* The figure here assumes that it is used in combination with another method such as a general mental ability test, though even without that addition work sample is still the most effective method of all. It is important to be wary, of course, that work sample will not assess potential.

³¹ A large sector, especially for low-skilled jobs: Keep E and James S, 2010, *op. cit.*, pp 7-12.

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include social networking websites. These have been used by employees to find job advertising and to research working conditions in likely employers, as well as by organisations to identify potential candidates and to investigate the behaviour and discretion applicants show in their private lives.

Some of these latter approaches in particular are invaluable in widening the field of candidates for specialist posts, since they allow one to reach people who are not currently looking for a move (LinkedIn Recruiter, which allows search by particular skills or experience, is especially adapted to this). But one needs to be wary: in general such techniques are by no means as robust as live performance tests, since they can often be easily faked³², and there are various reasons why referees may wish to modify their reports³³.

There are obvious ethical issues involved (the HR Director for Rent-A-Car Europe has remarked “it is like going into somebody’s house and searching through their cupboards”³⁴). Moreover, such methods lack the discipline of allowing the candidate the right of reply, and can tempt recruiters towards the use of inappropriate criteria. Those Facebook photos of a drunken night out may look unappealing, but they don’t necessarily offer fair evidence of how he behaves at work, and one may lose out on an excellent employee by relying on them. There are other risks of narrowing the field with such methods (in 2009, 30% of the population were still not using the internet), and further

³² Though I suppose that some, if filling a sales vacancy, might think persuasive faking a virtue...

³³ Even qualifications are not always to be relied on, since they do not always measure what is really wanted, and their use in practice seems to be changing over time: see an interesting discussion in Keep E and James S, 2010, *op. cit.*, pp 7-12; also Pellizzari M, 2010, “Do Friends and Relatives Really Help in Getting a Good Job?”, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, vol 63 no 3, pp 494-510.

³⁴ <http://www.ceridian.co.uk/connection/articles/recruiting-ethically/> [accessed Oct 2013].

ones of mistaken identity and potentially costly discrimination cases. So far, compared with people abroad, British employers and employees have been very wary of using these approaches³⁵. And there has so far been almost no research in this area.

Bear in mind, however, that it is less easy to disguise the truth within small communities. References can be effective, for example, within a particular professional group in a limited geographic area, especially if details can be probed by telephone.

Psychometric tests have been becoming more popular in recent years. This may be because they are less effort for the employer, since they reduce the time staff have to “waste” holding interviews, or devising and assessing work samples. They are also attractive to consultants, who get from them lucrative work which can be processed by fairly low-paid staff. Further, they project a comforting image of hard science and objectivity – though this may be illusory.

Recruitment:
psychometric
tests

Tests are essentially in two categories. There are tests of specific skills, such as literacy or numeracy or general intelligence. These tend to be well constructed and reliable; they often assess aspects of ability which could be addressed using work sample, but in a more systematic and robust way. They are much more useful than many people seem to think.

The most important to think about relates to general intelligence (identified in 1904, and also known as general mental ability). This is among *the most effective* predictors of suitability for complex jobs³⁶, though even for managerial

³⁵ Aquent Orange Book 2008-09.

³⁶ Schmidt F L and Hunter J E, 1998, *op. cit.*: the research giving this result is American, but based on work involving over 32,000 employees in 515 widely varied civilian jobs, and well founded.

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or professional roles its usefulness is not as much as two-thirds better than random. Unsurprisingly, for unskilled jobs it is not a great deal of use. It is worth bearing in mind that general intelligence, one of the best predictors of performance for most jobs, can to some extent be improved by training³⁷.

It used to be thought that one of the virtues of the concept of general intelligence was that it was, indeed, general, and therefore simple to conceptualise and easy to test robustly. In the 1960s this doctrine was challenged by the suggestion that one could distinguish abstract intelligence (“fluid intelligence”) from the practical ability to solve problems within one’s own culture or situation (“crystallised intelligence”)³⁸. It has since been argued that one can also separate out practical and creative problem-solving skills as different kinds of intelligence³⁹; and even that the ability to recognise the emotions of oneself or others, to understand social situations, to negotiate relationships and to use one’s emotions creatively constitutes another kind of problem-solving skill or intelligence, which has been called “emotional intelligence”⁴⁰. There is little good data as yet about the effectiveness of using these ideas in selection tests.

³⁷ This was for many years not believed to be so, and is clearly not easy, but has been recently shown to be the case: see Klingberg T, 2010, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, vol 14 no 7 pp 317-324 and references therein.

