

## THE TRUTH ABOUT HONESTY TESTING

C. W. Von Bergen, Southeastern Oklahoma State University  
Barlow Soper, Louisiana Tech University  
David Whitlock, Southeastern Oklahoma State University

### ABSTRACT

Honesty or integrity tests can predict important aspects of occupational performance related to theft. Research shows that many honesty tests provide information about the overall likelihood of dishonest behavior and that a person with poor scores is more likely to behave in a dishonest fashion across a wide range of situations than a person with higher scores. It has also been found that these tests can enhance fairness in the employment process.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Among fast-food employees, 62 percent admitted stealing company property or cash and 78 percent had engaged in time theft, such as faking illness, calling in sick and leaving early without permission (Slora, 1988). The Food Marketing Institute found that 45 percent of employees admitted to cash or property theft (Food Marketing Institute, 1992), while other research suggests that one in every three employees steals at work (Jones & Terris, 1989).

To counter such behavior, honesty tests have been developed. These paper-and-pencil instruments are most often utilized in personnel selection to predict employee dishonesty or counterproductivity in the retail sales, banking, hospital, and food service industries. Although integrity tests, as they are typically called, have been in existence since at least the 1950s (Ash, 1976), their widespread use is relatively recent due to the discontinuance of polygraph tests for employment screening in most jobs (Camara & Schneider, 1994).

Most of these exams consist of approximately 100 items or less and take 20 to 30 minutes to complete. The employer's cost is low, usually \$5 to \$25 per applicant. The time and cost advantages of written honesty tests, coupled with the tremendous need to reduce losses from theft and substance abuse, make written honesty tests an attractive option for organizations.

Despite its increasing usage, integrity testing remains a controversial topic. In part, this results from the content of the tests that sometimes ask questions that could be regarded as invasive or insulting, and because of the intensely personal nature of what is being assessed. To understand the controversy over integrity testing it is important to first describe the instruments themselves, then examine research on their use, and concerns raised by critics of their use.

### II. INTEGRITY TESTS AND WHAT THEY MEASURE?

Examples of the dimensions that appear to underlie the items included on most integrity tests are presented in Table 1.

**TABLE I. TYPICAL DIMENSIONS IN INTEGRITY TESTS**

1. Perceived incidence of dishonesty: Less honest people report a higher incidence of dishonest behavior.
  2. Leniency toward dishonest behavior: Less honest individuals are more apt to forgive or excuse dishonest behavior.
  3. Theft rationalization: Less honest individuals come up with excuses or plausible reasons for theft.
  4. Theft temptation or rumination: Less honest individuals think about theft.
  5. Norms regarding dishonest behavior: Less honest people view dishonest behavior as acceptable.
  6. Impulse control: Less honest individuals act more on their impulses.
- Punitiveness toward self or others: Less honest individuals have more punitive attitudes.

Sackett, Burris, and Callahan (1989) classified integrity tests into overt tests, which directly assess attitudes toward theft and dishonest and illegal acts, and personality-based tests, which are designed to predict a broad range of counterproductive behaviors. Overt integrity tests are based on the premise that persons' attitudes about theft as well as previous theft behaviors will accurately predict future honesty. As such, overt integrity tests typically include two sections. One deals with attitudes toward theft and other forms of dishonesty (e.g., beliefs about: the frequency and extent of employee theft, and perceived ease of theft). The other deals with admissions of theft and other illegal activities (e.g., dollar amount stolen in the last year, how often the person has been tempted to steal). An example of an overt integrity test is the Reid Report (Reid Psychological Systems, 1986) which reports scores on honesty attitude, social behavior, substance abuse, personal achievements, service orientation, and clerical/math skills.

Personality-based integrity tests are more general in that they tap a variety of personality traits thought to be related to a wide range of counterproductive behavior not limited to theft, such as: absenteeism, substance abuse, insubordination, bogus workers' compensation claims, various forms of passive aggression, and violence. The Hogan Reliability Scale (R. Hogan & J. Hogan, 1995) is an example of a personality-based test and measures hostility to rules and authority, thrill-seeking impulsiveness, social insensitivity, and alienation. Sackett et al. (1989) state that test takers usually find these personality-based tests less offensive than the overt integrity tests.

### **III. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE?**

In conducting a large statistical study of integrity test validities, Ones, Viswesvaran, and Schmidt (1993) used a total sample of over 500,000 subjects. The researchers found that integrity tests possess impressive validity (that is, the test's ability to measure what it is supposed to measure) and reported a mean estimated true



validity of .39 between overt integrity tests and counterproductive behaviors. With supervisory ratings of overall job performance as the criterion, the mean estimated true validity of integrity tests across overt and personality-based measures in applicant settings was .41 using a sample size of 7,550. Additionally, Ones et al. (1993) compared the validities of integrity tests for predicting counterproductive criteria using admissions versus external measures of counterproductive criteria. They found that integrity tests correlated .58 with admissions of counterproductivity and .32 with externally measured counterproductivity.

