

Assessments on Campus:
Utilizing Pre-Employment Testing in the Campus Public Safety Environment
by
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Introduction

It is two o'clock in the morning and your telephone rings, waking you from an otherwise sound sleep. On the other end of the line is your night shift supervisor, whose tone of voice tells you that you are probably not going to like the story he will soon be relating to you. The supervisor then informs you that one of your campus officers has just been accused of sexually assaulting a female student on campus. The victim had related to your night shift supervisor that the sexual assault occurred after the victim's car was pulled over on campus by this officer, who, according to the victim, then drove her to a university parking garage. The victim then related that the officer told her that in exchange for having sexual relations with him, he would not file any charges against her and would take her back to her vehicle where she would be released. The student refused the officer's advances, but he forced himself upon her anyway. You slowly put down the receiver, all the while thinking, "My god. What could ever have possessed this officer to do such a thing?"

While this story is fictional, it is just one of the many realities that today's campus law enforcement administrators may have to face during their careers. While the department's motto may say, "To protect and serve," and it is your heartfelt desire that the officers who work for you feel this motto is their utmost duty and responsibility, the reality is that, occasionally, there are those few officers who will disappoint the system. More often than not, we have to admit that in actuality, we know little about their ethical standards and morality until, unfortunately, it is too late, and they are a part of our public safety department.

How did they pass your selection process and get hired in the first place, you might ask? You feel confident that you have set your hiring standards exceptionally high, and you believe very strongly that you have made the entire process of joining your department very stringent. After all, it takes a college degree, passing a clean background check, as well as passing a rigorous physical agility test, before even moving to the interview stage of the application process. You, or your assistance chief, are also directly involved in the interview process, and you feel confident that your candidate interviews are rigorous, as well as thorough. What could you have done differently, or more importantly, what could you do in the future to avoid making an unfortunate hiring decision for your department?

While there are no guarantees that every hire that you make is going to be an exceptional employee, there are acceptable ways in which you can lower the odds of making a disappointing hiring decision for your department. One of the techniques that is being used with regular success by businesses of all kinds to weed out undesirable employment candidates is pre-employment testing, or assessments, as they are referred to in the testing business. A recent American Management Association survey showed that 43 percent of responding members assess applicants with basic math and/or literacy tests, 60 percent required specific job-skill testing of applicants, and 31 percent uses psychological tests (Nicholson, 2000). Additionally, the Association of Test Publishers tells us that employment testing has been growing at a rate of ten to 15 percent in each of the past three years, indicating wide acceptance in the private industry for assessing prospective new hires.

So, what can employment testing do for you and your public safety organization? To find out the answer to this question, I interviewed a noted expert in the field of employment testing, Hal Jay, president of Human Resource Innovations in Houston, Texas (www.hrihouston.com). Jay related he felt that employment testing was especially important for the position of a public safety officer, and even more so for the campus officers, who are entrusted daily with the safety of our nation's young adults. He stated, "Historically, employers depend upon resumes, references, background checks, and interviews as sources of information for making hiring decisions. In reality, these sources have often proved inadequate." He went on to say, "The use of pre-employment assessments has resulted in extraordinary improvements in productivity while reducing employee relations problems, turnover, stress, tension, conflict, and overall HR expenses. The utilization of assessments is universally advantageous in hiring, and possibly even more so in hiring public safety officers, as due to the nature of their responsibilities, they are held to even higher standards of conduct and responsibility."

Types of Assessments

What kinds of assessments are available from which administrators may choose? There are three primary types: the content test, of which an example might be a typing test; a criterion test, which generally is an aptitude test for the position in question; and third, the construct test, which tests for qualities like leadership or personality characteristics (Flynn, 1999). What specific types of tests would be good for assessing the position of a campus public safety officer? Jay recommends that two specific assessments be utilized in the hiring process for peace officers. The first is an instrument called the Step One Survey II, which provides insight into two areas: 1) the applicant's

Utilizing Pre-Employment Testing in the Campus Public Safety Environment

past with regards to employment, theft, illegal substance abuse, and criminal convictions, and 2) the applicant's attitudes in the areas of integrity, substance abuse, reliability, and work ethic. Jay stated, "The Step One Survey II will give a clear indication as to whether the applicant's attitudes in the four areas are consistent with the culture of the organization. The Step One is a vast improvement over the previous honesty and integrity tests, which many corporations have used in the past to assist in selecting their personnel."

These types of assessments have also been referred to as overt integrity tests. According to Shaffer and Schmidt (2005), previous studies have demonstrated the usefulness of honesty and integrity assessments to reduce theft and counterproductive job behaviors. There has also been quite a bit of validity research in this area, which is important when considering any assessment tool.

