

**METHODOLOGY & TOOLS OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT**



**PERSONNEL ASSESSMENT:** Personnel assessment refers to any method of collecting information on individuals for the purpose of making a selection decision. Selection decisions include, but are not limited to, hiring, placement, promotion, referral, retention, and entry into programs leading to advancement (e.g., apprenticeship, training, career development). Selecting qualified applicants is a critical step in building a talented and committed workforce, supporting an effective organizational culture, and enhancing the overall performance of the agency.

While many applicants may apply for any particular position, quantity does not guarantee quality. Assessment procedures can be a cost-effective tool in narrowing down large applicant pools. Assessment tools can also make the selection decision process more efficient because less time and fewer resources are expended dealing with applicants whose qualifications do not match what is needed by the agency.

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Effective personnel assessment involves a systematic approach towards gathering information about applicants' job qualifications. Factors contributing to successful job performance (e.g., oral communication, problem solving) are identified using a process called job analysis. Job analysis identifies the duties performed on the job and the competencies needed for effective job performance. Basing personnel assessment closely on job analysis results makes the connection between job requirements and personnel assessment tools more transparent, thereby improving the perceived fairness of the assessment process.

**PERSONNEL ASSESSMENT TOOLS:** Generally speaking, an assessment tool is any test or procedure administered to individuals to evaluate their job-related competencies, interests, or fitness for employment. The accuracy with which applicant assessment scores can be used to forecast performance on the job is the tool's most important characteristic, referred to as predictive validity. Not all assessment tools are appropriate for every job and organizational setting. Agencies must consider a number of factors in determining the most appropriate assessment strategy for a particular situation. These considerations include timetables for filling positions, available staff and financial resources, number of positions to be filled, and the nature and complexity of the work performed in the positions to be filled.



**EFFECTIVE PERSONNEL ASSESSMENT:** It is very simple using effective assessment tools will reduce the degree of error in making hiring decisions. Well-developed assessment tools allow agencies to specifically target the competencies and skills they seek. This helps to ensure the time spent by both applicants and agency personnel adds value to the decision-making process. Selection errors have financial & practical impacts on organizations. The consequences of even a single selection error can create problems for an entire work unit. For example, managers may have to devote substantial time training and counseling the marginal employee and coworkers must often handle increased workloads as they correct or perform the employee's work. Some selection errors can have agency-wide consequences such as customer service complaints, increases in work-related accidents and injuries, high absenteeism, poor work quality, increased turnover, or damage to the reputation of the agency.

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**COMPETENCY AND COMPETENCY-BASED ASSESSMENT:** Competency is defined as "A measurable pattern of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and other characteristics that an individual needs to perform work roles or occupational functions successfully." Competencies specify the "how" of performing job tasks, or what the person needs to do the job successfully

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Competencies represent a whole-person approach to assessing individuals. Competencies tend to be either general or technical. General competencies reflect the cognitive and social capabilities (e.g., problem solving, interpersonal skills) required for job performance in a variety of occupations. On the other hand, technical competencies are more specific as they are tailored to the particular knowledge and skill requirements necessary for a specific job.

### **EVALUATING AND IMPLEMENTING ASSESSMENT TOOLS:**



In selecting and evaluating an assessment tool, one must consider a number of important factors such as:

- a) Reliability,
- b) Validity,
- c) Technology,
- d) The Legal Context, And
- e) Face Validity/Applicant Reactions.

Each of these issues is discussed below as well as considerations concerning the design and effectiveness of selection systems.

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(a) **RELIABILITY.** The term reliability refers to consistency. Assessment reliability is demonstrated by the consistency of scores obtained when the same applicants are reexamined with the same or equivalent form of an assessment (e.g., a test of keyboarding skills). No assessment procedure is perfectly consistent. If an applicant's keyboarding skills are measured on two separate occasions, the two scores (e.g., net words per minute) are likely to differ. Reliability reflects the extent to which these individual score differences are due to "true" differences in the competency being assessed and the extent to which they are due to chance, or random, errors. Common sources of such error include variations in

- Applicant's mental or physical state (e.g., the applicant's level of motivation, alertness, or anxiety at the time of testing)
  - Assessment administration (e.g., instructions to applicants, time limits, use of calculators or other resources)
  - Measurement conditions (e.g., lighting, temperature, noise level, visual distractions)
- Scoring procedures (e.g., raters who evaluate applicant performance in interviews, assessment center exercises, writing tests) A goal of good assessment is to minimize random sources of error.