Unfortunately, few studies have attempted to correlate test scores with actual theft. Of course, those would be difficult to conduct, but not impossible. Instead, the validity of honesty tests has been determined by comparing test scores with: polygraph test results, self-admissions of theft, shrinkage (the amount of goods lost by a store), known groups (for example, priests versus convicts), and future theft. Regrettably, all such measures have problems. If polygraph results are used, the researcher is comparing test scores with the a measure that has been declared illegal, partly because of questions of accuracy. If self-admissions are used, the researcher is relying on dishonest people to be honest about their criminal history. If shrinkage is used, it is not known which of the employees is responsible for the theft or, for that matter, what percentage of the shrinkage can be attributed to employee theft as opposed to customer theft or incidental breakage. Even if actual employee theft is used, the test may only predict employees who get caught stealing as opposed to those who steal and do not get caught. One recent study by Bernardin and Cooke (1993), however, found that scores on an honesty test successfully predicted detected theft (correlation between the honesty score and detected theft was .28) for a group of convenience store employees and is in line with the mean uncorrected validity (.33) obtained in a meta-analysis of studies conducted by McDaniel and Jones (1988) in which theft was used as the criterion.

Despite these concerns, the data that are available suggest that integrity tests do a good job of predicting theft, especially when one considers that not all theft is caused by a personal tendency to steal (Murphy, 1993). Normally honest people might steal from an employer due to economic pressure caused by factors such as high debts or financial emergencies, or by an organizational culture in which it is considered normal to steal (for example, "It's OK because everyone takes food home with them"). Employee theft can also be the result of a reaction to organizational policy such as layoffs or a change in rules that employees perceive as unfair. To reduce theft caused by situational factors, non-testing methods such as increased security, explicit policy, and availability of due process and suggestion systems are needed.

#### **IV. CONCERNS OF THE CRITICS OF HONESTY TESTING?**

A. Ease of faking integrity tests. The processes that govern responses to items on personality scales are the same as those underlying social interaction in general (cf. R. Hogan, 1991). People usually try to control how others perceive them--they try to manage their reputations so as to maximize positive attention and minimize criticism. Responding to questionnaire items is like talking with an

anonymous interviewer. People use their item responses to convey who they are and how they would like to be seen. Thus, item endorsements are self-presentations, not self-reports. This means that personality scales sample a person's typical interpersonal style, and that style is what creates an image.

While it is true that items on some commercially available integrity tests are transparent and therefore easily faked, the base rate of deliberate faking in applicant populations is low (Christiansen, Goffin, Johnston, & Rothstein, 1994). Surprisingly, when it does occur, faking has relatively little effect on the validity of the tests. Although people can distort their responses to personality and integrity tests, doing so does not necessarily affect the relationship between test scores and performance. Faking may affect the overall mean test score, but it does not seem to substantially affect the rank-ordering of individuals. Hough and Schneider (1996) concluded that "intentional distortion does not appear to affect criterion-related validity negatively, as is often assumed" (p. 73).

B. Integrity Measures Invade Privacy. Woolley and Hakstian (1992) found that subjects rated lie detectors, drug tests, and medical exams as more invasive than written integrity tests. Nonetheless, many commercially available integrity tests contain items that may be considered offensive or invasive. However, people's right to privacy must be balanced against employer's (a) rights not to hire incompetent, insubordinate, or counterproductive people and (b) obligations not to hire those who are a threat to the safety and security of other employees, customers, and others (Hogan, Hogan, & Roberts, 1996).

C. Integrity Measures and Discrimination Against Protected Classes. Integrity tests are personality tests and there is no evidence that well-constructed personality inventories systematically discriminate against any ethnic or national group (cf. R. Hogan & J. Hogan, 1995). With respect to gender and age, males have higher failure rates than females and younger people have higher failure rates than older people (Aamodt, 1996). Adverse impacts on these two groups pose little legal threat, but telling the parents of a 17-year-old boy that their son has just failed an honesty test is not the best way to foster good public relations.

## V. CONCLUSION

In summary, research demonstrates that integrity tests do a good job of predicting theft. Usually people might steal from an employer due to situational pressures. Based on the available evidence, therefore, employers who choose to use honesty tests should use the test results only as one additional piece of personal information, to be used together with other screening devices.

## VI. REFERENCES

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