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Description

A growing number of American businesses are requiring that job applicants take "honesty tests" to prevent theft and absenteeism in the workplace, but the American Psychological Association thinks the tests are unfair to employees.

Keywords


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Do Honesty Tests Work?
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Transcript

Do Honesty Tests Work?

BRYANT GUMBEL, anchor:
On AFTER EIGHT this morning, we want to talk about honesty in the workplace. Americans have come a long way from sneaking paperclips and rubber bands out of the office supply closet. Department of Commerce claims employee theft alone costs us forty billion dollars a year. Broaden that scope of employee integrity to include fraud, drug abuse, and absenteeism, and you’ve got he reasons why one out of every three businesses go under each year. Well to address that problem, many businesses these days are having job applicants sit down, and take what’s called an honesty test. This particular one’s put out by a company called Reid Psychological Systems. Ryan Kuhn is president of Reid and good morning.

RYAN KUHN (President, Reid Psychological Systems): Good morning, Bryant.
GUMBEL: May I assume business is booming?
KUHN: Well as a matter of fact, business is doing quite well, yes, but not for some obvious reasons. The more obvious reason might be that the polygraph has recently been banned and that removes one tool available to employers. But the rising problems associated with employee theft is actually the major driver for concern here.
GUMBEL: Can I ask what your client list looks like?
KUHN: It looks like about 3,000 clients. They’re spread between retailing, distribution, trucking companies, manufacturing firms, a broad stretch of American industry.
GUMBEL: What do they buy, just the test or also your interpretation, your evaluation, your recommendation?
KUHN: The result they buy is actually a probability that an individual might commit an act of dishonesty on the job.
GUMBEL: And the American Psychological Association’s been looking closely at the various honesty tests that are out on the market and Alan Kraut has more than a few reservations about them. Like what?
ALAN KRAUT (American Psychological Association): Well, we’re concerned that there’s not enough research to actually predict who’s going to be a thief and who’s not. And what it does, is it puts employers at risk. They’re vulnerable, we understand that they’re afraid that their profits are going to be walking out the door with dishonest employees, but that doesn’t mean that bad tests address the problem. We’re also concerned about what happens to the employee. He or she is a person who’s really at risk. That is, they have a choice of taking the test and perhaps being labeled dishonest, but falsely, or they can say, no, no thanks, I’m not going to take the test and that takes them out of the job market all together.

GUMBEL: Is an employee who takes a pen or a paperclip or rubber band or makes a phone call at work necessarily a bad employee?

KRAUT: Not at all, not at all. I don’t think there’s any evidence to suggest that if you take home a pad of paper for your kids to doodle on, that makes you a less trustful employee.

GUMBEL: But that is theft?

KRAUT: I think call--that’s not he kind of theft employers are concerned about. They’re not concerned about the kid who takes an extra French fry at the fast food stand, or if you take a pen home. They’re concerned about people walking out with televisions, with radios, walking out with big appliances or cash.

GUMBEL: Does this--does this test make a distinction between those kinds of people?

KUHN: Oh, certainly. If these tests are so sensitive that they picked up people who took home pencils, then no one would be able to employ individuals.

GUMBEL: Well, we--we isolated some questions and we’ve put them--we’ve committed them to full screen addas and so let me take the test and it may lead to something. Ok, here’s number 104. “If you knew a member of your family was stealing from a place where he or she works, do you think you would report it to the owner of the company?” I can’t think of anybody that would say yes to that.

KUHN: Well as a matter of fact a number of individuals do say yes to that.

GUMBEL: If you say no, does that mean you’re dishonest?

KUHN: Bryant, I can’t respond to questions about the key to the test, but I can tell you that it solicits attitudes which are very clearly related statistically to the probability of dishonesty on the job.

KRAUT: Just as--just as that single question probably doesn’t predict whether you’re going to be a good or bad employee, we don’t think that any single honesty test ought to be used to make a decision whether to hire an employee or not hire the employee. And unfortunately, that’s what it comes down to all too often.

GUMBEL: Let me go to two other questions then we’ll talk a little bit more. Number 106, here’s one very simple for you: “Do you always tell the truth?” Number 128, “If you found a zipper money bag belonging to the Third National Bank, would you open the bag to see what was in it?” Can--can someone not take this test, if they’re trying to look like the most honest person possible, and simply lie and get through it?

KUHN: Bryant, these tests have histories of over thirty years of research behind them and they are extremely difficult to fake. As a matter of fact, as far as personality tests go, this one happens to generate a false positive rate of only about five percent, so it is extraordinarily accurate.

KRAUT: The research--the research is--is not presented in the more traditional scientific literature. There are thousands and thousands of psychology articles published each year on psychological tests. We did a
computerized search of honesty tests and came up with only three or four articles.

GUMBEL: Let me go to some other questions. Number 132: “Do you believe that taking paper, pencils or envelopes without permission and without paying for them from a place where you work is stealing?”
Number 164: “If you received a $1.00 item from a large mail order house that you were not charged for, would you go through the trouble and expense to mail that item back to the mail order house?” I mean, do people…

KUHN: People honestly answer these questions in ways which portray attitudes associated with dishonesty. And in contrast to Al’s perspective on the research here, I’m personally am familiar with over hundreds of studies that demonstrate these tests work.

KRAUT: Here’s the issue. The hundreds of studies that are being discussed here are studies that are done by the honesty testing manufacturers themselves and they’re not open to independent scrutiny by psychological scientists. We at the American Psychological Association would like to see much more of this research done before we’d be comfortable recommending the widespread use of honesty testing.

GUMBEL: Ok, I’m an employer. I can’t use a lie detector test, I don’t want to get robbed blind. I’m running a computer house that somebody can lift software and walk out with it over and over again, walk out with the disk. What options to do I have?

KRAUT: Well, there are several options. Remember, honesty is only one component of what makes a good employee. And what honesty tests do is--honesty tests attempt to screen out the rotten apples. There are other psychology tests that tap abilities, aptitudes, characteristics that are geared very much toward your job so that if you’re trying to hire salespeople, you want a test that’s going detect whether somebody’s going to be a good closer. If you’re hiring warehouse, you want to know whether that somebody knows the principles of inventory. Those are all facets…

KUHN: But if the issue is integrity--if the issue is integrity, then fortunately psychological--personality tests like this product are by far the most accurate measure to determine it.

KRAUT: But here’s always the issue. If you have a test that measures different factors of what happens in the employee’s world, then I guarantee you that that multi-factored test is always going to be a little more accurate than a single purpose test.

GUMBLE: Final note, does Reid give its test to perspective employees?

KUHN: Oh certainly. In fact, I was administered the test myself.

GUMBLE: I must assume then you passed?

KUHN: I did pass. But I missed one question though.

KRAUT: I wish I could sit here and say that we had the perfect tool to determine who was telling the truth and who is lying, but we don’t.

GUMBLE: Gentlemen, the ultimate truth on this program is always the clock. I thank you both.