INNOVATING THE TALENT ASSESSMENT EXPERIENCE:

A Promising Engagement

Profiles **)(** International®

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About **Profiles International**

We offer assessment solutions that enable organizations to select the right people for the right job and develop them to their full potential.

We work with clients across the employee life cycle to enhance the productivity and performance of individuals, teams, and organizations. Our solutions can help clients screen-out unsuitable candidates, match others with jobs that fit their inherent capabilities, understand the strengths and limitations of successful onboarding, and identify opportunities to enhance performance and maximize their long-term contribution to the organization.

About **Kurt Hulett**

Dr. Kurt Hulett received his B.S. in Public Administration with a minor in Special Education from James Madison University, his M.Ed. in Special Education from the University of Virginia, as well as his Ed.D. in Administration and Supervision. He has served in education in the classroom and in an administrative capacity. A published author, Hulett has also worked as a professional in the private sector as a Senior Director of Research & Business Development and Vice President of Assessment for Pearson Assessment and Triumph Learning.

For most of my career, I have strongly believed in the notion that if you want to improve an employment assessment, simply improve the quality and rigor of the items. The argument, in a nutshell, is that as long as the items measure the characteristics we are intending to measure, and does so with a high degree of reliability, validity, and sensitivity, then very little else matters. Unfortunately, I am coming to realize that I have been wrong for the majority of my career. Simply put, the field of employment and corporate assessment is not merely about building scientifically-sound tests; it's really about better engaging people and realizing that the experience does matter—from beginning to end. It's not enough to just assess personnel, the employee assessment process must continually engage every person in the process at the highest levels possible.

According to Gallup's 2013 State of the American Workforce Report, organizations with an average of 9.3 engaged employees for every actively disengaged employee in 2010-2011 experienced 147% higher earnings per share (EPS) compared with their competition in 2011-2012. Gallup estimates that active disengagement costs the U.S. "$450 to $550 billion per year" (p. 9). A key component of the report discusses how to facilitate greater engagement, and when. "Managers should also know that every interaction with an employee has the potential to influence his or her engagement and inspire discretionary effort" (p. 9). I found this last statement very interesting. If every interaction matters, then the engagement process actually begins the moment a candidate walks through the doors of human resources for the first time. No opportunity is too small or too early to actively engage potential or current employees.

Starbucks Theory of Product Design—The User Experience Matters

Starbucks realized and perfected the user experience long ago. They realized that people didn't go to the coffee shop for just coffee, they also went there to engage in the experience. Starbucks reasoned if they could optimize how people felt while they were there, they would be more engaged in the experience and keep coming back and to buy coffee. Everything at Starbucks has a purpose and is meticulously planned—down to the wrapping and packaging of oatmeal. The music you hear—that's no everyday station. They have a team of individuals who do nothing but evaluate "feel good" music. Can you imagine, a team of people who spend their time just trying to make sure the music feels good? Although this may seem trivial or a bit over-engineered, it's not—because it works. People come back again and again because of how they feel while they are there, and choose to re-engage time and time again. I wonder if most of their customers could tell you in a blind taste test which cup of coffee belonged to McDonald's, Dunkin Donuts, or Starbucks? I have no doubt, however, that most customers can tell a marked difference in how they feel when they visit the respective franchises.

The term "user experience" generally elicits thoughts related to technology and user interface. As it relates to corporate assessment and this paper, I am referring primarily to the relationship of the candidate to the actual assessment. Content, and how it is presented and the degree to which it is engaging, is king. Whether or not the user-interface is super slick or the assessment is merely five minutes long is of little consequence. What's important is the content of the items that are being used to assess the capacity, characteristics, and general intellect of the candidate, and how the content actually engages and impacts the candidate. The majority of companies still seem a bit off the mark, and only focus on technological upgrades with respect to user experience efforts, but a small group is pioneering in this area.

How does the user experience of a corporate assessment impact the ability of a company to recruit or retain top talent? My hypothesis is that once a candidate enters your HR doors, everything he experiences and the extent to which he is engaged is a reflection of the company, and will have either a positive or negative impact—nothing is perceptually static. A couple of days ago, I was chatting with a peer about this very topic, and he recounted a story of an interview process that included testing. He lamented, "The experience was awful. Once I finished the test, I knew the company wasn't the place for me. I just assume if the test is stupid, so are the people that stand behind it." This statement, for me, sums up the power and impact of the user's experience and resulting perception of the face validity of the assessment. The user experience of the corporate assessment is particularly important because it impacts and stimulates the most critical area—the brain. If the first exercise and experience a candidate has with a company is non-engaging and frustrating, it is likely the candidate will generalize those emotions to a future work environment with the same company.

