

Projective tests in human resource management and hiring process: a challenge and a boon

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ABSTRACT

Industrial and organizational psychology plays a major role in human resource management (HRM). From the selection of a candidate to promotion, psychology is applied, mainly in the form of testing and assessment. Even though a lot of care has been taken in selecting the right candidate for the right job, many organizations realize hiring mistakes after some time. This is mainly because psychological measurement tools can be easily manipulated by candidates; also, social desirability affects the responses. Personal interviews fail to gauge the right intention of candidates and the inner dynamics remains hidden, making the selection process hard. The objective of this paper is to propose projective tests as a tool to overcome some of the common problems faced by human resource personnel in the hiring process.

Keywords: *Projective Tests, Psychological Tests, Selection and Hiring Process, Psychology and HRM, Organizational psychology.*

People are fundamental to any organization. Psychology, to be specific, industrial and organizational psychology, has the potency to add the efficiency and effectiveness of any business, whether it is simple or complex, local or professional, by increasing the ability to understand human persons at workplaces in a much better way; thus, it attempts towards satisfaction and fulfillment to both the employer and employee. Psychologists in organizations play a pivotal role in analyzing the organizational DNA (OrgDNA), particularly, on selection of the right people for the right job, training of employees, evaluating employee performance, proposing competitive incentives, promoting excellent working conditions, strategies and techniques for increasing employee morale, team-building, productivity and profitability, job satisfaction, employee wellbeing, and similar related issues (Bartram, 2004; Janetius & Shilpa, 2016). Psychology in organizations, therefore, is a boon to maximize productivity and focus on the overall wellbeing of the employee.

Frank Parsons, American social reformer and the father of Vocational Guidance came with a revolutionary idea at the beginning of the 20th century ‘right person for the right job’

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(Parsons, 1909). Taking lead from this concept many psychologists ventured into identifying human potential, innate traits and talents to help individuals and organizations for better human capital management (Zunker, 2006). Psychological and psychometric tests were developed to measure individual human traits, personality characteristics, aptitude and interest for career selection. Understanding the stable and enduring patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving helped many groups of people: the employer, the employee, also the society in general. First, it allowed young people to identify their potentials and enter into the right job so that they can perform, contribute and attain personal satisfaction. Second, it helped the organizations to have dedicated, committed and above all, the right employee to perform the right job. When both these parties are satisfied, it paved the way for socio-economic development. Countries that took precedence to identify human traits and potentials for a career path, stand today as developed countries in the world. In a developing country like India, where human traits and potentials are seldom considered in higher studies and personal career choice, organizations struggle to get the right employee for the right job (Janetius & Mini, 2015).

Identifying the right employee for the right job is a Himalayan task faced by people associated with Human Resource Management in organizations. When people apply for specific jobs, as Thomas Overby wrote in the 17th century, ‘the legs are not matches, still setting the best foot forward’ (Morley, 1891). No one would say in an interview that s/he is not a team player or lousy worker or have the habit of tardiness, etc. Although one can easily assess a person’s skills and potentials needed for a specific job by precise testing and demo sessions; it is hard to understand the inner motives and unconscious mechanisms that motivate a person for action.

There are mushrooming psychological tests and assessment tools available today to measure the innate potential of a person which are used to identify the right employee with the right attitude. However, a lot of psychological tests and measuring tools are not foolproof and that can be easily faked by candidates in the selection process (Hogan, Barrett & Hogan, 2007; Donovan, Dwight & Schneider, 2014). Social desirability is one of the strong factors identified by psychologists to distort genuine responses in psychological testing by candidates (Ellingson, Sackett, & Hough, 1999; Furnham, 1986; Hancock, & Flowers, 2001). There are strong criticisms raised against psychological tests stating they do not measure exactly the attributes and variables that they claim to establish (Wallis, 2004). Added to that, it is difficult to assess the right intention of candidates just through interviewing. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the inner hidden dynamics of an individual by ordinary psychological tests or general interview process. To overcome these common glitches in the regular hiring process, projective tests appear to be a rescuer to many HR personnel.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this paper is to present some basic concepts on projective tests and to explain how they can be utilized in exploring the covert dynamism of an individual in the selection process and human resource management as a whole.

