

Media Article



Vocational Guidance Services

LOOKING FOR HONESTY

A company that has honest employees will certainly be more successful than one that employs thieves. In the US alone, businesses lose as much as \$40 billion a year through employee dishonesty, but how can they ensure only honest people get recruited?

We all know that references are not very reliable indicators of future performance especially if we contact those on someone's CV – who tend to be mostly friends and extended family! Even if previous supervisors not listed on the CV are contacted, they often don't feel justified in being too negative on a manager they employed and tend to focus on the positives, fearing the consequences of being too candid.

So, in an attempt to be a little more scientific about this, employers in the west used to use polygraph, also known as lie detector tests, to identify potentially dishonest employees. This controversial invasion of privacy was banned for use in recruitment in 1988 in the US and is no longer used in Europe, as it is seen as an infringement of human rights.

Given the vacuum left by the polygraph, some companies have turned to using what are called 'integrity tests' which are, in fact, questionnaires filled in by potential employees. These questionnaires encourage the examinees to make overt, if minor, admissions of theft and other illegal or undesirable activities (such as drug use and lax work attitude). Items examined here could be 'I have given friends company merchandise'.

The irony, here, of course, is that the systems rely on dishonest candidates being honest in their answers. Employers tend to vigorously protect the 'scoring systems' or 'norms' used to compare your answers to, which can result in a lack of transparency in the process, too. As such, the questionnaires are extremely controversial and, as with all questionnaires used in an employment based setting, are far from perfect in the predictions they yield. In fact, the US office of Technology has estimated that over 90% of those that 'fail' such questionnaires are incorrectly labeled as dishonest. Those candidates totally honest on minor things such as once coming to work hung over can actually find themselves penalized whereas, those who have dishonestly 'second guessed' their responses get through.

Because of the ethical, reliability and stability of the questionnaire systems, many states in the US, such as Massachusetts have also banned the use of integrity questionnaires by employers completely. Mood has also a great effect on a candidates responses to such an exercise – occupational psychologists point out: if you fill in the questionnaire in a cynical frame of mind you might not come across too well, whereas if we were having a good day and feeling good about yourself you would respond differently.

The ultimate irony, though about such systems is that, in order to 'disguise' their true, purpose, many such questionnaires are labeled 'General Personality Characteristics' or 'General Attitudes Toward the Work Place' – a disguise you may consider dishonest! But, be careful, if you are faced with a questionnaire that asks such things as 'have you ever left work early without permission' the company might be trying to analyze more than just your time keeping!

Madeleine Dunford
Managing Director
Career Connections

