



## Situational judgment test research: Informing the debate on practical intelligence theory

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### Abstract

[Gottfredson, L.S. (2003). Dissecting practical intelligence theory: Its claims and evidence. *Intelligence*, 31, 343–397.] provided a detailed critique of Sternberg's [Sternberg, R.J., Fotsythe, G.B., Hedlund, J., Horvath, J.A., Wagner, R.K., Williams, W.M., Snook, S.A., Grigorenko, E.L. (2000). *Practical intelligence in everyday life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.] practical intelligence theory. The current paper seeks to supplement Gottfredson's extensive critique using research and practice in the situational judgment literature in industrial/organizational psychology to inform the debate concerning practical intelligence. This paper makes four major points. First, there is a research and practice tradition in personnel selection that has used the item type that Sternberg uses to assess what he calls tacit knowledge. This item type is called situational judgment in the personnel selection field. There is an extensive literature on situational judgment tests that can inform debate concerning practical intelligence. Second, we present evidence that situational judgment tests do not measure a general factor, whether labeled practical intelligence, or something else. Both the individual test items and the tests are factorially complex and measure multiple known constructs. Third, since the measures assess multiple constructs (*g* and personality), they are best viewed as measurement methods. Fourth, we compare the validity of the measures with *g* for the prediction of job performance and examine the incremental validity of situational judgment tests. We conclude that this research can help guide a revision to practical intelligence theory.

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## 1. Introduction

In their book, *Practical Intelligence in Everyday Life*, Sternberg, Forsythe, Hedlund, Horvath, Wagner, Williams, et al. (2000) make two broad assertions regarding the nature of practical or tacit intelligence. First, they claim that there exists a general factor of practical or tacit intelligence that is substantively distinct from *g*. Second, they claim that this new construct, practical intelligence, predicts success in various domains as well as or better than *g*. In this paper, we describe research on situational judgment tests that may inform debate on both of these issues.

## 2. Sources used for informing this debate

The purpose of this paper is to inform the debate on practical intelligence by drawing on research from industrial/organizational psychology, particularly personnel selection. This critique originates from several sources. First, there is the literature on the use and validity of *g* in personnel selection (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). A second source of literature for this paper is evidence on the validity of situational judgment tests (SJTs) (Chan & Schmitt, 2002; Clevenger, Pereira, Wiechmann, Schmitt, & Schmidt Harvey et al., 2001; McDaniel, Morgeson, Finnegan, Campion, & Braverman, 2001; McDaniel & Nguyen, 2001; McDaniel, Hartman, & Grubb, 2003; O'Connell, McDaniel, Grubb, Hartman, & Lawrence, 2002; Weekly & Jones, 1997, 1999). This research addresses the extent to which SJTs assess various constructs, and the extent to which SJTs predict job performance and provide incremental prediction over *g*.

## 3. Questions addressed in this critique

This paper seeks to answer several questions concerning the measurement of tacit knowledge and the use of SJTs: a) Is Sternberg's description of tacit knowledge tests the same as other measures? b) Is there any evidence of a general factor in situational judgment tests? c) Are SJTs correlated with *g* and, if so, are SJTs a construct measure or a measurement method? d) Is the validity of SJTs lower than the validity of *g* for predicting job performance? Each of these questions is addressed in turn.

### 3.1. *Is Sternberg's description of tacit knowledge tests the same as other measures?*

The Tacit Knowledge Inventory for Managers (TKIM) (Wagner & Sternberg, 1991) was offered as test to identify individuals whose tacit knowledge indicates the potential for successful performance in managerial or executive careers. Although not labeled as a situational judgment test, the similarities between SJTs and the TKIM are clearly shown in the examples given below. The first item is an example of a situational judgment test in which a scenario is described and the respondent must identify an appropriate response from a list of alternatives or rate the effectiveness of each alternative. The item is from an Army situational judgment test and is illustrative of SJTs (Guilford & Lacey, 1947, page 131, as cited in Northrop, 1989).

A man on a very urgent mission during battle finds he must cross a stream about 40 ft wide. A blizzard has been blowing and the stream has frozen over. However, because of the snow, he does not know

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