As a general rule, the smaller the amount of error, the higher the reliability.

(b) **VALIDITY.** Validity refers to the relationship between performance on an assessment and performance on the job. Validity is the most important issue to consider when deciding whether to use a particular assessment tool because an assessment that does not provide useful information about how an individual will perform on the job is of no value to the organization. There are different types of validity evidence. Which type is most appropriate will depend on how the assessment method is used in making an employment decision. For example, if a work sample test is designed to mimic the actual tasks performed on the job, then a content validity approach may be needed to establish the content of the test matches in a convincing way the content of the job, as identified by a job analysis.

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If a personality test is intended to forecast the job success of applicants for a customer service position, then evidence of predictive validity may be needed to show scores on the personality test are related to subsequent performance on the job.

**(c) TECHNOLOGY.** The technology available is another factor in determining the appropriate assessment tool. Agencies that receive a large volume of applicants for position announcements may benefit from using technology to narrow down the applicant pool, such as online screening of resumes or online biographical data (biodata) tests. Technology can also overcome distance challenges and enable agencies to reach and interview a larger population of applicants. However, because technology removes the human element from the assessment process, it may be perceived as “cold” by applicants, and is probably best used in situations that do not rely heavily on human intervention, such as collecting applications or conducting applicant screening. Technology should not be used for final selection decisions, as these traditionally require a more individualized and in-depth evaluation of the candidate.

**(d) LEGAL CONTEXT OF ASSESSMENT.** Any assessment procedure used to make an employment decision (e.g., selection, promotion, pay increase) can be open to claims of adverse impact based on subgroup differences. Adverse impact is a legal concept used to determine whether there is a “substantially different” passing rate (or selection rate) between two groups on an assessment procedure. Groups are typically defined on the basis of race (e.g., Blacks compared to Whites), gender (i.e., males compared to females), or ethnicity (e.g., Hispanics compared to Non-Hispanics). Assessment procedures having an adverse impact on any group must be shown to be job-related (i.e., valid). What is a “substantially different” passing rate? The Uniform Guidelines provide a variety of statistical approaches for evaluating adverse impact. The most widely used method is referred to as the 80% (or four-fifths) rule-of-thumb. Agencies are encouraged to consider assessment strategies to minimize adverse impact. When adverse impact is discovered, the assessment procedure must be shown to be job-related and valid for its intended purpose.

**(5) FACE VALIDITY/APPLICANT REACTIONS.** When applicants participate in an assessment process, they are not the only ones being evaluated; the agency is being evaluated as well. Applicants who complete an assessment process leave with impressions about the face validity and overall fairness of the assessment procedure. Their impressions can also be impacted

by whether they believe they had a sufficient opportunity to display their job-related competencies. The quality of the interactions between the applicant and agency representatives can also affect applicant reactions. Agencies using demanding assessment procedures may end up alienating applicants. It is important to recognize applicants use the assessment process as one means to gather information about the agency. Failure to act on this fact can be very costly to agencies, particularly if top candidates are driven to look elsewhere for employment opportunities.

## ASSESSMENT METHODS



This section of the Assessment Decision Guide describes the following assessment methods:

1. Accomplishment Records
2. Assessment
3. Biographical Data (Biodata) Tests
4. Cognitive Ability Tests

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5. Emotional Intelligence Tests

6. Integrity/Honesty

7. Job Knowledge Tests

8. Personality Tests

9. Reference Checking

10. Situational Judgment Tests

11. Structured Interviews

12. Training and Experience (T & E) Evaluations

13. Work Samples and Simulations

**1. Accomplishment Records:** The accomplishment record is a systematic procedure used to collect information about applicants' training, education, experience, and past achievements related to critical job competencies. The accomplishment record is based on the behavioral consistency principle that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. Applicants are typically asked to submit information on personal accomplishments to best illustrate their proficiency on critical job competencies (generally between four and eight). Specifically, applicants are often required to provide written descriptions of what was accomplished, including detailed information about the problem or situation, the specific actions taken, and the results or outcomes achieved by those actions. The name and contact information of an individual who can verify the statements is also usually required. Accomplishments do not need to be limited to those demonstrating previous experience on the specific job in question. Rather, experience gained from other jobs or through community service, school, volunteer work, military service, or even hobbies may also be used to provide examples of accomplishments relevant to the targeted position. Accomplishment statements are evaluated by a panel of trained raters using competency-based benchmarks created for the targeted occupation. The competency-based benchmarks typically provide specific behavioral examples of what



