



Lowell Hellervik, cofounder and retired chairman and CEO of Personnel Decisions International (PDI)

Schools should help teach students the conscientiousness sought by employers

A Civic Caucus Focus on Competitiveness Interview

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Present

John Adams, Pat Davies, Paul Gilje (coordinator), Lowell Hellervik, Randy Johnson, Annabelle Joyce, Sallie Kemper, Dan Loritz (chair), Paul Ostrow, Dana Schroeder, Clarence Shallbetter. By phone: Dave Broden, Janis Clay, Tim McDonald.

Summary of Discussion

Conscientiousness is likely the most sought-after characteristic across all employees, says Lowell Hellervik, cofounder and retired chairman and chief executive officer of Personnel Decisions International (PDI).

In the early 1980s, PDI came up with an assessment eventually described in the profession as a "Conscientiousness Test," which has been given to 25 million Americans. The test is a 15-minute pre-employment assessment that became very widely used and praised. Some items try to predict behavior and some try to measure attitude.

Hellervik doubts that training and educational institutions pay attention to what PDI specifically is looking for in employees. Institutions could train students to have the competencies they need for the world of work. He would like schools to pay more attention to nonacademic goals and pursuits, such as teaching conscientiousness, than to the core academic subjects, which he thinks are overemphasized, especially for students who should not be thinking of traditional colleges in their futures. He believes using a combination manager-peer-parent-student assessment of teachers would be a low-cost way to change schools, but he says the teachers unions won't allow it.

Hellervik says companies need both conscientiousness and creativity and also a balance of conflict-avoiders and conflict-makers, who know when to fight and when to pull back. He notes that high IQ is an important quality for a successful employee, but it does not always correlate with good judgment.

Background

Lowell Hellervik is the cofounder and retired chairman of the board and chief executive officer of Personnel Decisions International (PDI). He began his career at PDI in 1967, was named president in 1975 and became chairman of the board and chief executive officer in 1989. In 2013, PDI was acquired by Korn/Ferry International, a global provider of executive recruitment and talent management solutions.

In the early 1980s, the company came up with an assessment eventually described as the "Conscientiousness Test," which has been given to 25 million Americans. PDI has 30 offices around the world, with 750 employees at its peak.

Hellervik was an original author of the widely used *Successful Manager's Handbook*. He was also key in developing PDI's extensive 360-degree business. He initially created PDI's managerial coaching business in the early 1980s and made a significant contribution to the *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology* with his chapter, "Behavior Change."

Hellervik is from Montevideo, MN. He received his bachelor's degree from St. Cloud State University and became a teacher. Planning to train as a guidance counselor, he attended the University of Minnesota, where he became interested in industrial psychology. He received his Ph.D. in Educational Psychology in 1968 from the University of Minnesota, where he is currently on the adjunct staff as a clinical associate professor.

Discussion

In the early 1980s, Personnel Decisions International (PDI) came up with an assessment eventually described as a "conscientiousness test."

According to Lowell Hellervik, cofounder and retired chairman and chief executive officer of PDI, job applicants and employees were troubled by an honesty test being used at the time by Dayton Hudson. PDI did an exhaustive review of the literature on counterproductive behavior and developed a test for predicting this type of behavior.

The test is a 15-minute pre-employment assessment that became very widely used and praised, Hellervik said. Over 25 million Americans have taken the test over the years. The test measures the conscientiousness of employees and potential employees, which he says is an excellent predictor of who will turn out to be a good employee.

He said the assessment contains some items that are based on applicants' past behavior and some are based on measuring attitude. PDI found that the test predicted conscientiousness: attendance, getting to work on time, honesty, not extending breaks, etc. Although most widely used for entry-level jobs, it has been shown to predict white-collar crime and counter-productive behavior, as well.

It appears that most K-12 or postsecondary educational institutions are not training students in conscientiousness.

In response to a question, Hellervik said he is not sure whether training and educational institutions pay attention to what PDI and companies are looking for in employees. Institutions could train students to have the competencies they need for the world of work. He said there are some organizations that train kids how to behave when they go into the workforce: to show up on time and to be appropriately dressed.

In education, more attention should be paid to nonacademic goals and pursuits.

