

# **OPTIMISE YOUR INDIGENOUS TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES THROUGH VALID, RELIABLE, CULTURE-FAIR ASSESSMENT**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

When a decision is required for the allocation of scarce training places and employment opportunities, valid and reliable assessment is an important consideration. Further, the significant investment in workplace training supports the need for suitable decision making processes to deliver optimal benefits for candidates and organisations alike.

Normally, the closer the fit between the cultural and educational backgrounds of the candidate and the assessor, and the similarity in their approach to thinking, the greater the accuracy of the assessment decision. In circumstances where the candidate and the assessor come from very different backgrounds or have very different thinking styles, the risk of errors increases. The importance of managing this issue cannot be overstated, particularly in the context of the employment and training of indigenous populations.

Indigenous candidates require the assessment process to be appropriate from a cultural perspective to ensure validity and reliability. Where language barriers also exist between the assessor and the candidate, both language-free delivery and culturally appropriate processes are important factors in optimising the validity and reliability of any assessment process.

## INDIGENOUS ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS

Two factors are pivotal in the successful implementation and application of assessment processes with indigenous candidates. The first is gaining the acceptance and trust of the communities that the assessment is fair and unbiased. The second is providing organisations with an accurate predictive tool.

In many circumstances 'western' language-based tests have been unsuccessful in meeting these requirements. Inherent language and cultural bias have had a significant negative impact in terms of community acceptance and have subsequently resulted in resistance from prospective candidates. When invalid and unreliable processes result in candidates being placed into inappropriate training and employment roles, there is a resulting negative outcome for the person, the community and the employer. In these circumstances, there may be poor retention of recruits due to dissatisfaction if their training or roles are not sufficiently challenging. Likewise, retention issues may result if there is an inability of candidates to absorb the selected training or to complete the requirements of their chosen role. These outcomes can subsequently have a negative impact on the relationship between the employer and the community.

A range of other negative issues may be encountered when assessing indigenous candidates with inappropriate processes including:

- resistance to assessment processes
- resistance of line managers to embrace indigenous employees in their work teams due to previously unsuccessful placements
- inherent dangers of having unsuitable employees in high risk environments.

## Q TEST BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT

The Q Test is a highly specialised assessment tool which has the potential of overcoming many of these problems when assessing indigenous candidates for training and workplace roles.

The precursor to the Q Test, The Pacific Island Regiment (PIR) Test, was originally developed by Australian Army psychologists who were asked to assist with the selection of recruits into the Pacific Island Regiment in New Guinea in the 1950's. At this time and in this region, approximately one third of the known languages in the world were spoken and the general level of education was low. Because of an army policy to recruit widely from all areas, the option of limiting recruiting to areas with well educated candidates was not appropriate. As a result, prior to the introduction of the PIR Test, there was a relatively high wastage rate (20%) at initial training. This led to a number of negative impacts, including considerable cost in the recruiting process and significant shame to the tribal communities when unsatisfactory recruits were returned home.

The research team (McElwain and Griffith, 1957) collected empirical evidence and, after discarding a large number of selection devices, were able to develop the PIR Test. The introduction of the PIR Test reduced the wastage rate to approximately 2 per cent.

Later research and refinements in the 1960's were made to the PIR Test to make it suitable for the assessment of other cultural groups including indigenous Australians. Further refinements in recent years by Professor G Kearney in conjunction with ValueEdge have led to the current structure of the Q Test, which has been validated in Australia and Asia. These refinements have included:

- Enhanced clarification of the tasks through the utilisation of more practice items, removing doubt about the task requirement even in the absence of any mutual cultural understanding and common language or interpretation
- Restructured format of the testing resources to make them more portable and robust
- Modifications allowing the instrument to be administered to younger groups and children from the age of seven.

In the development of the Q Test, initial validation procedures were conducted with a variety of population samples including Indigenous Australians, New Zealand Maori, Fijians, Gilbert and Ellice Islanders, Filipinos and Australians of European descent. Industry validations have additionally been conducted with indigenous Australians, Indonesian (Papuan and Dayak) and Laotian sample populations.