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constitutes high, medium, and low levels of proficiency. Scoring is typically based on the degree to which the behaviors and outcomes described within the accomplishments reflect the benchmark levels of proficiency. The length of the rating process, generally between two and six weeks, is determined by the number of applicants and the number of competencies being assessed. Because the accomplishment descriptions are in the form of a written narrative, the method assumes applicants are able to communicate in writing.

**2. Assessment Centers:** The assessment center is not a place as its name seems to suggest, nor is it a single process or method. Rather, an assessment center employs multiple assessment methods and exercises to evaluate a wide range of competencies used to make a variety of employment decisions (e.g., employee selection, career development, promotion). Assessment centers can be used to assess small groups of people at relatively the same time. Many assessment center exercises resemble work sample tests designed to simulate the actual challenges found on the job. Assessment center exercises can be used to measure many different types of job related competencies, including interpersonal skills, oral and written communication, planning and evaluating, and reasoning and problem solving abilities. A frequently used assessment center exercise is the in-basket test. A typical in-basket test is designed to simulate administrative tasks. During this exercise, applicants are asked to play the role of a person new to the job and are instructed to read and react to a pile of memos, messages, reports, and articles. Some assessment center exercises can be used to evaluate groups and individual behaviors in group situations. For example, in a leaderless group discussion, a group of applicants is tasked with solving a problem or a series of problems in a limited amount of time. Other assessment center exercises include, but are not limited to, job knowledge tests, personality tests, and structured interviews. Applicant performance is usually observed and evaluated by multiple assessors (i.e., raters). When used for internal promotion purposes, assessment centers are frequently designed to reflect values and practices specific to an organization, but when used to assess external applicants, assessment centers should be designed to focus on the job and level of the job (e.g., manager) rather than practices unique to the organization. While assessment centers can be designed for various types of jobs, they are particularly effective for assessing higher-level managerial and leadership competencies.

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Assessment centers require extensive experience to develop, considerable logistical planning to set up, and numerous personnel to administer. Highly trained assessors are needed to observe and evaluate applicant performance on the group and individual exercises.

**3. Biographical Data (Biodata) Tests:** Biodata measures are based on the measurement principle of behavioral consistency, that is, past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. Biodata measures include items about past events and behaviors reflecting personality attributes, attitudes, experiences, interests, skills and abilities validated as predictors of overall performance for a given occupation. Often, biodata test items are developed through behavioral examples provided by subject matter experts (SMEs). These items specify situations likely to have occurred in a person's life, and ask about the person's typical behavior in the situation. In addition, biodata items reflect external actions that may have involved, or were observable by, others and are objective in the sense there is a factual basis for responding to each item. An item might ask "How many books have you read in the last 6 months?" or "How often have you put aside tasks to complete another, more difficult assignment?" Test takers choose one of several predetermined alternatives to best match their past behavior and experiences

**4. Cognitive Ability Tests:** Cognitive ability tests assess abilities involved in thinking (e.g., reasoning, perception, memory, verbal and mathematical ability, and problem solving). Such tests pose questions designed to estimate applicants' potential to use mental processes to solve work-related problems or to acquire new job knowledge. Traditionally, the general trait measured by cognitive ability tests is called "intelligence" or "general mental ability." However, an intelligence test often includes various item types which measure different and more specific mental factors often referred to as "specific mental abilities." Examples of such items include arithmetic computations, verbal analogies, reading comprehension, number series completion, and spatial relations (i.e., visualizing objects in three-dimensional space). Some cognitive ability tests sum up the correct answers to all of the items to obtain an overall score that represents a measure of general mental ability. If an individual score is computed for each of the specific types of abilities (e.g., numeric, verbal, reasoning), then the resulting scores represent measures

of the specific mental abilities. Traditional cognitive tests are well-standardized, contain items reliably scored, and can be administered to large groups of people at one time. Examples of item formats include multiple choice, sentence completion, short answer, or true-false. Many professionally developed cognitive tests are available commercially and may be considered when there is no significant need to develop a test that refers specifically to the particular job or organization.

