

How to use Pre-Screening Tools More Effectively

WHITE PAPER

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Introduction

The last few years have witnessed considerable growth in the use of online pre-screening tools. These tools ask candidates direct questions about their skills, experiences, interests and job requirements early in the hiring process in order to screen out unqualified applicants from the candidate pool. Companies typically require applicants to pass pre-screening before they are considered for interviews or other more in-depth staffing assessments.

Most pre-screening tools use relatively simple questions to assess basic skills and qualifications. Common kinds of questions include "What is your level of skill using Excel?", "How many years of experience do you have as a manager?", "Can you provide proof of your eligibility to work in the United States?", and "Are you willing to work Saturdays?". There are over 20 vendors in the online staffing assessment market who offer some form of pre-screening tools. Although they differ in sophistication and functionality, every pre-screening system allows clients to write and score their own questions. Some systems also provide clients with recommended pre-screening questions for different types of jobs or skills.

Several popular publications such as Business 2.0, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post have noted the growing use of pre-screening and called attention to potential problems with these tools. However, little objective systematic research has been done to evaluate whether using pre-screening tools can effectively hire better candidates. The purpose of this white paper is to share some initial results of research into the use of pre-screening tools, and to provide guidance on the effective use of pre-screening as an assessment method. The observations and recommendations made in this paper are drawn from several sources including:

- Statistical analysis of pre-screening data collected from several thousand candidates applying for a variety of professional and hourly jobs at a Fortune 500 company.
- Discussions with recruiters and other staffing professionals who use pre-screening tools to staff exempt and non-exempt positions.
- Relevant research from sources such as the Journal of Applied Psychology, Personnel Psychology, and the Society of Industrial & Organizational Psychology.



In the first part of the white paper, eight widely promoted "half-truths" about pre-screening are critiqued. These half-truths represent common but only partially substantiated claims often made by pre-screening vendors. The second part of the white paper provides some suggested "best practices" for effectively using pre-screening tools.

Eight "Half Truths" About Pre-Screening

Listed below are eight claims about pre-screening that are often used to sell the value of these systems. These are named "half-truths" because they represent statements about pre-screening that, while not completely false, neither are they totally true. They can be viewed as risks that should be acknowledged and managed when implementing pre-screening systems.

Half-Truth #1: Pre-screening is simple and easy to use.

The pre-screening concept is very straightforward. You need only to identify key requirements for a job, use the Internet to ask candidates specific questions to determine if they meet these requirements, and then only spend time reviewing and talking with the candidates who have the minimum requirements needed to perform the job. However, what appears to be a simple concept in theory can be very difficult to apply in "real life".

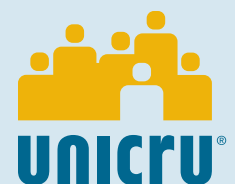
First, it can be very difficult to write good pre-screening questions. Hiring managers are notoriously poor at identifying job requirements, let alone writing effective questions for assessing these

requirements. It is also very difficult to write pre-screening questions that validly assess less tangible "soft" skills such as ambition, work ethic, customer service, or innovation. Because the value of pre-screening is completely dependent on the quality of the questions used, pre-screening tends to have limited utility for jobs where performance depends primarily on soft skills such as motives, style, and attitude, and does not require long lists of specialized skills, knowledge, or qualifications.

Second, it is not always easy to accurately interpret the meaning of candidates' responses to pre-screening questions. Just because a candidate says they possess certain skills is no guarantee that they actually have these skills. Like conducting interviews, effectively using pre-screening questions is not simply a matter of asking the right questions, it also requires learning how to effectively interpret the answers.

Developing the skills and processes needed to effectively write and interpret pre-screening questions takes time. Companies implementing pre-screening may find themselves in a learning curve often exceeding six months. One leading vendor indicated that learning to use their pre-screening system requires "a full day of training followed by regular, one-on-one coaching sessions for a month". In other words, these are not simply "plug and play" tools. In addition, the technology side of pre-screening can be very time consuming, particularly if the pre-screening systems are expected to automatically pass data between a company's Enterprise HR systems.