Workplace Selection Process

Selection and placements are very crucial for the productivity of any organization. This process starts with an advertisement and ends in offering a job to a selected employee. In every stage of the recruitment process, starting from advertising, initial screening, short listing, interviewing, competency checking and the final selection, certain clearly defined or internally shared parameters are applied to identify the suitable candidate. Generally, this is

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done by the specialized human resource management team. Whether the organization is small or big, a similar process is involved in identifying a potential candidate who would be loyal and dedicated to the vision-mission of the organization, and to lead the organization to achieve the desired goals. A highly competent HR team, therefore, is important for this selection process. Even though high priority is placed in the selection process in identifying the right candidate for the right job, many times the organizations are not happy with the selected candidates (Travis, 2015). Hiring mistakes surface, disappointments and regrets are felt by the management after a certain period. Primarily, the hiring process costs a lot for the organization and secondarily, it affects the smooth running of an organization and ultimately, the overall productivity is hindered (Friedman, 2015; Travis, 2015). Therefore, apart from the traditional screening methods of selecting the resume and conducting interviews, organizations are looking for a more reliable screening and selection process with the help of psychological tests.

Psychological tests are validated, standardized tools to measure the behavior dynamics of a candidate through sample behavior. These tests can offer inimitable information about a candidate's cognitive ability, personality dynamics, teamwork capability, decision-making skills, handling stress situations, sociability, dedication, commitment, and the level of motivation. Common psychological tests like Personality tests, Skills tests, and Aptitude tests are used not only in hiring but also in measuring the performance, motivation, and commitment of individuals and teams; also utilized in the promotion process. The psychological tests and assessments used by human resource management are meant to gather information intended to augment the suitability of a person for a specific job so that sound decisions could be made in selecting the promising people from a group of job applicants.

Projective Tests

Projective tests adhere to the philosophy that individuals' perception of self and the world around is colored by unconscious mechanisms based on the Freudian and Jungian understanding of human personality (Murstein, 1965). By exploring the instantaneous thoughts about the intriguing stimulus, psychodynamic psychologists (who belong to the school of Freud and Jung) can explore unconscious processes and personality characteristics. The unconscious is formed or conditioned in the neural system of the human brain by complex mechanisms like subdued feelings, habituated tasks, concealed understanding, perceptions, cognitions, and likes and dislikes. The unconscious or unconscious mind is an abstract concept widely used by Freud and the early psychologists. However, it could be explained as an established neural process in the brain and nervous system from which many cognitive and behavioral functions emanate automatically, that include thought processes, memory, emotions, and motivation (Janetius & Mini, 2019). Freud and his followers rely more on this innate and covert mechanisms to understand behavior dynamics and, strongly believe that current problems are rooted in childhood experiences and basic ingrained instincts.

Regarding the applicability of projective tests, although primarily used in clinical and counselling settings, can be used in recruitment, personnel selection, executive coaching, team building, management development and job placements, and any individual profiling (Tuber, 2012). In projective tests, while responding to the ambiguous stimulus, the candidates provide clues and insights about hidden self, perceptions and motives. Therefore, psychodynamic psychologists consider that projective tests are superior to inventories and rating scales or other questionnaires in exploring the deeper levels of a hidden complex personality (Kline, 2013).

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Human beings generally tend to project their inner thoughts on every external stimulus. In projective testing, when some unstructured or semi-structured stimulus is provided in the form of pictures, inkblot cards, scanty words or incomplete sentences, it enables the subjects to project their inner thoughts on to the stimulus. Further, it is presumed that individuals try to attribute their inner feelings, attitudes, attributes, likes and dislikes on the external stimulus. Thus, the unconscious or other inner dynamics and hidden motives that are difficult to identify, mainly cognition, thoughts, and other psychological factors are projected by the subject and clearly understood by a psychologist.