- **5. Emotional Intelligence Tests:** Emotional intelligence (EI) is defined as a type of social competence involving the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions. EI is a fairly specific ability that connects a person's knowledge processes to his or her emotional processes. As such, EI is different from emotions, emotional styles, emotional traits, and traditional measures of intelligence based on general mental or cognitive ability (i.e., IQ). EI involves a set of skills or abilities that may be categorized into five domains:
  - **Self-awareness:** Observing yourself and recognizing a feeling as it happens.
  - **Managing emotions:** Handling feelings so they are appropriate; realizing what is behind a feeling; finding ways to handle fears and anxieties, anger, and sadness.
  - **Motivating oneself:** Channeling emotions in the service of a goal; emotional self-control; delaying gratification and stifling impulses.
  - **Empathy:** Sensitivity to others' feelings and concerns and taking their perspective; appreciating the differences in how people feel about things.
  - **Handling relationships:** Managing emotions in others; social competence and social skills.

The typical approach to measuring EI ability involves administering a set of questions to applicants and scoring the correctness of those responses based on expert judgment (expert scoring) or consensus among a large number of people (consensus scoring). For example, one EI ability test requires the applicant to view a series of faces and report how much of each of six emotions is present, answer questions about emotional scenarios and responses (e.g., predict how an anxious employee will react to a significantly increased workload), and

solve emotional problems (e.g., decide what response is appropriate when a friend calls you upset over losing his or her job).

**6. Integrity/Honesty Tests:** An integrity test is a specific type of personality test designed to assess an applicant's tendency to be honest, trustworthy, and dependable. A lack of integrity is associated with such counterproductive behaviors as theft, violence, sabotage, disciplinary problems, and absenteeism. Integrity tests have been found to measure some of the same factors as standard personality tests, particularly conscientiousness, and perhaps some aspects of emotional stability and agreeableness. Integrity tests can also be valid measures of overall job performance. This is not surprising because integrity is strongly related to conscientiousness, itself a strong predictor of overall job performance. Like other measures of personality traits, integrity tests can add a significant amount of validity to a selection process when administered in combination with a cognitive ability test. In addition, few, if any, integrity test performance differences are found between men and women or applicants of different races or ethnicities. Integrity tests will not eliminate dishonesty or theft at work, but the research does strongly suggest that individuals who score poorly on these tests tend to be less suitable and less productive employees. Overt integrity tests (also referred to as clear-purpose tests) are designed to directly measure attitudes relating to dishonest behavior. They are distinguished from personality-based tests in that they make no attempt to disguise the purpose of the assessment. Overt tests often contain questions that ask directly about the applicant's own involvement in illegal behavior or wrongdoing (e.g., theft, illicit drug use). Such transparency can make guessing the correct answer obvious. Applicant faking is always a concern with overt integrity tests. The score results from such tests should be interpreted with caution.

**7. Job Knowledge Tests:** Job knowledge tests, sometimes referred to as achievement or mastery tests, typically consist of questions designed to assess technical or professional expertise in specific knowledge areas. Job knowledge tests evaluate what a person knows at the time of taking the test. Unlike cognitive ability tests, there is no attempt to assess the applicant's learning potential. In other words, a job knowledge test can be used to inform employers what an

applicant currently knows, but not whether the individual can be relied on to master new material in a timely manner. Job knowledge tests are not appropriate when applicants will be trained after selection in the critical knowledge areas needed for the job. Job knowledge tests are used in situations where applicants must already possess a body of learned information prior to being hired. They are particularly useful for jobs requiring specialized or technical knowledge that can only be acquired over an extended period of time. Examples of job knowledge tests include tests of basic accounting principles, computer programming, financial management, and knowledge of contract law. Job knowledge tests are often constructed on the basis of an analysis of the tasks that make up the job. While the most typical format for a job knowledge test is a multiple choice question format, other formats include written essays and fill-in-the-blank questions.