## THE Q TEST: LANGUAGE-FREE, CULTURE-FAIR ASSESSMENT

The outcome of the Q Test is an insight into a candidate's training potential or 'trainability', enabling companies to establish training pathways based on a realistic understanding of the candidate's capacity to cope with available training programs and employment opportunities. It is important to note that the test measures potential not achievement, as is measured by literacy and numeracy tests.

The Q Test is an individually administered performance test of general cognitive capacity. It consists of six sub-tests. The individual items are constructed of portable coloured beads, tiles and other material which the candidates are required to construct or manipulate, or recall patterns, shapes or sequences. The six sub-tests are:

- Subtest 1: Sequential Memory
- Subtest 2: Visual Memory
- Subtest 3: Planning
- Subtest 4: Abstract Manipulation
- Subtest 5: Pattern Matching
- Subtest 6: Design Sequencing

Each sub-test consists of items of increasing difficulty enabling a candidate to demonstrate their level of cognitive performance in finding a solution. The test takes about one hour to administer. The assessor administering the test must be a skilled assessor. The test does not rely on formal education or the need to complete items quickly. Although there are time limits, these are generous and simply a means to establishing a convenient time for discontinuation before any significant levels of frustration or anxiety begin.

## INDUSTRY-BASED INTRODUCTION OF THE Q TEST

Since 2002, assessment tests have been used by the Freeport mine in West Papua to support their recruitment, selection and training processes for the local indigenous community - the Seven Suku Tribes. The initial processes included the application of language-based 'western' assessment tests. Unfortunately these tests did not provide valid selection predictions, with community members and elders describing these tests as "unfair" and the organisation being concerned that the results were not accurate.

Based on a request for a culturally appropriate assessment process for their indigenous candidates, a trial of the Q Test was conducted by ValueEdge and Profesor Kearney at Freeport in 2004 and a high correlation was established between the performance of Freeport's current Seven Suku employees (as assessed by their managers) and their Q Test results. Based on the results of this pilot, the Q Test was successfully implemented as the primary selection tool for potential employees from these local indigenous groups.

The Q Test gained community trust and support, with tribal elders describing the Q Test as a fair and suitable selection tool for their community members. Since its introduction in 2004, over 3,500 Q Test assessments have been completed at Freeport.

These results have been the platform for a significant level of interest and subsequent application of the Q Test for organisations with indigenous recruitment needs throughout Australia and Asia. Primary applications to date have been in remote regions to support mining operations. Through these applications, it has become increasingly clear that the Q Test has the potential of assisting organisations optimise their training and employment outcomes for indigenous candidates.

Recent levels of interest have extended the potential Q Test utilisation into regional and urban areas for both indigenous and non-indigenous candidates including migrant candidates from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Broader applications in remote regions beyond the needs of the mining industry have also been identified.

## CONTINUED APPLICATION OF THE Q TEST

The implementation of the Q Test at a number of locations throughout Australia and Asia has led to improved assessment of indigenous candidates and selection outcomes for a number of major organisations. These organisations include Freeport McMoran, Rio Tinto, OZ Minerals, Pan Australian Resources, BHP Billiton and Newmont Asia Pacific.

The application of the Q Test with these organisations has assisted them in meeting a range of objectives such as:

- Indigenous recruitment requirements
- extending the productivity, skills and retention of indigenous employees across multiple sites
- ensuring appropriate training and career path selection
- implementing a cultural shift in assessment processes for indigenous candidates.

Through the utilisation of the Q Test, a wide range of organisations have been able to establish realistic pathways for their current and prospective indigenous candidates and trainees based on a valid, reliable and culturally-fair evaluation of their 'trainability'.

## REFERENCES

McElwain, D W and Griffiths, D M 1957 Report on the possibility of using psychological procedures as an aid to recruiting in the Pacific Islands Regiment (unpublished report), Headquarters, Northern Command: Brisbane