

“Recruit the Right Person the First Time – Using Psychological Profiling for Volunteers and Career Fire Fighters”

K. Byrne

Australian Institute of Forensic Psychology, Melbourne, VIC, Australia
41 Queens Parade, Clifton Hill, Victoria 3068

Abstract

All Fire Fighting organisations are faced with the challenge of selecting the right people, either as volunteers or career Fire Fighters. Commonly, there are more applicants than jobs. Some otherwise unsuitable applicants can produce a “good” application and even “look good” in the standard interview. This is because neither of these techniques is particularly revealing or scientifically valid.

Specialised psychological profiling can play a significant role in minimising the substantial risk which goes with hiring the wrong person. This paper provides an introduction to the role that profiling can play in assisting to hire the best available people.

The Challenge of Selecting the Right People

Organisations around the world tend to make the same fundamental hiring error. Applicants are hired for what they know. This is judged by their written application, their ability to successfully pass reading or numeracy tests, and most importantly, their ability to answer questions during an interview. Unfortunately, all of these techniques – while of some assistance – usually fail to reveal very much about who the person really is.

Almost invariably, when an organisation wishes they could fire someone, it is because of who they are, not because of a lack of knowledge.

Poor performers, or those who cause problems for the organisation, almost invariably do so because of a constellation of personality traits manifesting themselves in the work place. Unfortunately, these very personality traits are often not evident during the interview process. A common profile of a problem employee is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Typical Profile of an Obvious Poor Performer

• Poor interpersonal sensitivity
• Overly aggressive and dominant
• A “know it all”
• Difficulty accepting direction from superiors
• Low tolerance for repetitive work
• High need for excitement

As a Fire Fighter, a person with this profile is exceedingly likely to have difficulty getting along with both team mates and bosses. The majority of station time for Fire Fighters is spent doing routine work without very much “action”. This person’s low tolerance for such work combined with a high need for excitement often causes them to “look for trouble”.

How effective will a job application be at revealing these personality traits?

In most cases, little if anything will show up. For an applicant who is even moderately able to sell themselves, it will be a challenge for the interviewers to uncover these traits with any degree of confidence.

What is Psychological Profiling?

Psychological profiling began during the First World War and became more prominent during the Second World War. It evolved in response to the challenge of screening a very large number of people being inducted into the armed forces. Since then psychological profiling has come a long way, yet often suffers from a chequered reputation. This is mainly because of poorly developed tests being oversold, or instruments being used for the wrong purpose or by untrained people.

Fundamentally, all psychological profiling strives to reveal aspects of the subject’s personality. There are literally thousands of psychological tests available in the marketplace. Like all other products, they range from being shoddy, to average, to being of very high quality.

Given the number of organisations selling test instruments, the old saying of “let the buyer beware” is very appropriate. Using the wrong instruments can not only lead to poor decision making, but can also create a number of problems the organisation didn’t have before introducing the tool. As Australia becomes more litigious, there is an increased risk of legal challenges based on hiring procedures which are discriminatory or inappropriate for the task at hand.

Some essential criteria for evaluating any profiling instrument is set out in Table 2.

Table 2

Seven Essential Questions to Evaluate Psychological Profiling

In evaluating any psychological tool a number of questions must be considered:

1. Are the dimensions being measured directly related to what is required for success in the job? If any test does not pass this first threshold, it is probably illegal.
2. Has the test been designed for the specific job which the organisation is hiring for?

3. Does the test have normative data for the population being screened? In the case of Fire Fighters, is it possible to compare an individual applicant with a large number of applicants to the same job?
4. Does the tool have any research to demonstrate that people selected using the tool turn out to be better performers than those who are selected without using the tool?
5. Can the test be shown to be reliable? That is, if an applicant takes the test one day, and takes it again at some stage in the future; will the results be very similar? If the answer is no, then the test fails to measure enduring personality traits.
6. Does the tool have one or more scales which reveal the extent to which the applicant is trying to “fake out” the test?
7. Will the test provider go to court to defend the results if your decision is challenged?

What Can Be Achieved Through Using Psychological Profiling?

