

Promotional tests can discourage some of the best, says new research

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Standardized tests are a common choice for organizations looking for an objective way of fairly evaluating who is the best person for the job.

But new research looking at the use of promotional exams with Ontario police officers shows that these tests may discourage candidates from applying and create anxiety that could hurt a candidate's performance. If this happens, the whole organization could be hurt, rather than helped by the promotions process. This groundbreaking research is forthcoming in the journal *Personnel Psychology*.

"These data really speak to the fact that the process needs to be looked at from the perspective of the applicant," said study co-author Julie McCarthy, an organizational behaviour professor at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management and The University of Toronto Scarborough.

Organizations "need to ensure that the process they are using is fair and that people are going to have positive reactions to the process, even if they do not receive a promotion," Prof. McCarthy said.

Researchers looked at the examples of police officers writing exams through the Ontario Police College for the purpose of promotion to higher policing ranks such as sergeant or staff sergeant. "We partnered with OPC for several years. They are really committed to providing high-quality exams and considering candidates' perceptions when planning improvements", said McCarthy. The study found that officers who felt

the process was fair were more likely to recommend it to other officers. Such positive "word of mouth" is important as police agencies and other organizations try to get their best candidates to compete for increasingly responsible positions in an era of impending retirements.

But fairness perceptions were not related to exam performance. Candidates who did better on the exams were those who were motivated to do well. The study also suggested organizations can help employees do their best in promotional processes by developing test preparation and coping tools designed to manage exam anxiety. "Anxiety is complex - it can both help and hurt exam performance." Anxiety management techniques should teach candidates to channel their arousal into productive behaviours, such as carefully responding to exam questions, and help them to avoid negative behaviours, like mind wandering, that tend to accompany this arousal.

Source: University of Toronto, Rotman School of Management

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