Higher Validity and Less Adverse Impact!
Using “Executive Attention” to Measure Cognitive Ability

Executive Summary

The primary purpose of the present research is to investigate the criterion-related validity and adverse impact potential characteristics associated with more recent measures of cognitive ability from the field of cognitive psychology and neuropsychology reflecting a distinct construct called executive attention. Cognitive ability has long occupied a central role in the prediction of employee performance. Researchers assert that it is essential for international competitiveness and even public safety that organizations select employees on the basis of cognitive ability for reasons of high criterion-related validity with a host of outcomes including job performance. Unfortunately, along with their superior validity coefficients, tests of cognitive ability show large score differences across ethnic groups. This pattern of findings has left practitioners in a position of dealing with a trade-off decision among predictors of varying validity and adverse impact potential. According to Campion et al. (2001, p. 150), this trade-off decision “is a choice between a ‘rock and a hard place’ and may be the most perplexing problem facing the practice of personnel selection today.”

Executive attention (EA) represents the underlying mechanism responsible for the ability to manage the allocation of cognitive resources to ongoing processes (Engle, Tuholski, Laughlin, & Conway et al., 1999). Sometimes referred to as executive functioning or executive control functioning, executive attention is mainly located in the brain’s prefrontal cortex. It allows the brain to focus attention, ignore distractions, and flip between multiple pieces of information while problems solving.

A key attribute of EA is that, unlike many common cognitive ability tests that have been criticized for the inclusion of socioeconomic status-sensitive components influenced largely by educational history, measures of EA are relatively uninfluenced by learned knowledge (Kyllonen, 2002). Measures of EA are attention-based tasks that assess the ability to manage the allocation of cognitive resources to on-going simultaneously required mental operations. To the extent that subgroup differences observed with traditional measures of cognitive ability are partially attributable to socioeconomic status-driven differences in learning, education, or acculturation, we expect measures of EA to exhibit smaller group differences and result in reduced adverse impact.

Key Findings and Practical Implications

Key Findings:

• Across samples, EA tended to predict performance as well or better than the Wonderlic Personnel Test (WPT), with performance criteria including simulation games, managerial in-baskets, and supervisor ratings of job performance.
• The predictive advantage of EA relative to the WPT tended to increase as studies moved from the laboratory with undergraduate students to a concurrent validation study with employees of a large financial services firm and supervisor ratings of job performance.
• Across samples, EA tended to exhibit smaller race-based subgroup differences than the WPT.
• The smaller race-based subgroup differences associated with EA were most pronounced in the concurrent validation study with employees of a large financial services firm.
• Across samples and performance measures, EA tended to exhibit less race-based test bias than the WPT.
• EA exhibited no significant race-based test bias with regard to actual supervisor ratings of job performance across both samples with access to supervisor data.
**Practical Implications:**

- The most important practical implication of these findings is that EA measures may present a partial solution to the validity-adverse impact tradeoff that managers and HR professionals face with regard to using cognitive ability tests for selection. Our findings suggest that EA’s validity is at least as high as traditional measures of cognitive ability.

- Another key practical implication is that EA measures may help managers and HR professionals striving to simultaneously achieve and maintain a diverse workforce while making selection decisions that result in high-performing employees. To the extent EA measures exhibit smaller race-based subgroup differences than traditional cognitive ability measures, they may enable the identification of a larger and more diverse high potential applicant pool from which to select.

- Yet another key practical implication is that EA may represent an especially appropriate selection method for 21st century jobs that increasingly require multitasking. Multitasking has become an important job component for many workers, to the extent that almost every job requires some degree of multitasking, and EA measures may be particularly well suited to assessing the ability to perform in such contexts.

**REFERENCES**


**Want to get involved?**

- We’re looking for organizations willing to provide developmental funding in exchange for long-term usage.
- We’re looking for additional research sites.

**Contacts**

**Frank A. Bosco, Ph.D.**
Lewis College of Business
Marshall University
Office: GC 338 (S. Charleston)
Voice: 304-746-8961
boscof@marshall.edu
Web: www.frankbosco.com

**Barry R. Nathan, PhD**
President/Organizational Psychologist
Leader Business Coaching
633 Hastings Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15206
Voice: 412-901-2685
barry.nathan@LeaderBusinessCoaching.com
Web: www.LeaderBusinessCoaching.com

**David G. Allen, PhD**
Department of Management
Fogelman College of Business and Economics
University of Memphis
Memphis, TN 38152-3120
Voice: (901) 678-4729
dallen@memphis.edu
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Frank A. Bosco, Ph.D.
Barry R. Nathan, Ph.D.
David G. Allen, Ph.D., SPHR

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What is “Executive Attention” (not CEO attention span)

Executive attention (also referred to as executive functioning or executive control attention), is mainly located in the prefrontal cortex.

It allows the brain to:
• Focus attention,
• Ignore distractions
• Flip between multiple pieces of information
• All while problems solving.

From Neuropsychology

Prefrontal Cortex
Executive Attention
(“Best of the best of the best”)

MiB Example:
• Focus attention
• Ignore distractions
• Flip between multiple pieces of information
• All while problems solving
“So I’m thinking coverage; my coverage could go from being a slot safety to a zone, or to someone in the backfield or to someone on the other side of the field....

