Shaping your culture with psychometrics

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WORKPLACE STRATEGISTS

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The concept of organisational culture, what it is, and how it impacts on every aspect of organisational life, dominates discussion - and rightfully so.

A strong culture that is effective and fit for the organisation's purpose should be considered the holy grail of business management, and an entire industry of products, services, consultants, pop psychology concepts, and publications exist to help you to shape your culture in the perfect way for you.

Psychometric assessments, although considered in humble terms and often relegated to the discretionary category, provide us with one of the most impactful, cost effective, and unintrusive methods of taking control of shaping our culture.

Organisational Culture

Organisational culture is a mammoth topic and could easily span its own whitepaper series, but interestingly the challenge still exists in how to define it properly. A common shorthand is 'how we do things around here' [1], and more recently at Mapien we have been adjusting that to 'the way that we have to act to fit in around here'. A good way to think about culture mathematically is that it is the collective average of all of our behaviour, and technically speaking it presents as consistent, observable patterns of behaviour in organisations [2].

Culture drives the behaviour of our people, therefore literally describing the way in which we perform in our roles, what hard work and discretionary effort looks like, how we communicate and collaborate, what our stories, symbols, and patterns are, and what success looks like. Psychometrics, conversely, are how we predict behaviour.

Psychometric Assessment

Psychometric assessments are created to help measure and predict the behaviour, thinking, skills, and problem-solving capacity of our people.

We define it in our first whitepaper of the series as 'a scientific and standardised method of measuring the abilities &/or behavioural preferences of an individual'. The entire purpose of implementing psychometric testing in any kind of process is to be able to consistently predict patterns of behaviour and thinking in a standardised way.

Culture, representing the combined average of our behaviour in the workplace, is therefore intrinsically linked to the sort of information and insights that testing affords us. All that is needed then is an in depth understanding of what our culture currently looks like, and what it needs to look like.

Aspirational culture

Knowing what our 'aspirational' culture looks like and how that differs from what we're currently experiencing is crucial.

Without a plan or an understanding of where we are going and why, any cultural intervention is a waste of money, time, and productivity. There are plenty of approaches [3] to explore and choose from when it comes to setting your aspirational culture, but generally the process involves identifying the broad theme or flavour of culture, and to identify the behaviours of most note to focus on and emphasise or shift.

To do this, it is essential to have a clear understanding and definition of our 'purpose' and 'mission', which in turn helps us to frame and define our 'values' in behavioural terms.

The above consideration and preparation is obviously best undertaken by your leadership team. Culture really does come from the top [4] (partly [5]) in terms of modelling and advocating particular attitudes and behaviours, and also given the leadership teams close proximity to the organisational purpose and strategy.

The methods of embedding and reinforcing such behaviours vary, and extend beyond the strategic use of psychometric testing per this whitepaper. The benefit of behavioural change is that behaviour and social expectations and norms also impact on attitude, [6] just as attitude impacts our behaviour, strengthening the lived experience of our culture at work.

Behaviour

Knowing how we would like our people to behave, their attitudes, and what they value on their mission to accomplish our organisational purpose, we can more easily prioritise those elements in our selection and development initiatives. While we know that there is no such thing as the perfect candidate, we can include cultural and team fit considerations in our thinking and when making decisions between candidates.

Likewise in development contexts, we can identify and target specific behaviours, attitudes, and skills, that align with our cultural expectations, values in action, and the skills that will be critical for our future. This takes mindful and purposeful communication and planning, but the benefit is that these processes of selection fond development already exist within our regular operating rhythm.

Psychometrics in selection

We have highlighted the benefits of psychometric assessments in selection in our previous whitepapers, so we know the benefits a well validated, reliable, and appropriately used assessment can bring to our recruitment and selection.

Traditionally when we talk about the application of testing, it is to predict 'performance' in the job, but a more accurate way to describe this is that we are predicting 'behaviour'.

The way that we frame performance in our mind is really defined by the behaviours that we know will result in success on the job. This obviously includes the explicit job tasks themselves, but more so we address 'performance' also through how well this candidate is likely to fit in with their manager and their team.