If using a profiling system which meets all of the above criteria, there are a number of very distinct advantages available to the hiring organisation.

First, specialised profiling will reveal information which is impossible to obtain by any other method. For example, few if any applicants will admit during an interview to being biased toward women or minorities. Yet, with specialised profiling, an elevated level of such bias is often detected.

Second, psychological profiling will yield information which is highly objective. Indeed, many of the findings are as close to a “fact” as will ever be possible in a hiring procedure. For example, if an applicant scores at the 3rd percentile on a measure of interpersonal sensitivity – the ability to “read” other people – it is a fact that 96% of 2000 similar applicants scored higher on the test than this person did.

While a hiring decision would never be made based on only one piece of data, it is important to be able to gather data which is objective, and goes beyond the commonly relied on “gut feel”.

Third, specialised profiling allows for the objective comparison of applicants. Any organisation wants to hire the very best people that are available at a given time. Trying to compare people after a panel has conducted say 50 interviews is almost impossible to do with any real objectivity. Profiling brings a degree of science to the task.

Fourth, it is common for applicants who are not selected to challenge the hiring decision. Defending these challenges can be difficult when the decision is based only on a job application and an interview. The multiple sources of objective information provided by profiling make it very easy to defend decisions not to hire.

Finally, the use of specialised psychological testing will almost certainly result in reduced sick leave, reduced stress claims, and fewer problem performers. Essentially, choosing people whose personality traits match what the job requires leads to a more satisfied employee. (REF x 2)

Organisations who have considered using psychological profiling often want to know what information they can expect to receive about an individual applicant. Keeping in mind the caution above, that each dimension being measured must be relevant to the job, Table 3 sets out a list of factors which a correctly developed profiling tool should be able to provide data on.

What Information Can Psychological Profiling Provide?

Table 3

Job Relevant Personality Traits to Evaluate and Select Fire Fighters

Motivation for the position	Level of self confidence	Level of “common sense”
Intelligence	Acceptance of responsibility	Willingness to cooperate
Stress tolerance	Practical judgment	Tolerance for boredom
Pathological interest in setting fires	Capacity to accept criticism and learn from mistakes	Attempts to “fake out” the test
Potential for substance abuse	Impulsivity	Maturity
Level of aggression	Ability to follow orders	Ability to “read people”
Racial bias	Gender bias	Need to dominate others
The ability to work in a team	Emotional stability	Honesty and integrity

What is most important is how all of these different factors may interact in one person. Another common example of someone who becomes a poor performer, yet often remains hidden in the organisation, is the person who applies to the job for the wrong motivation.

Table 4

Typical Profile of a Hidden Problem Performer

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacking self confidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacks sufficient courage in the face of danger
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subtly undermines directions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacks ability to take responsibility for their actions

This type of man often applies to be a Fire Fighter with the belief – often unconscious – that joining the organisation will somehow make up for his underlying lack of confidence. Unfortunately, no one’s personality changes simply by going through even the most comprehensive training program. At the end of the process the person will be as self-doubting as before the training, sometimes even more so.

This person will quickly become unhappy with the job because he will sense a lack of acceptance among his peers. With a tendency to find fault with others, and not with himself, it often becomes “the organisation did this to me”. Combined with a passive approach to life, this person will seemingly obey procedures, yet subtly fail to comply or actively undermine their boss.

The job becomes stressful because the person knows that he is not really living up to what is expected. Commonly then, this person is prone to abuse sick leave and far more likely to put in a stress claim.

How many candidates will reveal these personality traits at an interview?

Who Makes a Good Fire Fighter?

While the question is simple, the answer is not. The reality is that people with a wide range of personalities all become satisfactory and highly successful Fire Fighters. There simply is no one “profile” of who will be good in the job.

It is much easier to determine who will not be successful. Considerable psychological research has identified a variety of factors which would suggest a lack of success in the role. The more of these factors a given candidate has, the less likely they are to be successful. Many of these characteristics are summarised in Table 3.