Popular projective tests can be classified into abstract, thematic, expressive, constructive and association. In abstract testing, visual materials are provided to tell what the individuals see or feel. For example, the Rorschach Inkblot Test falls into this category of abstract projective tests. Whereas, getting a stimulus from visual clues like pictures, Thematic Apperception Tests invites individuals to narrate a story in which evolving themes are analyzed to explore the inner dynamics. In expressive tests, individuals are instructed to draw a tree, a human figure, and a house, where significant expressions of taken into consideration. Constructive projective tests provide ambiguous materials by which individuals are requested to construct something of their own for assessment. In association, the subject's verbal association in completing words, phrases or stories are utilized for assessment; for example, Sentence Completion Test. The overall constraint in these tests is the subjective interpretation the testing professional provides. The professionals who administer or interpret the test results, therefore, should be highly competent, evidently efficient and beyond bias to draw a clear picture of the candidate being assessed. Although some objective scoring has been introduced by some psychologists, it is often criticized for being not very scientific in its interpretation (Murstein, 1963; Robin, 1968). Although the scientific status of projective test is disputed, still they are popular among psychologists and clinicians of all levels all over the world (Lilienfeld, Wood & Garb, 2000). Anastasi (1982), a prolific researcher in psychological testing and assessment, sees an interesting discrepancy between research findings based on meta-analysis and actual popularity in practice. The popular projective tests are explained below:

The Rorschach Inkblot Test: The Rorschach Inkblot Test was created in 1921 by a Swiss psychologist Hermann Rorschach. It is very popular and most frequently used psychological tests. It consists of 10 ambiguous inkblot images printed on cards. A trained psychologist provides each of the ten cards, one by one and the subject is asked to hold the cards in any position and interpret and describe what is seen in the card. Some individuals see one thing, other different things or some would even say they see nothing. Once the responses are collected, the psychologist would probe and elaborate the initial responses by asking further questions. The psychologists also assess the way the candidates react to the picture, like, how they look at the picture, whether they are fixated on a single part of the image, or if they look at the image as a whole or in parts (Choca, 2013). These observations and interpretations are compiled as a profile to explore individual motives and intentions. A common criticism of this projective test is that it is not easy to interpret individual unless some background information is collected by the psychologists. Also, testing professionals should be highly competent to assess and interpret accurately.

Thematic Apperception Test: The Thematic Apperception Test, popularly known as TAT, was developed by psychologist Henry A. Murray and Christina D. Morgan during the 1930s that uses 31 picture cards of ambiguous scenes to stimulate stories or descriptions to evaluate a person's patterns of thought, attitudes, observational capacity, and emotional responses. The

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subject is asked to narrate a story about each picture. The narratives of the subject are recorded and then analyzed by the psychologist. Although some scoring system has been created to identify defense mechanisms, mainly denial, projection and identification from the narrated stories of the subjects, subjective interpretations of the psychologist prevail in the assessments (Mursterin, 1963).

House, Tree and Person Drawing: Creative art is seen among humans in cave paintings and other early historical and anthropological excavations. Art used as a psychological measurement is attributed to Florence Goodenough, a child psychologist, in 1926 (Scott, 1981). Based on the creative concept expressed by humans, the House-Tree-Person Test (HTP) is designed to determine how a person expresses various traits while performing the test. Although commonly used as art therapy or creative therapy given to children to explore their untold expressions, it is used for all age groups and also to normal individuals to identify the inner personality dynamics and unique hidden motives. The main focus of analysis falls on the dimensions of the drawings to analyze the self-confidence, strokes, and lines to evaluate the determination and other decision-making process and clarity of the picture to assess the harmony and adjustability.