The second assessment recommended by Jay is the Profile XT. Jay states, "The Profile XT calls for testing people who are already in the job, performing their tasks and duties. We go to the job site, assess those current employees who are performing at the desired level, and develop what is referred to as the job success pattern, or Occupational DNA, of the specific position for which you will be hiring. We then assess the employment candidates and identify their Occupational DNA, which is then compared to the job of a public safety officer in your organization, and then determine if the candidate possesses the same core competencies of the very best people currently in the job. These assessments have resulted in significant reductions in turnover in virtually every organization, both public and private." Overall, you get a better "fit" for your specific

organization by testing the applicant against your own personally developed hiring template.

Testing also has other helpful benefits for the administrator, as noted by Gale (2002). “When you add up the money spent on recruiting, hiring time, lost productivity, orientation, and training, turnover costs are about 150 percent of an employee’s annual salary. If the average salary in a company with 1,000 employees is \$50,000, and there is a ten percent turnover rate, the annual cost of turnover is 7.5 million” (p. 1).

Legal Issues

One of the issues that seem to arise when discussing pre-employment testing is the legality of using the testing instruments. When are tests unlawful? According to Flynn (1999), tests are unlawful “when they have a statistically significant negative impact, in that the test works to exclude a protected category” (p. 82). If the test is excluding a protected category, like women or minorities, at a significant rate, the test may be unlawful “unless the employer can show the test is job-related for the position in question and consistent with business necessity” (Flynn, 199, p. 82).

The majority of organizations use the rule of eighty to test for disparate impact. This rule states that if you take the group with the highest rate of candidate selection and the selection rate for protected individuals is less than 80 percent of that number, then it is considered disparate impact.

How then can employers protect themselves from disparate impact when utilizing an assessment for employment purposes? “This can easily be done by utilizing an assessment that has an accompanying, comprehensive validation study,” said Jay. “The validation study assessment must also have been completed in the workplace, and must

Utilizing Pre-Employment Testing in the Campus Public Safety Environment

present statistical data stating that the assessment is compliant with federal statutes pertaining to discrimination. Further, it must show that the specific assessment has high reliability (consistent) and validity (measures what it is designed to measure) with people who are already performing those job duties within your organization. The validation assessment that takes place within your specific organization makes the assessment very defensible against any court actions.”

This method of validation is also supported by Putt Fleming, sales manager at MindData, who stated, “You have to benchmark your existing employees by giving them the tests. All business cultures are unique, [so] it is necessary to benchmark high-performers in order to take full advantage of a profiling tool” (as cited by Gale, 2002, p. 2).

Additionally, what a campus police executive needs to be acutely aware of is that in today’s litigious environment, there is also legal risk in not giving an assessment. These risks generally may fall under Title 42 U.S.C. 1983, which provides a remedy for the violation of federally-protected rights by governments and its employees. Schmidt (as cited in Nicholson, 2000) stated, “With the tort of negligent hiring now recognized in a majority of the states, employers have been forced to defend a growing number of suits seeking redress for crimes committed by employees, usually thefts or assaults that victimize customers or co-workers” (p. 6). Shaffer and Schmidt (1999) also commented, “Psychological testing becomes relevant because the plaintiffs generally allege that the employer should have been aware of the characteristics of the employee causing the harm. Testing provides probative evidence that the employer met its duty to reasonably

investigate an applicant's fitness. Companies that adopt pre-employment integrity tests to screen job applicants can reduce their exposure to negligent hiring claims” (p. 9).

What’s New in Assessments

Web-based pre-employment assessments are the newest thing to hit the market. Companies such as Capital One have found that by using online and computerized testing, they can save a lot of time and money with their testing program. Nicholson (2000) stated that Capital One’s costs per hire dropped 45 percent, while the pass rate increased to 30 percent. Not only do the online tests save time and money, they can also reduce the expense of high turnover by helping to determine who will do well in a particular job on the front end of the hiring process. In addition to hiring, assessments can also be utilized for addressing other important organizational needs, such as staff development and team building. For example, one instrument that Jay utilizes, the Profile XT, can be used to create a “Coaching Report,” which provides managers with sound suggestions for to how to improve an employee’s performance.

Conclusions

Hiring the right employee is more important now than ever before. We have probably all heard horror stories from other administrators (and probably have some stories of our own to relate) about making a hiring decision that unfortunately “keeps on giving” in the form of complaints from citizens, other officers and supervisors, and may have even resulted in bad publicity in the local media or even a lawsuit against your organization. The peace of mind in knowing that you took all necessary steps to screen your public safety candidates before making the final decision to hire is, without question, comforting.

While utilizing assessments cannot guarantee that you make the right hiring choices every time, it has been reported that those candidates who have been assessed with an honesty and integrity test, or other pre-employment assessment instrument, have more often than not proved to be a better hire and fit within the organization. In closing, most employment testing people would likely agree that you should let the pre-employment tests count for about a third of your overall hiring decision, while the interview and the background investigation would consist of the other two thirds.

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