It is commonplace now also to interpret psychometric outputs relative to a broader cultural fit, bringing individually based behaviour, interpersonal behaviour and patterns of work, and broader behaviour within and on behalf of the organisation, to assess fit at all levels. Finding the balance and assessing with a fair and realistic benchmark in mind is critical, noting again that there is no such thing as a perfect candidate, and selecting for cultural fit for a culture that does not resemble the one that you currently have, will not yield the results that we are looking for.
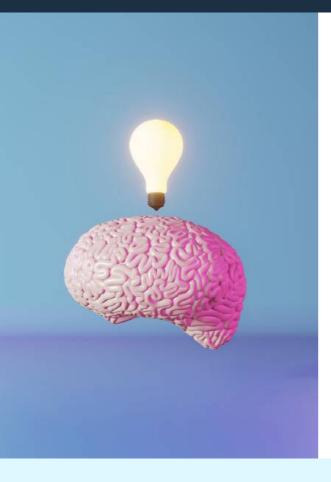
Personality

When considering the ways in which testing at selection can help identify well-aligned candidates, it's helpful to consider that a valid and reliable, trait-based **personality assessment** gives you very detailed and accurate predictions of how that person is likely to behave in a variety of contexts. As always this insight is based on probability, but this aligns with enduring culturally relevant behaviour over time, allowing for an informed decision about candidates and their tendency to operate in the same manner as our cultural champions [7] and drivers. In this way personality assessments can be used as a gauge of cultural fit across the vast majority of contexts [8], regardless of your industry, location, or culture.

Likewise if interpersonal influence and skill, understanding of others, and a philosophy of leadership at all levels feature as cultural touchstones, then **emotional intelligence** will be important to assess at selection.

Emotional intelligence

A valid and well-designed, ability based **emotional intelligence assessment** will provide you with sharp insight into the ways in which your candidates will understand themselves and others, how they manage and work with their own emotions and reactions and those of their colleagues, and how much of a focus rapport and relationship development is for them.

Typically in selection emotional intelligence is indicative of success in roles such as the emergency services, medicine and healthcare, relationship based sales environments, roles that involve managing the self and others in emergency scenarios, senior leadership positions, among many others. Those ingrained behaviours are highly valuable, and many aspirational cultures centre around these types of natural behaviours.

Safety attitude/awareness

In other industries, a stronger focus on safety related behaviour as a cultural driver is required. In such cases, using a **safety attitude** or **safety awareness** assessment will help to identify those candidates who align best with your current and future culture. The attitudes towards and perceptions of risk contribute en masse to the collective messaging and behaviours from our team, and the ability to maintain perception, accuracy of decisions, and ongoing attention to the environment impacts on how risk and safety is managed.

All of these elements impact on the way safety-related scenarios are managed and spoken about, and ultimately the way that they are learned from and avoided in future. A good way to picture differences in organisational safety culture is to consider how the fields of medicine and aviation have historically dealt with mistakes, errors, and accidents in their industries [9].

The aviation industry typically excels at spotting and correcting mistakes, with a strong focus on safety and learning. Traditionally in medicine, research and observation has typically shown that people are sometimes hesitant to report errors for fear of the consequences. While aviation has set guidelines on how to use error data to make things better, medicine and healthcare is more so still working on establishing consistent ways to learn from and address mistakes, without leaning into punitive action. This has an incredibly transformative effect on the daily experience and comfort of working in such a culture.

Considerations

These assessment types are a sample, but other forms of valid testing can also be used for such strategic changes, as long as we know what we are trying to achieve, and we are using valid, reliable tools to do so.

The appropriateness and quality of the tool forms as a key consideration in using testing in selection to drive culture, among a few other points:

- It is critical to ensure that your assessment is valid and reliable, is being used in the correct context, and is being used ethically in general, which is content that we cover in an underline earlier paper.

- This brings about the question of using trait versus type personality assessments, again covered in an earlier paper. While the simplicity and communicability of some of the more popular type-based personality and behaviour assessments can be useful in spreading understanding and language, it is important to balance this simplicity with accuracy and reliability of data, and to be mindful of putting people in boxes.

- If our aspirational culture is quite far removed from our current culture, we can fall into the trap of selecting the candidates that are aligned to a culture that does not yet exist. In terms of behavioural consistency the weight of numbers that represent the existing culture will extinguish any different behaviours, and make life very difficult for new employees in such an environment, leading to worse outcomes. Change must be gradual and sustainable.

- Consistent with all of selection, psychometric assessments provide insight into the likelihood that the test taker will behave in a certain way, meaning that we are speaking purely in probabilities that must then be followed up or clarified. While numbers are helpful in clarifying decisions and can bring a sense of comfort and confidence in the decisions that we make, they only give us predictions of various strengths, and must be used in concert with other data and observations to ensure that we are making accurate and ethical decisions.

