Do you understand why stars twinkle?

Would you rather read than watch TV?

Do you trust data more than your instincts?

And other strange questions you need to answer to get a job in the era of optimized hiring

By Eliza Gray
Here is what it’s like trying to get a job right now. You’ve racked up your college loans, worked hard to get your degree and polished your LinkedIn profile. You’re ready to find your first professional employer with your qualifications and your drive. Maybe you buy a nice interview outfit. But then come the questions.

True or False: “I never get angry.”

Um. False, you guess? Doesn’t every one get angry sometimes?

“My parents praised me for my achievements.”

Careful here. True might make you seem entitled. False might make you seem neurotic.

When I was young, there were times when I felt like leaving home.

This is the point at which you might consider asking yourself, What’s going on here? What could any of that possibly have to do with my ability to analyze candidates and place them in jobs that fit their personal strengths? One of the most popular tests, Gallup’s StrengthsFinder, is now used by 457 of the Fortune 500 companies as a way to communicate with workers, according to the Wall Street Journal.

Employers are now monitoring workers’ temperaments in real-time—including the world’s largest hedge fund, where employees can track their individual stats on a personalized digital “baseball card.” Experts in the fast-growing “people analytics” industry believe it won’t be long before algorithms regularly sift through Facebook and Twitter posts to glean and analyze additional data. The upshot is that there’s a new vogue for qualifications for workers all across the economy. It isn’t IQ rating or even EQ, looked at the emotional intelligence quotient that came into vogue in the 1990s. There’s no name yet for this indispensable attribute. The qualities are so murky that often not even the employers themselves are able to define it; they simply know that an algorithm has discovered a correlation between a candidate and their company’s top performers.

So let’s call it the X quotient—and get ready, because thriving in the new economy means acing your XQ test, an exam that no one has prepared you for. And it’s not a test of how much math you can do, or how much you can remember by rote. It’s not even a test of how much stuff you can read. It’s a test of how much you can learn from the stuff you can’t read.

“I BELIEVE THIS is really the future for hiring,” says Andy Biga, a 35-year-old JetBlue executive with a toothy smile who looks a little like an intern himself as he tells me about using data and assessment in HR. Biga has a corporate-sounding title, director of talent acquisition and assessment, but in April, at the Wharton People Analytics Conference at the Kritz-Carbon hotel in Philadelphia, he looked more like a possible employer, with dozens of human-resources professionals sitting enthralled as he spoke.

Biga was letting them in—just a bit—on some company secrets: By using a personality profile made up of 12 traits, JetBlue is able to tell the flight attendant which employee will make a good impression on a customer. Biga says it may not be as precise as potential competitors; his PowerPoint explained to the audience that JetBlue’s employees far too much to the best performers; his PowerPoint explained to the audience that JetBlue’s employees.

To me, that seems like the kind of a future the Wall Street Journal pointed out that machines might find. In a typical year, JetBlue posts 3,000 job openings—for 150,000 applicants. To win a coveted spot, a big chunk of those applicants must get past the battery of tests Biga’s team designed.

I called Biga and his protégé, another 30-something data wrangler named Ryan Dullaghan, after the conference to see if they’d talk me past the buzzwords and through why they’re going for in a new hire. No dice. After all, if the traits they wanted in an employee were printed in TIME, they might be able to game the test. Ditto the questions, though they did offer some examples of similar ones that didn’t make the cut: “I am uncomfortable accepting help from others,” and “I feel stressed when others rush me.” (Test takers are typicalizing, which Biga says will get them agree or disagree with a statement.)

Applicants are rated by color based on their scores. Greens are a great fit. Yellows will do O.K. in a pinch when JetBlue needs to hire a lot of people. Reds are the do-not-hires. The payoff for the airline: customers were 15% to 25% more likely to complaints of similar ones that didn’t make the cut, like: “I am uncomfortable accepting help from others,” and “I feel stressed when others rush me.” (Test takers are typicallyizing, which Biga says will get them agree or disagree with a statement.)

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The brains behind much of the personal- ity work at the company, one of the field’s biggest innovators. In Dalio’s vision, personal- ity traits don’t just help you find the right people; they help you understand them, manage those below you, work better with those above you and cooperate better with peers.

