

# Work Sample Testing

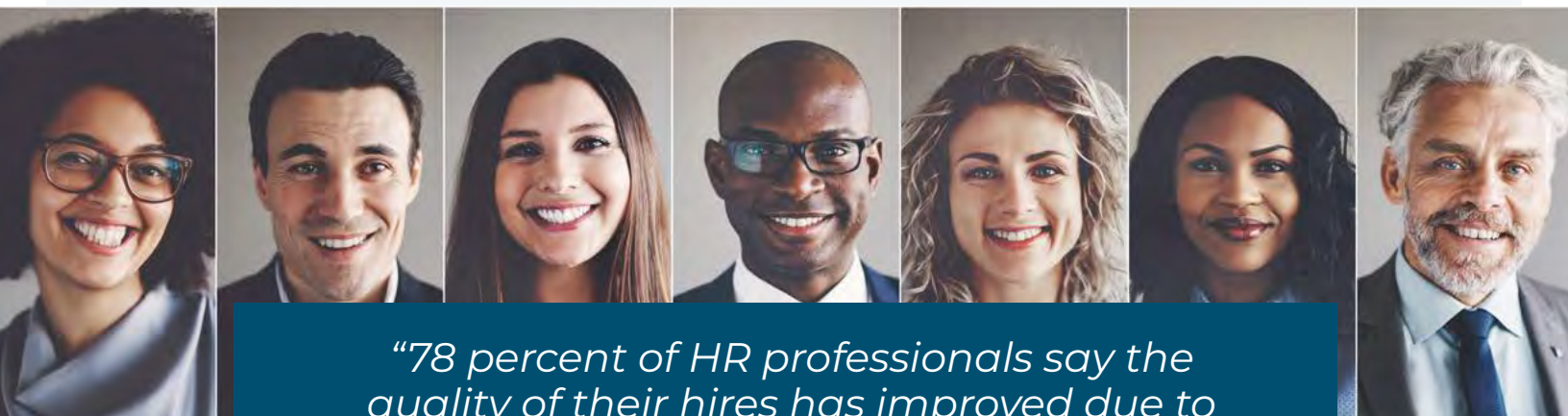
Your goal as a hiring manager is to select the candidate most likely to succeed in your role. But can you really determine that by looking at a resume or having a free-flowing, conversational interview? Probably not. [Research shows that those approaches are poor predictors of success on the job.](#)

Instead, the Staffing Advisors team recommends using a succession of skills-based assessments that increase in rigor as the hiring process moves forward.

- Written prompts asking candidates to describe their experience in defined key competency areas.
- Structured interviews that explore those same competencies in-depth, focusing on how the candidate created impact, collaborated with others, and measured results.
- Work sample tests to assess these competencies in real-world context, allowing candidates to demonstrate their skills rather than talking about past experiences.

Written prompts and structured interviews invite candidates to share relevant experience from their former work. The work sample test is how you assess those same skills *in your business context*. Work sample tests are one of the most reliable ways to gather measurable data about candidates' competencies and working styles and validate what they say about themselves.

Once you've evaluated candidates in different ways—writing and talking about past work and demonstrating their skills during the work sample—you'll have a rich set of data to compare against your organization's needs.



*"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

## Higher 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.

## 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. A skills test allows you to see a candidate's cognitive style, how they solve problems with a given set of resources, and how they organize their thinking.

## Builds Commitment and Trust With Candidates

Candidates appreciate the opportunity to 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. For candidates from groups that are underrepresented in a functional area or industry, skills tests send a clear 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 a better employee experience and long-term retention.

## Saves Time and Resources

While developing work sample tests requires effort from your hiring team, these assessments can save time and resources in the long run by helping you avoid hiring the wrong person. The information you gain helps you clearly identify the tradeoffs you would make in choosing one candidate over another.

## How To Design a Work Sample Test

The best work sample assignments mirror a real business challenge and reflect the complexity and demands of the role. If the role is strategic, present a scenario that requires strategic thinking and problem solving. For more task-oriented positions, design an assignment that allows the candidate to demonstrate their ability to execute and manage relevant tasks (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 most essential to the role. 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 challenge that is similar to what they will encounter on the job and that a candidate could complete in about two hours.
3. **Include some constraints and resources.** Set parameters and be specific. Give candidates real information to simulate your work environment. Examples include standard operating procedures, a sample portfolio of products, an org chart, membership surveys, sales analyses, etc.
4. **Develop evaluation criteria.** How will you measure success? Are there multiple viable approaches? 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 everyone.
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 adapt when something new comes up. Even if a deliverable is part of the assignment, explain 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 work sample assignment. Think of it this way: AI tools can now create a wide range of deliverables—from SWOT analyses to slide decks—with impressive quality. Simply reviewing a project that technology could replicate may not reveal much.

The real value comes from a conversation where the candidate can show how they collaborate, how well they understand the issues, and how they would complement your team's strengths. Think of this like working together, just as you would with a team member.

During the discussion, ask the candidate to present their approach, and then follow up with detailed questions. Propose a roadblock. Ask what they would change if different stakeholders were involved. Ask them to explain judgment calls. 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 business 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 this 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. Do you see this as 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.