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Half-Truth #2: Pre-screening identifies the best candidates.

Pre-screening can effectively eliminate candidates who clearly lack key job qualifications. While pre-screening is effective for screening out the "bottom half" of the candidate pools, pre-screening tools lack the accuracy needed to differentiate between "great" candidates and those that are merely acceptable. The only exception to this limitation appears to be for jobs that require long lists of very specific, well defined, highly objective, and relatively rare skills, experiences, and qualifications. However, very few jobs have such extensive lists of clearly defined requirements.

It is not uncommon for the majority of qualified candidates to receive nearly identical pre-screening scores. Often the differences in pre-screening scores between candidates scoring at the 90th percentile and those scoring at the 60th percentile depend on responses to one or two questions. These questions impact a candidate's overall pre-screening ranking, even though the questions may be relatively weak indicators of overall candidate potential. For example, we found that the main difference between top scoring candidates and candidates scoring at the 75th percentile for one pre-screening questionnaire depended primarily on how candidates rated their knowledge of a single software system. While this question was job relevant, it was not considered to be a "make or break" question in terms of whether to review the qualifications of a candidate.

Furthermore, just because candidates say

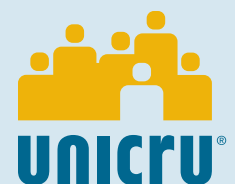
they possess this knowledge does not mean they have it. Consequently, whether someone scored in the top 10% might depend more on their willingness to be candid than their actual skills and experience.

Half-Truth #3. Pre-screening is not affected by candidates "faking" their responses.

It should come as little surprise that candidates often respond in an "overly favorable" manner when asked to rate their knowledge, skills, and experience as part of a job application. Many candidates would rather be eliminated during an interview with an actual person than to be automatically screened out by a machine. Analysis of pre-screening data suggests that if candidates can find a way to rationalize giving positive answers to pre-screening questions, then they often will. This means responding that they had "extensive management experience" even though it was informally as a team leader, or claiming to be an "expert in Excel" even though all the applicant actually ever did was enter data into Excel worksheets for several years. After all, what constitutes extensive experience and expertise is largely a matter of perspective.

One of the primary problems with faking is that those candidates who do respond in an open and candid manner are likely to receive much lower scores than candidates who "stretch the truth". This is even more troublesome given research showing that the most accomplished experts are often the most self-critical. Simply stated, the more you know the

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less you think you know, and vice versa. This means that when true experts answer pre-screening questions they may report having lower skill levels than those overconfident novices who do not realize how little they know.

Half-Truth #4. Pre-screening allows you to increase the quality of candidates by "raising the bar".

One of the reputed benefits of pre-screening is that it lets you effectively manage large numbers of candidates by "raising the bar" so that you only review the qualifications of candidates who receive the very highest scores. This benefit might be true if it were not for the problems raised by half-truths #2 and #3. While pre-screening tools can be used to systematically screen out large numbers of candidates, there is often little guarantee they are eliminating the candidates you want to screen out. This is particularly true when they are used to screen candidates at the upper end of the candidate pool. Several recruiters have suggested that the best candidates are often not those with the highest scores, but those falling roughly between the 50th and 85th percentiles. These candidates tend to be the most candid and realistic about their skills and experiences. In contrast, candidates with the highest scores often appear to be "faking" their responses, to lack accurate insight into their strengths and weaknesses, or to be overqualified for the position.

Half-Truth #5. Pre-screening questions are more effective than resume reviews.

Another supposed benefit of pre-screening is that it can save recruiters from having to spend long hours reviewing resumes. This is true insofar as pre-screening questions can automatically screen out resumes from candidates who lack certain specific job requirements. However, recruiters may still need to review the resumes of the 50% or so of the remaining candidates who meet the minimum job requirements.

