

Study Explodes Employment Test 'Myths'

Testing in employment and promotional procedures in industry and government have long been thorny issues, especially among minority groups. For years, opponents of pre-employment testing have charged that because of racial bias in written employment tests, performance on the job cannot be directly related to scores on examinations.

Now, results of an intensive six-year research study indicate it can, provided the proper steps are taken in the selection and use of the tests. And the findings can have major implications for persons who supervise hiring and promotion techniques and policies.

The study, which investigated possible bias in predicting job performance, was a joint effort of Educational Testing Service (ETS), Princeton, N.J., and the U.S. Civil Service Commission.

Researchers found that carefully selected written employment tests predict job performance fairly for members of varied ethnic groups — Caucasians, Blacks, and Mexican-Americans.

The study, which examines three skilled occupations, points out that extreme care must be taken in selecting predictive tests and in assessing job performance if unbiased results are to be obtained.

“One key objective of this study from the outset was to explore the real facts behind the oft-expressed belief that tests are biased against minority groups,” said Dr. Joel T. Campbell, a psychologist at ETS. “Six years later, we found that belief was wrong, if you define bias as meaning the scores are unrealistically low in relation to performance on the job.”

Campbell found that persons who do poorly on job-related tests, regardless of race, don't do well at work either. Likewise, a

good test score was reflected in good job performance.

Campbell stressed that the study does not indicate why the situation exists. “The educational and social background that can adversely affect test performance may also affect job performance. Now we must learn how and why this situation develops and work to improve it,” he said.

Conducted with a Ford Foundation grant, the project was based on studies of 1,400 government workers — medical technicians, cartographic technicians, and inventory management specialists.

Measuring job knowledge and possible test bias was a complex problem, according to Campbell. Researchers selected existing written tests produced either by ETS, the Civil Service Commission or independent test publishers to measure the kinds of abilities necessary for success in each occupation. In each case, test scores were compared with actual work samples.

“Supervisors' evaluations were also gathered and information about educational and career experience was provided by the subjects. Most had generally similar backgrounds,” Campbell said.

Almost three-fourths of the measures the researchers used proved valid, indicating pre-employment tests do predict potential job performance and correlate with post-hiring tests of job knowledge and work samples.

“We found that Black supervisors provided ratings that corresponded most closely with test results and work samples,” said Campbell. “This was especially true when a Black supervisor rated a Black subordinate.” Ratings by supervisors appeared most lenient when raters and ratees were of the same ethnic group.

Campbell and others who participated in evaluating the study

cautioned both employers and other researchers that supervisors' ratings are not the most valid means of evaluating an employee's performance unless the supervisor is specially skilled or trained.

An unexpected study finding was the discovery that test scores sometimes overestimated job performance for minority workers.

Testing critics have charged that exams underestimate job performance for minority groups and that direct recruitment without

regard to test scores should be instituted.

"The myth that direct recruiting of minority groups will solve all of the problems of job restriction caused by supposedly biased tests was pretty much exploded by the study," said ETS vice president Samuel J. Messick. "With present entry procedures, persons who do poorly on pre-employment tests do poorly at work also, and recruitment alone, with no follow-up effort, could lead to

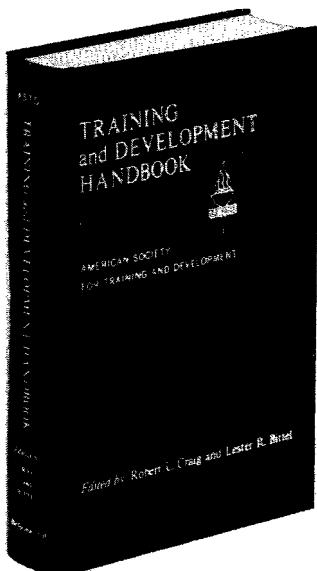
occupational ghettos with serious economic and social consequences."

Messick said he advocated improved job training programs as a way to raise the performance level of those who do poorly on the tests and on the job. He stressed that the study's results definitely did not mean that minority groups should be screened out of jobs simply because of low test scores but that the scores point to the need to help workers improve their skills.

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