

Job Tryouts Go Virtual

Online job simulations provide sophisticated candidate assessments.

By Connie Winkler

Anyone applying for a job building Tundra trucks at Toyota Motors' new San Antonio plant has to start at a computer screen. They have to read dials and gauges, spot safety problems and complete an interactive job simulation that demonstrates their ability to

assess and solve problems, as well as their general ability to learn. Via video, candidates can see and hear about the job they're applying for from current Toyota employees.

If they perform well enough, they get to return for a hands-on tryout lifting 50-pound bumpers, spray painting and bolting nuts with an airgun.

Welcome to the new interview. In today's workplace, it is computer-based, often online via the web, and increasingly resembles reality simulation video games, flight simulators or military simulation training. Called virtual job auditions, virtual job tryouts or realistic job previews, this new screening process goes beyond candidates watching videos or completing online application forms.

By putting a job candidate in an online environment that mirrors the work they will be performing if hired, these tools help employers make smarter hiring decisions in less time. They also give candidates a more accurate picture of the job they are seeking, in an effort to reduce employee turnover.

Building a Better Yardstick

At companies such as Toyota, Quest Diagnostics and SunTrust Bank, candidates use online tools to perform a particular job—or at least tasks similar to those required by the job.



"It really boils down to job simulations as assessments," says Charles A. Handler, president of Rocket-Hire, an HR consultancy in New Orleans. "It allows you to leverage technology to measure people's ability to perform the key job characteristics in a much more realistic manner."

SunTrust, a southeast regional bank, reports cutting its teller recruitment costs in half and upping retention by at least 10 percent. Now, via the web and at their convenience, SunTrust candidates answer initial questions and view game-like figures that ask them to perform various teller tasks such as looking up account information and entering customer data.

Tryouts give employers the ability to predict better performers, says Joseph P. Murphy, principal of Shaker Consulting Group.

"Companies can't hire enough 'A' candidates because they are a single-digit percentage of the candidate population. But 68 percent of the candidate population are 'B' and 'Cs,'" he says. "What companies need is help that can prevent them from hiring the lowest performers."

Murphy recommends that job tryouts work best when they are tailored to precise jobs, companies and brands.

Electronic auditions are ideal for businesses with a high investment in training or that have high turnover, such as call centers. Because the tests are technology-based, employers can finely measure many competencies and link the data to existing systems, as well as build databases of future candidates, Murphy says. And HR can report to the boardroom the results and savings that effective hiring bring, such as ATM repair technicians who can handle more calls per day and don't need return calls to complete repairs.

So far, the use of such electronic tryouts by employers is in the 3 percent to 5 percent range, according to experts. Last year, in a sampling of 282 companies, the Society for Human Resource Management, working with Murphy, found that about 5 percent of respondents used some kind of virtual pre-employment tryout.

"What you're evaluating at the time of hire has a direct correlation to the way employees perform on the job," Murphy says, adding "and the way they perform on the job is aligned to your business objectives."

Adopting the Technology

Although companies differ on when they schedule auditions, doing them early and offering them to a broad pool multiplies the process's utility, says Oscar Spurlin, an industrial psychologist at Ergometrics, an assessment consultancy in Lynnwood, Wash. "Funneling people through these multi-

ple hurdles means you're left with your best possible people. You haven't just randomly thrown out good candidates."

Suppliers of online pre-screening tools, such as Select International, HR Alloy, ERC Dataplus, Ergometrics, Shaker Consulting Group and many others, offer systems that start at \$50,000 to \$100,000.

Toyota introduced computer-based assessment technology in 2002-2003 at its first Mexico plant and in 2004-2005 at its \$800 million San Antonio plant when the company was interviewing tens of thousands of candidates for 2,000 local jobs.

Taming Turnover Through Better Job Information

At Quest Diagnostics, high turnover among certain job categories led the company to adopt a computer-based, standardized interview approach aimed at maintaining its workforce of 8,000 specialized phlebotomists, who draw blood at nationwide patient centers. These patient service centers serve up to 200 patients a day, and the phlebotomists who work in them not only collect blood samples, but also answer phones, input data and complete forms.