We would argue that including some level of resume review is actually a good thing. Unlike pre-screening questions that ask candidates to respond to questions about their skills, resumes reflect how candidates proactively describe themselves. This is an important difference, since how we describe ourselves on our own is different from how we describe ourselves in response to questions from others. Resumes allow candidates to provide more enriched and unique descriptions of their skills and experiences as they see themselves. Even though these descriptions can be somewhat flowery and overly grandiose, they are far more reflective of a candidate's unique talents than answers to radio button questions asking about experiences performing different, and largely generic tasks.

Half-Truth #6: Pre-screening is not a form of selection.

We once heard a pre-screening vendor make the following statement: "Our system is not a selection system and does not need to be held to the same standards as tools used to make selection decisions. We simply use pre-screening

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to place applicants into two groups, those you want to look at and those you don't." What this vendor failed to acknowledge (or perhaps did not want to acknowledge), is that removing applicants from the candidate pool and placing them in a group that will not be considered for potential hire is equivalent to making a selection decision for those candidates. We suggest that any pre-screening system that places applicants into different groups based on whether they are considered to be high or low potential candidates is functioning as a selection system, and should be held to the same legal standards and guidelines as any other selection instrument.

It may still be possible to implement pre-screening tools so that they are not treated as a formal selection tool. In this context, pre-screening is used purely as a way to prioritize recruiting efforts, without specifically labeling candidates as "qualified" or "unqualified". The easiest way to do this is to rank order candidates based on the pre-screening reports and simply work down the list, reviewing candidates until you identify those you wish to pursue further. This approach has the same effect as eliminating low scoring applicants since it is unlikely you will get very far down the list before finding some potentially suitable candidates to hire. However, it never specifically labels candidates as ineligible for hire, and thus the system never actually makes a selection decision.

Half-Truth #7. Candidates do not mind answering pre-screening questions.

Research indicates that candidates are willing to answer fairly lengthy sets of pre-screening questions if they have a strong interest in the position. However, this does not mean that candidates like answering these questions. In fact many job search experts specifically recommend that candidates find ways to "go around" pre-screening systems and talk directly with people in the organization. In general, we expect that candidate reactions to pre-screening systems are likely to depend on the same things that influence candidate reactions to any selection tool: "is the pre-screening system easy to use", "are the questions clearly job relevant and easy to answer", and "do candidates receive timely and meaningful feedback on the status of their application". However, it is not safe to assume that pre-screening questions and tools will always meet these three criteria.

Half-Truth #8. Pre-screening leads to better hiring decisions.

Pre-screening will most likely reduce the time needed to process candidates. However, there are several reasons why pre-screening may not necessarily lead to better hires. For pre-screening to increase the chances of hiring the right candidates, the system must be appropriately designed and deployed.

Unfortunately, many pre-screening vendors focus far more on staffing efficiency as opposed to staffing effectiveness. As one staffing manager said, "Many pre-screening systems were designed by people who have a background in supply chain automation". These vendors focus

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more on volume of product moved than actual quality. When evaluating pre-screening vendors, ask how they measure the value of their system. Note whether their response emphasizes candidate processing metrics (for example, cost of hire, time to hire, and number of candidates screened) or measures of new hire performance (for example, performance ratings and retention). If their focus is primarily on number of candidates processed and other actions taken before the hiring decision, this vendor may be of little help to ensure that the candidates you are screening in will turn out to be high performers after they have been hired.

Pre-screening is an effective method for identifying talent provided the tools are rigorously designed and effectively used. Pre-screening will most likely increase the ability of recruiters to efficiently process large quantities of candidates. However, it may not lead to more effective identification of high quality candidates. In fact, poorly implemented pre-screening tools can systematically screen out the best candidates, leaving a "pre-screened" pool of candidates who are largely inexperienced, insincere, or both. This risk is compounded by the variety of pre-screening vendors who have proven themselves ready and willing to sell systems to clients without actually testing whether these systems truly lead to better hiring decisions.

