

## 18 Continuing professional development

With 500 applicants competing for a dozen places EMB turned to psychological profiling to select the candidates with the best mix of skills and personality. **Howard Lent** explains

# Playing mind games is just the job for top candidates

**T**here is something in the name 'insurance actuaries' which is redolent of Dickens and of inky clerks perched on high wooden stools. All nonsense of course.

In the field of recruitment, for example, Surrey-based consultancy EMB is attempting to break new ground for the industry in using psychologically profiling for graduate applicants.

Until recently, the firm had followed the traditional approach and selected its graduates on the basis of CV and interview alone. But faced with over 500 applicants for a dozen places, HR manager Vicky Webb wanted to get a more comprehensive picture of the people she might be hiring.

"We put great value in getting the right individuals with the best mix of personality, drive and motivation. It was important to improve the quality and consistency of applicants; to take people some of whom

So, what do the graduates think of this approach to recruiting? John Coe joined EMB last year after finishing his degree in chemistry and maths at Southampton, and is still working towards his PhD.

"The Kaisen interview was part of a day-long assessment. There was about an hour of quite probing questions on my past, going right back to childhood situations and how I dealt with conflict at school," says Coe.

Initially, Coe says he found some of the questions off-putting and even intrusive. "But there was nothing I didn't want to answer and I realised it was meant to find out how I'd handle work pressures here; how I'd fit in."

The interview was followed by feedback, which identified Coe's strengths and potential weaknesses. "In general I thought their analysis was spot on and gave me stuff to work on. It was unusual but a refreshing experience."



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**John Coe, EMB graduate**

had the potential to go on to become partners."

EMB used business psychologists Kaisen Consulting to conduct in-depth interviews and psychometric testing on short-listed graduates.

"We were looking for patterns of behaviour, the themes that run through their lives, so we

can predict how they are likely to perform in the future," says Kim Miller of Kaisen.

"It wasn't only a question of discovering their skill-shortages, we needed to know about their activities at university, what motivated them, what their emotional profile was and how they related to people."

The psychological appraisals were part of

what Vicky Webb calls EMB's 'holistic' approach to selecting its graduate trainees. Candidates were also put through separate technical and HR interviews in a rigorous process of assessment.

"We often have a sense of an applicant's character and suitability" says Webb. "But the psychologists give this shape and a rationale."

Kaisen measured candidates' performance against the psychological skills of senior managers, and against EMB's required attitudes to work.

"The interview focused on the influences that had shaped the motivation of the graduate, and on the values that were developed in the course of their upbringing," says Kaisen's Heidi Hunter who ran the psychological assessment sessions.

"The questions were unlike anything I'd been asked at the five or six other firms I applied to," says 22-year-old new recruit Matthew Fothergill.

"They wanted to know why I'd chosen my LSE course, what activities I enjoyed, what my motivation was, who had influenced me most - and even who I was most like, my mother or my father. They were really quite probing questions. But I realise it was to get a rounded picture of me and see if I was from a stable background."

Vicki Webb makes no apology for the rigour of the process. EMB has found that Kaisen's analyses has proved largely accurate: "As a result of our psychological innovations in recruitment I feel a lot more confident with candidate selection." **IT**

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