The second is subtly different. It’s called analytics, a broad term that describes using lots of data combined with lots of data. In Dalio’s vision, analytics can optimize pretty much any aspect of life. Independence

For a better sense of what these tests are like, TIME asked Hogan Assessments to devise a brief example for readers. The company’s co-founder, Robert Hogan, is a fellow at the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. He says he believes testing can strengthen organizations. More harm than good is...
evidence-based system is so much better than the cronyism of the past—where a boss can pick his best pal for a job and not have to say anything about the reasons behind that decision,” says Dalio. Without data, we are no better than cavemen he says. “Society is in its animal, emotional state that is the equivalent of the dark ages. We are in this transition period where all that is hidden in darkness will come out through statistical evidence,” he says.

IT IS DIFFICULT to listen to Dalio without becoming at least a little swept up in the potential. Objectivity in hiring—and managing—is a goal few would take exception with. It could help reduce discrimination based on gender and race, which can be overt or can stem, as studies have demonstrated, from subconscious bias on the part of the fallible humans doing the hiring.

But critics worry that most employers don’t have the resources or the sophistication to use all this data properly and with perspective. As any parent of a school-age child knows, some individuals just perform better in testing situations than others. What if some people simply aren’t good at dealing with personality tests—and what if that is its own form of discrimination?

“I think that what is going to happen with the tests is that people with disabilities are going to be screened out,” says Jinny Kim, a senior staff attorney in the disability-rights program at the Legal Aid Society Employment Law Center in San Francisco. Lawyers who represent employers counter that testing doesn’t look for disabilities, merely undesirable personality traits. As Eric Dunleavy, a consultant at DCI, an HR risk-management firm in Washington, D.C., puts it, “Pains-in-the-ass are not a protected group.”

All of this skirts an even bigger question. Employees aren’t spreadsheets to be crunched or search results to be optimized. They’re humans with good days and bad moods, gritty tendencies and silly whims—in other words, often unpredictable. Data can answer a lot of questions, but it can’t answer all of them. Are we truly comfortable with turning hiring—potentially one of the most life-changing experiences that a person can go through—over to the algorithms?

It may be a digital-age heresy to say it, but putting blind faith in the data can produce unexpected results, as some employers are beginning to learn. Daniel Rogers, a manager of 18 Little Caesars franchises across Virginia, Maryland and D.C., uses Infor’s assessments through a website called Snag-a-Job. Though he says the tests are better than hiring blind, he doesn’t rely fully on them, partly because they tend to screen out older, less computer-savvy applicants. “We’ve seen more females, younger applicants, people with some computer skills. That is not necessarily a better class of employee,” Rogers says.

Even at the high altars of data, faith is mixed with doubt. Early in his tenure at Google, Prasad Setty, vice president of people analytics and compensation, wanted to come up with a better way to promote engineers. The company had been using an expensive event for this, flying in hundreds of senior Google engineers from all over the world to a Marriott in California to judge their subordinates’ applications for promotion. Setty and his team discovered an algorithm that could predict, for some employees, who would get promoted with 90% accuracy. The next step seemed obvious: ditch the convention, use the algorithm.

Then a funny thing happened. The engineers revolted. “They wanted no part of an algorithm. They said these are such important decisions that we want people to make them. We don’t want to hide behind a black box when someone comes and says, ‘Why didn’t I get promoted?’” Setty said, recounting the story at the Wharton analytics conference.

Google’s executive in charge of hiring, Laszlo Bock—another rock star of the HR world—says the company’s deep experience with data allows it to understand better than most the danger of imperfect algorithms. “I imagine someone who has Asperger’s or autism, they will test differently on these things. We want people like that at the company because we want people of all kinds, but they’ll get screened out by this kind of thing.”

Bock also says companies shoulder a grave responsibility when they play with such data. “Google can tell you with very high confidence what phrase you are going to type, six letters in,” says Bock. “On the people side, the levels of confidence are very, very different, but in a way, the impact is much greater. If I get a bad auto-suggest, my life doesn’t change. But if somebody makes a bad assessment based on an algorithm or a test, that has a major impact on a person’s life—a job they don’t get or a promotion they don’t get.”

But ultimately, in Bock’s vision, the solution is not to abandon analytics, but to double down, building an assessment system that goes beyond personality to span all sorts of factors and draw on a broader variety of workers and companies. “This will sound like hubris,” he says. “If you could figure out a robust way to assess people’s capabilities … and if you could actually assess what makes people perform well … you could go a long way to matching people to jobs. I actually think assessment is part of that, but it has to be a much bigger solution than dozens of companies and thousands of individuals. You need to actually understand how jobs and employment works across the country. And I think over the next five to ten years, someone’s going to figure that out.”

—With reporting by Giri Nathan/New York City