

Psychometrics

Without prejudice

BERLIN

A new way of making personality tests useful

AROUND half of the companies that recruit graduates use some form of testing to identify the ones they wish to employ. A small industry has sprung up to advise job-hunters on how to complete these assessments, which include psychological tests. But the days of trying to guess the employer's desired answers could soon be over. Psychologists have developed a system that translates a person's gut instincts into a rich picture of personality. Crucially, they can now process this information in a meaningful way.

Modern personality tests date from 1950s America, when George Kelly invented his "personal construct" theory. His work was designed to elicit personal information by asking people open questions about themselves that could not be interpreted as having right or wrong answers. For example, asking a person whether he considers himself to have leadership skills will generally produce the response that he possesses them in abundance. But asking him how he considers himself to be different from his boss might garner more information: he is innovative, say, whereas his boss is traditional. As none of the questions are prejudicial, the temptation to provide anything other than honest answers is removed. And the descriptive terms are introduced by the person being tested rather than the ques-

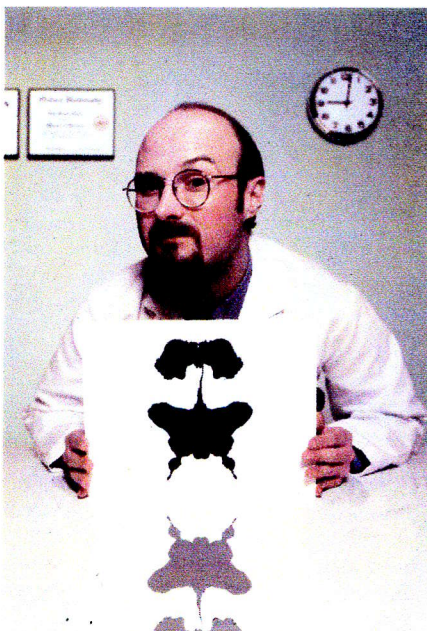
tioner, allowing new and more personal information to be introduced.

Researchers can use this information to create complex grids and webs that map an individual's personality and that can be used to compare it with others'. By asking a person's opinion of colleagues, the company he works for and where he sees himself in five years' time, a rich image of the person can be created. But the picture grows rapidly more complicated as more questions are asked, making detailed assessment and comparison difficult.

A team at the Chemnitz University of Technology in Germany, led by Matthias Rosenberger, has transformed the usefulness of the test by feeding its results into high-capacity computers. When many so-called "personal cognitive dimensions" are entered, computer software generates

three-dimensional grids that represent the answers. These can be manipulated and explored. The software allows researchers to compare grids from different people to see who has relatively similar personalities and may get on well and who may be quite different and experience constructive friction with one another. The results will be presented to a conference at the end of November.

Two German companies are already using the system. One, a tools company, is employing it to select members of its own staff and some from another company to take part in a joint project. A second firm is profiling its entire staff before restructuring, to find out who will best fit where. People in human-resources departments around the world will be curious to see how well the system works in practice. ■



See anything suspicious?