

The psychology of the job hunt

November 16 2010, by Elaine Bible



In addition to the traditional application form and interview, job seekers are increasingly asked to take a pre-employment test -- an assessment that employers use to screen candidates. But how easy is it to fake the "right" answers on these tests and what can be done to promote honesty? Associate Professor of Psychology Chris Wright investigated these questions in his latest study. He discusses his findings below.

Q: You studied faking on pre-employment tests. What are these tests and who uses them?

Chris Wright: A lot of research has focused on personality tests, but we study pre-employment tests that collect biographical data, for example about a person's education, [work experience](#), skills and attitudes. These tests are becoming more and more popular and a lot of retailers and large

firms like Starbucks and Wal-Mart use them.

Q: How did you conduct the study?

CW: We studied 200 participants who were applying for jobs as bus drivers. They took a test about their attitude and approach to attendance, safety and customer service. Half of the applicants were warned that misrepresenting themselves would be detected by the test and that information about their [honesty](#) would be used in hiring decisions, and the other half took the test without being warned.

Q: What did you learn about applicant faking and how it can be prevented?

CW: We found that some people do embellish their answers on pre-employment tests, but a simple warning can influence candidates to provide honest answers. When job applicants were warned that the test could detect fake responses, they achieved significantly lower [test scores](#), which suggested that they had been honest rather than inflating their test result with exaggerated answers.

Q: How can a test detect faking?

CW: Many tests have built-in faking scales that rely on specially-designed questions to detect faking. Applicants might be asked to rate their agreement with unrealistic statements, such as "I have never lied." They may be asked the same question in different ways, or fakers may be caught out with a red herring question, for example a question about a software package that doesn't exist.

Q: What is the take-home message for job seekers?

CW: Honesty is always the best policy. In our study, the applicants who were warned against faking were more likely to be rated as "honest" by the test's lie detection feature. Although they achieved lower test scores because of their honesty, their higher honesty rating could improve their chances of being hired.

More information: Wright's study was published in the Winter 2010 issue of the human resources journal *Applied HRM Research*, which can be found online at:

www.xavier.edu/appliedhrmresearch/2010-Winter.html

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