³⁸ Horn J L & Cattell R B, 1966, “Refinement and test of the theory of fluid and crystallized general intelligence”, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol 57(5), pp 253-270.

³⁹ Gardner H, 1983, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Basic Books; Sternberg R J, 1985, *Beyond IQ: A triarchic theory of human intelligence*, Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁰ Goleman D, 1996, *Emotional Intelligence*, Bloomsbury, London. Though “EQ” has become very popular, many psychometricians are sceptical: the jury is still out, though a good, succinct demolition job, with references, was done by Munro A, 2011, “Emotional Intelligence: extravagant hype or a damaging folly?”, *Assessment and Development Matters*, vol 3 no 4 pp 15-17.

Recruitment:
personality tests

Then there are the personality tests. These may be the well-known general tests of personality trait, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the 16PF or NEO. They may be a team-role assessment, such as the Belbin Team-Role Self-Perception Inventory, or the Margerison-McCall Team Management Profile. Or they may be tests directed at particular aspects of the personality, such as FIRO-B (which focuses on control and dependency issues), TKI (which looks at preferred approaches to conflict) or the Strong Interest Inventory (used for career counselling).

In recent years, personality tests have been spreading in recruitment selection, and they are now in routine use in about a fifth of workplaces⁴¹. And there is good evidence that one of the five personality dimensions which they rely on, known as “conscientiousness”, is strongly associated with job performance⁴². However, many psychologists think that personality tests are unsuited for recruitment, and that in the work context they should be pretty well exclusively kept for training and development.

They do have a number of problems. A great deal of care and thoroughness, along with advanced statistics, goes into validating these tests, and most of them are very good at doing what they seek to do. But some, even some of the best known, do have technical weaknesses (one of the most popular, for example, the MBTI, has a poor consistency record – so that, if you take the test twice over, you can expect to get the same result not more than two times in three, and perhaps as little as one time in four⁴³). Such questions,

⁴¹ Keep E and James S, 2010, *op. cit.*, p 16, citing WERS.

⁴² Barrick M R and Mount M K, 1991, “The Big Five personality dimensions and job performance: a meta-analysis”, *Personnel Psychology*, vol 44, pp 1-26 (the so-called Big Five – Extraversion, Emotional Stability, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience – have been more or less agreed upon by psychologists since the 1980s; in an earlier version of the schema there were four).

⁴³ Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, 1991, *In the Mind's Eye: Enhancing Human Performance*, The National Academies Press: the characteristic in question is known in the jargon as the test-retest record. This US

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though, are not the main problem. The real issue is not whether the tests are measuring things well, so much as whether what they are successfully measuring is actually much use in selection.

Personality tests will score someone against the five dimensions of personality, such as, for example, introvert-extravert. However, if someone comes out on this dimension with a relatively high introversion score, that does not mean that they cannot operate effectively in work contexts which require extraverted behaviour, such as addressing a crowd or hosting a lively social event⁴⁴. It may mean merely that they will have to make a bit more of an effort than a natural extravert would in such circumstances; and this is likely to be a problem only if they are going to have to do a great deal of such things under pressure, so that they don't get an opportunity to recharge their batteries. Busy managers on a selection panel, untrained in using tests, are unlikely to give this important distinction the weight it deserves.

Moreover, how easy is it for assessors to judge whether a particular job calls for extraverted behaviour anyway? Many jobs can be performed in very different ways, as is clear from the fact that there is a perennial debate about whether leadership styles are important (see Chapter 8 below). People often have a lot of scope to mould their

Government study commented (p 95) "The evidence...raises questions about the validity of the MBTI...Nor has the instrument been validated in a long-term study of successful and unsuccessful careers. Lacking such evidence, it is a curiosity why the instrument is used so widely, particularly in large organizations." More recently see Petersen V C, 2006, *MBTI – Distorted reflections of personality?*, Working Paper, Aarhus School of Business. Some other later work has been rather less critical, but assessment of such findings remains difficult because so many people working in the area have some kind of financial interest in the use of psychometric tests.

⁴⁴ The idea of absolute and unchangeable character traits was exploded in the 1980s, though some conservative psychologists continue to resist it (see Roberts B W & DelVecchio W F, 2000, "The rank-order consistency of personality from childhood to old age: A quantitative review of longitudinal studies", *Psychological Bulletin*, vol 126 pp 3-25).

work role to their own preferred way of behaving, and this is more so the more complex or senior a job is. It is sometimes argued that managers need to be extraverts, since “they have to relate to other people”⁴⁵; yet this is misleading, since introverts relate to others too, and can in any event produce extraverted behaviour if they need to⁴⁶.

