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Psychometric Tests Decoded

What numerical, verbal, abstract, situational-judgement, and personality tests actually measure — and how to prepare honestly.

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01 Introduction

> *Psychometrics are not a measure of who you are. They are a measure of how you perform under specific kinds of artificial pressure. Both are skills; both can be trained.*

Aptitude and personality tests sit between application and interview at most large employers worldwide. Pass them and you're invited to the interview. Fail them and the most polished CV in the world doesn't save you.

Most candidates approach these tests with one of two false beliefs. The first: "I'm smart, I don't need to prepare." The second: "I'm not smart enough, no point preparing." Both are wrong. The tests measure performance under specific kinds of artificial pressure, and that performance is highly trainable — typically 0.5 to 1 standard deviation of improvement with two weeks of structured practice.

This guide walks through the five test types you'll encounter at almost every formal-sector employer worldwide and gives you a preparation system that works.

01 Numerical reasoning

Not a maths test. A reading-and-extraction-under-time-pressure test.

Format: a chart, table, or paragraph with numbers. A question. You compute the answer. 60-90 seconds per question. 18-25 questions in 18-25 minutes.

What it measures: not your maths capability. It measures your ability to read a question carefully, extract the right numbers, and apply two or three operations under time pressure without making a careless error.

Three highest-leverage habits:

1. **Build reading speed before maths speed.** Most candidates lose questions not because the maths is hard but because they re-read the chart twice.
2. **Memorise common percentage equivalents.** 10% = X/10, 20% = X/5, 25% = X/4, 33% = X/3, 50% = X/2, 75% = 3X/4, 12.5% = X/8. Cuts 5-10 seconds per question.
3. **Estimate before calculating.** If the rough estimate eliminates 3 of 5 multiple-choice answers, you don't need the precise calculation.

02 Verbal reasoning

A discipline test, not a comprehension test.

Format: a passage of text. A statement. You answer "True", "False", or "Cannot say" based *only on the passage*. 45-75 seconds per question. 16-22 questions.

What it measures: your discipline to answer only what the passage explicitly supports, regardless of what you think you know about the topic. The "Cannot say" option is the trap most candidates fall into — they answer "True" or "False" based on outside knowledge.

The default rule: if you cannot find the supporting sentence in the passage, the answer is "Cannot say". When in doubt, "Cannot say" is correct more often than candidates expect.

PRACTICE RULE

Read the statement first, then scan the passage for it. This reverses the natural reading order but doubles your speed and improves accuracy. The passage is data; the statement is the query.

03 Abstract / diagrammatic reasoning

Pattern recognition, ruthlessly trainable.

Format: a sequence of shapes following a pattern. You pick the next shape, the odd one out, or the rule that governs the transformation. 45-60 seconds per question. 18-24 questions.

What it measures: pattern-recognition speed. Closer to "raw IQ" than the others, but still highly trainable.

Most abstract sequences use one of five transformation types. Memorise these and you'll spot the pattern in 5-10 seconds instead of 30-40:

1. Rotation — shape spins by a fixed angle
2. Mirror flip — horizontal or vertical reflection
3. Colour or fill change — black, white, striped, dotted
4. Count change — number of elements increases, decreases, or follows a series
5. Shape addition or removal — elements added or removed in sequence

Train yourself to scan for which of the five is at play, then look at the second sequence to confirm.

04 Situational judgement (SJT)

A competency-framework alignment test, not an ethics test.

Format: a workplace scenario, four possible responses. You rank them, or pick best/worst, or rate each. Usually untimed but with a soft cap.

What it measures: not your "judgement" in any abstract sense. It measures whether your responses align with **the competency framework the employer has chosen**. The "right" answer at one bank can be the "wrong" answer at another bank for the same scenario.

The single highest-leverage preparation step: **read the employer's published competency framework before the test**. Most large employers publish leadership behaviours on their careers page or in their annual report. The "right" SJT answer is almost always the one that aligns with their published framework.