If a candidate is genuinely engaged and his interest is piqued by the assessment, it seems reasonable that the individual will have increased confidence and enthusiasm for the company administering the assessment. High-stakes assessments of any kind will nearly always create a degree of anxiety for the person taking it. If an assessment is genuinely tied to potential work tasks and aligned with real-world applications, chances are greater that the individual taking it will be engrossed and highly engaged in the experience.

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Authentic, Meaningful Assessment

If there is one thing the corporate assessment industry does well, it is measure general characteristics related to achievement, intellect, and personality with reliability, validity, and sensitivity. The industry leaders adhere to generally-accepted scientific norms and employ highly-skilled and well-trained research scientists who oversee the development of these assessments. Due to the overall quality, accuracy, and strength of these assessments, not a great deal of discussion has been focused on the need for change. It makes sense:

seemingly applicable. One of the real values of this item, beyond the strong psychometric properties, is that it can be performed quickly.

We need to move toward case-based, contextualized assessments that are specific to individual industries. Similar to what is done in the education industry, where state-specific assessments are created for high-stakes assessments tied to specific standards, the corporate assessment industry needs to start creating more industry-specific assessments that truly measure one's skills and

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why fix something that isn't broken? For the most part I agree, which is why I don't support the need for a fix as much as I support the idea of an evolution of sorts.

As an example of opportunity for assessment evolution, let's discuss a general mathematical reasoning question. It is common in this industry to utilize basic algebraic questions to evaluate and measure one's ability relative to mathematical reasoning. This type of item is extremely reliable and valid relative to what it is measuring. A 50-something executive, however, may fail to see the connection to the job for which he is applying and become quickly disengaged. Although he likely understands the general purpose of the item and why it is being measured, it may not be particularly engaging or

knowledge against industry standards and cognitive demands. Assessments presented in case study formats containing content that is industry specific may be more timely and expensive to create, but I believe the positive gain relative to the user experience justifies the means. Additionally, the candidates will walk away with a much greater appreciation for the company, and confidence in the approach that the company utilizes to assess talent. At a minimum, I recommend corporate assessment companies actively begin exploring the ability to develop extensions of these assessments that are more applied, relevant, and meaningful.

Consultative Culture

The value of a corporate assessment company is not solely in its

product offerings; rather, it's truly in the people that offer the products and consult with the consumers directly. The last part in the testing process involves the analysis of complex data and the application of critical decisions. In all honesty, the easy part, relatively speaking, is in the development of an assessment and the proctoring process—it's formulaic in nature. The real art is in the interpretation of the data, and then determining which levers to pull based on the data. A critical element in this process is ensuring the reports that represent the results are easy to understand and actionable. A small number of companies have mastered this realm—making complex data understandable and easily implemented. The better the reporting, the easier it is to get the data into action. If the client is not engaged by the data and reporting, a higher likelihood exists that limited or no action will be taken.

It is also an art to teach people to deviate from decades of thought patterns, standard approaches, and relying on hunches, and to move toward a disciplined, structured decision-making process that is heavily driven by objective data. This is where the absolute critical role of the consultant begins. Once the assessments are completed and the data is in hand, the consultant must now sit down with the leadership team and help them to not only understand each piece of datum, but to also understand how to apply the data and understand both short- and long-term impacts of their decisions. The absolute value is not in the tool; it's in the information that it yields and how effectively it is used to make informed decisions. In the business of information and testing, nothing is more important than the individual that deciphers all of the data and serves as a trusted advisor.

Moving Forward… First Things First
It makes sense for a company looking to evolve their product offerings or who wish to create the next big thing in corporate

assessment to focus squarely on the test itself. If they do, however, progress may be made, but it will be done so to a limited extent. To truly evolve and grow in this industry, companies must work hard at adjusting old paradigms, and put the majority of their focus squarely on better understanding the needs, experiences, and perceptions of the clients they serve and the candidates they assess. First, companies must realize the days of the tough interview panel sitting with crossed arms and stoic faces are over. The days when the candidate needed to impress the company are long gone. Talent is scarce, and companies must be prepared to actively compete and fight for the top candidates. In doing so, they must ensure that everything the candidate experiences during the interview is as positive and engaging as possible. Therefore, the companies developing pre-employment assessments must take steps to ensure that everything possible has been done to maximize the engagement and the user experience for the candidate. With a broad focus on user experience and engagement, companies are more likely to take a broader, more holistic approach to test design, item development, and consultative services. At the end of the day, it's less about test development and more about understanding human development and engagement. It truly does not matter where we look on the employee lifecycle, the importance of employee engagement is absolutely critical to the bottom line. Companies cannot afford to overlook any opportunity to engage employees or candidates. As the data demonstrates, the companies that ignore employee engagement may have to learn a very expensive lesson.

Profiles International
5205 Lake Shore Drive
Waco, Texas 76710-1732
866.751.1644
www.profilesinternational.com