Compare the example of stage actors. They perform in public to large audiences, and one would think that they more than anyone would need to be extraverts; yet the greatest comics, such as Tony Hancock or Kenneth Williams, have been haunted by depression (an introverted characteristic), and to all appearances have drawn the energy and edginess of their professional success from the conflict between their stage persona and their inner self. In any event, population studies tend to show that most people who score well on intelligence are on balance introverts⁴⁷; and that does not mean that all of them are bad at their jobs.

Anyway, people adapt: they bed into their role. Not only do they often mould the job around themselves, focusing on those aspects which they do best. There is evidence that one’s social context (at home or at work) influences one’s score on personality tests. That implies that, whatever one’s underlying preferences, if one is called on to behave a lot in a certain way, then one develops a greater ease and comfort with behaving like that. This is one reason why the test-retest consistency of personality

⁴⁵ Stewart R, 1988, *Managers and their jobs*, Macmillan, London; Bartram D, 1992, “The personality of UK managers: 16PF norms for short-listed applicants”, *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 65 pp 159-172.

⁴⁶ Attempts to show a link between extraversion and performance have only showed a weak relationship: Barrick M R, Mount M K and Judge T A, 2001, “Personality and performance at the beginning of the new millennium: what do we know and where do we go next?”, *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 9 pp 9-30.

⁴⁷ Furnham A, Forde L and Cotter T, 1998, “Personality and intelligence”, *Personality and Individual Differences*, 24:2, 187–192; Furnham A, Moutafi J & Paltiel L, 2005, “Intelligence in Relation to Jung’s Personality Types”, *Individual Differences Research*, 3(1) pp 2-13.

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tests is not all that good: people do change over time, so what you get in a recruitment test may not reflect the results if you try again once the candidate has started work in the job.

Personality tests are self-reports, and results can also be faked. The test publishers have an obvious interest in being sceptical of this. And they do indeed do their best to set up ways of spotting distortions. But the truth is that they are not infallible. If the candidate has an idea what is being looked for, and is familiar with the test, it can be done⁴⁸.

Finally, those making selections seldom look at the numerical scores of personality tests: they look at the text reports, which these days are produced automatically by software. Such reports tend to be better at looking at the interactions between the measures overall, than at the subtlety of the strengths of the measures individually. For example, where someone is broadly in equal balance between introversion and extraversion, but scores just a little higher on the first, they will often give the false impression that s/he is no different from someone who comes out way up the introversion scale and with almost no extraversion score⁴⁹.

Hence personality tests, though they appear very much like respectable objective science, are often unreliable, are very hard to use, and may well measure things which have little relation to the probable work performance of a candidate, if appointed to the job.

A final point to be cautious about is that tests can produce different results from people of different sex, race

⁴⁸ Krahe B, 1989, "Faking personality profiles on a standard personality inventory", *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol 10 no 4, pp 437-443; Kleinmann M, Ingold P, Lievens F, Jansen A, Melchers K, & Konig C, 2011, "A different look at why selection procedures work: The role of candidates' ability to identify criteria", *Organizational Psychology Review*, vol 1 (2), pp 128-146.

⁴⁹ Some tests, referred to as "type" rather than "trait" tests, actually institutionalise this distortion in the design of the test in order to produce results that are easier to understand (the MBTI is one).

or social background. This is not a good thing if one is looking for the best candidate, and may land one before a tribunal accused of unfair discrimination. Trained test administrators will be alive to these issues: do not try to use tests without guidance.

*Selection
review
and
valida-
tion*

Where recruitment of similar staff is likely to be continual (for example in a large call centre or some industrial settings) it will be worth validating the effectiveness and relevance of selection procedures by assessing the performance and retention of staff some period of time after their engagement. Such assessment is complex, since external factors such as changes in the labour market cannot be excluded, and professional help may be needed for it to be done well.

*Selection
for dis-
missal*

The pool of skills in an organisation is of course not only affected by recruitment. It is also important, though more sensitive, to seek to remove people who turn out not to have the skills which the organisation needs, or to have once had them but lost them, or to have skills which are no longer needed as a result of changing circumstances. This will sometimes be in the course of inefficiency procedures, and sometimes in the course of redundancy exercises in lean times. In both cases, practice will be confined by employment relations considerations and legal constraints. In principle, methods used in selection for redundancy can mirror those in selection for recruitment, but legal provisions and natural justice demand that they be exercised in a more fully accountable way and with even greater attention to the use of objective evidence in the decision.

