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TECH TESTS

VALUABLE INTERVIEW TOOL OR TALENT DETERRENT

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Introduction

With remote working forces looking like the new norm for most tech companies I work with across the Northwest, a lot of companies are still working out an effective way to test the capability of developers at the interview stage whilst fully remote.

22% of the clients I work with and other companies' process' I am familiar with offer a tech test as part of an interview. This will usually involve the candidate going away for 2, 3, 4, sometimes 5+ hours and complete a coding kata, problem solving exercise, multiple choice question, build part of a solution etc.

Of the 22% of clients that have a tech test, I took an average of the last 100 people who went through the process:

19% completed the tech test if it was part of the initial screening process or introduced after a short conversation with the business.

57% completed the tech test if it was introduced as a final stage of the interview.

So, are they an accurate way though of truly gauging the ability of a senior developer who has been doing their job for years? Or are they immediately excluding and deterring really exceptional candidates?

The following is a review of tech tests based on feedback from real developers and business leaders in my network, so you can decide if tech tests are really the best way to analyse and interview candidates.




Benefits

When done correctly technical tests can be a great way of measuring somebody's practical skills rather than relying on conventional indicators of talent such as certification, degrees, job experiences and qualifications. This could be a way of improving diversity by removing the barriers of required certifications and university degrees, and could open up the door to exceptional candidates who are self-taught, or chose a non-traditional path into tech.

Businesses often use technical tests as an easy way to filter out less capable candidates and to assess candidates based on quantifiable results, which can offer a good comparison of applicants due to its standardised nature.


If positioned and designed well, it can provide an equal opportunity for all candidates to perform based on job related tasks, which can be a really good indicator, especially for hands-on coding roles, for example.

What our respondents think:




"Some bad executions of tech tests mean they tarnish the approach for everyone"

James, CTO



"My personal opinion is that tech tests can be a useful indicator if they show you how someone works, how they approach a problem, which things they're thinking about while solving them, how they structure their code, whether they test, and how they communicate with others"

Nat, Lead Software Developer



"We developed a tech test to find the ways of working, the level of experience, good/bad practices. I believe we fed back on every one of them in a constructive way. We also worked a system of screening for them, the inexperienced members of the team looked first, commented and fed back. This worked really well for us."

Michael, Director

Disadvantages

In the survey I conducted, there seemed to be an overwhelming negative opinion of technical tests. From that I can deduce that technical tests can massively impact and harm the candidate journey, resulting in the potential loss of great candidates and a slower hiring time.

Despite the argument of tech tests being an objective assessment of an individual's ability there is a well-supported point of view that they actually place too much focus on a technical pass or fail, and therefore neglect hiring on aptitude and competencies. If a test is too rigid, you can alienate candidates who won't be able to display their full ability, as suggested by Senior Developer, Marijn.

There's also the argument that some of the most capable and intelligent developers, decision makers, and leaders, don't test well. The emphasis on this one pass or fail, means that it only takes a headache or sudden illness, a bad night's sleep, a family emergency, or a connection issue to fail. This pass or fail approach may result in a good candidate being turned away from the role as the result of a single assessment.

Lengthy tests (more than two hours) are a big commitment for candidates and naturally, there is a huge reluctance from candidates to invest lots of time and effort with no guarantee of another stage.

Time consuming tests are especially problematic if a developer is applying for multiple roles with companies who are all asking for tech tests, or for someone still in another role, or someone with other commitments (family or work related). Therefore, you may be already neglecting diverse and exceptional candidates due to time pressures and constraints.

What our respondents think:

"Unless it was a job or company I really wanted to work for if I was presented with a multi-hour test I would likely take myself out of the running at that point"

Stuart, Software Developer

"Do you really think that anyone will spend the time and provide production grade code, for a technical test?"

Andrei, Senior Developer

"I have completed 3 Kata tests this year, and I don't feel that the feedback on them reflected the effort I put in, and in turn, made me turn down the role because of the feedback I received."

Ian, Senior Lead Developer

"Even after selecting using this approach, not all candidates took well to the team so there was still something missing about the culture and ways of working that a tech test can't provide."

Michael, Director

Considerations

Businesses that do opt for technical tests have several things to consider to ensure that the test is practical, relevant, accessible, and worthwhile. One of the biggest things to keep in mind is maintaining a good candidate journey and experience. Here is a list of what you should be questioning when organising technical tests.

At what stage is the tech test?

An early stage tech test is likely to deter candidates from pursuing the job, especially if the technical test is the first stage. At this point candidates are the least invested in your business, and if they feel like they are expected to do hours of work for a company who they haven't met or conversed with, they are likely to drop out. A final stage tech test is more likely to have a higher completion rate, because the chances of success and receiving an offer is higher, and therefore the potential return on their effort is greater.

How long is the test?

Anything above 1-2 hours is more of a deterrent and can show a lack of consideration for the candidate, who may have family, health, or other work commitments. Candidates who are still working in their current position or who have other commitments will struggle to dedicate more than a couple of hours to a test from which they might gain nothing. It's much better to be reasonable with the suggested time for task completion.

Is the test relevant to the role?

The technical test should be specific to the role you have advertised, otherwise it isn't valuable. Testing someone on generic skills that have little to no relevance to the job will not give an accurate assessment of the quality of the candidate in relation to the role.

Are you timing the test?

Rather than timing the test, it is often better to suggest a time frame to the developer. This provides flexibility and removes added, unnecessary pressure and stress.

Would you honestly be happy to do the test?

Put yourself in the shoes of the candidate and consider how happy you would be to complete the set test.

Summary

There is a clear divide between candidates and employers views on tech tests from my survey. From a candidate perspective, tech tests seems to be perceived more negatively and can definitely act as a deterrent if it is not created, presented, and delivered in the correct way.

To avoid deterring exceptional candidates, who may just have time constraints due to current employment, health, or family, businesses should only use technical tests if they feel like it is absolutely necessary.

If this is the case, the test should take no more than two hours maximum, and should have a brief that is specific, measurable, relevant to the role, and realistic in the given time frame. Considerations should also be made for those with visual impairments or other disabilities where possible to ensure all applicants have equal opportunity.

Testing is a great way to find people who are good at completing tests, and a really poor way of introducing your company to people you want to like your company.

Steve, Technical Project Manager

Candidates do continue to perceive tests, from their side, as time consuming and unsociable ways of testing ability, and many admit to dropping out of the process if faced with a lengthy test. Glyn suggests that they would "rather someone ask me some questions and then challenge or discuss my answers".

Clients do seem to favour tech tests as time savers, and if done well, technical tests can carry merit in terms of objective assessment, standardised approach, and filtering out inappropriate candidates. To achieve this businesses, need to review their tech test process and make it as optimal for use as possible. Even positioning it something other than a test might appeal more to people who have a fear of testing. Really though, businesses really need to question the necessity of the tech tests.

The use of tech tests seemingly depends on the values of a company and whether they are looking to hire on aptitude or attitude primary.

"If the attitude is right, the rest can be coached."

Michael, Director

For help building your tech teams, or for more information on the validity of tech tests, please get in touch for a confidential chat: stephen.ashbee@maxwellbond.co.uk.

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