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The Potential of Personality Tests in the Candidate Selection Process: A Critical Analysis Using Argument Mapping

Abstract: Psychological testing – including personality tests – is one of the methods used by contemporary organisations for selection of candidates. This article provides a systematic analysis of arguments concerning the validity of this selection method using the argument mapping technique. The study highlights doubts regarding the validity of assessing a candidate’s potential on the basis of such tests due to the significant potential for result manipulation by the candidate. The primary conclusion drawn from this analysis is that personality tests should only be used as a complementary instrument alongside other selection techniques. Test-based assessment methods should be used optionally, while adhering to appropriate standards for conducting such tests. The study also suggests a shift away from self-report tests and entrusting their execution and interpretation to individuals with relevant qualifications.

Keywords: psychological testing, personality tests, validity, selection methods, argument mapping

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1. Introduction

Personnel recruitment is currently considered as one of the most vital aspects of human resource management within an enterprise. This process encompasses three key components: recruitment, selection, and onboarding. Recruitment activities are aimed at attracting candidates who possess the necessary qualifications and experience required for a particular job vacancy. The selection process involves assessing each candidate's suitability for the position in question. Onboarding is a crucial activity that familiarises newly-hired employees with the organisational culture and work environment of the company. These stages are designed to ensure that the most competent candidate, whose skill set best aligns with the job requirements, is ultimately hired for the position.

In general, testing, and personnel assessment, has always been somewhat controversial. However, testing remains an important basis for many kinds of decisions, not only related to personnel management issues (Highhouse, Doverspike, Guion, 2015: 207). Only several percent of HR professionals reported using personality inventories in any capacity (Highhouse, Doverspike, Guion, 2015: 212). Personality inventories have been found to be useful especially for early identification of leadership, and validities for service and sales jobs are particularly strong. However, there continues to be a lack of agreement among psychologists about the predictive efficacy of personality tests for employment decisions.

Regardless of the doubts, the importance of personality tests in the selection of job candidates is gradually growing. Increased acknowledgement of how personality impacts individual, group, and organisational results has led to more refined contemplation of personality traits and their function as determinants or predictors of individual, team, and organisational outcomes. Therefore, more personnel selection tests incorporate personality traits to improve the anticipation of significant work-related outcomes (Hough, Dilchert, 2017: 298). Rapidly changing work and social environments (e.g.: the need for creativity, adaptability, or interpersonal skills), changing demographics (personality variables are becoming better predictors for employee performance than demographic data) and availability of mega-data (which can lead to more nuanced and sophisticated research with personality variables, how they are measured, and how they are used) are affecting the use of personality variables for personnel selection.

The focus of this article is on the viability of personality tests as a plausible method for candidate selection. The central premise of the argument is that personality tests must constitute a fundamental aspect of the selection process. This proposition is inherently open to debate, as highlighted by Davidshofer and Murphy (2005), who contend that, while tests are an invaluable and equitable means of making crucial judgments about individuals, psychological testing remains a contentious issue.

The establishment of an approach for the selection of psychometric tools already entails certain axiological choices. Psychometrics formulates three concepts of selection, namely unqualified individualism, qualified individualism, and quotas (Hornowska, 2019: 119–125).

According to the concept of unqualified individualism, the selection process involves choosing candidates with the highest anticipated test scores using variables that have the highest predictive accuracy. Demographic and biological information can be included in this approach, as long as they are correlated with the forecast criterion. The use of such variables is viewed as part of the statistical methodology, rather than an ethical concern. Consequently, unqualified individualism permits the recognition that the race or gender of a candidate may determine their employment status. Furthermore, tools utilised for a specific demographic group can be customised to make them more applicable. However, this exposes the recruiter to the possibility that the use of different tools for different social groups may be deemed discriminatory, resulting in unequal treatment of individuals based on their gender, race, etc. As an alternative to this approach, the predictive accuracy of the test can be intentionally lowered for certain groups, which can result in less qualified individuals being accepted for the position. This, in turn, is discriminatory for the individuals who were rejected. Ideally, a selection tool (test) that has consistent predictive accuracy across all candidate subpopulations should be employed.

The second approach is known as ‘qualified individualism.’ Under this approach, variables that can lead to discrimination are not included in the set of predictor variables. However, in order to enhance predictive accuracy, sensitive variables are replaced with others that are highly correlated with those that have been excluded. This sometimes results in hidden discrimination, such as asking questions about a candidate’s parents’ education or place of residence.

The third approach, known as ‘quotas,’ considers a fair selection process to have a sample structure that reflects the population’s structure. In this approach, the tool’s accuracy takes a backseat to other social benefits, such as inclusivity. Consequently, to increase the employment chances of specific groups arbitrarily included in the adopted quotas, the recruiter agrees to discriminate against certain groups of candidates who would perform better on the test than those selected if they had unrestricted access to recruitment. The average test score of a minority group established through quotas is always lower than the average score of majority candidates. Moreover, in this approach, the adopted proportions can always be questioned due to the limited availability of data on the demographic structure of individuals of working age in the labour market for a given position. It is also argued that individuals selected through the quota system, who would be selected anyway based on their qualifications under the ‘unqualified individualism’ system, incur the costs of lower self-esteem and prestige.

