

How do employers test an applicant's skills?

Have you ever looked at a job posting and thought, "Yeah, sure, I could do that"? Or applied to a position that you'd like but didn't necessarily have the skills for? This is one of the biggest reasons employers have a series of tests to weed out applicants that may not be ready for a role's challenges.

"According to the U.S. Department of Labor, any assessment used during the employee screening and selection process is a test. And any test used must be job-related," says Ira S. Wolfe, President of Success Performance Solutions and author of *Perfect Labor Storm 2.0*. "The inherent problem with most testing is that it focuses on what the applicant accomplished in the past. And many managers focus on the 'hard' skills — the technical and administrative skills."

As Wolfe points out, though, employers need to test *how* the applicant will apply these skills, and that they can repeat their success. "While the interview and references are still important tools, work samples and pre-employment testing are playing a bigger role to assess future performance and potential to adapt and grow."

Read on to learn more about how employers can adequately test the skills of their applicants, and to find out how you can prepare to ace these tests.

1. Following instructions and demonstrating creativity

Ashley Schwartz, Director of Multimedia Production at The Security Awareness Company, was responsible for hiring a new production assistant earlier this year. In order to find the best match for their team, she first assessed candidates through emails.

"When we posted our ad, there were five requirements for them to send us when they replied," Schwartz says. "Anyone who didn't follow the directions we didn't even look at since that's a pretty basic skill. But then since a couple of our requirements were on the more 'informal' or 'fun' side, we looked at how much thought and creativity the applicants put into their responses. Some of them were so creative, we put those in the 'maybe' stack."

2. Proving experience through examples

Next, Schwartz gauged the applicants' work history by viewing their online portfolios. "A lot of the things in the portfolios are obvious school pieces, where they had a lot of time to complete an assignment and were given specific instructions. So that can tell you how literally a person follows rules given to them, how they think when given specific parameters, etc."

However, Schwartz's team also expected candidates to display creativity through their own ideas and work, not necessarily what was assigned to them. "It's important to look for other pieces, like personal projects, or stuff they've done on their own just to learn something. Many of the applicants didn't have those things, and when we spoke to them on the phone or in person it became clear that they lacked a certain creative spark. They weren't going to go out and learn how to do stuff without being told or asked. So they wouldn't be good for our team."

3. Explaining the process and meeting demands of the job

Having an end product that employers like may not be enough to get the job if you can't also work within their workflow demands. Demonstrating passion for your work and being able to complete it within the role's demands is essential. Schwartau says, "Get them to show you what they are most proud of and find out why. You can find out how long they spent doing something and what they went through to figure out how to do it.

"We saw this beautiful series of posters one applicant had done as his semester-long project and they were *great*. Lots of detail and his own illustrations included. Very modern, fresh look. But then we thought about it — it took him four months to do something that we would need to turn around in a couple weeks. After speaking with him further, it became clear that deadlines and a quick turnaround were going to end up stressing him out and he might be overwhelmed by the pace of our chaos. His skills weren't up to the challenge."

4. Showing problem-solving skills and knowing resources

A favorite adage in work and life is "If you can't explain it, you don't really understand it." While you may have work experience and an interest in a role, if you can't explain the processes to complete it or offer insight to particular projects, you're not bringing much to the position.

Schwartau elaborates, saying, "When a project comes across my desk, I immediately start thinking of all the ways we could handle it from a broad branding approach, down to the 'which buttons will I click in InDesign® to accomplish the effect I want?' approach. So we posed a few hypotheticals to the candidates and asked them to describe the process they would take to handle the approach. For example, if someone says they're going to use Photoshop® to create what needs to be a scalable vector logo, you know they don't know what they're doing. And always ask them what their favorite font is. If they name a regular system font or have never heard of places like Dafont or 1001 Free Fonts then maybe they don't know that half a designer's job is going out and *looking* for the right pieces and tools to complete the job. That comes up during the 'how would you handle this project' question a lot."

It may be a lengthy process to secure a role, but demonstrating your skills and abilities and meeting the challenges of an employer is an exceptional way to ensure that both the employer and employee understand the expectations of the position.