05 Personality and Big Five tests

Don't game them. Just be aware of the shape.

Format: 50-200 statements. You rate agreement on a 5- or 7-point scale. Usually untimed, often forced-choice (rank statements rather than rate them).

What it measures: where you sit on the Big Five dimensions — Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism — plus role-specific scales (resilience, achievement drive, customer focus, etc.).

The mistake candidates make: trying to "answer like a leader" or "answer like a high performer". Modern personality assessments include lie-detection and consistency scales that flag exactly this. Inconsistent answers across the test are scored as a red flag, often eliminating the candidate from consideration.

The right approach: answer honestly, but with **self-aware framing**. If a statement says "I prefer to work alone", and you'd rate yourself 4/5, but the role is heavily collaborative, it's fine to rate 3/5 — you do work in teams sometimes — without flipping to 1/5. Honest within a defensible range.

> ★ **DIAGNOSTIC**
>
> If you take a Big Five test before applying and get a result that surprises you, that's a useful signal regardless of the application. Self-knowledge before high-stakes interviews compounds. Test yourself first; understand your shape before someone else assesses it.

06 The norm-referenced scoring trick

Why your raw score doesn't matter.

One thing most candidates don't know: aptitude tests at major employers are almost always **norm-referenced**. Your score is compared against a reference group — usually graduates from the same year, sometimes prior-year applicants — and reported as a percentile, not a raw count.

A raw score of 14/20 might be the 78th percentile against the previous year's applicant pool. The recruiter doesn't see "14/20"; they see "78th percentile" and apply their cut-off (typically the 50th to 70th percentile).

Two implications:

1. You're competing against the cohort, not against the test. The test getting "easier" doesn't help if everyone else also finds it easier.
2. The cut-off is set by the recruiter. At the most competitive employers, the cut-off is around the 70th percentile of the applicant pool — meaning you have to be better than 70% of other candidates, which is the actual practical target.

08 Regional variants

Where the universal pattern shifts by market.

EU

European Union

GDPR Art. 22 limits fully automated decisions. Most large EU employers run psychometric tests but flag results for human review before rejection. You can request the test logic and your raw score under data subject rights.

US

United States

EEOC scrutiny on adverse impact means most large US employers have moved away from cognitive ability tests for non-technical roles. Personality and SJT remain common; cognitive tests survived for engineering and finance.

UK

United Kingdom

BPS-registered psychometricians required for full administration at most employers. Civil Service Fast Stream uses Cubiks Logiks + verbal + numerical + SJT — the most well-documented public test.

AFRICA

African corporate hiring

Banks and telcos use SHL, Talent Q, and homegrown systems. Big Four use SHL Verify globally. Norm tables are typically built from prior local applicants, so practice against generic "global" tests is less predictive than practice against the specific vendor.

IN

India — IT services and consulting

Aptitude tests heavily standardised. Wipro, Infosys, TCS use AMCAT; product companies use HackerRank, Codility. Engineering aptitude prep market is huge and well-documented.

JP

Japan

SPI test (Synthetic Personality Inventory) is near-universal at large Japanese firms. Has a distinctive format and timing pattern; Japanese-specific prep books available locally.

Ready to put this into practice?

The test is unfair in the same way the seven-second CV scan is unfair. The compensating discipline is to take it seriously enough to prepare for the format. Practise on a system that mirrors what you'll actually face.

MJC Assess

Same item formats real employers use, in real time pressure, with norm tables built from genuine applicant pools. Reports your percentile, not just your raw count. Pay-per-use.

myjobconcierge.com/ai-tools/aptitude-test-prep/

AI Career Coach

For SJT prep specifically: walk through a scenario with the coach, see how it would be scored against different employer frameworks.

myjobconcierge.com/ai-tools/career-coaching/

CV Gap Filler

Strong CV → through to test → through to interview. The funnel is sequential.

myjobconcierge.com/ai-tools/cv-diagnostics/

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