

Personality tests adapt to the times

By Ed Frauenheim

An award earned recently by scientists at assessment firm PreVisor highlights the emergence of a new form of online personality tests.

Computer adaptive personality tests, advocates say, offer the promise of shorter, more secure, more accurate assessments for hiring and promotion purposes. The online personality tests, which are designed to change depending on each test taker's answers, build on years of research in computer adaptive tests for cognitive skills, says Steve Reise, professor of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles.

"It's pretty cutting edge, Reise says. It's an exciting idea."

Exciting enough to win PreVisor scientists this year's M. Scott Myers Award for applied research in the workplace from the Society for Industrial & Organizational Psychology. The society is honoring a team of scientists at the Atlanta-based firm for their work developing and validating computer adaptive personality assessments.

PreVisor announced the award in mid-January, though the society will officially bestow the honor at its annual conference in April.

Tests measuring personality traits such as openness and conscientiousness are used to help predict performance in many jobs. They are the most popular type of pre-employment assessments, ahead of both skills testing and cognitive ability testing, according to a survey last year by consulting firm Rocket-Hire.

The use of more traditional assessments in employment has come under scrutiny in light of a Supreme Court case last year. In *Ricci v. DeStefano*, the high court ruled that in discarding tests for fear the results would make it vulnerable to a lawsuit by minority employees, the City of New Haven, Connecticut, violated the civil rights of other employees.

Questions also have surfaced about testing in an online setting. To save costs and increase convenience, companies over the past decade or so have been turning to tests conducted over the Internet. But this practice has raised the specter of cheating, since candidates can—and do—share test questions.

Early evidence suggests adaptive tests may be less susceptible to faking. It is unlikely any two test takers will see the exact same version of the assessment, given that PreVisor's tool has more than 200 items for each of 13 categories.

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Computer adaptive personality tests help solve this problem by customizing the assessment to each test taker, says Ken Lahti, vice president of strategy and content at PreVisor. The company's adaptive tool works by asking test takers to select from a pair of statements that capture a personality trait, such as co-operation. Candidates are forced to decide which of the two statements is most true of them. Depending on the answer, another set of statements is shown to them that refines the degree to which they embody the trait.

Lahti says it is highly unlikely any two test takers will see the exact same version of the assessment, given that PreVisor's tool has over 200 items for each of 13 categories. The company's online adaptive personality assessment takes about 25 minutes, compared with 45 minutes or more for a comparable non-adaptive version, he says.

Early evidence also suggests the adaptive tests may be less susceptible to faking, Lahti says. PreVisor has been using computer adaptive personality tests in various job-specific assessments for more than a year. Other firms that offer some version of a personality test for employment include Krono's, Development Dimensions International and SHL.