Guidelines to Manage Risks Associated with Use of Pre-screening Tools

Following these guidelines will not guarantee that pre-screening will achieve all the marketing claims made by pre-screening vendors, but will help ensure that it provides maximum value to your staffing process. The guidelines address the major risks and advantages of pre-screening we uncovered through our studies of pre-screening and qualifications questioning. The guidelines are organized as follows:

- Category 1: Integrating pre-screening into your staffing process,
- Category 2: Selecting a pre-screen vendor,
- Category 3: Writing pre-screen questions, and
- Category 4: Scoring and interpreting candidate responses.

Category 1: Integrating Pre-Screening into Your Staffing Process

It is important to understand that pre-screening be viewed as one step in a broader strategic process for sourcing, screening and selecting candidates. Pre-screening is a critical component that will help you address some specific problems you may be facing (such as resume overload, lack of a systematic process for evaluating candidates, and increased hiring costs due to high turnover rate). When deploying pre-screening, it is critical to clarify requirements and manage expectations about the purpose of pre-screening within this broader system. A failure to do so can result in unmet expectations, increased resistance, and

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other forms of organizational backlash. Paying attention to the following guidelines can help you avoid these problems.

- **Emphasize the strengths of pre-screening.** Pre-screening can efficiently screen out applicants who admit to lacking job-relevant skills, experiences or qualifications. This can reduce applicant pools by 50% or more, which is a tremendous value when dealing with large volumes of candidates. Pre-screening can also be effective for finding candidates who possess highly specific and unique qualifications .
- **Recognize the limitations of pre-screening.** While pre-screening questions can identify applicants who lack job qualifications, they have limited value for actually predicting job performance. Just because a candidate says they have certain skills is little guarantee that they are truly skilled. Simply placing a few simple questions about skills and experiences on the Internet does not provide some magical power to evaluate candidate potential. Companies that expect pre-screening questions to effectively identify the top 10% of candidates are probably setting themselves up for disappointment. The main purpose of pre-screening is to remove the bottom half of the applicant pool, not sort the top half.
- **Pre-screening is only as good as the questions.** Writing good pre-screening questions takes a lot of work. Hiring managers or recruiters must be able to determine what require-

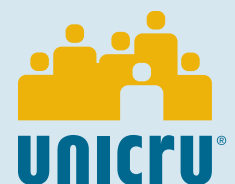
ments drive job success, and be able to create questions to determine if applicants meet these requirements. This is not a trivial task. Make sure hiring managers know that they will have to do a fair bit of upfront work if they are to reap the benefits of pre-screening. This is a weakness for many pre-screening vendors. While they may provide excellent tools for asking questions, they often fail to do the post sales work and analysis required to ensure the questions being asked are the right ones.

- **Emphasize pre-screening as one part of the staffing process.** The purpose of pre-screening is to make high-level decisions about applicants' general qualifications early in the staffing process. While pre-screening questions are an excellent first step for narrowing the number of applicants, they are not suited for determining which ones are the best fit for a particular job. Nor do they guarantee that the right people are applying in the first place. Communicate pre-screening as one step in a larger staffing process that includes using appropriate sourcing methods prior to pre-screening, and using other forms of assessment and interviewing techniques to evaluate applicants who pass pre-screening.

Category 2: Selecting a pre-screening vendor

There tends to be relatively few differences between many assessment vendors in terms of the look and feel of their qualifications questions. However, there

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are major differences when it comes to the technology used to support these questions, the emphasis placed on ensuring that pre-screening questions are valid and effective, and the ability of their systems to support other forms of assessment in addition to pre-screening. Price also varies widely, from less than \$10,000 for simple, stand-alone systems to well over \$100,000 for enterprise applicant tracking systems. Which vendor is the "best" will depend on the unique needs of your company. No matter what your situation, the following guidelines can help you to better evaluate potential pre-screening vendors.

