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Are Hiring Assessments Actually Useful—Or Just Slowing You Down?

By Scott Cullen

What works, what doesn't, and how to use assessments without losing great candidates

Assessments are ubiquitous across the professional hiring landscape. From personality tests and cognitive evaluations to role-specific simulations, many employers now use at least one type of assessment, a trend widely documented by organizations such as the Society for Human Resource Management. The goal is clear: as resumes become less reliable and interviews remain subjective, employers seek a more objective way to evaluate candidates.

But ask recruiters, especially those in ever-evolving industries like office technology, and you'll hear a different story. Assessments can slow hiring, frustrate candidates, and, in some cases, eliminate strong potential hires. Recruiters also note that these tools can have an unintended chilling effect. They can be helpful in confirming a hiring manager's gut instinct about a candidate, but they've also seen employers cool on strong candidates simply because they didn't meet a company's specific "personality requirements," according to Copier Careers recruiters.

So which view is right?

Like most aspects of hiring, it's more about how the tool is used than about the tool itself.

The Case for Assessments: Why Employers Keep Using Them

There's a reason assessments have grown in popularity. At their best, they provide structure to a process that has historically relied too heavily on instinct.

Instead of judging candidates primarily on interview performance, employers can assess how someone thinks, solves problems, or responds to real-world situations. That added objectivity can improve consistency among hiring managers and reduce bias. Research from organizations such as the American Psychological Association and the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology shows that structured evaluation methods are generally more reliable than unstructured interviews.

Certain assessments also have a proven track record. Decades of research in Industrial and Organizational Psychology, including the widely cited work of Schmidt and Hunter, have shown that cognitive ability and work-sample tests are among the strongest predictors of job performance.

There's also a practical benefit. Assessments can identify candidates who might otherwise be overlooked—people whose resumes don't fully showcase their skills but who demonstrate their ability when given a chance.

In principle, assessments supplement interviews and references. In practice, they don't always work that way. As Copier Careers recruiters put it, "assessments are trying to create a shorthand representation of a complex person's history, skills, and personality. They will miss things or exaggerate the significance of others." They note that interviews have similar limitations, reflecting how well someone interviews, not necessarily how they will perform on the job. "You can't really know until you hire them," say Copier Careers recruiters. "That's the scariest part about hiring."

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Where Assessments Go Wrong

The problem isn't that assessments exist, but how they are used. Too often, they serve as filters rather than tools. Instead of providing insight, they create friction that appears quickly.

The first issue is speed. In a competitive hiring market, timing is crucial. Strong candidates, especially experienced sales reps, technicians, and managers, don't remain available for long. Data from platforms like LinkedIn and Glassdoor consistently shows that lengthy hiring processes lead to higher candidate drop-off and lower acceptance rates. When multiple rounds of testing are added, what should be a simple process becomes prolonged. By the time decisions are made, the candidate may already be gone. Copier Careers recruiters say this is one of their biggest frustrations, noting that assessments can significantly slow the hiring process or turn a candidate off the job entirely.

Then there's candidate drop-off. Not every applicant is willing to complete assessments, especially those who are currently employed and only casually exploring new opportunities. When the process requires a significant upfront time commitment, some simply drop out. Research from platforms like Indeed shows that longer or more complicated application processes increase abandonment rates. Employers may think they're screening candidates, but they're also losing them.

Misalignment is another common issue. Many organizations rely on generic assessments that don't accurately reflect the realities of the role. A broad personality profile may offer general insight, but it won't show how a technician handles a service call or how a sales representative manages a key account. When assessments aren't directly tied to job performance, they create more confusion than clarity.

Finally, there's overreliance. In some organizations, assessment scores become the sole decision factor. Candidates who fall below a benchmark are eliminated, regardless of experience or interview performance. That's where things break down. Even well-designed assessments are imperfect predictors, and guidance from organizations such as the Society for Human Resource Management and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission makes clear that assessments should support, not replace, human judgment. As Copier Careers recruiters emphasize, assessments are a tool, not a guarantee; the best approach is to use them as a guide alongside other observations.

