

Work Sample Testing

What Are Work Sample Tests?

Work sample tests involve giving candidates a small sample of relevant work to do, creating an environment like the actual job. They provide a more objective way to assess candidates' skills when used as part of a complete [competency-driven interview process](#) that evaluates candidates in different contexts with increasing rigor throughout your search.

- The supplemental information form. 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 results.
- Work sample tests. These help you assess competencies in real-world context, shifting candidates from talking about past work to demonstrating their skills.

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. They also uncover valuable insights about candidates who may present less confidently in interviews, but would be highly competent and 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

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 candidates with easy confidence or familiar credentials, invites candidates from various backgrounds to showcase their skills, and leads to better quality hires and more diverse teams.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 and think deeply about how their skills align and whether the work is something they want to do. They also want to demonstrate their strengths and increase their chances of getting hired.³ And for candidates drawn from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, skills tests send a powerful signal that you evaluate candidates consistently and fairly.

Improves Your Onboarding and Training

Skills assessments will reveal each candidate's strengths and weaknesses in the context of your specific job and 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 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 more time in candidates who are not a good fit for the role. The additional information you gain helps you more clearly identify the tradeoffs you would make with one candidate over the other.

“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, advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace

¹SHRM data on skills-based hiring: <https://www.shrm.org/about-shrm/press-room/press-releases/pages/new-shrm-research-makes-the-case-for-skills-based-hiring.aspx>

² Research on the effectiveness of work sample testing and other interview practices: https://bobsutton.typepad.com/my_weblog/2009/10/selecting-talent-the-upshot-from-85-years-of-research.html

³ Indeed's research on work sample testing: <https://www.indeed.com/lead/indeed-assessments-skills-tests>

Designing a Work Sample Test

How you design a work sample will vary from position to position. See pages 5-6 for examples. Find advice on [developing an assessment for a senior-level executive here](#). General guidelines include:

- Before assigning a skills test, ensure you have narrowed your candidate pool to two or three finalists. Using them earlier in the process creates a barrier for candidates who are not yet invested with you.
- Decide what you want to learn and make sure your test is relevant and accurately measures the skills needed to succeed in the job.
- Ask candidates to accomplish a task that mimics real work so you can observe their approach to an actual scenario. This should not be work that will be used by your team or a client.
- Give candidates clear instructions, any needed resources, and adequate time. We recommend no more than two hours of work with a week to complete.
- Depending on the level of the position, you may want to include some ambiguity in the assignment to see how they navigate it.
- Invite candidates to discuss the work in their next interview.
- Develop a fair and consistent method to evaluate candidates' responses.

Suggested Project Types

Develop a solution to a strategic issue

Create a (short) brief, budget, presentation, or project plan

Create or work with a spreadsheet

Edit a document

Discuss a framework

Discussing the Candidate's Work

During the candidate's presentation of their work in the interview, listen for the following:

- Were they prepared?
- Did they make reasonable assumptions (even if not always accurate)?
- Were they inclusive of the perspectives of staff and members?
- Was the (presentation, assignment, discussion, etc.) logical?
- Would they work well with the executive team (if applicable)?
- Would they effectively engage with managers and staff?
- What support would they need to be successful in this role?

Examples of Work Sample Tests

Work Sample 1 – Communications and Marketing:

In this role, you will be responsible for conceiving, developing, implementing, and integrating a broad range of communications, public relations, social/digital, and content marketing activities in support of the strategic plan.

Please be prepared to discuss your framework and approach, timelines for the top-level actions, and the metrics or milestones that will measure your progress, focusing on the following key areas:

- Enhancing member engagement by modernizing both our communications and marketing efforts
- Creating high-value content
- Developing a more coordinated and robust means of disseminating content across our portfolio
- Improving overall product strategy and positioning

Please note that a presentation is not required. You are welcome to prepare a few handouts if you think it would make the conversation more productive.

Work Sample 2 – Education (new content):

Exercise: Our board has decided it wants to add two hours of continuing medical education on a new topic. It has potential to get corporate funding to help support it. Map out your steps to roll out the new content, from how to assess the best learning platform (live/online, new or folded into an existing program) to member needs assessment, ACCME criteria compliance, budget, and marketing.

Work Sample 3 – Operations:

Given that in the next year, we will be creating a new strategic plan, conducting an initial assessment of IT and finance, evaluating all processes and systems, identifying opportunities to increase efficiencies, and creating a culture of continuous improvement, please come prepared to discuss your 3-month, 6-month and 12-month goals that outline your approach, priorities, timeline, and resource allocations.

Examples Continued

Work Sample 4 – Public Education:

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 kidney disease. This company will be providing funding for the us to launch an education-focused campaign aimed at informing the target audience about this comorbidity, its critical nature and new the treatment that is available.

Assignment:

Please create an outline that encompasses the steps, key considerations, and critical elements 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.

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 in our Communications and Marketing Department.

Work Sample 5 – Human Resources:

We have recently hired new leaders to fill out our executive team and want to improve how we assess talent across teams. As Senior Director of Human Resources and Talent Management, how would you partner with the executive team to rethink our talent management and succession planning process?

- What framework would you use?
- How would you lead these discussions with the executive team?
- How would you engage with managers and staff?
- What support would you need?
- What should we be attentive to through this process?

Examples Continued

Work Sample 6 – CEO:

What strategy would you develop to increase the relevance of our organization outside the US? How would you engage stakeholders to define our role?

Work Sample 7 – CEO:

The attached PDF contains several documents to give you a better understanding about our operations (an org chart, financial statements, the current strategic plan, and a member satisfaction survey). Based on this information, please come prepared to discuss the following topics with the search committee:

1. Focus areas: Where would you focus your energy in the next 3-5 years to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of the organization?
2. Membership: Based on the information we shared, what approach would you take to serving all our members?
 - a) How do we generate an appropriate level of value to each different membership segment?
 - b) What additional opportunities should we consider in meeting the needs of our members?
 - c) How would you increase membership?
 - d) How would you evaluate the member dues structure?