

Work Sample Testing

What Are Work Sample Tests?

Work sample tests involve giving candidates a small work assignment to discuss in their next interview. They are part of our [competency-driven interview process](#) that evaluates candidates in different contexts with increasing rigor at each step. Key elements of our process include:

- Supplemental information. This serves as a “blind” first interview, asking candidates to write about job-relevant experience and illustrate their competency in key areas.
- Structured interviews. These delve more deeply into the competencies outlined in the supplemental form to understand the candidate’s role in creating impact, who they worked with to achieve results, and how they measured impact.
- Work sample tests. These help you assess competencies in real-world context, shifting candidates from talking about work to demonstrating their skills.

Work sample tests are one of the most reliable ways to gather data about candidates’ skills and working styles and validate what they say about themselves. They also reveal insights about candidates who may present less confidently in interviews, but would be highly successful in the role.



“78 percent of HR professionals say the quality of their hires has improved due to their use of assessments.”

— 2022 SHRM Survey

The Business Benefits of Work Sample Testing

Better Quality Hires and More Diverse Teams

Interviews favor candidates who are good at talking about work, while skills-based assessments favor candidates who are good at working. Using both practices reduces the potential for bias toward easy confidence or familiar credentials and invites candidates from various backgrounds to showcase their skills.¹

More Accurate at Predicting Success on the Job

Extensive research shows that work sample testing is a more accurate predictor of success than the interview itself.² A skills test allows you to see the candidate's cognitive style, how they solve problems with a given set of resources, whether they understand the context of the position in your organization, and how they organize their thinking.

Builds Commitment and Trust With Candidates

Candidates appreciate the opportunity to visualize themselves in the position, see how their skills align, and think about whether the work is something they want to do. They also want to demonstrate their strengths and increase their chances of getting hired.³ For candidates from groups that are underrepresented in a functional area or industry, skills tests send a powerful signal that you evaluate everyone consistently and fairly.

Improves Your Onboarding and Training

Skills assessments will reveal each candidate's strengths and weaknesses in the context of your organization. This insight can be invaluable in structuring onboarding and training to give them the support they need, leading to better employee experience and long-term retention.

Saves Time and Resources

While developing work sample tests requires effort for your hiring team, these assessments can save time and resources in the long run by helping you avoid hiring the wrong person or investing time in candidates who are not a good fit for the role. The information you gain helps you clearly identify the tradeoffs you would make in choosing one candidate over another.

“Being around people who are different from us makes us more creative, more diligent and harder-working.”

— Katherine W. Phillips

Senior Vice Dean, Columbia Business School, workplace DEI advocate

How to Design a Work Sample Test

The content of your work sample exercise will vary by career level and functional area (see pages 4-6 for examples). Here is a basic structure to follow:

1. **Decide what you want to learn.** Consider the 3-5 key skills outlined in your position overview and supplemental information form. What do you want to see in action? What will convince you that this person has the skills to do the job and collaborate with your team?
2. **Identify a challenge this person may face in their day-to-day work.** Choose a task that mirrors something that will fall on their desk and that a candidate could complete in about two hours (we recommend giving them a week to do so). The work assignment should reflect the complexity and demands of the role and provide insights that interview questions cannot.
3. **Include some constraints or resources for the candidate to work with.** Set parameters and be specific. Give candidates real information to work with to simulate your work environment. Examples include standard operating procedures, a sample portfolio of products, an org chart, membership surveys, sales analysis, etc.
4. **Develop evaluation criteria.** How will you measure success? Are there multiple viable approaches to the work? Remember, you aren't looking for the "right" answer. You're looking for thought processes that will benefit your team. Use the same criteria for every candidate.
5. **Ask candidates to come prepared to discuss.** A deliverable alone tells you nothing about how a candidate arrived at their conclusion or how they will pivot when something new comes up. Even if a deliverable is part of the assignment, tell the candidate that your goal is to understand the thinking behind their work.

How to Discuss a Work Sample Test

The discussion is the most important part of the assignment. Think of it this way: AI-driven tools can create all kinds of deliverables fairly well (from a SWOT analysis to a slide deck and more). Without a discussion, reviewing a project that technology could easily do isn't going to tell you much. Allow candidates to show their real value—how well they collaborate, how well they understand the issues, and how their perspective would complement your team's skills.

We can't overemphasize the importance of talking about the work. Both you and the candidate gain valuable perspective in the conversation.

Ask candidates to "Come prepared to discuss how you would handle (some challenge)." Follow up with detailed questions. Propose a roadblock and ask how they might tweak their approach. Ask what they would change if different stakeholders were involved. Ask them to explain judgment calls and connect the work to past experiences. Challenge their thinking.