"We weren't recruiting as effectively as we would have liked, and our research found that people were leaving because they didn't fully understand the role they had committed to when they came on board," says Michele I. Cox, director of employee initiatives/effectiveness at the company's Lyndhurst, N.J., headquarters. "We needed to show what the role is all about."

Starting this fall, job candidates can go to kiosks at Quest locations or via online web connections to view streaming video previewing the job and to hear Quest phlebotomists describing the good and bad of their workdays and workplaces. Candidates who are still interested can then enter application data (linked to PeopleSoft systems) for follow-up by HR.

"Due to the level of our attrition, we believe that the system cost is offset by the savings from retaining people ... vs. training new people," says Cox, whose team worked with Shaker Consulting Group. Next, Quest plans to revamp its pre-screening process for its client services group, which fields inquiries.

Similarly, high turnover among tellers led SunTrust Bank to adopt a new pre-employment process after the bank recognized that it took too long from the time candidates were assessed to the time they got an interview with a line manager. "We knew we were losing qualified candidates," says Ken Troyan, senior vice president and chief staffing officer, who estimates that the bank's pre-employment process, which used to take 2 to 4 weeks, can now be completed in as little as a week.

In 2003-2004, SunTrust brought together ERC Dataplus and Ergometrics to build its online screening and assessment system. The system has cut turnover by 10 percent and reduced recruitment costs from \$1,000 per hire to \$500 per hire. Furthermore, 80 percent of candidates give the system high marks.

In Tijuana, Mexico, 24 employees administered the assessments (in Spanish), which Select International had refreshed and upgraded from a simpler computer assessment. At a similar Tundra truck plant that opened in the late 1990s in Princeton, Ind., the company needed 68 assessors. Toyota estimates the new technology saved it \$2.6 million at the San Antonio plant.

The computer assembler audition, which combines online and hands-on assessments, is now a best practice at Toyota, and the system is being considered for administration jobs. It is also being implemented at Toyota's new Canadian plant and is planned for use in the United Kingdom, where it will be rolled out to European plants over the next year.

Employees Take To Technology

Companies that use virtual auditions to assess job candidates say the tools have garnered broad acceptance among applicants of all ages.

"We haven't seen any adverse impact," says Ken Troyan, senior vice president and chief staffing officer at SunTrust Bank, despite concerns that the technology might be best-suited to members of Generation X. "There's some mythology—if you will—about older people not being computer-savvy, and that's just not so."

Still, Carl Greenberg, vice president of selection and retention at Spherion Corp. in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., cautions companies to avoid getting caught up in

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the "glitz" factor: simulations that appear jazzy but do not accurately or validly measure the characteristics and competencies of the job. "They may [offer] a great candidate the experience of interacting and previewing of the job, but there are better measurements on the market," Greenberg says.

SunTrust has not experienced compliance issues related to the use of virtual auditions. And at least one diversity study has shown that computer auditions are especially successful with black job applicants.

"When using technology-based assessments, there's less gap between black participants and white, in contrast to paper-and-pencil assessments," reports John Hausknecht, assistant professor of HR studies at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, in Ithaca, N.Y. One thesis is that black job applicants are more comfortable with the interactive and behavior- and oral-oriented evaluations.

Some experts believe there is actually less likelihood of a candidate challenging

virtual auditions because prospects view them as more job-related—and less likely to be biased—than attitude surveys or other forms of screening tools.

"Job simulations reduce the risk of litigation because they are more closely aligned with the job," says Greenberg.

Paul Rathblott, CEO at ERC Dataplus, an outsource/

systems provider in Norwalk, Conn., says virtual tryouts have become a hit with a wide range of job candidates because they give the candidates a better feel for the work environment.

Companies say applicants often react to the new simulation tools with comments like "wow," "cool" or "neat."

"By providing the candidate with good information, we're able to assess their interest in the job *and* communicate what the job is about," says Rathblott. "It's a lot more candidate-friendly than a written job description." **HR**

CONNIE WINKLER WRITES ABOUT THE MANAGEMENT OF TECHNOLOGY, FROM SEATTLE, AND HAS AUTHORED TWO BOOKS ON HIGH-TECHNOLOGY CAREERS.



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