Responding to a question about how to define outcomes for testing in K-12 education, Hellervik said, "There has been too much emphasis on every kid training for college. Core academic things have been overemphasized. Writing and math competencies are not new problems today. There should be more attention to nonacademic goals and pursuits. Not every kid is suited for college. Many will be far better off if they do things they enjoy and are good at." He noted that now some people are thinking about preparation of kids for high-tech, blue-collar jobs.

360-degree evaluations of teachers could be a low-cost way of changing schools.

In response to a question, Hellervik said PDI has no clients interested in preparing or educating teachers. He said it would be a big help if teachers could get 360-degree feedback (feedback that comes from members of an employee's immediate work circle) from students, other teachers, parents and administrators. The feedback would not go to the administrators, only to the teacher. "It's a huge problem to fight the way through the teachers unions," he said. "This would be a low-cost way to change schools, but the unions won't allow it."

Hellervik's comments about the schools are similar to those made by [Steve Rothschild](#) to the Civic Caucus on May 17, 2013. Rothschild, founder and chair of Twin Cities RISE! (TCR!), is frustrated that school districts-Minneapolis, in particular-won't use a personal empowerment program for students and parents like the one TCR! has created for its job-training participants. He believes such a program would help children become self-aware and give them a reason to be in school. "You don't do that by just teaching them math and science and taking them to gym," Rothschild said.

Companies need both conscientiousness and creativity.

An interviewer noted how much we hear today about companies' placing great value on creativity. He asked if there is a conflict between conscientiousness and creativity, between conformity and nonconformity. Hellervik responded, "All of this is multi-dimensional. We want to measure as many characteristics as possible deemed important to success on the job. We should be taking a shot at creativity."

An interviewer commented that in the late 1980s, industry felt that conflict was the worst thing you could have. But, he added, the best companies he worked for had constructive conflict. "Creativity dropped when we hired people who would say 'Yes' only," he said. "We didn't get creative people."

Hellervik responded, "You can't have organizations filled with conflict avoiders or filled with conflict makers. A person's judgment isn't always equal to a high IQ. You must know when to fight and when to back off."

An interviewer noted there are employees who own their *jobs* and do them as conscientiously as they can, but if the employees own the *organization*, they'll be willing to raise questions. "They have a larger sense about the organization holistically," he said. Hellervik responded that there must be components of both conscientiousness and responsibility.

To help combat discrimination in hiring, PDI developed the concept of competencies.

When discrimination in hiring became a big issue, Hellervik said, PDI came up in the 1970s with the concept of competencies. The company developed competency models, sometimes for a whole organization and sometimes by job or division.

"Tests are tough to develop," he said. "You must prove a question is related to the job. If it isn't, you're in trouble. Competency models help a lot. One competency is strategic thinking and one variable to help predict it would be how bright a person is." Hellervik said that after developing competency models, PDI researched what behaviors in simulations would reveal behaviors that would work with the models. The company developed an "inbox test," where a job candidate would have a limited amount of time to go through a simulated inbox. The test would evaluate whether the candidate's handling of the inbox showed strategic thinking, as well as many other competencies deemed important.

An interviewer asked about leadership and organizational change and what PDI would be looking for in, for example, the superintendent of a large school district. Hellervik responded, "Most people we evaluate in management and leadership are good people. We're not necessarily in the business of stamping someone as competent or not. Instead, we say 'This is the best candidate for what you're looking for.'"

PDI's customers are mostly large organizations.

In response to a question about PDI's major customers, Hellervik said they are mostly large organizations and include the public sector. He cited the U.S. Army as one example. The Center for Creative Leadership, an organization focused on leadership education and research, created leadership training in collaboration with PDI. The military, he said, pumps generals, admirals and other leaders through these training programs.

Responding to a question, Hellervik said PDI's model for hiring its own employees is that high-value employees should have an advanced degree in psychology, probably a Ph.D. He said after that degree, he would want conscientiousness. "I want hard workers; I want them to be intelligent," he said. "Within a cohort of employees in any job, IQ is among the very best predictors of how well they'll do."

Hellervik complained that many companies place too much emphasis on speed in the hiring process. "They don't care about the quality of the person," he said. Their focus is on having the right engineering degree and the right kind of computer knowledge. Companies should be concerned about a potential employee's basic qualities, such as conscientiousness, he said.