

Work Personality Index® tool keeps airlines in South Africa flying high

It's not easy to find the kind of person who will fly an airplane into a war-torn region. But with some help from assessment tools, the National Airways Corporation based in South Africa is not only finding the right pilots for the job, but also keeping them.

"The pilots these companies look for are a different species," says Altharine Visagie, a psychometrist in independent practice who works with NAC. "Some of them spend a long time away from family, sometimes flying into war zones."

Visagie also works with two other regional airlines, Safair and Airlink. She started out in 2008 doing assessments with ground crews at Airlink, then expanded to help all three companies select flight attendants and pilots. She now also works with revenue analysts, operations and technical staff, and newly appointed managers. She says each company has its own environment and challenges that call for different types of people, so she tailors her assessment work to get the right people for each particular environment.

"Most applicants are already pilots with lots of experience," she explains. "The goal is to select the ones who will fit with the company—who have the right personality and can work with the company's aircraft."

Another challenge is making sure the right people get off the ground in a different way: as leaders. "It costs the companies a lot of money to implement intervention programs when people underperform or do not have necessary skills or characteristics for the specific position," Visagie says. "Do they have the personality to delegate, the right leadership skills? Some pilots can take command positions, but others are better suited to be co-pilots."

To help her clients meet these challenges, Visagie uses the Work Personality Index® (WPI) tools, including the Job Match Report for selecting pilots and cabin attendants. She also uses the Select Report for managerial staff, as well as any other employees who do not have Work Personality Index profiles created.

Visagie says the reports are part of a battery of assessments used to generate a profile of preferences and leadership skills. She notes that the Work Personality Index assessment accurately measures the essential personality characteristics needed for successful performance, and that the WPI job match profile is flexible enough to suit

each company's needs. "We have somewhat different WPI profiles for each company."

So what does it take to fit the desired profile for pilots? "Conscientiousness, rule following, attention to detail, dependability, and persistence of concentration. Pilots who can make safety checks and keep vigilant despite boredom would be more likely to catch any abnormalities before they turn into major disasters. Being slow to anger is important, as are good communication skills and stress tolerance," Visagie says.

Pilots are assessed before they are promoted, which can lead to them being sent to leadership development programs—or sometimes to not being promoted. But Visagie stresses that the profile works both ways, benefiting the potential employee as much as the employer. "This is about the lives of people, not just the performance of the organization."

In fact, she says, the Work Personality Index® assessment can even be useful for pilots who don't meet the profile. "Their ultimate goal is to fly for a commercial airline, but not all are capable. The WPI helps make recommendations as far as strengths and weaknesses. So the assessment can be a self-study program for further development."

She also notes that the WPI tools resist attempts to fudge results. "Applicants who tend to avoid the extremes of 'strongly agree'

WHAT THE WPI MEASURES

ENERGY AND DRIVE	Ambition Initiative Energy	Leadership Flexibility
WORK STYLE	Persistence Attention to Detail	Rule Following Dependability
WORKING WITH OTHERS	Teamwork Concern for Others	Outgoing Democratic
PROBLEM SOLVING STYLE	Innovation	Analytical Thinking
DEALING WITH PRESSURE AND STRESS	Self-Control	Stress Tolerance

and 'strongly disagree' produce average scores that don't indicate suitability for these unique jobs."

That uniqueness comes through in the surprising success story Visagie shares—a participant who asked to be put back in their old role after being promoted. "This person was an excellent employee but simply not a manager. And for this person, finding that out through the WPI was the best thing for them and for the company."

SEAN TOWNSEND

Altharine Visagie is a psychometrist in private practice and part-time lecturer at Midrand Graduate Institute (MGI). Her primary areas of lecturing are research methodology, and assessment and evaluation. She joined MGI in 2005 and started her own private practice in 2003. Altharine is a registered member of the Health Professions Council of South Africa and the Psychological Society of South Africa. She holds a BA in psychology, industrial psychology and communications, and an honours degree in psychology.