Selection for promotion raises very similar issues to selection for recruitment. But there are some differences.

recruitment

In part, these are simply down to the fact that the people involved are already part of the organisation. Their strengths and weaknesses ought to be known, and one of the key needs is to ensure that that knowledge can be used in the promotion decision in a way which is effective, and which is seen to be equitable by them and others. Line management systems need to be able to generate the necessary information for this, for example written annual reports with sections on promotability. This helps to anchor decisions and to avoid too much reliance on gossip and personal contacts, or treating newer staff too differently from those who have been in place for many years.

*Selection
for
promo-
tion*

People are sometimes selected for their potential, whether as part of selection for immediate promotion or to feed a development programme (a classic UK example is “fast stream” recruits earmarked for accelerated promotion, say in the civil service or in large firms like Shell). Such schemes, which worked well in the stability of the post-war consensus, have come under strain in recent years as a result of growing political, economic and commercial volatilities, and there is also an increasingly active debate about what constitutes “potential”⁵⁰.

*Poten-
tial*

Generally, this is seen as either the ability to take on effectively a broader scope and senior (or in time top leadership) roles, or else the ability to perform well in areas key to the organisation’s strategic objectives; and people with potential can be seen as grouped in particular disciplinary talent pools (eg finance, engineering, HR). However, predicting future abilities is little easier for a business leader, or for a psychologist, than for a punter in a horse race. And it does not help that precise definitions of “potential” are seldom made explicit, and often vary widely within an organisation. It is likely that past success in

⁵⁰ See Silzer R and Church A H, “Pearls and perils of identifying potential”, *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 2009 vol 2 no 4 pp 377-412.

learning, and interest in and openness to future learning, are the only criteria which have much chance of identifying people with “potential”. Nevertheless, relying simply on the standard of current performance is unlikely to be in itself a good way of making promotion decisions.

The Peter Principle Other issues may affect promotion. In 1968 the British reading public, already excited by *Parkinson's Law*⁵¹ which had been published a few years before and was still in the shops, discovered a new book on the shelves with a similar sort of title: *The Peter Principle*, written by an American academic, Dr Laurence Peter⁵². This argued that in a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence. Thus people who are particularly good at their work get promoted until they reach a level where they are no longer so; thereafter, they are passengers in the organisation, and the work has to be done by those employees who have not yet reached their level of incompetence.

The message was half-humorous, and is such a challenge to conventional wisdom that nobody seems to have been quite sure what to do with it. Evidently there was some underlying truth in it somewhere, and it found its way into the curriculum of a number of US management courses. Observation and assertion were the basis of the original book, though a study in 2000 suggested that there might be statistical reasons to explain it as inevitable⁵³. In 2009 systematic simulations of promotion dynamics were carried

⁵¹ “Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion”: Parkinson C N, 2002, *Parkinson's Law: or the Pursuit of Progress*, Penguin Modern Classics, Harmondsworth.

⁵² Peter L J and Hull R, 1971, *The Peter Principle: why things always go wrong*, Pan Books, London.

⁵³ Lazear E P, 2000, *The Peter Principle: Promotions and Declining Productivity*: <http://www-siepr.stanford.edu/Papers/pdf/00-04.pdf>; see also Pluchino A, Rapisarda A and Garofalo C, 2011, *Efficient Promotion Strategies in Hierarchical Organizations*, *Physica A*, pp 3496-3511.

recruitment

out, and renewed the challenge by proposing that promotion on a random basis might actually be more successful than the elaborate procedures which are often followed⁵⁴.

Random promotions would stand conventional wisdom on its head. They would obviously be seen as deeply unfair, and have no chance of being widely adopted. Commentators have suggested rather desperately that rotating people between jobs, which is a bit more recognisable as a practice, would achieve some of the benefits and minimise the risks caused by promotions on the Peter Principle⁵⁵. It is perhaps worth recalling that the ancient Athenians appointed citizens to a number of important public offices by lot rather than on apparent merit, and the fact that they went on doing it for generations suggests that it cannot have been a total disaster⁵⁶.

Ultimately, what you think of the Peter Principle is up to you. If, like most people, you opt for a more considered approach, you do have one reassuring thing to fall back on: in seeking to get enough and not too many people with the right skills you'll have a lot of support from robust scientific research into the right techniques to use.

⁵⁴ Pluchino A, Rapisarda A, Garofalo C, 2010, "The Peter Principle Revisited: A Computational Study": *Physica A* 389 (2010) 467.

⁵⁵ Rajiv Mehta of the New Jersey Institute of Technology, quoted by Mark Buchanan in *New Scientist*, 19 December 2009 p 69.

⁵⁶ Google has tried it too, reputedly with reasonable results: BBC R4, *Analysis*, "Do Leaders make a Difference?", broadcast 7 November 2011, edited by Innes Bowen.