Considering the above content regarding testing for selection, this all follows also for applying psychometric assessments in a development context. As we would expect, in the case of development the purpose is to identify and subsequently build the skills, behaviours, attitudes, or other broader factors that must be developed to align with the culture that we aspire to. As with selection, personality or 'style' type assessments when interpreted in a developmental context can help to provide a guide for coaching and nudging to achieve the best behavioural outcomes, while also highlighting and emphasising current strengths and culturally aligned behaviours. In this case, the use of a 'type'-based personality/behavioural assessment can be helpful, remembering the considerations mentioned earlier. Capability/skill based assessments such as emotional intelligence and safety behaviours can be applied in a similar fashion, while it is critical to ensure that the assessment and reporting is appropriate for development contexts (i.e. is not normed or reported for a selection context), and features developmental recommendations, or is debriefed with a qualified professional who can provide developmental guidance and coaching.

In line with this, aspects of our make-up like cognitive ability, which cannot be developed beyond what we are born with [10], are less valuable in a development context. While it may be interesting to gain a snapshot of an employee's cognitive ability, this is used in selection to predict problem solving ability, speed of learning, and ultimately success and performance in the role, for which we have actual observations and performance data at our disposal once employed. While not common, circumstances exist where cognitive ability assessments are attempted to be used in development in a punitive manner, which is a usage that suppliers should actively block. In all cases of psychometric measurement, if we have more direct data on an employee's performance or behaviour, we simply consult that data rather than attempting to predict it with a less accurate tool than what real data offers.

360° assessments

An option that exists purely in a developmental context is the 360 survey, which allows those who work with the participant/s to provide their direct observations of behaviour and ability within a particular sphere, allowing the direct observations mentioned above to be applied quantitatively to an assessment process, standardised, and compared to the participant's own view. When undertaken ethically and in good faith, 360s are a highly powerful and thought-provoking intervention, unearthing deep observations, highlighting blind spots good and bad, and again allowing us to draw direct links between behaviour and cultural experience. Common 360 assessments focus on leadership behaviours, emotional intelligence, safety behaviour, sales and sales leadership ability, and others. As with selection assessments, 360s come in a variety of build qualities, and it is important to keep in mind the reliability of the tool, whether it measures what it says it measures in a statistically meaningful degree, and whether the construct is a useful one for developing performance and culture in the manner that we need.

Psychometrics in development

Organisational surveys

A further method of guiding culture comes in the form of organisational surveys. While not all surveys are psychometrically sound and really do not need to be in many cases, for some more sensitive organisational constructs it is important to know that what you are measuring is a clear and real factor that impacts on behaviour, performance, and experience.

Measuring **engagement** is one of the most common uses of organisational surveying, and it can be highly useful to measure engagement constructs that are identified in research, and compared them to other similar organisations for a point of comparison.

Likewise we can also attempt to measure **cultural factors** more directly with a dedicated tool, and it can be useful to measure our culture using a common definition and compare our own to similar businesses via normative comparison groups. Although given the extremely broad definition of culture, one could make the argument that assessing culture can benefit from more bespoke measurement.

Organisational climate related factors like **change readiness** can also be measured via survey to provide insight into how our culture handles change, and whether we are even ready yet for a wide-reaching cultural intervention.

Finally, surveys can also be employed to assess cultural factors in the face of emerging needs or obligations. For example in Australia where all employers, leaders, and business owners are required not to proactively identify, assess, and control for **psychosocial hazards** in the workplace [11] and in work design, prompting a need for the accurate and defensible assessment of these risks as a matter of legal priority.

In such cases we want our assessment to be valid, reliable, and defensible, which can be achieved through a scientifically developed survey with appropriate comparison groups and underlying psychometric properties, which Mapien and similar suppliers are currently developing. It is critical from a financial, legal, and safety perspective to measure these hazards accurately, and doing so kickstarts our journey to shift the culture of our workplaces to a safe and psychologically healthy one.

Beginning with psychometrics

The prospect of being able to influence culture through the relatively inexpensive and powerful use of psychometric assessments is tantalising, but can be overwhelming if you are starting this journey from the very beginning and do not know where to begin.

The power of psychometrics is easily procured in the era of modern HR technology, and so getting started is as simple as building the use of testing into our habits for every recruitment and selection process. Habits are powerful [12], and apply to organisations just as they do with individuals. Selecting the assessments and process that is right for your strategy and routine, then committing to slowing your thinking and decision making down to include a new step in your process, and diligently sticking to habit to ensure it is truly embedded, allows us to set steps in place without having to think about them at all.

The more difficult aspect of this process is really the discovery and articulation of our cultural aspirations. Applying our strategic planning principles to understand our mission and direction, what our goals are, and what kind of culture is required to get us there. Strategically planning actions and interventions features in this strategy also, however, once our habit of assessing for the factors that we are interested in is in place, the measurement of behaviour and of change across time becomes much easier.

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