

# Preparing for Psychometric Tests

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Psychometric tests are often used in conjunction with career guidance and counseling to help employers make informed decisions about hiring and promotion. There are two basic types of tests: aptitude tests and achievement tests. Aptitude tests measure a person's interests and their ability to acquire a variety of skills. Achievement tests measure a person's current knowledge and capabilities. It is helpful to understand the types of psychometric tests that you might run across in your job search. Different tests need to be approached in different ways. Ask yourself these questions:

- Will it be necessary for me to prepare separately for each type of psychometric test?
- Which resources can best help me to prepare for a particular kind of test?
- What are some test-taking skills that I can incorporate into my preparations?
- What are my options if I disagree with the results of the test?

## What You Need to Know

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### Why do employers use psychometric testing?

Large organizations often use psychometric testing in their hiring and promotion processes as a way of determining whether the knowledge, skills, and personality characteristics of a candidate are a good fit for a particular job. This type of testing may be used as one aspect of an assessment center process that helps to identify candidates for future leadership positions.

### How can I make use of psychometric testing in my own career planning?

Whether you are just starting to think about a career or contemplating a major change in direction, psychometric testing can help you to identify which paths would best fit your interests and personality (see John Holland's self-directed search Web site below). University career development offices offer a battery of tests for students and alumni. Probably the most popular career instrument is the Strong-Campbell Index. This is sometimes used by career coaches as well.

## **How accurate are these tests?**

While no psychometric test is 100% accurate, the more well known ones all have been studied for reliability and validity. There are reference books dealing with the various kinds of psychometric tests, what they measure, what research has been done on them, and statistical information on their usefulness. If you are taking these tests for career planning purposes, it makes sense to take several different tests, compare the results, and look for themes and patterns.

## **What to Do**

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### **Be at Your Best Physically Before Taking a Psychometric Test**

This might seem like odd advice, since psychometric tests measure psychological and intellectual qualities, not physical fitness. However, research indicates that people perform better in all kinds of psychometric tests when they are well rested and in good physical shape. Another thing to note is that people do better on tests when they are slightly hungry, so eat lightly before taking one.

### **Know How to Do Well on Aptitude Tests**

Preparing for an aptitude test is not at all like preparing for a math or history exam. Since these tests typically measure your interests and your ability to acquire and learn new skills, your best preparation is to spend time thinking about what is important to you. This will probably include aspects of your personal life, your career goals, and the things you love to do. Career-related aptitude tests are based on self-awareness, so the more you know yourself, the more likely the test results are to be useful to you. Richard Bolle's book *What Color is Your Parachute?* is an excellent resource with numerous self-awareness exercises.

Skills-related aptitude tests, on the other hand, generally test your problem-solving ability in a particular field. For example, you might take a test that measures your proficiency in spatial reasoning if you are interested in careers that involve working on equipment, designing with CAD-CAM tools, or doing architectural work. The best preparation is to be well rested and relaxed so that you can focus clearly on the questions and provide your best answers.

### **Think About the Skills Needed for Achievement Tests**

These tests are most often constructed to measure verbal reasoning and mathematical ability, which is why they have been used in schools and workplaces for decades. Achievement tests are considered

valid and reliable tools, and they have been shown to be reasonably sound predictors of success in academic work and in certain types of jobs.

Because there are so many kinds of achievement tests, you'll want to find out exactly what skills and knowledge are being examined before you begin to prepare. There are hundreds of test preparation books on the market, and it makes sense for you to take advantage of this resource. The books typically explain how the questions are structured, provide test taking strategies, and have sample tests you can take. After you've worked your way through all of this, you should be able to evaluate your present level of skills and knowledge. The next step is to use the book's study guides to work on strengthening your weaker areas and then retest yourself to see if you have improved. By using this approach, you will probably be able to increase your score by a significant percentage.