Examples

The examples below include work samples from a range of career levels and functional areas. What makes them effective? They are highly relevant, engaging, and specific, each involving an in-depth discussion with the candidate.

Example #1: Meetings Coordinator

Career level and industry: junior, professional research association

Key skills: task completion, excel expertise, data entry, attention to detail

Assignment:

This task is completed once a year. Member data pulled from our membership database is used to populate a database of names within our abstract submission site. This data is used for abstract submitters to add co-authors. To import, we need to format the data in a specific way based on the rules from the abstract submission site.

Below are the documents needed to complete this exercise:

- Standard operating procedures (SOP). Feel free to read the entire SOP, but only the highlighted parts need to be completed as part of this exercise.
- Membership import spreadsheet. This is a copy of the data we receive from IT (last name and email removed for privacy).
- Resources document. This was downloaded from the submission site and includes formatting for countries and states.

Review the SOP and produce the spreadsheet following the highlighted guidance in the SOP. Please come prepared to discuss your process in the next interview.

Example #2: Digital Products Manager

Career level and industry: senior, national literacy nonprofit

Key skills: product experience evaluation, product roadmap development, implementation strategy

Assignment:

Within our portfolio there are several tools and resources for educators, parents, and volunteers. What is your initial assessment of how they are presented? What (if any) changes would you recommend to improve use and impact? At your next interview, please come prepared to talk through your assessment framework, who you would collaborate with (internally and externally), additional questions you have, and an outline of timelines and benchmarks for your plan.

Example #3: Director of Health Initiatives

Career level and industry: senior, patient-centered healthcare nonprofit

Key skills: campaign strategy and implementation for public health education, staff management

Assignment:

A pharmaceutical company has recently received FDA approval for a breakthrough treatment for a serious, but often overlooked, comorbidity that is common among people living with a disease. This company will be providing funding for our nonprofit to launch an education-focused campaign aimed at informing the target audience about this comorbidity, its critical nature and the new treatment that is available.

Please create an outline that encompasses the steps, key considerations, critical elements, etc. to successfully develop and execute this campaign. Your outline should be reflective of your approach to work projects and demonstrate a sound understanding and application of public health principles.

At the end of your outline, please include a subheading titled, Key Questions. Underneath this subheading, you may list no more than ten questions you would ask to further inform your approach and/or development of key content for the campaign. Please come prepared to discuss your approach in the next interview.

Items to consider:

- The campaign cannot mention the specific treatment by name.
- The campaign will run for a period of one calendar year.
- The campaign will be patient-facing.
- You will have two support staff to assist you.
- You will work in collaboration with colleagues from our Communications and Marketing Department.

Example #4: Chief Executive Officer

Industry: global health association

Key skills: business model evaluation, implementation strategy, funding strategy

Assignment:

In the Fall of 2022, our organization commissioned a business model assessment from a consulting firm. We have attached the final report of their findings. Pages 16-18 contain some potential business models we could consider. We have yet to take a position on the recommendations. How would you approach the challenge of determining What Businesses We Could Be In? After reading this report and what you know about our organization so far, what business model would you want to discuss further? What are your ideas on how to implement it, including sustainable funding? Please come prepared to discuss at our next meeting.

Example #5: Executive Director

Industry: professional design association

Key skills: membership value, financial stewardship, strategic partnerships

Assignment:

The attached PDF contains several documents about our operations (org chart, membership surveys, and a sales analysis), and I have also attached the 2022 financials as a separate document. Based on this information, please come to the interview prepared to discuss the following three topics with the search committee:

1. Our membership has been flat or in decline for several years, and we are having a conversation about how we focus efforts/programs/resources to serve all member segments (educators, students, and professionals) and trying to be everything to everybody; where should we spend our resources to provide value and be financially viable? Provide recommendations that will have the biggest impact on membership. What membership models exist today in other organizations, that do not offer an accredited program as a requirement for their profession, that we could emulate/benefit from?
2. After reviewing the financial statements, please provide your assessment of our current financial position. What are your observations? What questions do you have? Where do you see opportunities for improvement?
3. The board has suggested that we should develop partnerships, paid and unpaid, to enhance revenue and brand visibility. How do you see this being a financially viable approach, or the opposite? What would be your approach to this challenge?

Please note that a formal presentation is not required. The committee is more interested in your framework for thinking about the issues. If you think it would make the conversation more productive, you are welcome to prepare a few handouts.

¹ [SHRM data on skills-based hiring.](#)

² [Stanford Professor Bob Sutton's research on the effectiveness of work sample testing and other interview practices.](#)

³ [Indeed's research on work sample testing.](#)