“It can go from all of that — pre-snap — to [instead] being pass rush. So now you’ve got to think, what’s the down and distance?” What have they run prior to [this]? What’s the stance, the alignments and the settings of the offensive line? What’s the running back looking at? What did you study in film? What’s the personnel?

“And all of that (Worilds snaps his finger) is split second.” ... You’ve got to make a decision. Not only are the other 10 guys on the field waiting on you to make a decision, the sideline is, the fans are, everybody in the world is...And, if you make the wrong decision, somebody knocks your head off.”

(From Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 12/17/2011)
Executive Attention: Definition

- Neuropsychological measure of mental ability
  - Ability to manage the allocation of cognitive resources to multiple simultaneous cognitive processes (i.e., “multitasking”)
    - (Engle et al., 1999)
  - Relatively uninfluenced by learned knowledge
- Traditional measures of mental ability
  - Performance in isolation (unlike modern work environment)
  - Heavily influenced by $g_C$ (likely source of ethnicity bias)
A Central Issue for HRM

- Mental ability is essential to employee selection
  - There “cannot be a debate” on this issue (Schmidt, 2002: 187)
  - $\rho = .65$ (Schmidt et al., 2008)
- However, mental ability tests $\rightarrow$ adverse impact
  - $d = 1.0$ (approx.)
  - Also, differential prediction likely exists
    - Slope and/or intercept bias (power issues; Aguinis et al., 2010)
- HR managers often choose between validity and adverse impact
  - “a choice between a ‘rock and a hard place’ and may be the most perplexing problem facing the practice of personnel selection today”
    - (Campion et al., 2001: 150)
Theoretical Framework of EA

- Baddeley’s theory of Working Memory

General Research Question

- Will executive attention predict performance as well as traditional measures of mental ability (i.e., Wonderlic), and also serve to remedy the adverse impact problem?

- Three studies were conducted (research funded by SHRM)
General Hypotheses (all studies)

- H1: EA will be positively related to performance.

- H2: EA will exhibit significantly smaller ethnic group differences than the Wonderlic Personnel Test.

- H3: EA will exhibit significantly smaller differential prediction values (slope and intercept bias) across ethnicities compared to the Wonderlic Personnel Test.
Study 1: Method

- **Participants**
  - 109 undergraduate management students
    - 59% male, 53% African-American

- **Measures**
  - **Criterion:**
    - Near Beer Game
  - **Predictors:**
    - Wonderlic Personnel Test
    - EA: Operation Span task
    - EA: Reading Span task
    - EA: Arrow Flanker task
    - EA: Antisaccade task
Study 2: Method

- **Participants**
  - 106 master’s and undergraduate management students
    - 53% male, 67% Caucasian

- **Measures**
  - **Criteria:**
    - Management in-basket
    - Supervisor ratings ($N = 33$)
      - Williams and Anderson (1991)
  - **Predictors:**
    - Wonderlic Personnel Test
    - EA: Operation Span task
    - EA: Reading Span task
    - EA: Arrow Flanker task
Study 3: Method

- **Participants**
  - 121 bank employees
    - 81% female, 57% African-American

- **Measures**
  - **Criteria:**
    - Simulation (Oliva & Sterman, 2001)
    - Supervisor ratings (Tsui et al., 1997)
  - **Predictors:**
    - Wonderlic Personnel Test
    - *EA: Operation Span task*
    - *EA: Reading Span task*
    - *EA: Arrow Flanker task*
Meta-analytic Results

- **Relationships with performance (studies 1-3)**
  - Wonderlic \( r = .28 \) (95%CI = .01/.54; \( k = 3; N = 265 \))
  - EA Comp \( r = .35 \) (95%CI = .20/.50; \( k = 3; N = 265 \))

- **Relationships with ethnicity (studies 1-3)**
  - Wonderlic \( d = 1.09 \) (95%CI = .87/1.35; \( k = 3; N = 309 \))
  - EA Comp \( d = .65 \) (95%CI = .54/.75; \( k = 3; N = 304 \))
Discussion

Key findings
- EA predicts performance as well as WPT
- EA shows significantly smaller subgroup differences
  - 40% reduction in adverse impact potential
Implications for Practice

Key managerial implications

- Select on the basis of mental ability while maintaining workplace diversity
- Select for wide range of jobs requiring on-the-job problem-solving with varying degrees of cognitive complexity
Implications for Theory and Research

- Implications for conceptualizing what “mental ability” means
- Implications for traditional, psychometric-based conceptualization of intelligence and cognitive ability
- Implications for understanding construct validity and mental ability
- Implications for training (and “world knowledge”)
- Links to job analysis (e.g., O*Net)
- Establish norms
- Implications for cross-cultural mental ability, independent of language
Future directions

- Replicate; reduce duration of tasks
  - Internet-based assessment
  - Job analysis development
  - Develop norms

- **Want to get involved?**
  - We’re looking for funding
  - We’re looking for additional research sites

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Web: www.frankbosco.com

Barry R. Nathan, PhD
President/Organizational Psychologist
Leader Business Coaching
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Voice: 412-901-2685
barry.nathan@LeaderBusinessCoaching.com
Web: www.LeaderBusinessCoaching.com