crf Work Psychology Network

PREDICTING PERFORMANCE AT WORK

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The success and effectiveness of organisations depend to a large extent on the performance of the people within them. Selecting job applicants who are more likely to perform well is one of the single most important responsibilities of managers and HR.

At its simplest this involves:

1. Specifying what good performance means;
2. Identifying KSAOs (knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics) that are likely to predict performance;
3. Assessing KSAOs and using that information to select applicants.

No matter how effective this process, if the work environment does not support performance it will still be difficult for employees to perform well.

Predicting performance is a large and dynamic area in which there is much organisational, academic, practitioner and commercial activity.

As in other areas where there is much customer demand, this creates a lot of commercial activity which aims to meet that demand. As ever, businesses that provide selection products and services will differ in the extent to which they base their products on scientific and other forms of evidence.

Job performance is about the behaviours employees engage in. We might expect that those behaviours would result in organisationally-relevant outcomes, but that is not always the case. Performance only refers to behaviours that are within the individual's control and, typically, many other contextual factors apart from the employee's performance affect outcomes. In other words, to define performance we must consider those behaviours that are likely to lead to results – and not the results themselves – as end results usually depend on many other factors outside the control of the employee.

There are several types of general job performance, including task performance, contextual performance (which includes organisational citizenship behaviour and counter-productive work behaviour) and within-person performance dynamics.

Competencies are also sometimes used to describe the behaviours required for general job performance – though the term is also sometimes used to describe the KSAOs that might predict such behaviours.

General job performance can provide some useful clues about what behaviours constitute performance, but much more important is considering job performance in specific jobs and roles.

Job analysis is a method or set of methods that allows us to identify the specific behaviours required to perform in a given job. Understanding the behaviours the job entails is a prerequisite for predicting performance as we need to understand what performance is before we attempt to identify its predictors.

External sources of work analysis data (such as O*NET) can also be used to identify relevant performance behaviours.

Sometimes, KSAOs that might predict performance are also referred to as competencies and there is some confusion around the use of this term.

Typically, knowledge is described as an organised body of information; skills as proficiencies developed through training or experience; abilities are relatively enduring attributes that represent potential or capability for performing tasks; other includes personality, values and interests.

Assessments of KSAOs must be reasonably valid (accurate) and reliable (consistent), though what types of validity and reliability are important depends on which KSAO is being assessed.

There are a great many methods for assessing KSAOs including ability tests, psychomotor tests, personality scales, job knowledge tests, work samples and simulations, interviews, bio(graphical) data and assessment centres.

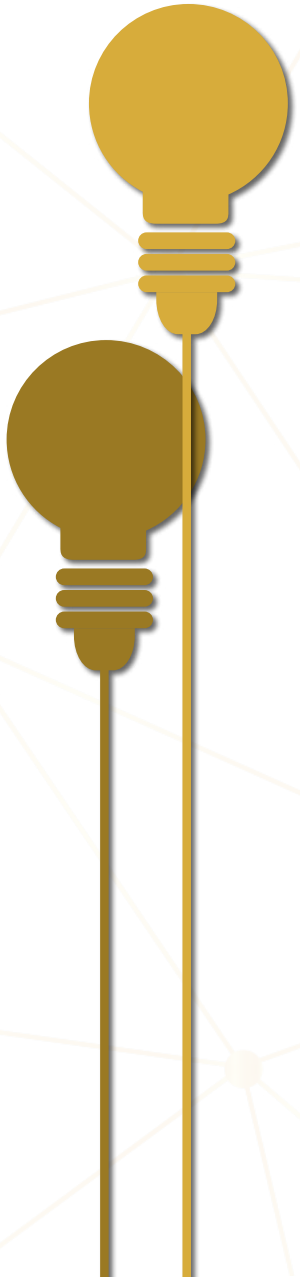
It is important to make a distinction between the KSAO construct of interest and the methods used to assess it. Typically, a single KSAO may be picked up by different methods.

There are some meta-analyses which examine predictors of general job performance. Such meta-analyses provide some broad indications of which predictors most strongly predict performance but they are not capable of taking into account the context and focus on general job performance – often supervisor ratings – rather than specific types of job performance.

A recent meta-analysis (Sackett et al, 2022) obtained rather different results than previous meta-analyses, suggesting that the overall strength of common predictors was, in general, rather weaker than had been thought. Also, some predictors were found to be stronger (e.g., structured interviews) and others weaker (e.g., intelligence) in predicting performance than previous findings suggested.

Meta-analysis can also provide broad indications of weaker, and therefore probably not particularly useful, predictors of performance including assessment centres, ability-based EI, agreeableness and job experience.

In designing a selection process, it is important to bear in mind other outcomes of the selection process apart from predicting performance that may in some circumstances be important. Such outcomes include candidate experience, turnover, adverse impact, cost and risk.



A recent meta-analysis (Sackett et al, 2023) suggested there was more support for a sampling (sampling behaviours directly relevant to job performance) approach than a sign (measuring individual attributes that may indirectly predict behaviours relevant to job performance). In addition, it was suggested that a custom-designed rather than an off-the-shelf selection process was more likely to be effective.

There are several general guidelines that can be incorporated into the design process such as using multiple selection procedures, adding structure and minimising cognitive load.

Recent trends in selection show an increasing use of AI, algorithms and video. Some of these developments are likely to be very important practically, though they are unlikely to change the underlying work psychology theory and evidence around predicting performance.

An Evidence-Based HR approach to designing a selection process involves using multiple sources of evidence and critical thinking to identify the specific selection challenge around predicting performance and the design of a selection process that will be able to meet that challenge.

The approach involves six steps:

1. What does performance mean in this job or role?
2. What other outcomes do we want from the selection process?
3. Given our understanding of the behaviours that constitute job performance, which KSAOs are most relevant?
4. Given our understanding of the other outcomes we want, which KSAOs and features of the selection process are most relevant?
5. How can the selection process be designed?
6. Evaluation.

Selection processes and systems can be extremely elaborate. An Evidence-Based HR approach helps us ensure that such processes are designed to be as simple as possible – but no simpler.