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Faking personality tests

On the face of it, you would be hard put to find two more unlikely soul mates than Jack Welch, former chief executive of General Electric, and Margaret Beckett, secretary of state for the UK's environment, food and rural affairs department (Defra).

Yet both have declared an enthusiasm for rigorous assessment and grading at the highest levels of their organisations. Mr Welch was responsible for pioneering "session Cs", where every year the company's leading executives are given A, B and C ratings. The Cs are told they must improve or else they are out.

The Defra model of leadership assessment, announced earlier this month, appears to be equally selective. Some 500 managers are to be psychometrically tested to discover their leadership qualities. From this exercise a minority will be perceived to have the right stuff. Most will be earmarked for development training but those regarded as lost causes among the bottom tier may lose their jobs.

Charles Johnson, chairman of the British Psychological Society's steering committee for test standards, is puzzled that tests should be used at all in such an exercise.

"When you have had staff working for you for some considerable time and you have to rely on test data, it would suggest that something peculiar has been going on with your staff appraisal processes," he says.

Defra was at pains this week to stress that the assessments, which it confirms will include personality and ability tests, are about developing staff. "We are not setting out to make people redundant. We can't say that people won't lose their jobs but there is no staff redundancy strategy. This is all about getting a leadership profile," it says.

It is to be hoped that personality tests are not used to remove people. When such tests were used in selecting people for redundancy at Southwark Council and at Anglian Water some years ago, the practice was widely criticised by psychologists.

Yet the use of psychometric testing continues to enjoy popularity, particularly in employee development and at entry-level recruitment. According to SHL, the human resources group, 56 per cent of UK employers with more than 750 employees use personality tests and an even bigger percentage use the less controversial ability tests.

But there is good news for those who may be undergoing personality tests in recruitment, development or redeployment. They are easy to fake. I know this because I put myself to a test BBC Radio 4's Today programme, made available on its website.*

The test is a 60-item questionnaire described as a Jung Type Indicator assessment profile. Some 12,000 people had taken the test by the beginning of this week. It takes no more than five minutes if you belt through the questions.

I took the test three times, the first time answering the questions as honestly as possible. The second time I answered them as if I were an outgoing, life-and-soul-of-the-party type, which I am not. The third time I behaved as if I were an orderly

individual who is comfortable with numbers, which I am not.

The results for the test I completed as the "real me" did not look good. It said: "He is fairly unconventional and independently minded by nature and will not want to feel constrained by his work situation." This is psycho-speak for "difficult". It did not get any better: "will not enjoy working within traditional hierarchical structures; prefers a loose and unstructured environment; unlikely to be seen as highly dependable but individualistic and resourceful".

Would I employ the man described here? Not a chance, particularly if I had the choice of one of his alter egos.

For the second questionnaire, I imagined myself to be a smooth-talking but not very caring socialite. The results suggested that this fellow was much more employable. It proposed only two areas for development: the need for a little more reflection before taking action; and a need to spend "more focused concentration on aspects of his work".

But these seemed trifling issues when compared with the report's assessment of his dependability. It concluded that he was structured, organised, reliable and loyal to his organisation and managers. What more could any employer want? The third test report, as might be expected, described a somewhat detached figure who finds it difficult to relate to people.

I would not quibble too much with the results of the first test. In its assessment of my management style, I would say it was bang on. In that sense, as a way of gaining personal insight into your personality, these tests work.

But when the stakes are high, when the chance of a job, or indeed your future in a job, might depend to some extent on your performance in one of these tests, would it be wise to be honest? Or should you give them the answers you think the bosses want? My own test results suggest that this is not too difficult to achieve. Laurence Paltiel, director of Psytech, the company that put the test on the Today website, agrees that personality tests can be faked: "What you put in, you get out. That's one of their disadvantages," he says.

He stresses that the Jung test is not used for selection. Some tests are equipped with so-called "lie detector" questions but it is possible to be aware of these too.

If I were one of the 500 Defra managers I would try to anticipate the requirements of the assessment procedure. In Defra's case it is looking for an individual's willingness to "lead change".

It would therefore be wise to go big on communications, social skills, openness and creativity. I would steer clear of agreeing with anything that suggests I might like to work in a quiet office.

For years these managers have worked within the system, carefully briefing ministers, passing on the benefits of their experience. But everybody in Whitehall is suddenly talking about change. At Defra the tactic for survival is straightforward. Stop using words such as "agriculture" and "farming" and start using buzz words such as "sustainability" and "environment".

Bone up on organic farming and wetlands management. Decide what personality the top people are looking for, walk the walk and talk the talk. Last, remember this: when

taking a personality test you can be whoever you want to be.

Those seeking more information on psychometric testing can visit the British Psychological Society's online testing centre at www.psychtesting.org.uk .

* www.bbc.co.uk/today

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