Not All Assessments Are Created Equal

If you're going to use assessments, it's important to know which ones truly add value. Work sample tests are often the most effective. By asking candidates to perform tasks that mirror the job, such as handling a customer scenario, diagnosing a technical issue, or working through a real-world problem, these tests provide a clear view of performance. They're also hard to manipulate, making them especially valuable.

Cognitive ability tests can be useful, especially for roles that require problem-solving and adaptability. They offer insight into how quickly a candidate processes information and responds to new challenges. However, they don't measure interpersonal skills or experience, so they are most effective when used alongside other evaluation methods.

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Personality and behavioral assessments are more complex. They can provide insight into communication styles and motivation, but they are often overused. Research frequently cited in publications such as *Harvard Business Review* indicates that these tools are less reliable for predicting job performance than cognitive tests or work samples. When used as context, they can be useful. When used as filters, they can be misleading.

An often-overlooked option is the situational judgment test. By presenting candidates with realistic scenarios, these assessments provide insight into decision-making and customer interaction. For sales and service roles, they often offer a more practical perspective than personality assessments alone.

Recruiters also note that some of the most effective “assessments” aren’t formal tests. Ride-alongs, in which a technician spends time in the field with a service manager or sales rep with a sales manager, can offer a clearer picture of real-world ability. “Those tend to be the most effective because you’re actually seeing the person on the job and what they can do,” according to Copier Careers recruiters. At the same time, they acknowledge the challenges. For example, these can be difficult to schedule if the candidate is currently employed, and some candidates may hesitate at the idea of effectively “working for free.”

The Real Issue: Process, Not Tools

When assessments fail, it’s rarely because the tool is flawed. More often, it’s due to how it’s used. Problems usually arise when assessments are introduced too early, take too long to complete, or aren’t clearly tied to the role. They also occur when assessments are the primary decision-making tool rather than one of several inputs.

The issue isn’t about whether to use assessments, it’s about how to use them effectively without undermining the hiring process.

A Smarter Way to Use Assessments

Employers who derive the most value from assessments tend to take a more thoughtful approach. They start with conversation rather than testing. Initial interviews help identify strong candidates and build mutual interest. Assessments are introduced later, once there is a reasonable expectation of fit.

They also maintain focus during assessments. Instead of requiring candidates to take several generic tests, they choose role-specific tools and keep the time commitment reasonable.

When Assessments Make Sense—and When They Don’t

Use Assessments When:

- You need to evaluate job-specific skills (especially with work sample tests)
- The role requires problem-solving or adaptability
- You’re deciding between two or three strong finalists
- The assessment clearly reflects real-world job demands

Think Twice When:

- The assessment is generic and not tied to the role
- It’s introduced too early in the process
- It adds significant time or complexity for the candidate
- You’re using it as a pass/fail filter instead of a decision tool

Remember, assessments work best as a validation step, not a gatekeeping mechanism.

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Equally important, they don't rely on a single data point. Interviews, references, and real-world experience still carry weight. Assessments are used to confirm or, at times, challenge what's already been learned. As organizations such as the Society for Human Resource Management emphasize, the most effective hiring decisions use multiple evaluation methods.

Finally, they use common sense. A strong candidate with solid experience, good references, and a good interview shouldn't be eliminated because of a marginal test score. Hiring decisions are rarely clear-cut, and assessment practices should reflect that.

Assessing Assessments

Assessments can definitely be helpful, but they're not a panacea. When used properly, they add structure, enhance consistency, and offer valuable insight. When misused, they slow the process, frustrate candidates, and risk missing out on the right hires.

That's why recruiters push back. It's not that assessments don't work; it's that they see, every day, how easily they're misused. The goal isn't to eliminate assessments but to use them with intention.

In a hiring market where speed and quality matter, the advantage doesn't come from running more tests. It comes from knowing when you have enough information to make the decision.