## **Read and Learn from the Instructions**

Perhaps because of anxiety, many people begin working on a test without first taking time to read the instructions. Actually the first step in successful test taking is to go over the instructions very carefully, making sure you understand them completely. Don't be afraid to ask for clarification from the person administering the test. If you don't take these precautions, you could end up getting a much lower score than you deserve because you missed some important information that could have been helpful.

For example, with a timed test it's important to know how much time you have left so you can focus on the questions that you are most likely to answer correctly. In other tests, unanswered questions do not count against you. The instructions may tell you that wrong answers will be subtracted from right answers to provide a ratio score for the test. If you understand this, you know that you shouldn't guess any answers and that it's best to skip over questions you're not sure of. One common test-taking strategy is to go through the test the first time answering only the questions you are sure of. Once you have done this, you can go back over the unanswered questions and tackle the ones that you are reasonably sure of. If you still have time left, you can go through the questions once more, trying to think them through and provide your best answer.

## **Trust Your Intuition as You Analyze Test Results**

No test is completely accurate, so take the results of any career guidance tests with a grain of salt. Remember that no one knows you better than you do yourself. Sometimes the career advice provided by a test can seem far afield of your own interests or the direction you think you would like to take. In this case, trust your intuition and consider taking another type of career test as a kind of "second opinion."

If you have taken a test as part of a job application process, try to get an explanation of your results from the people giving the test. If they don't want to tell you the specific results, they should at least let you know if you passed or failed. If you failed the test, or if the results lead to placement in a job

that seems inappropriate to you, you have the right to question the test. In most organizations, a lot of work has been done to validate tests and make sure they are accurate in assessing the knowledge or skills that they're supposed to measure. But not all companies do this. As a result some tests have been shown to be discriminatory, and may therefore be illegal.

If you have any questions about your results, your first point of contact should be the human resources department, as they are responsible for the quality of the tests. If you are given a response that does not sound reasonable, and if you feel that the test could be used to discriminate against you, you may wish to consult a lawyer.

## What to Avoid

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### **You Rely Too Much on Test Results to Help You Make Career Decisions**

It's best to use a variety of techniques when making important career decisions. A comprehensive career planning strategy should include several self-assessment exercises, plenty of personal soul searching, the use of trusted friends and family as sounding boards, and possibly a professional career coach. Tests are only meant to be used as a guideline in your decision-making process, so don't make a major career shift based on tests results alone.

### **You Don't Put Enough Importance on Tests Used in Hiring**

If you are applying for a job that requires you to take a test, be as prepared as possible to do well on it. You may not give much credence to employment tests, especially if your résumé looks good, you know some people in the organization, and you have confidence in your ability to make a good impression in the interview. But you really need to take these tests seriously. Organizations that require testing typically use the results as the first screen for job candidates. If you don't pass the test, you may not even be considered for an interview.

### **You Put Off Preparing for the Test**

Drinking a lot of coffee and staying up all night to cram before an exam may have worked in college, but it's really not a good strategy. Studies have shown that college students who do the best on exams are the ones who begin preparing for the final exam right after the first class. So the best way to learn is to study over a period of time on a regular basis. If you are told you will need to take a psychometric test to measure your knowledge and skills, find out as much as you can about the test beforehand to give yourself time to prepare. If you have done your job, you won't need to study the

night before you take the test. Relax and make sure that you get a good night's sleep. That way you'll be clear headed and at your best.

## Where to Learn More

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### **Book:**

Bolles, Richard. What Color is Your Parachute? A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters and Career-Changers. Revised ed. Ten Speed Press, 2007.

### **Web Sites:**

The five rules about taking career tests by Richard Bolles: [www.jobhuntersbible.com](http://www.jobhuntersbible.com)

The Net Guide: [www.jobhuntersbible.com](http://www.jobhuntersbible.com)

SHL Group: [www.shl.com/shl/americas](http://www.shl.com/shl/americas)

Careerzone online assessment center: [www.people-center.com/bydesin.htm](http://www.people-center.com/bydesin.htm)

John Holland's self-directed search: [www.self-directed-search.com](http://www.self-directed-search.com)