

KEYWORDS:

August 20, 2001

NEWS & ANALYSIS

Headlines
 Money & Markets
 Tech & Telecom
 Media & Marketing
 Metrics & Stats
 Policy & Politics
Careers
 Lifestyle
 Opinion
 International

SEARCH

[advanced search](#)**SERVICES**

Company Index
 Newsletters
 Conferences
 Wireless
 My Account

PRINT EDITION[Read the Magazine](#)[Home](#) > [Careers](#) > [Article](#)

THE INDUSTRY STANDARD MAGAZINE

Want a New Job? The Shrink Will See You First

By *Linda Heuman*
 Issue Date: Oct 02 2000

Tech writing candidate finds out that personality really does go a long way.

I am a technical writer with several years of industry experience working for leading Silicon Valley companies. I am looking for a job. Recently, a promising East Coast high-tech company asked me to come in for an interview. My curiosity about the particular position had been piqued by their job listing on the internet: "Technical Writer. Salary: up to 120,000K." This was the highest salary I had seen for a writer in this part of the country. They had my attention.

The company asked me to do a preliminary interview, which I was informed would be a logic test. I was never fond of tests, and I took plenty during my Stanford years. I was hardly eager to sharpen my pencil.

I was met at the receptionist's desk by a young, bouncy recruiter. He ushered me into a conference room which was empty except for a huge desk and a telephone. He handed me two papers to fill out and left the room.

I looked around me, uncertain when the logic test would begin. I had an uncanny sense of being watched... In my hands I had the two forms. The first was easy: name, address, and the rest. The second was more perplexing. There were two exercises, one on the front side and one on the back. Perhaps this was the logic test.

The first exercise was to describe how I see myself. I was given a list of several dozen adjectives and told to check the ones that applied to me. Now, confronted with a list of flattering and unflattering words, I did what any logical interviewee would do: I checked all the positive words: "Popular?" Sure, why not? "Fashionable?" Well, I think so. "Outstanding? Bold? Motivated..." You got it! With eyebrows furrowed, I chewed on the end of my pencil and worked my way down the list. "Fearful?" Who me? Naa. "Cynical? Messy?" You've got to be

RELATED CONTENT

- [Articles](#) (9)
- [Column Archives](#) (3)
- [Topics](#) (1)
- [Insights](#) (1)

[Printer-friendly version](#)[Email to a friend](#)

Write the author:

- [Linda Heuman](#)

[Subscribe to **The Industry Standard**](#)

Want a New Job? The Shrink Will See You First

Tech writing candidate finds out that personality really does go a long way.

By Linda Heuman

I am a technical writer with several years of industry experience working for leading Silicon Valley companies. I am looking for a job. Recently, a promising East Coast high-tech company asked me to come in for an interview. My curiosity about the particular position had been piqued by their job listing on the Internet: "Technical Writer. Salary: up to 120,000K." This was the highest salary I had seen for a writer in this part of the country. They had my attention.

The company asked me to do a preliminary interview, which I was informed would be a logic test. I was never fond of tests, and I took plenty during my Stanford years. I was hardly eager to sharpen my pencil.

I was met at the receptionist's desk by a young, bouncy recruiter. He ushered me into a conference room, which was empty except for a huge desk and a telephone. He handed me two papers to fill out and left the room.

I looked around me, uncertain when the logic test would begin. I had an uncanny sense of being watched... In my hands I had the two forms. The first was easy: name, address, and the rest. The second was more perplexing. There were two exercises, one on the front side and one on the back. Perhaps this was the logic test.

The first exercise was to describe how I see myself. I was given a list of several dozen adjectives and told to check the ones that applied to me. Now, confronted with a list of flattering and unflattering words, I did what any logical interviewee would do: I checked all the positive words: "Popular?" Sure, why not? "Fashionable?" Well, I think so. "Outstanding? Bold? Motivated..." You got it! With eyebrows furrowed, I chewed on the end of my pencil and worked my way down the list. "Fearful?" Who me? Naa. "Cynical? Messy?" You've got to be kidding.

