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Do you have what it takes to be an FBI agent? A, B, C, D or E

04/07/2009 01:00 AM EDT

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Columbia News Service

How often are your library books overdue?

- A. Always
- B. Often
- C. Rarely
- D. Never
- E. I never take books out of the library

The FBI's hiring Web site asks seemingly random questions.

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In post-9/11 America, where the government's daily threat level hovers at significant risk of terrorist attacks, the FBI wants to know: To what extent have you enjoyed being given a surprise party?

- A. Not at all.
- B. To a slight extent.
- C. To a moderate extent.
- D. To a great extent.

E. I have never been given a surprise party.

If you're the poor guy from answer "E" standing alone on your seventh birthday with a tear rolling down your cheek, don't despair — there may be a spot for you with the FBI.

The FBI is on a hiring blitz, looking to recruit 850 new special agents and 2,100 other staff members by October. That's good news for those Americans hoping to weather the economic tsunami in a recession-proof federal job. But before they can start busting the mob or indicting a governor, special agent-wannabes first have to pass a test called a "biodata inventory" that asks them more about memories than marksmanship. It's a test where the right answers are almost impossible to figure out.

Biodata inventories are becoming a common hiring tool throughout the federal government and in private companies such as Procter & Gamble, which began using them in 2002, and Google, which instituted the practice in 2006. They are based on the idea that what you did yesterday foretells what you'll do tomorrow.

"Anything that someone has done in the past is game for predicting what they will do in the future," said Donald Currier, an industrial psychologist who has created inventories of biodata, short for biographical data.

Companies are reluctant to give information about these tests. Procter & Gamble did not return calls in time for this story. Google declined to comment, but the company told The New York Times in 2007 that it had instituted the tests to find well-rounded candidates, not just those with the best GPA.

"With traditional hiring methods, we were worried we will overlook some of the best candidates," Laszlo Block, Google vice president of people operations, told the Times.

Questions are meant to reveal information about events, emotions and actions from a test-taker's life — everything from games you played as a kid to how you completed a college project. Sample questions for the FBI's exam listed on its Web site include the surprise party example, along with "How did you typically prepare for final exams in college?" and "How often are your library books overdue?"

Biodata inventories don't stand alone in the FBI's hiring process. They're one of three tests by which special agent applicants are judged in the first round of the written exams. The other tests measure reasoning assessments and situational judgment, according to an FBI spokesperson.

Employers such as the FBI use the tests as a way to filter new hires by comparing the answers from applicants with those of their best current workers. The theory is that people whose results most closely match those of ideal current employees best fit the job and the culture of the workplace.

Studies have shown that high-performing employees share not only personality traits, but even past experiences.

In World War II, when most psychologists say that biodata testing began, the Air Force discovered that its best fighter pilots had built and flown their own model planes as boys and it used that information to recruit. About 10 years later, a study of sales clerks at a large department store showed that the best sales people were widowed women between 35 and 54 years old, lived in a boarding house, had a high school education, at least five years' sales experience, had between one and three dependents, stood between 4-foot-11 inches and 5-foot-2 inches tall, and weighed more than 160 pounds.

There are two basic approaches to biodata testing: Those concerned with actual events that happened in a person's life, such as being fired, and those that analyze someone's attitude or judgment about something that's happened to him, according to industrial psychologist Michael Cuttler, who specializes in law enforcement hiring. He sees the FBI questions as the latter.

So why does the FBI want to know if you've had a surprise party?

The agency itself answered obliquely.

"The response to any one item is not necessarily important, it is the pattern of responses to items that measure similar characteristics," an FBI spokeswoman said. "Key attributes the FBI seeks may include conscientiousness and reliability, underlying characteristics that lead to sound decisions, initiative, fidelity, honor, leadership, etc."

Others thought the question could have a number of meanings.

Currier, the industrial psychologist, said he could see the surprise party question used as a personality question: "Is the person sociable?" he said. "Do they like to be the center of attention in a group of people? These sorts of personality traits can be beneficial to someone in a sales job, or more specific to FBI jobs." He added, "Perhaps it's a prediction for how someone handles surprises."

The question was likely one "where the socially desired answer is not obvious," Cuttler said. This means a layman test-taker would have difficulty figuring out what would most impress the FBI versus a question like, "Did you smoke pot last night," in which the right answer is pretty clear.

This is a big reason employers use biodata inventories — no one outside of the test's creators and scorers really knows what the "right answer" is.

"It's multiple choice, but the answers are not readily game-able," said Chuck MacLane, a former research psychologist with the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. MacLane retired in 2008 after almost 34 years with the agency. He didn't create the FBI test, but has been involved with 25 to 30 biodata inventories used by various federal agencies for hiring.

"It's really not helpful to guess what the right answer is," he said. If you don't fit the profile of the job, "you're probably not going to be very happy there."