2. Research methodology

In order to evaluate the thesis on the potential of personality tests as a candidate selection method, a literature review was conducted across several disciplines including psychology, management, and law. The main discussed thesis was that personality tests should be an essential element of the selection procedure. To structure the discussion, the argument mapping technique was used as part of the critical thinking method (Twardy, 2004; Dwyer, Hogan, Stewart, 2011). After critically analysing the collected material, twelve premises were identified, both supporting and negating the thesis. From these premises, four arguments were derived, the first two supporting the use of personality tests for candidate selection and the next two highlighting the limitations of this selection method (see: Appendix_Argument_map prepared using the MindMup 2.0 programme).

3. Literature review and discussion

3.1. Supporting arguments (SA)

Argument SA_1 supports the main thesis arguing that the use of personality tests can increase the accuracy of the selection process. The argument is based on three premises.

The first premise suggests that personality has a significant impact on the way and results of one's work. While it is not the only factor influencing job performance, personality can play a crucial role in determining how well an individual can perform their job. This premise is supported by research conducted by Czarnota-Bojarska and Andersz (2020).

The second premise highlights the usefulness of personality tests in selecting job candidates. According to Czarnota-Bojarska (2020), personality tests are effective in eliminating personal considerations and prejudices, giving all candidates an equal chance. The open grading scales make it easier to compare the results of individual employees, as suggested by Hornowska (2019: 115).

The third premise refers to the guidelines of the American Office of Personnel Management. According to the guidelines, the use of personality tests can significantly increase the accuracy of the selection process when used in combination with cognitive ability tests. This premise emphasises that personality tests can be a valuable tool in the selection process.

Overall, argument SA_1 provides strong support for the main thesis by presenting evidence that personality tests can enhance the accuracy of the selection process.

The second argument in support of the thesis (SA_2) asserts that personality tests aid in developing a comprehensive understanding of the candidate. This argument is based on two premises. The first premise argues that personality tests facilitate a holistic assessment of the candidate, which enables the identification of their potential weaknesses. As a result, the interview process can be tailored to address these weaknesses, thereby encouraging the candidate to discuss them (Bates, 2002). The second premise highlights that for certain job roles in Poland, there is a legal requirement to use psychological tests, including personality tests, in addition to traditional selection tools to obtain a complete profile of the candidate (Regulation of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of 28 May 1996). These positions include uniformed services such as the police and army, and professional drivers, such as couriers, taxi drivers, emergency vehicle drivers, and machine operators. This is a significant demographic in the labour market, and no arguments opposing the use of psychometric tests have been found.

3.2. Negative arguments (NA)

The first argument against the thesis (NA_1) questions the validity of personality tests by highlighting that their results may not always reflect the candidate's true potential. This argument is based on four premises. The first premise is derived from research conducted among candidates applying for medical studies (Griffin, Wilson, 2012). The study found that during the selection process, participants tended to present themselves as more conscientious, agreeable, extroverted, and open to experience, and less neurotic than they actually were. However, their personality scores after being accepted into the program did not align with these self-descriptions. The conducted analysis of the scores revealed that nearly two-thirds of the sample appeared to have provided false information on at least one of the Big Five personality factors. Despite being informed that their personality test results would not be used for selection, applicants still showed signs of dissimulation. The study suggests that if personality testing were part of the formal selection process, dissimulation may be even more prevalent.

The second premise points out that the results of personality tests can be influenced by various factors, such as the conditions in which they are carried out and the passage of time. Fukui et al. (2019) found that social situations, high emotions, or mental stress experienced by the candidates might affect their responses, leading to lower scores in some cases.

The third premise refers to a worrying trend in terms of a sharp increase in the share of people falsifying the results of personality tests. Tests are falsified in various ways (Tett, Simonet, 2021). Firstly, fraudulent faking, which is a deliberate distortion of the truth

constituting in responding to personality test items with the opposite of what one believes is true about the self. Secondly, exaggeration, which entails intentionally or unintentionally overstating strengths and understating weaknesses. Thirdly, applicants engaged in reactive responding answer each item to make a favourable impression with regard not to the self but rather to what the applicant expects the organisation will find desirable. Fourthly, self-presentation, which is the applicant's attempt to respond to personality items so as to convey the reputation they seek to show on the job. The percentage of tests falsified in this way has increased from about 14% in the 1960s to even 62% in the 21st century. The widespread phenomenon of falsifying selection tests is also demonstrated by Birkeland et al. (2006), Levashina and Campion (2007) and Levashina et al. (2014).

