

RACIALLY BASED SCORE ADJUSTMENTS DEEMED JUSTIFIED FOR WIDELY USED EMPLOYMENT TEST

There are statistical grounds to continue to adjust the scores of minority job seekers who take the widely used General Aptitude Test Battery (GATB), an expert committee has told the Department of Labor. Such a move is necessary to ensure that qualified blacks and Hispanics have the same chances as white applicants of being referred by the federal/state Job Service program to employers, the National Research Council committee concluded.

While the GATB is as good a predictor of job performance as are other available employment tests, the committee said, that ability is nevertheless only "modest." Many applicants who could perform successfully on the job score low on the test and all low-scoring groups suffer from the effects of this prediction error. Blacks and Hispanics as groups receive lower scores than do whites and --without score adjustments-- would be disproportionately excluded from the Job Service job-referral pool, the committee found.

The effect of score adjustments--both as currently practiced by the agency and as the committee would like to see them modified--would be to boost the scores of these minorities. The committee recommended that the adjustment mechanism chosen by the Job Service be enough to compensate for the impact of prediction errors made when referring minority candidates to employers.

"With no score adjustments, very low fractions of minority-group members will be referred for employment," the committee said. The result, it stressed, would be "a severe adverse impact on the employment opportunities of those demographic groups," particularly if the GATB is used as widely as proposed by the Department of Labor (DOL). Other referral criteria should be used to supplement GATB test scores, it added.

The general ability test is taken by several hundred thousand of about 20 million Job Service applicants annually.

MODEST VALIDITIES

Properly used, the GATB can help provide a more able pool of applicants than employers would see in

the absence of testing, the committee affirmed. Based on DOL research involving more than 500 different kinds of jobs, the committee concluded that the GATB has "modest but useful" validities for the types of jobs typically handled through the Job Service. However, it found that the available evidence does not support the agency's claim that the GATB can be used to screen applicants for all 12,000 job categories in the U.S. economy.

Moreover, the committee labeled as "unfounded" the DOL claims that broader use of the GATB would save employers some \$80 billion annually through increased workforce efficiency. Such claims were not based on empirical evidence, it said, although it confirmed that individual employers could realize economic gains from GATB-based referral of capable employees.

The study was requested by DOL, which has been challenged by the Department of Justice on the legality of adjusting the scores of minority test takers. The 14-member committee was asked to help resolve technical issues surrounding the validity of the GATB as a test instrument. It was charged especially to examine whether the GATB could be used for a wider range of job types and was asked to study the impact of score adjustments; it was not asked to resolve the legal issues involved in the dispute.

The National Research Council is the principal operating agency of the National Academies of Sciences and Engineering.

EXPANDED USE

At issue is how to refer the best job candidates from the Job Service (the state and local units of the U.S. Employment Service, USES) to potential employers. Most of the job orders handled by the Job Service are for semi-skilled and skilled workers. Some 19.2 million job applicants used USES services in 1985, the most recent year for which data are available. Only about 8 percent of those applicants took the GATB, but DOL officials would like to see the test administered to virtually all candidates and used to help fill nearly all requests for applicants.

The GATB assesses verbal, nu-

merical, perceptual, and psychomotor skills. However, because job performance is a function of complex human behavior, no test is likely to predict it very well, the committee said. GATB scores, for example, show only modest correlations with supervisor ratings of job performance. Nevertheless, these correlations are similar to those found for other general ability tests used in employment settings, such as military entrance tests. (In statistical terms, the correlation between GATB scores and subsequent supervisor evaluations of employees ranges from 0.2 to 0.4; a perfect correlation would be 1.0.)

MINORITY SCORES

The less predictive accuracy a test has, the more likely it is that people with low scores could nevertheless do well on the job, the committee explained. The GATB is no exception, it found. The test produces both "false rejections" -- low scorers who could perform jobs well -- and "false acceptances" -- high scorers who perform poorly on the job.

Minorities tend to receive lower scores on the GATB than do majority-group job seekers. For example, a black candidate taking the GATB in the hopes of being referred to a job requiring semi-skilled workers might receive a raw score of 276. That would put him at the 50th percentile (the "median" score for all blacks testing for that kind of job. The same score of 276 is at the 32nd percentile for Hispanic applicants (for whom the median score is 295), but only at the 22nd percentile for other, mostly white, candidates (whose median score is 308).

However, because the GATB is such an imperfect predictor of job performance, differences among groups in actual job performance will be much smaller than their differences in test scores, the committee said.

"Our premise is that the inaccuracy of the test should not unduly affect the employment prospects of able minority workers," the committee wrote. Therefore, it recommended that the Job Service continue to construct its referral pools using adjusted scores. The net effect of these adjustments should be to

eliminate the disproportionate rates of false rejection for those groups, the committee said. At the test's current level of validity, referring candidates of equivalent percentile rankings within each of three racial and ethnic groups -- black, Hispanic, and other -- provides one way to achieve the appropriate adjustments, the committee suggested.

To give the employer the best information available about prospective employees, the committee recommended that the Job Service include with the referred client's application both this within-group percentile ranking as well as an "expectancy score." An expectancy score -- based on the raw GATB score -- reflects the probability that a given applicant will perform successfully on the job as compared with all other applicants who take the GATB.

IMPROVING THE TEST

The committee found other flaws in the test that will have even more impact if the test receives more widespread use. For example, the test is highly "speeded" -- many of the sections have such severe time limits that the average person can finish only about one-third of the question. Test coaches can teach people to randomly answer the remaining questions in the last minute of the test, thereby boosting their scores but further reducing the test's predictive abilities.

Refinement of the test to reduce its speededness should begin immediately, the committee recommended.

Test security is a second problem with the GATB because there are only two versions of the test. The committee urged that additional forms of the test be developed on a continuing basis so that no examinees benefit unfairly from prior knowledge of the questions should copies of the test leak into the public domain.

WHO SHOULD TAKE THE TEST?

Many applicants will benefit from taking the test, the committee said. But it noted that the test is not a good enough predictor of job performance for test scores to be used in isolation. "Traditional and alternative referral criteria" -- such as experience and education -- should continue to be

used to supplement GATB scores.

Moreover, there are some client groups -- non-English speakers and people with certain handicaps -- for whom standardized testing is inappropriate, the committee noted. It suggested that DOL take steps to ensure that referrals are not made "automatically and solely" using GATB scores.

"We recommend that no job seeker be obliged to take the GATB," the committee concluded; every office that uses the GATB to refer candidates to jobs should maintain an "alternative referral path for those who choose not to take the test."

The report was edited by committee chair John A. Hartigan, Eugene Higgins professor of statistics and director, Statistical Computing Laboratory, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.; and Research Council study director Alexandra K. Wigdor.

SEARCH FOR HOWARD PRESIDENT LAUNCHED

Howard University Board of Trustees chairman John E. Jacob recently announced that a search committee has begun work on the process of seeking applications for the presidency of the university and making a final recommendation for the appointment of a new president.

Dr. James E. Cheek, president of Howard since July 1, 1969, announced his retirement in April, effective June 30, 1989. Dr. Carlton P. Alexis, executive vice president, will serve as interim president, effective July 1.

"The search committee will screen all of the applications during August, September, and October and will interview the best candidates. It is anticipated that the board of trustees will appoint the new president during the early part of 1990."

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