In the second exercise I was given the same list and asked to check the adjectives that best described how I thought others wanted me to be. By this time I was getting a bit fed up. This whole game seemed rather silly. So, again I was entirely logical. I decided that, for any adjective, I could imagine a situation in which others would want me to be that way. So I checked all the words. Let's see what they do with that, I thought.

The recruiter returned to the room and began to give his interviewer spiel. I interrupted him. "Before we start, I'd like to ask *you* a few questions."

He shifted in his seat. "OK."

"This test--what's the point? Why do you give it? What do you hope to accomplish?"

"Well, we feed it into the computer and the computer tells us what the applicant's strengths and weaknesses are, what kind of person they are and if they are going to be successful at the company in the job they are applying for," he answered.

"Now, I have industry experience over 14 years and a degree from a prestigious university," I said. "What do you hope to find out from this test that my resume doesn't already reveal?"

"Oh, you can tell a lot about a candidate from this test. Our managers also use these results as a guide to manage candidates once they become employees."

I was getting flustered. "You have to understand, as a prospective employee, this is the first impression I have of your company. It's a strange thing. In all my years of consulting and working in the industry, I've never been asked to take a personality test. Other companies get this information by talking to applicants or checking references."

"Oh other companies give this test too," he smiled.

Turns out that that was only a preliminary test, a personality test. The real logic test was yet to come. The recruiter gave me the test booklet and instructions and left me alone for an hour in the room.

Meanwhile the computer crunched on my checkmarks.

The logic test was a rigorous exam, consisting of twenty multiple-choice questions. It assumed an advanced and working understanding of mathematical and programming concepts such as functions, arrays, and Booleans. It was an odd test to give a writer.

I slogged my way slowly through it. The phone rang. Is this part of my test? I answered it. "Hello?" A strangely familiar voice (was it the recruiter?) asked for Anne. "Wrong number, " I replied politely. (Did I pass?)

When I had finished the logic test, the recruiter and I reconvened. He took out a chart and a hefty manual he would use to interpret it. He showed me my chart: three graphs that purported to capture the essence of me. There I was: three jagged lines against a grid. Somehow, mysteriously, my personality was captured in these cryptic peaks and valleys.

"The first thing I can tell you," he said, opening his reference manual and pointing to one of several numbers on my chart, "is that you scored extremely high on this one particular rating."

"Huh?" (Perhaps that was the BS rating?) I peered over his shoulder and followed his finger.

"Like, I'm a 72--that's about average. You're 169. That's like a CEO." His eyes had new respect.

"Hmmm, I like this test." I was warming. "Tell me more."

"It means in one day's work you can accomplish what takes most people a week. Then you can go home, do projects for hours, play with the kids for hours, and stay up half the night reading..."

"I see..." I said, flattered but doubtful.

"It's an intensity rating," he said meaningfully. "You're off the chart!"

I still had no idea what rating he was talking about. He went on to tell me I was "altruistic" and "service oriented" as well as "contentious," "detail-oriented," and a "team player." By now I was wondering if this were a personality test or a horoscope.

Within about 20 minutes, the jagged hieroglyphs had been fully deciphered.

"That's really some test," I conceded at last.

"Yes." The recruiter drew himself up confidently. "It gives us a way to predict how prospective employees will do. And it really works. We have almost no turnover at the company."

I silently wondered if the six-figure salaries had more to do with it. "Well, it is a structured system for classifying people into groups on the basis of certain correspondences and using that as a predictor of the future..." I began to say.

"Exactly!" he confirmed, convinced now he had won me over.

"...like astrology, " I continued.

All the puff went out of his sails.

"Oh, not at ALL! This is SCIENTIFIC! Astrology is just fortune telling."

At the end of the interview, I suggested to the recruiter that giving logic tests to writers is perhaps not the most logical means to select qualified personnel. After all, good writers, even technical ones, are distinguished primarily not by their mathematical expertise, but by their communication skills. He did admit that the company had been having a problem recruiting for the writing department. All the writers seemed to be failing the test. They hadn't been able to hire a writer in over a year.

I was to be no exception. Upon my return home, I received an email from the recruiter informing me that I had only answered 15 out of the 20 questions on the logic test correctly. "Although relatively high," he conceded, this was not a passing score. Even my CEO rating on the personality test couldn't save my job prospects.

At my next interview what should I expect, palm reading?