Sentence Completion Test: The origin of sentence completion test is attributed to Hermann Ebbinghaus, a German psychologist, who used words to test the mental ability of school children in Germany. Carl Jung also used word associations as a means of exploring unconscious mechanisms of clients. Both these psychologists' concepts are considered a prelude to the present form of sentence completion test. The present-day sentence completion tests presume that a single word association cannot bring out a clear assessment of a person. Thus, from the one-word association technique, completion of brief phrases, to sentences evolved. One of the most popular tests Rotter Incomplete Sentence Blank was developed and popularized in 1950. While asking the subjects to complete a sentence can measure general intelligence, it can offer how a person gets insights into his view of different problems, inadequate social relationships and many other inner intentions (Rhode, 1957).

Application of Projective Tests: The application of projective tests in Human resource Management and personnel selection is similar to the application in other tests in psychology. It is to explore various inner dynamics of the human personality to select a candidate well suited for the necessary position as well as to rule out candidates with unsuitable personalities for a specific position in an organization (Steinman, 2009). These tests are less susceptible to faking than other common psychological tests. They bring out the hidden meaning of inner self, even if the candidate tries to hide or try to show a favorable face. The limitations of these testing are, they are interpreted subjectively and no standardized scoring is available; only a competent testing professional can administer and assess the candidates accurately. The processing of data is far more involved and also time-consuming than the other tests.

SAMPLE CASE STUDY

A young adult candidate who applied for a teaching job was given the Big Five Personality test and Sentence completion projective test. Big Five personality test is a self-report inventory that measures a person's preferences, mannerisms, and behavior five aspects of personality namely, openness, conscientious, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism (Boele, 2000). It is often referred to as OCEAN or Big Five or FFM (Five-Factor Model). Openness gives a person characteristic of imagination and insight and tends to have a broad range of interests, eager to learn new things as against the traditional way of doing things. A conscientious person tries to be fair in interpersonal and intrapersonal dealing and more

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reliable. People with this trait will have higher levels of thoughtfulness and goal-directed action. Extraversion might lead a person to make friends easily, enjoy being active in the company of others and seek excitement or adventure. This trait is reflected in their sociability and emotional expressiveness. Agreeableness leads a person towards running smoothly with less interpersonal conflicts, always ready to help out and more cooperative. Neuroticism is characterized by emotional instability, mood swings, anxiety, and irritability.

This model was developed by Robert McCrae and Paul Costa based on Cattell's 16PF inventory. A lot of studies have been done to identify the universal application of this test and the five traits tend to be found worldwide. Although some cultures may give importance to one trait over the other, this model is universally accepted.

The candidate seems to be cautious in answering the Big Five personality test, selecting carefully the statements to highlight positive traits appropriate to the job applied. As such, he scored high in openness, extroversion, agreeableness and moderate score in conscientious and low score in neuroticism. It seems that the candidate is a highly desirable person, apt for the job. However, in the sentence completion test, some problem areas are identified. For example, in completion of statements like, People are not always reliable, Girls are stupid sometimes, I failed many times, My thoughts are different and some similar statements gave contradicting statements than those selected in the Big Five personality test. The highlighted areas in the sentence completion test were cross-checked during the interview and the candidate was assessed further to identify the suitability for the post.

Drawing basic conclusions from the above sample case study, the social desirability in which the candidate replied the Big Five personality test and the missing in-depth understanding of a candidate's personality dynamics were brought out (in a limited way) by the sentence completion projective test.

CONCLUSION

Psychological tests used in HRM are meant to assist the employers to identify individuals who possess specific personality style, work habits, abilities, motivation, and thus the right person for the right job is employed. Tailor-made psychological tests can reduce attrition, increase employee satisfaction and consequently contribute to the competence of an organization. The disadvantage of these psychological tests is that employees tend to give fake answers and try to present their self the way an employer prefers to see. Candidates who try to hide their negative thoughts and mindset, and who try to showcase positive factors win the appreciation of interview panels. To eliminate these situations in the interview and hiring process, projective techniques can be used. Although projective tests utilize subjective interpretations, it is effective in the hands of trained interviewers and skilled psychologists. Therefore, projective tests stand as a stronger contender in hiring people, in understanding the candidate's covert mental state and cognitive processes and remain a level higher than the ordinary psychological tests. When professionally used by trained psychologists, they are a boon to HR personnel.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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