- **Does the vendor focus on quantity or quality?** The ultimate goal of staffing is to make good hires as efficiently as possible -- not to make bad hires quickly. When evaluating pre-screening vendors, ask how they measure the value of their system. Note whether their response emphasizes measures of staffing volume (for example, number of candidates processed) or measures of new hire performance (for example, performance ratings and retention). Vendors who focus primarily on staffing volume may offer little help to ensure that the candidates you are screening in are truly the best performers.
- **Does the vendor effectively integrate assessment and information technology?** Robust technology platforms are critical for effective use of pre-screening. Make sure you involve your IT department early in the vendor selection process. At the same

time, remember that the ultimate goal is to hire better employees and not simply to get a system that is easy for your IT department to support. In other words, do not put the technological cart before the application horse.

- **Does the vendor support alternative forms of assessment?** Pre-screening should be one of several assessment tools used to support staffing. A variety of other assessment tools such as knowledge tests and culture fit measures can also be used early in the staffing process to complement pre-screening. Look for vendors whose systems integrate and support these tools in addition to pre-screening questions.

Category 3: Writing Questions

Perhaps the single biggest challenge to using pre-screening is developing effective questions. Most vendors leave it to the client to determine which questions to ask. Consequently, you must clarify the process for developing questions prior to choosing a vendor. This requires determining who will be involved in writing or choosing the questions, and the steps to take to make certain these questions are job relevant, legal, and effective. In general, pre-screening questions should be objective and well defined, critical and relevant to performing the job, and useful for distinguishing between candidates (for example, qualifications only a few people possess). The following guidelines can help with this process:

“Which vendor is the “best” will depend on the unique needs of your company.”

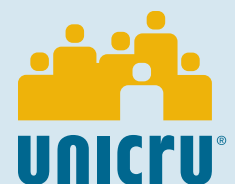


- **Focus on specific, verifiable skills and experiences.** As a rule, assume that candidates will always respond positively to a question if they feel they can justify or rationalize their answer. The best way to counter this is to ask very specific questions about tasks that candidates clearly have or have not done. For example, rather than asking if someone is an "expert in Excel", ask if he/she has "written Excel macros". Instead of asking if candidates have "managed people", ask if they have been "responsible for making hiring and promotion decisions".
- **Make certain all questions are job relevant.** To ensure the legal defensibility of any component of your hiring process, establish clear links between hiring criteria and specific aspects of job performance. It is critical to demonstrate direct relationships between the content of pre-screening questions and job requirements. This is especially true if you are using questions to eliminate applicants from the candidate pool. Do not simply include questions because people want to ask them. Challenge hiring managers to explain why the skills and experiences addressed by these questions are critical to job performance.
- **Avoid questions that are offensive or illegal.** Make sure that questions do not violate any EEOC regulations and that they will not seem offensive to applicants. Be wary of letting hiring managers write their own ques-

tions unless they are well versed in EEOC hiring guidelines. It is easy to write apparently job relevant but potentially illegal questions (for example, "Do you own a car?"). Avoid writing offensive questions by making sure that questions do not leave applicants wondering, "Why are they asking me this?".

- **Focus on "high impact" questions.** The goal of pre-screening is to remove the maximum number of unqualified applicants with the minimum number of questions. Avoid questions that are answered the same way by the majority of candidates, as these provide little value for distinguishing between candidates. Also avoid questions that reflect "nice to have" concepts instead of critical skills and qualifications. For example, some pre-screening vendors recommend asking if candidates are interested in using certain skills. However, a wealth of personnel research indicates that being interested in a task has relatively little relationship with actual task performance. Furthermore, when analyzing pre-screening responses, we found that almost every candidate who indicated their skill level to be intermediate or higher also expressed a medium to high level of interest in using the skill. This suggests that little useful information is gained by asking about interests. In general, limit the focus of pre-screening questions to specific experiences and requirements, and use other

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more in-depth assessments to get at soft skills like motives, interests and competencies.

- **Be consistent.** It is critical that every applicant for a given position be asked the same pre-screening questions. Consistency is important for establishing legal defensibility. Using pre-screening inconsistently also reduces the effectiveness of your hiring process. Do not allow managers or recruiters to change pre-screening questions after a requisition has been posted.