The last premise pertains to the effectiveness of training individuals to achieve high scores on personality tests, which is supported by Miller and Barrett's research (2008) on tests for uniformed services in the US. The study demonstrated that training for personality measures led to significantly higher scores in conscientiousness. The authors note that individuals who prepare for tests with a coach or provide answers that align with the ideal candidate are more likely to secure jobs compared to those who take the test honestly. However, they caution that this recommendation applies only if personality test scores are the sole basis for decision-making.

The second argument (NA_2) negating the thesis in question says that the use of personality tests in selection procedures is legally questionable. This argument is supported by the following three premises.

The first premise constitutes that the legal validity of personality test scores can be subject to challenge in various ways, as pointed out by Woods Jr. and Savino (2007). Certain test questions may delve into personal matters that employers cannot clearly relate to the candidate's suitability for a specific role, such as inquiries about religious beliefs or sexual preferences. Moreover, some questions may reveal the candidate's mental health issues, such as depression, mania, paranoia, or psychopathy, apart from their primary indications. To avoid legal disputes, the authors suggest that organisations must evaluate the existing legal frameworks while contemplating the use of this selection method. Furthermore, they should consider using only tests that have been proven statistically valid and reliable, supplement them with other screening methods, ensure that the tests are consistent with the company's image, and select a test that aligns with the type of candidate being evaluated.

Another important consideration is the legal standpoint in Poland, which does not provide employers with the authority to mandate personality tests for candidates, particularly concerning labour law (Polish Labour Code, Article 221) and personal data protection (General Data Protection Regulation – GDPR). Even if the employer obtains the candidate's prior consent, the voluntary nature of such consent is often disputed in court due to the unequal bargaining power between the parties involved.

Furthermore, the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP) advises employers to exercise prudence while incorporating personality tests in their selection process. As data controllers, employers are responsible for any potential data breaches that may arise (PARP, 2020).

4. Conclusion and recommendations

Considering the arguments presented, the recommendation for the mandatory use of personality tests in the selection process has been rejected. This is primarily due to uncertainties regarding the accuracy of candidate assessment, given the significant potential for result manipulation and the lack of regulated legal frameworks that necessitate the use of such methods. Nonetheless, it is advisable to use personality tests as an optional selection tool while adhering to proper testing standards. This includes avoiding self-report tests and entrusting test administration and interpretation to individuals with adequate qualifications.

Additionally, when utilising psychometric tests as part of the candidate selection process, the following considerations should be taken into account (Hornowska, 2019: 118):

1. Test validity: It is essential to verify whether the applied test measures the traits and abilities that predict future work or behavioural outcomes.
2. Test effectiveness: It is important to determine whether the test can maximise the share of suitable candidates selected for work and minimise the percentage of suitable candidates not selected.
3. Ethical conduct: This includes safeguarding the privacy rights of candidates, avoiding discrimination based on non-substantive characteristics, and introducing appeal procedures.
4. Selection costs: If it is feasible to gather adequate information about the candidate by shortening the procedure, it should be done. The automation of the testing process also helps reduce the unit cost of the procedure.

When considering selection tests, it is crucial to remember that from a societal standpoint, these procedures contribute to labour market segmentation. They may also result in discrimination and unemployment for certain individuals. However, practitioners' interest in selection issues is increasing, and impartial solutions are becoming necessary to evaluate candidates based solely on their suitability for the position (Hornowska, 2019: 114). Standardised other-reports may be a step in the right direction in relation to occupational standards (Hough, Dilchert, 2017: 316). According to existing research, other-reports can be more reliable than self-reported personality measures for specific criteria. Other-reports can efficiently capture personality variations that improve the scope of the construct, leading to improved criterion-related

validity. Nonetheless, additional evidence for the validity of other-reports must be established, and moderator variables such as the rating source should be studied systematically before organisations widely adopt such measures in employee selection.

In conclusion, it is important to emphasise that the arguments presented in this article are based only on a partial analysis of the scientific literature in this field. This provides a starting point for further, more in-depth research in this area.

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Potencjał testów osobowości w procesie selekcji kandydatów: analiza krytyczna z wykorzystaniem mapowania argumentów

Streszczenie: Testy psychologiczne, w tym testy osobowości, to jedna z metod stosowanych przez współczesne organizacje przy selekcji kandydatów. W artykule dokonano systematycznej analizy argumentów dotyczących słuszności tej metody selekcji z wykorzystaniem techniki mapowania argumentów. Wskazano wątpliwości co do zasadności oceny potencjału kandydata na podstawie takich testów ze względu na możliwość manipulacji wynikami przez kandydata. Podstawowy wniosek płynący z tej analizy jest taki, że testy osobowości powinny być stosowane jedynie jako narzędzie uzupełniające w stosunku do innych technik selekcji. Metody oceny oparte na testach należy stosować fakultatywnie, zachowując odpowiednie standardy przeprowadzania takich testów. Badanie sugeruje także odejście od testów samoopisowych na rzecz powierzania ich wykonania i interpretacji osobom mającym odpowiednie kwalifikacje.

Słowa kluczowe: testy psychologiczne, testy osobowości, trafność, metody selekcji, mapa argumentacji

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