**8. Personality Tests:** Personality tests are designed to systematically elicit information about a person's motivations, preferences, interests, emotional make-up, and style of interacting with people and situations. Personality measures can be in the form of interviews, in-basket exercises, observer ratings, or self-report inventories (i.e., questionnaires). Personality self-report inventories typically ask applicants to rate their level of agreement with a series of statements designed to measure their standing on relatively stable personality traits. This information is used to generate a profile used to predict job performance or satisfaction with certain aspects of the work. Personality is described using a combination of traits or dimensions. Therefore, it is ill-advised to use a measure that taps only one specific dimension (e.g., conscientiousness). Rather, job performance outcomes are usually best predicted by a combination of personality scales. For example, people high in integrity may follow the rules and be easy to supervise but they may not be good at providing customer service because they are not outgoing, patient, and friendly. The personality traits most frequently assessed in work situations include: (1) Extroversion, (2) Emotional Stability, (3) Agreeableness, (4) Conscientiousness, and (5) Openness to Experience. These five personality traits are often referred to collectively as the Big Five or the Five-Factor Model. While these are the most commonly measured traits, the specific factors most predictive of job performance will depend on the job in question. When selecting or developing a personality scale, it is useful to begin with inventories that tap the Big Five, but the results from a

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validity study may indicate some of these traits are more relevant than others in predicting job performance.

**9. Reference Checking:** Reference checking is an objective evaluation of an applicant's past job performance based on information collected from key individuals (e.g., supervisors, peers, subordinates) who have known and worked with the applicant. Reference checking is primarily used to:

- Verify the accuracy of information given by job applicants through other selection processes (e.g., résumés, occupational questionnaires, interviews)
- Predict the success of job applicants by comparing their experience to the competencies required by the job
- Uncover background information on applicants that may not have been identified by other selection procedures Job applicants may attempt to enhance their chances of obtaining a job offer by distorting their training and work history information. While résumés summarize what applicants claim to have accomplished, reference checking is meant to assess how well those claims are backed up by others.

Verifying critical employment information can significantly cut down on selection errors. Information provided by former peers, direct reports, and supervisors can also be used to forecast how applicants will perform in the job being filled. Reference data used in this way is based on the behavioral consistency principle that past performance is a good predictor of future performance. As a practical matter, reference checking is usually conducted near the end of the selection process after the field of applicants has been narrowed to only a few competitors. Most reference checks are conducted by phone. Compared to written requests, phone interviews allow the checker to collect reference data immediately and to probe for more detailed information when clarification is needed. Phone interviews also require less time and effort on the part of the contact person and allow for more candid responses about applicants.

**10. Situational Judgment Tests:** Situational judgment tests (SJTs) present applicants with a description of a work problem or critical situation related to the job they are applying for and ask them to identify how they would handle it. Because applicants are not placed in a simulated work

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setting and are not asked to perform the task or behavior (as would be the case in an assessment center or a work sample), SJTs are classified as low-fidelity simulations. SJTs measure effectiveness in social functioning dimensions such as conflict management, interpersonal skills, problem solving, negotiation skills, facilitating teamwork, and cultural awareness. SJTs are particularly effective measures of managerial and leadership competencies. SJTs can be developed to present scenarios and collect responses using a variety of formats. One alternative is to present a situation and then ask respondents to answer several questions about the situation. More often, SJTs present a new situation for each question. To respond to this type of SJT item, applicants may be asked:

- a) What they would do in the particular situation,
- b) What they would be most and least likely to do in the situation,
- c) What response is the best response among several options?
- d) What response is the best and second-best among several options or
- e) What would most likely occur next in a certain situation or as a result of a certain decision?

**11. Structured Interviews:** The employment interview is one of the most widely used methods of assessing job applicants. Due to its popularity, a great deal of research on improving the reliability and validity of the interview has been conducted. This body of research has demonstrated that structured interviews, which employ rules for eliciting, observing, and evaluating responses, increase interviewers' agreement on their overall evaluations by limiting the amount of discretion an interviewer is allowed. The level of structure in an interview can vary according to the constraints placed on the questions asked and evaluation criteria. Interviews with a low degree of structure place no constraints on the questions asked and allow for global evaluation of applicant responses.

