

Will Tests And “Brain-Teasers” Reveal Your Next Golden Hire?

Recently, I came across a [promotion by Jaguar](#) that was designed not to sell cars but to highlight how the brand plans to hire thousands of new engineers this year. How so? It starts with a challenge for the potential hire using an app that’s been developed by the company and in the process, seems to be a unique way to gamify the recruiting process.

Obviously, a name like Jaguar lends a slick appeal of working with such a recognized brand. But don’t let that fool you. At the end of the day, **it’s still about the test, not the brand.**

What I’m finding is that a great many companies these days will have some kind of a working challenge for the candidate that happens outside of their office. The popular tools right now to create these challenges are usually ones like [HackerRank](#) and Codility.

In essence, both of these tools have the same scenario: You're given the problem, a timeline within which to work on the problem and asked to write code. Typically, you are given the choice of which language you want to use, whether that’s writing in Java, C++, C-sharp, Python, etc. Once you write your code, in the window provided, their system will basically analyze it and will tell you if you can run it. And if you can run it, there will be a certain number of tasks to complete.

The Question Is: Do Tests Skew Toward One Candidate Or Another?

People who have never seen these kind of problems, when presented with them, usually have, well, a problem. But it's becoming quite common that unless the person can score really well on this kind of test, they will not move to the next stage.

That tends to favor people more recently out of school, because they're likely to have already been practicing for this opportunity.

Conversely, in the real world, when you write software, most of the time you don't start with a blank page. You start with the code that's already there that you can change, modify, reuse and so on. That’s far different

than what's happening in these tests I'm referring to where there's nothing to reuse. Because of that, you have a limited time. This favors a certain kind of activity of writing from scratch as opposed to dealing with a million lines of code and finding out where and why a bug has appeared in that code.

The Value Of Projects: Practical Scenarios Over Simulated Ones

However, there is more and more of a push toward creating a scenario in the interviewing process that **resembles the real work environment and the real work processes as closely as possible**. That's where projects come in.

Can you sit someone down and say, "*We'll give you a project*" and immediately find out what kind of contributor you have? Probably not. It might take six months or more for you to know if that individual has reached the potential you hope them to. You can't find that out very often in an interview then and there (although it hasn't stopped companies from trying to find out).

Still, the positive light as we see it in a project-driven process is that it tends to favor what we would call a ***serious candidate*** – someone who is willing to prepare by investing time and effort into getting ready for this process right now, not eventually.

Let's contrast this with someone who may have great talent but whose attitude is, "*Look, I basically like my job. So, yeah, maybe I'll go in for an interview. But...they want me to do this test. Hmm. OK, I'll try to do it in an hour before dinner on Sunday.*" The reality is that he probably won't be able to finish it in just an hour before Sunday dinner, his family will start screaming "*Dinner!*" and he'll be forced to pick it up later. But let's face it: "Later" could very well become "never."

But Don't Forget: The Latter Could Also Be Your Golden Candidate.

That's right. He's the ***passive job hunter***. The one who doesn't need to change jobs right now but could be persuaded if all the stars align for him. Many companies frequently want someone in this mold, an individual who is quite happy working somewhere else. Unfortunately,

they've created a challenge-based process that is heavily biased against somebody who has no substantial incentive to prepare!

Yes, a candidate may indeed say, *"This opportunity is very interesting."* But most of the time, this statement comes after the fact with 20/20 vision in the rearview mirror – followed by the phrase, *"I guess I should have spent more time preparing for it."*

Didn't Google Favor Challenges Or "Brain-Teasers" For Candidates?

For a time, yes. Google used to think that they could use these "brain-teasers" in a way that would hopefully project that candidate's likelihood of success. However, it seems that more recently, they've come to the conclusion that success with a brain-teaser does not translate to success working at Google.

Despite that development, our impression is that Google also asks people to do a lot of programming projects before they get hired. Again, this requires a fair amount of commitment.

To use a holistic view, the more desirable the job turns out to be, the more selective the company will be in hiring. Part of that will be a reflection of how much of a commitment the candidate is willing to put into the process. In turn, if a company doesn't feel a full commitment is being put forth by a candidate, how much of a commitment can the company be expected to provide toward that person?

The Key To Discovering Such Commitment Levels On Both Sides?

Herein lies the dilemma. It's not an easy proposition for a company to invest so much time and energy into a process for a passive job candidate who isn't fully committed yet. But should that person be bypassed for this reason alone in favor of an active job seeker? A closer look at a passive candidate may still be worthwhile as they may actually be the best candidate of all.

Fortunately, at **Roy Talman & Associates**, we've found that a lot of education can go a long way. Regardless of whether a person is active or

passively looking, the more a candidate can be informed about not only the position itself but the culture as well, the more likely they will buy into the idea of a long-term growth opportunity. The commitment can be slowly but surely mature when nurtured in this manner.

Likewise, the more that a company feels that a relationship with a “hidden gem” is worth us spending time on, particularly if they also see how this individual may offer a long-term impact on the business, the more they too may commit to the process.

Whether that process should include tests, brain-teasers or projects, to us the key is to give highly qualified candidates the tools to prepare for those components of the process. That’s good for the candidate and good for the company potentially hiring them.

Tests and brain-teasers aren’t inherently bad, but they’re not right for every company’s interview process either. If they are used, companies should consider how they’re incorporated into the process and how much weight they should have in evaluating a candidate as a fit. Test and brain-teaser results can convey a certain amount about a person’s skill set, but do they tell the whole story of whether or not a candidate will ultimately be successful? We’ve been consulted on this area because the answer to that question isn’t always abundantly clear from one test, one brain-teaser or even one project alone.

Above all, when companies and candidates alike are fed a steady stream of more complete and insightful information, they can make more intelligent decisions about a possible next step that impacts their respective futures for years to come. Thanks to the depth of our knowledge of many companies in the fields of technology and financial trading, Roy Talman has been an exceptional facilitator of relationships on both sides of the table for over 30 years.

Speaking of next steps, let’s talk about how we can help you further your own process today.