

WHY METRICS STILL NEED A HUMAN TOUCH

By GRAEME MCFARLANE and DREW DEMERSE

A TRAGIC ON-THE-JOB DEATH galvanized the employer to action. After an inquest, the coroner recommended that for certain positions, physical strength and stamina were key factors in dealing with constant danger, and only physically fit employees be assigned to those jobs. The employer engaged a crack team of university researchers who studied the job's functions in detail, measured each function's physiological demands and devised tests to measure whether an employee could meet those demands. The employer then commissioned a study, which concluded the tests were scientifically accurate predictors of actual job performance.

The employer now requires its employees to pass the tests as part of their annual performance reviews. The employer is determined to keep its employees safe.

Elsewhere, a different employer operates a call centre dedicated to answering 9-1-1 calls. Employees type information gleaned from distressed callers into a sophisticated system which then dispatches emergency personnel. Concerned with maintaining the highest level of service, the employer mandated annual typing tests and requires employees to maintain a typing speed at no less than 120 words per minute (wpm).

From all appearances, these two employers are at the cutting edge of measurement metrics testing. They're not.

The problem in both scenarios – the first a true story, the second fictional – is that the tests discriminate against an identifiable group of employees.

You see, while the measurements described here are scientifically correlated to job performance and designed with the laudable goal of safeguarding both public and personal safety in mind, there was no process to ensure that the standards established were reasonably necessary to ensure safe and efficient job performance. Since each standard will adversely affect a group of employees, the standards are incapable of withstanding the application of human

rights laws. So said the Supreme Court of Canada in its landmark Meiorin decision nearly a decade ago.

Herein lies a pitfall associated with measurement. While employers have become more sophisticated in ensuring that tests are accurate predictors of actual job performance, admirable human resources goals can sometimes obscure a human rights dilemma. There is sometimes a temptation to rely too heavily on the numbers. On its face, it seems both logical and equitable to hire or promote the person with the best score in an effort to build the best performing workforce possible.

Some metrics may adversely affect a group of people enumerated by human rights laws. If they do, judicial intervention is the likely result. In Meiorin, the offending test required all firefighters to run 2.5 kilometres in 11 minutes in full firefighting gear. The test could not withstand judicial scrutiny because the employer could not prove that 11 minutes was the standard that was minimally necessary for safe and efficient job performance. Because the employer could not prove this, it could not answer whether it was necessary for every member of the firefighting crew to meet this standard, or, as in this case, whether women could be tested against a different standard.

On the surface, professionally designed metrics testing can be a valid tool to objectively assess and predict job performance. However, in the end it may be human resources practitioners who are themselves tested on their deftness in assessing whether the metrics chosen adversely affect a particular group of people and, if so, what changes might be made to level the playing field. Even for the most seasoned practitioner, that's no easy metric. **■**

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