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Why a Psychologist Might Be at Your Next Interview

More companies are turning to interviewers with Ph.D.'s to find a candidate who's the right fit

By [LIZ WOLGEMUTH](#)
Posted: June 17, 2009

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It is, no doubt, some job seekers' worst interview nightmare: an hour on the phone answering questions posed not by a hiring manager but by a [psychologist](#). Or, even more frightening, several hours in an office with a psychologist, quietly filling out multiple-choice tests, or even performing workplace simulations with paid actors. Marketing executive So Young Park started scouting for a new job in November, the middle of the worst recession in two-and-a-half decades. Park's search took about four months, and she was asked—by three different companies—to have a talk with a psychologist. "I had never had to do one before," Park says. Indeed, experts suggest that this economy may have created a perfect storm of reasons for companies to embrace psychologists in the hiring process: Employers are struggling to filter the right hire from truckloads of candidates, and the ugly marketplace means good hires are even more critical to a company's success.

Stuart Sidle, director of the industrial-organizational psychology program at the University of New Haven and a consultant on hiring, says use of psychologists has become more mainstream in recent years, and employers have become more upfront about it. In the recession, while overall business has dipped because hiring has taken a dive, companies have insisted on more comprehensive—and time-consuming—hiring processes when filling positions. A bad hire can create enormous havoc—and financial distress—for an organization, and today's companies are trying to improve their batting averages, says Scott Erker, a senior vice president at Development Dimensions International.

The goal of psychologists in hiring is really to discover the knowledge and skills that would be associated with success in the position they are helping fill—and then to follow a fairly structured format for the assessment. Some executive interview assessments can be costly events involving job simulations that attempt to mimic a tough (even stressful) scenario or meeting that might be encountered on the job. Often, the psychologist will play a role in the simulation, but it's also common to pay trained actors to play the parts of frustrated consumers or aggravated employees. Most of the time, however, the assessments should not be stressful to the candidate. "If stress is not an attribute of the job...you want people to feel calm and to understand what's going on," Sidle says. Whether a psychologist spends a few hours in testing with a possible manager or spends all day assessing a prospective executive, the bottom line is fit. For example, a prudent supervisor who runs a tight ship may be a great manager, but if the client company is looking for an innovator, it won't be the right match.

Personality evaluations are not new to corporate America. William Whyte wrote of personality tests in his 1956 bestseller *The Organization Man* that "many social scientists have assured me that this bowdlerization of psychology is a contemporary aberration soon to be laughed out of court." (Whyte then offered workers tips on beating the tests, insisting that it's best to offer the most "conventional, run of the mill, pedestrian answer possible" when prompted to offer an individual perspective.) Psychologists may have even been somewhat common interview participants from the 1950s through the 1970s, but they had almost completely disappeared by the 1980s, says Peter Cappelli, a management professor and director of the [Center for Human Resources](#) at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business. Today, Cappelli's

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