Category 4: Scoring and Interpreting Candidate Responses

The best pre-screening questions can be rendered meaningless or even harmful if the responses to the questions are not appropriately interpreted. This requires establishing effective methods for evaluating and scoring candidate responses. The following are a few guidelines to consider in this area:

- **Assign scores carefully.** Many pre-screening systems allow you to assign scores or points to different applicant responses. Most also let you create "knock-out" questions where applicants who do not give the right response are disqualified from the candidate pool. Make sure that you carefully think through how these scores are used, particularly knockout questions. Test different scoring options by comparing scores received by candidates with other information you may have about

them (for example, resumes and interview results). Make sure that the scores accurately reflect key job demands and requirements, and are not overly rewarding candidates who have job relevant but somewhat trivial experiences. If you are using pre-screening to place candidates into discrete groups based on qualifications, review EEOC statistics to ensure you are not disproportionately eliminating candidates from certain protected groups. The advantage of scoring pre-screening is that it allows you to automatically sort through large numbers of candidates. The risk is that it lets you rapidly duplicate mistakes.

- **The highest scores are not always the best.** Our research indicates that candidates that get the highest pre-screening scores are often overqualified, are more willing to "stretch the truth" in their responses, or have job-relevant skills but non-job relevant experience (for example, an IT professional applying for an administrative job on the basis of his/her knowledge of MS office software). Do not assume a one-to-one correspondence between scores and performance potential. Remember, pre-screening questions are good for removing clearly unqualified applicants from the bottom half of the candidate pool, but have much less value for rank ordering high potential candidates in the top half.
- **Do not overly rely on pre-screening to evaluate candidates.** Pre-screening

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is good for evaluating whether candidates meet the minimum requirements of a job. However, other forms of assessment such as interviews and personality or ability measures should be used to make more fine-tuned judgments about a candidate's true performance potential. This is particularly true for assessing competencies associated with motivation, expertise, interpersonal style, and other "soft" skills.

- **Monitor the effectiveness of questions.** Establish processes to track whether your pre-screening questions are screening out applicants who do not meet the minimum requirements, and to determine if the applicants being screened in are the "right" candidates. If large numbers of unqualified applicants are appearing at the later stages of your hiring process, then try to determine what is missing from your pre-screening questions. Conversely, make sure the questions are effec-

tively identifying qualified candidates. Metrics that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of pre-screening include interview to hire ratios, new hire performance and retention, relationships between question responses and resume quality, and question response frequencies. The primary focus of these metrics is on candidate quality, not quantity.

Summary

The rise of online pre-screening was historically driven more by operational concerns regarding applicant tracking and candidate management as opposed to selection concerns focusing on the quality of staffing decisions. These systems have now proven their value as tools for managing large numbers of applicants. Pre-screening tools can be effective in screening out applicants that do not meet the minimum requirements. However, they are generally not very good evaluating the screened-in applicants.

This white paper has attempted to provide you with guidelines on how to use these pre-screening tools effectively. While using pre-screening and following these guidelines won't guarantee great hires, it will greatly reduce the time you lose dealing with clearly unqualified applicants.

¹Handler, C.A., & Hunt, S.T. (2003). **The Rocket-Hire Buyer's Guide to Web-Based Screening and Staffing Assessment Systems.** www.Rocket-Hire.com.

²An actual candidate example provided by a recruiter working at a Fortune 500 company.



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Dr. Steve Hunt (shunt@unicru.com) is Chief Scientist at Unicru. Steve's responsibilities include developing methods to identify key behaviors that drive job success in different environments and designing tools to assess the fundamental motives, abilities, and characteristics that predict these behaviors. He has over 12 years of consulting and research experience in strategic human resources, and has developed and deployed staffing assessment systems for jobs ranging from front-line associates to senior executive leaders. Dr. Hunt possesses a Ph.D. and Master's Degree in Industrial Organizational Psychology, B.A.s in Applied Mathematics and Psychology, and an SPHR certification from the Society for Human Resource Management.

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