Profiling is then largely a matter of first ruling out grossly unsuitable candidates. The second step is to then rank order the remaining candidates from those most likely to be successful to least likely to be successful.

In addition to profiling, it is essential to have an interview which is highly time efficient and which evaluates many of the same personality traits that the profiling is targeted at. To ask the most useful types of questions is important to frame the interview properly, explain to the candidate the types of questions which will be asked and why, and to gain the candidate’s permission.

Once this is done, it then becomes possible to ask a question such as “When was your last physical fight?” or “When was the last time you lost your temper?” Are such questions job related? Clearly, the ability to tolerate stress and face confrontation while maintaining self-control is fundamental to being a successful Fire Fighter.

Such questions, along with many others, will reveal a great deal of information relevant to the hiring decision.

Is Profiling Legal?

A common question about profiling as well as a more challenging interview is whether such an approach is legal? While to date there has been no case law specifically addressing this issue in Australia, in the United States, the landmark case of McKenna v Fargo addressed this question squarely.

In this case a group of Fire Fighters objected to psychological profiling of applicants on the basis that it was unconstitutional. The department argued that using psychological profiling was necessary in order to carry out their duty of protecting the public. The case made its way through several levels of appeal over four years.

In its judgement the court concluded *“There is sufficient support to conclude that the psychological evaluation and hiring procedure taken as a whole is useful and effective in identifying applicants whose emotional makeup makes them high-risk candidates for the job of fire fighting. Because fire fighting, like police work, involves live-endangering situations, the State interest is of the highest order. Plaintiffs lose sight of the fact that a Fireman who loses emotional control endangers his own life as well as those of other Firemen. While a psychological evaluation intrudes on an applicant’s privacy, it may save him from the risk of losing his life. The life of a community as well depends at the most basic level on those whose job it is to protect the community from physical forces, like fire, that have escaped from the control that makes them productive. Property, and the security of the community, as well as lives, are at stake in improving the Fire Department. The State interest is compelling, indeed, and is served by the challenged evaluation and hiring procedure.”*

In Australia, psychological profiling has been scrutinised by several government bodies in different states. In each case a decision has been made in favour of the use of appropriately scientific, job related and defensible profiling and interviewing.

The justification seems to have several “legs”, each of which is referred to in the above case. Any Fire Fighting organisation has an inherent duty to provide a safe workplace for its employees. Hiring someone who is unsuitable by virtue of personality or psychological disturbance can easily create danger for its members, as well as the public.

Secondly, Fire Fighters are called upon to make life and death decisions, as well as being given very unique authority. Who else in society can break into someone’s home when they aren’t there? How many other jobs require someone to safely remove a baby from a smoke filled room while the building is on fire?

These inherent job requirements imply a positive duty on the part of the department to use the most rigorous screening tools available.

What about Return on Investment (ROI)?

All Fire Departments work with a tight budget and any extra expenditure must be evaluated very carefully. When an organisation invests in any extra service, it is quite reasonable to ask what the return on the investment will be. Five Australian studies have shown that the investment in psychological profiling is repaid many times over in both tangible and less tangible ways. (Lough, in press) (Lough, in press) (Byrne, K., Guller, I. and Guller, M., August 2002)

Measurable improvements include reduced sick leave and reduced stress claims. The intangible benefits include less management time spent dealing with problem performers, increased morale, and a safer work force.

In two studies, an actual ROI figure was calculated. Using very conservative estimates, one study showed a ROI of 753.5%, a saving of \$7.54 for each \$1 invested in profiling. A second study showed an ROI of 1,905%, a saving of \$19.05 for \$1 invested in profiling.

On average then, it can be conservatively anticipated that investments in appropriate psychological profiling will yield a ROI of \$13.50 for each \$1 invested in profiling.¹

Conclusion

In summary then, specialised psychological profiling which has been developed for the purpose of selecting Fire Fighters can play an important role in the ongoing challenge of screening large numbers of applicants and selecting those who are best suited for the role. Using such tools appropriately can lead to substantial benefits to the organisation, with relatively minimal investment in human resources and dollars.

¹ Copies of these studies can be obtained by contacting the Author.

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