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Virtual Job Tryouts Give a Clearer View

In 2007, millions of job applicants will submit their resumes the newfangled way: online. But the ones that make the cut will be screened nearly the same way as applicants were 50 years ago, through interviews, references, and occasionally, for positions such as copy editor or administrative assistant, with a skills test.

But a small number of employers are now using a screening tool that employs technology to move the assessment process into the 21st century. The virtual job tryout (VJT) is an online assessment tool that creates an interactive simulation of the work experience modeled on video games or flight simulations.

Designed to benefit the employer and the applicant, the VJT gives candidates a feel for the job and offers employers assessments based on candidates' performance on a hands-on simulation.

"We try to provide an engaging experience for applicants and recruits," says Brian Stern, president of Shaker Consulting Group of Cleveland, a provider of online screening tools. "They get a chance to see if the job is right for them. Filling out paperwork isn't how people want to be treated. We ask for feedback from every applicant."

Diebold Uses Virtual Job Tryouts to Field a Workforce of 4,000.

Applicants for service technician positions at North Canton, Ohio-based Diebold (the company calls them customer solutions engineers) can watch a video posted on the careers section of the company Web site that depicts a typical day on the job, illuminating the pros and cons. If prospects decide to apply and meet the job requirements, they are called in to take a virtual job tryout for the company, which makes ATM and security products.

Diebold incorporated the tool into its recruitment and screening process 18 months ago in order to better differentiate the skill levels of candidates. The turnover rate for customer service technicians was relatively low. But with 4,000 positions nationwide, the company always has hundreds of openings to fill and thousands of applicants to process.

"We knew the program would be paid for if we reduced turnover by just two individuals per year," says Jerry Gilin, vice president of global training and development.

The VJT provides a more objective assessment tool than relying on what candidates say about themselves in interviews. "Some applicants are skilled in 'impression management' and saying what you want to hear, but they lack the skills to succeed in the position or organization," says Stern.

High Performance on Virtual Tryout Correlates With Success on the Job.

The Diebold virtual job tryout assesses a variety of competencies the company considers key to job performance, including technical knowledge, troubleshooting, achieving results, building relationships and providing customer service. These competencies were identified by Shaker consultants through in-depth observations of, and interviews with, current service technicians and their managers, and a thorough assessment of which job requirements and skill sets are key to success.

One example is a troubleshooting exercise in which the applicant has to evaluate a simulated equipment malfunction and determine where the system has broken down. Tackling the task online more closely approximates the on-the-job experience than a written test. Performing well on this exercise has been strongly linked to troubleshooting success on the job.

Diebold technicians initially tested the tryout to assess which exercises and responses were most predictive of performance in the field. The final assessment takes an hour and includes troubleshooting exercises and questions that assess personal attributes, such as working with a team.

"The virtual assessment can be challenging, especially the later sections which take you through a complex series of problems. Most applicants complete it but

some de-select themselves,” says Gilin.

Online Assessments Are Best Suited to Jobs with Clear-Cut Skill Sets.

Like the customer service engineer, the positions best suited to a virtual assessment have clearly defined roles and measurable results, such as sales per square foot in retail or product quality, Stern says. The assessment is popular with call centers and manufacturers that have set clear performance goals.

Sherwin-Williams, for example, uses the virtual job tryout for its manufacturing positions, introducing applicants to its product line of paints and wood finishes, and plans to extend the tryout to distribution positions. A large purveyor of premium coffee is currently developing a tryout for prospective store managers, presenting them with challenging customer situations, such as a disagreement on the balance of a store credit card. Banks use it to evaluate prospective tellers.

“We’re still testing the limits of how the VJT can be used,” says Stern. When it comes to management and supervisory positions, the tryout can capture 75 percent to 80 percent of the role, with other methods assessing the rest, he says.

Diebold is currently completing a new virtual assessment for management positions. “There are certain competencies required in any management position. An assessment system is a good tool to identify individuals who impact the success of the company,” says Gilin.

In one interactive component of the management VJT, called “strategy richness,” applicants are presented with a challenging scenario and are asked to generate as many viable options as possible. The exercise is structured to gather data that is used to predict success in handling various management situations.

Managers Say Tryout Assessments Are Right on the Mark.

Most conventional screening techniques use inference rather than direct evidence to assess whether a candidate can do the job. For example, if an applicant has comparable work experience, a manager will infer that they can perform a similar job. Even a behavioral assessment that captures applicants’ personal characteristics relies on inference, such as assertiveness correlating with sales success.

When applicants are called on to simulate specific job tasks, managers have solid evidence on which to base their decision. “The data tells us that if you give someone a chance to try out the job, you see exactly how well they perform. It’s less risky than drawing inferences based on traditional applicant information,” says Stern. “This can be especially valuable for companies that want to reduce turnover for specific positions and decrease hiring costs.”

At Diebold, where the tryout is part of an assessment process that includes intensive behavioral interviews, turnover has been reduced by 50 percent. While the test is required of all applicants, managers apply it at their own discretion. “We haven’t found that managers have ignored guidance from the assessment, but rather [they] have made it a part of the culture,” says Gilin. In instances where managers have hired a candidate who didn’t do well on the test, “the assessment nailed it. And I’ve never heard that the assessment missed a good candidate. These stories spread fast among managers.”

While only a small fraction of organizations currently use an online or virtual assessment – just 3 percent according to a 2005 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management – that may change as companies recognize the advantage of incorporating technology into the screening process. “One of our goals is to get the applicant to feel good about the brand and the company’s professionalism and sophistication,” says Stern.

Weeding out poor performers early on also provides a competitive edge. “We strongly embrace the assessment but we hope our competitors don’t. All those people who don’t pass our assessment do need to work somewhere,” says Gilin.

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