

Getting a Job - Psychometric Tests



Why do recruiters use psychometric tests? Employers use a variety of methods to select the right staff and tests are simply one way of testing the competencies relevant to a specific job; they should ideally be designed with that type of work in mind. From an employer's point of view, tests are also a reasonably cost-efficient way of assessing a large number of applicants; this probably explains why many organisations use them to pre-select candidates for what are comparatively expensive interviews.

➤ What are psychometric tests?

Psychometric tests are structured pencil and paper or, more often these days, computer-based exercises, usually presented in the form of multiple choice questions. They are designed to assess your reasoning abilities, or how you respond to different situations.

➤ How are psychometric tests used?

You are quite likely to come across psychometric tests in a recruitment context, but they can also be used as a tool to help you to understand where your strengths lie and what career areas might be most appropriate and of most interest to you

➤ What types of tests are used?

There are two main types of psychometric tests:

- **Aptitude (or ability) tests**
- **Personality questionnaires**

1) Aptitude (or ability) tests

These test your logical reasoning or thinking performance; they are not tests of general knowledge or intelligence. Administered under exam conditions and strictly timed, a typical test might allow 30 minutes for 30 or more questions.

Often presented in multiple-choice format, the questions have definite right and wrong answers and, as you go through the test, the questions often become more difficult. Be aware that some tests are subject to 'negative marking' - whereby incorrect answers will result in marks being deducted from your total of correct answers.

A large number of tests are produced, but the most common ones used in graduate recruitment are:

- **Verbal reasoning** (tests of reasoning with written information)
- **Numerical reasoning** (tests of reasoning with numbers, charts and graphs)
- **Diagrammatic or spatial reasoning** (tests of reasoning with abstract figures)

2) Personality questionnaires

Personality questionnaires explore the way you tend to react to, or deal with, different situations and are 'self-report' questionnaires - meaning that a profile is drawn up from your responses to a number of questions or statements.

Unlike aptitude tests, there are no *right* or *wrong* answers, and questionnaires are usually completed in your own time. You may receive some feedback on the profile which your answers produce, and occasionally it might form the basis for discussion at a subsequent interview. The selectors are unlikely to be looking for a rigid 'typical' personality profile, although certain characteristics may be more or less appropriate for particular jobs or organisations.

The best way to approach all of these questionnaires is just to answer them as straightforwardly and honestly as you can. Guessing what the employer is looking for is difficult and could well be counter-productive - most tests are designed to check the consistency of your answers - and you may not spot all of the underlying questions.

➤ How can I prepare for aptitude tests?

Although you cannot buy complete test papers, there is a range of practice resources available. (See the section headed *Practice resources* below.)

There are a number of things you can do to prepare yourself. Playing with word games, mathematical teasers and diagrammatic puzzles may help to get you into a logical and analytical frame of mind, and the following ideas may be of help to develop particular abilities:

- **Numerical reasoning skills** - practise basic mental arithmetic with and without a calculator. Addition, subtraction, division, multiplication and calculations of percentages and ratios are commonly required, and the ability to extract information from charts and graphs can be as important as the actual calculations in these tests. Remember that,

unless a job requires a very high level of numeracy, numerical tests are not likely to be pitched higher than GCSE level maths.

- **Verbal reasoning skills** - these are more difficult to quickly brush up on. Reading manuals, technical reports, or academic and business journals may help. Practise extracting and summarising the main points from passages of information.

➤ **A word of warning...**

Practice can help you to feel more confident about sitting these tests, but it is unlikely that you will improve your scores beyond a fairly minimal level as they measure your innate ability (your potential) rather than what you have learnt.

➤ **How can I do well on the day?**

- Get a good night's sleep the evening before the test.
- If you usually wear glasses and/or a hearing aid take them with you.
- Arrive in good time at the test location and switch off your mobile phone.
- Avoid alcohol, and inform the test administrator if you are on medication which makes you feel drowsy.
- If you have a disability and you require special provision, discuss this with the employer in advance of the test session. (See the section entitled *What if I have special needs?*)
- Ensure that you know exactly what you are required to do - do not be afraid to ask questions.
- Follow the instructions you are given exactly.
- Read through the questions and answer choices very carefully.
- Eliminate as many wrong answers as possible. For example, with numerical tests, a quick estimate may help you to discard several of the options without working out every alternative.
- Work as quickly and accurately as you can. Both speed and accuracy are important - don't spend too long on any one question, and keep an eye on the clock.
- Do not waste time on difficult questions - leave them and move on. The best approach is probably to go for your best choice, but to avoid wild guessing.
- Don't worry if you do not finish all the questions in the time but, if you do, go over your answers again to check them.

➤ **What if I have special needs?**

Psychometric tests are less open to the biases which might emanate from other recruitment tools such as interviews. Everyone who takes a psychometric test is given the same questions and takes them under the same basic conditions. By discussing beforehand what your needs might be, however, you will ensure that reasonable adjustments can be made to ensure a level playing field. These might include providing a personal reader/writer or signer, allowing extra time to do the test, or providing specialised equipment (eg loop systems/Braille keyboards).