Interviews with a very high level of structure involve asking all applicants the same exact set of pre-defined lead and probe (i.e., follow-up questions) and are scored according to benchmarks of proficiency. Interviews with higher degrees of structure show higher levels of validity, rater

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reliability, rater agreement, and less adverse impact. Interviews also vary according to the specific competencies being measured. Employment interviews can focus on past, present, or future behavior, beliefs, opinions, or attitudes of the applicant. Information may also include behavior observed during the interview itself (e.g., oral communication), work experience, training, education, and career aspirations. Research shows interview questions based on specific job competencies identified through job analysis as being critical to job success demonstrate high levels of validity, rater reliability, and rater agreement.

The most common methods for developing specific, job-related questions are based on either the situational or behavioral description format. Situational interview questions ask applicants to describe what they would do or how they would behave in a situation similar to those encountered on the job. An example of a situational question is, “You have been assigned to work on a project with some of your coworkers. While on the job, you notice several of them goofing off. You know you are falling behind schedule to complete the work by the deadline. What would you do?” This format relies on applicants’ ability to project what they might do in a future situation. Behavioral description interview questions ask applicants to describe a past behavior demonstrated in a situation relevant to the competency of interest. An example of this type is, “Describe a situation where you analyzed and interpreted information.” This type of interview is based on the behavioral consistency principle that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior.

**12. Training and Experience (T & E) Evaluations:** A traditional T & E evaluation, sometimes called a crediting plan or rating schedule, is a systematic method used to assess previous experience, education, and training information provided by job applicants. These assessment factors are based on critical job requirements and competencies identified through a job analysis. Rating factors generally include the amount and quality of the applicant’s previous job-related experience, as well as any other information deemed important to performing the duties of the position. Typically, information on the assessment factors is reported by applicants as a supplement to the application blank. This information is evaluated against education and experience benchmarks to generate scores for selection purposes. Benchmarks are often developed by Human Resource Specialists familiar with the occupations covered with the T & E



evaluation. T & E evaluations are relatively easy to develop and may apply to multiple occupations sharing the same requirements and competencies. For the most part, these assessments are used for entry level positions. Most often, T & E evaluations are used as a screen early in the selection process to identify applicants who meet the minimum proficiency levels on the rating factors. While most rating factors are usually broad, more specific factors tailored to a particular occupation or organization can be developed.

**13. Work Samples and Simulations:** Work sample tests require applicants to perform tasks or work activities that mirror the tasks employees perform on the job. For instance, applicants for an Administrative Assistant position may be asked to transcribe an internal memo using a word processor or to accurately file a stack of paperwork. Because work samples require applicants to perform tasks identical or highly similar to tasks from the job, great care is taken in trying to mimic the work environment to the greatest extent possible. For example, applicants to the Administrative Assistant position may perform tasks at a workstation highly similar, if not identical, to that found on the job. As with job knowledge tests, work sample tests should only be used in situations where applicants are expected to possess the required competencies upon entry into the position. If training on how to perform the work activities will be provided after selection, the work sample method may not be appropriate.



## TERMINOLOGIES

**Adverse impact:** A substantially different rate of selection in hiring which works to the disadvantage of members of any race, sex, or ethnic group.

**Behavioral consistency method:** Based on the principle that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. In practice, the method involves describing previous accomplishments gained through work, training, or other experience (e.g., school, community service, hobbies) and matching those accomplishments to the competencies required by the job.

**Concurrent validity:** In a concurrent study, job incumbents (i.e., current employees) are tested and their job performance is evaluated at the same time. The relation between current performance on the assessment and on the job can then be examined. Evidence of concurrent validity is often substituted for predictive validity. Whether this is appropriate will depend on the type of measure and how similar the incumbent sample is to the applicant population.

**Construct validity:** A construct refers to the underlying trait (e.g., intelligence, sociability) assumed to be measured by an assessment. Construct validation involves collecting evidence to determine whether the assessment does indeed measure the trait it was intended to measure.

**Content validity Evidence :**( based on job analysis and expert judgment) the choice of items or tasks included in the assessment logically matches or represents those tasks or competencies required by the job.

**Criterion-related validity:** The degree to which performance on an assessment procedure predicts (or is statistically related to) an important criterion such as job performance, training success, or productivity. There are two major types of criterion-related validity, concurrent and predictive. Back