➤ **Can I 'fail' psychometric tests?**

1) Aptitude/ability tests

These tests are what we call 'normative'; your performance is judged against that of a comparison (or 'norm') group and your score simply reflects how well you have done against those people. Although there are right and wrong answers, you cannot, in theory, 'pass' or 'fail' an aptitude test.

In reality, employers use these tests to select the most suitable people for particular jobs and, at the end of the day, you will 'pass' a test if your score is above a certain point. The point at which you will 'pass' will vary from company to company and from job to job; there is no such thing as a definitive 'pass mark' for a particular test.

Remember, also, that the significance of the pass point will vary depending on where the tests are used in the selection process. Organisations which use these tests to select candidates for first interview are likely to make their decision based solely on your test score (ie as a pass/fail gate). Organisations which use the tests a little later in the selection process are more likely to use your results as just one of the criteria for overall selection. A less than ideal performance on one of the tests, for example, may be compensated for by a good performance in other selection exercises - particularly those measuring similar competencies/abilities.

British Psychological Society (BPS) good practice guidelines suggest that all test takers should receive feedback on their test performance, so do ask for feedback if it is not offered. There can be a number of reasons for poor performance. These could include feeling tired or under the weather, being unable to concentrate due to personal problems, misunderstanding what you had to do, answering questions too slowly or panicking. Poor test results on the day do not necessarily mean that you are lacking in ability, and you may like to discuss your test technique with a careers adviser or sit a practice test to get feedback on what might have gone wrong.

2) Personality tests

It is not possible to 'fail' a personality test! Your answers may reveal characteristics not sought within a particular organisation, but you cannot *fail* the test. Very few organisations will make a selection decision based solely on a personality test, and the result is more likely to be a source of discussion with you. Bear in mind, however, that some organisations do include a personality test as part of their application process and that answers which indicate a serious mis-match between you and the prevailing culture may mean that your application will not be progressed. Either way, it does not mean that you have *failed* the test itself.

➡ Practice resources

The best way to find out what psychometric tests are all about is to practise as many variations of them as you can and discuss your progress with one of our careers advisers. You may also wish to borrow relevant books from our office in the Students' Union and practise the sample questions available on a range of websites.

Books on aptitude tests

- How to Pass Advanced Aptitude Tests (J. Barrett, Kogan Page)
- How to Pass Graduate Psychometric Tests (M. Bryon, Kogan Page)
- How to Pass Verbal Reasoning Tests (H. Tolley and K. Thomas, Kogan Page)
- How to Pass Advanced Numeracy Tests (M. Bryon, Kogan Page)
- How to Pass Numeracy Tests (H. Tolley and K. Thomas, Kogan Page)
- How to Pass Numerical Reasoning Tests (H. Smith, Kogan Page)
- Practice Psychometric Tests (A. Shavick, How To Books)
- The Ultimate Psychometric Test Book (M. Bryon, Kogan Page)
- Succeed at Psychometric Testing: Practice Tests for Critical Verbal Reasoning (P.S. Rhodes, Hodder Arnold)

Leaflet on mathematics

- Improve Your Numeracy (University of Bristol and University of Birmingham)

Useful websites

- www.shldirect.com (SHL)

Examples of verbal, numerical, inductive and mechanical reasoning, situational judgement, spatial reasoning and accuracy tests, as well as motivation and personality questionnaires - plus practice verbal, numerical, inductive and mechanical tests with feedback.

- www.morrisby.com (Morrisby)

Includes sample test questions in the Morrisby Profile section.

- www.cimt.plymouth.ac.uk/interactive/ (Centre for Innovation in Mathematics Teaching, Plymouth University)

Countless tests on which to practise all levels of mathematical skills - answers and feedback provided.

- www.mensa.org.uk (Mensa)

Not aptitude tests as such, but the puzzles pages might get you used to thinking quickly in test situations.

- <http://practicetests.cubiks.com> (Cubiks)

Contains 8 verbal and 6 numerical reasoning practice test questions with answers. Diagrammatic practice tests are currently in development.

- www.markparkinson.co.uk/psychometric_links.htm

Regularly updated page of links to free tests.

- www.psychometricinstitute.co.uk (Institute of Psychometric Coaching)

Includes free numerical, verbal and abstract practice tests and a very basic introductory personality test.

- www.assessmentday.co.uk (Assessment Day)
- Includes free numerical, verbal and inductive reasoning practice tests plus advice on assessment centres and a downloadable in-tray exercise.

- www.theonlinecentre.com (The Online Centre)

Free verbal, numerical, diagrammatic and logic tests.

- www.graduatewings.co.uk (GraduateWings)

Includes free practice tests as well as tests for sale.

- www.practiceaptitudetests.com (Practice Aptitude Tests)

Free verbal, numerical and diagrammatic practice tests, as well as tests for sale.

- www.apptitudeexercises.co.uk (AptitudeExercises)

Includes free practice tests, as well as tests for sale.

- www.practiceshltests.com (Practice SHL Tests)

Information on SHL tests, including companies using them and general tips.