Before we make a big purchase most of us “kick the tires.” We put in our due diligence, research what experts say and check customer reviews. We hope to reduce risk and avoid surprises through our fact-finding to gain a better understanding of what we can expect in quality, reliability and other important performance measures.

Employers have the same issues. When employers consider hiring, how can they achieve some level of confidence that the candidate will perform according to company needs and expectations, rather than bring increased risk of employee injury or incident?

Employers must be sure the potential hire has the right skills to execute all aspects of the job in a safe and healthy way. So, when it comes to evaluating job candidates, employers must find ways to kick the tires so that employees—the most important aspect of an organization—are protected.

This article examines accepted safety risk management practices that can be used to increase confidence when making hiring decisions. If the situation requires you to hire a less than ideal candidate, identify where deficiencies exist so that targeted improvements can be made prior to assignment to avoid potential injury. As always, take caution to ensure that the hiring practices employed are compliant with federal and state guidelines, client or union requirements can be rather nebulous for hiring decisions following an incident or other instance, if one wants to know how that person would approach safety responsibilities in real life.

The Value Proposition
Risk takers are out there. Many employers have regrets about their hiring choices following an incident or a poor decision made by an employee. After the fact, a manager may admit, “I should have seen that coming” or “I knew something wasn’t right with that person.”

Relying on intuition is not a reasonable approach, however. Likewise, interviews are not always telling. Injuries cost companies lots of money through lost time, increased insurance premiums, reduced production levels, and slowed or delayed schedules. Safety losses can also expose the company to a citation or result in negative publicity and threaten its sustainability.

Ultimately employers are responsible for ensuring that employees are properly trained and can otherwise safely perform their job duties. This performance requirement can be rather nebulous for employers, with hindsight proving to be the standard for determining whether their efforts were good enough to keep employees free from injury.

The Propensity to Take Risks
It would be great if by looking into a crystal ball one could see the exact time and place when a potential new hire would make a bad decision, or otherwise choose to forego a company safety procedure to save time. As creatures of habit, people hold fast to their tendencies. However, habits offer some predictability that can be identified. For instance, if one wants to know how neat and orderly a person will keep his/her office space, just take a look inside his/her car (or house).

Talent Click, a Canadian research firm, has identified a strong correlation between five personality characteristics and causation for workplace safety incidents. Through a prehire personality survey, an employer can assess the risk associated with a person’s behavior. The five determining traits are:

•Safety acumen and attitude;
•Physical ability;
•Past behavior as a predictor of future likelihood;
•The propensity to exhibit at-risk behavior;
•Impulsive: Those who seek excitement and underestimate the consequences of their actions.

Criminal Activity & Substance Abuse
Criminal background checks disclose only convictions. Pointed discussions
with a candidate or his/her references may reveal problems in the past. In some cases, employment history may indicate a pattern of substance abuse. According to National Council on Alcohol and Drug Dependency (NCADD), workers who report having three or more jobs in the previous 5 years are about twice as likely to be current or former users of illegal drugs compared to those who have had two or fewer jobs.

Prehire drug and alcohol tests can be effective in screening out chronic substance abusers, but these tests only provide a snapshot of the present. Drug and alcohol screening is still valuable and patterned abuse proves to be problematic for employers. NCADD has also found that workers with alcohol problems were 2.7 times more likely than workers without such issues to have injury-related absences.

Additionally, a candidate’s social media postings may portray questionable off-the-job behaviors, but can we say that those behaviors relate directly to safety responsibility, following directions and risk-taking?

Safety Attitude
Where else has this job candidate worked? Learned safety behaviors are developed through time, based partly on the accumulated expectations of previous employers. One will likely inherit an employee with a solid safety basis if the employee’s previous employer(s) are known to use engagement, accountability and peer-to-peer messaging methods.

In addition to verifying employment, employers should target safety as a discussion point during interviews. “A good tactic is to ask questions specific to safety during the job interview to evaluate a candidate’s situational understanding about safety,” says Beth Mathison, director of employment services for MRA. Mathison helps employers focus on the quality of a hire. Asking open-ended safety questions related to behavior or decision making helps reveal a candidate’s thought process. Such questions might include, “What would you do if your coworker did not report or fix an unsafe condition?” or “How would you respond to a supervisor asking you to bypass a safety step?”

Training, Knowledge & Skill Check
At times, the media reports on an individual who committed fraud by claiming to be someone s/he is not. For the employer, taking a candidate’s word that s/he holds a credential is risky. The best policy is “trust but verify.” In the case of previous safety training, it is best to follow up on training certificates, cards and diplomas, and verify that they were obtained correctly and are current. This extra time may uncover a lie and reveal an employee characteristic that does not fit with the organization.

Every employee job description should include a description of tasks and the required safety training elements. For example, if a person will be working often on ladders, how will the employer know that the candidate has adequate knowledge of ladder safety? For someone to make correct decisions, s/he must first understand what safe conditions are required. This can be accomplished by:

- Knowledge testing through a written or oral quiz. These should be thorough and identify specific areas of safety that can be targeted for remedial instruction before assigning tasks.
- Skills testing through the demonstration that s/he can safely perform a task. This might include, for example, assembling scaffolding, operating power tools, defensive driving, and any other hands-on means that allow for a determination of a minimum competency level.
- Comfort within the workplace. As part of the hiring process, expose the candidate to the actual work environment and gauge his/her reaction. For example, walk the individual through an assembly line area while describing the requirements to wear PPE and utilize other workplace safeguards. Cues can be telling, and negative reactions may signal a lack of desire to observe OSHA requirements.

Physical Fitness
OSHA’s directive to employers to ensure that each employee remains free from harm clearly extends into the realm of accounting for each worker’s physical condition. The question, therefore, is whether a candidate can safely perform the essential job duties based on his/her physical condition and ability.

A candidate’s physical condition is typically assessed by qualified healthcare professionals. Physicians occasionally find significant health conditions such as high blood pressure, heart disease or diabetes that the candidate was unaware of or elected not to disclose. Hiring the candidate with such preexisting conditions could put him/her in peril and place the employer at risk of a lawsuit.

Following are common postoffer conditional-hire physical evaluation methods.

Physical Exam
A general physical exam is performed by a physician and often includes a review of a medical history during which the candidate discloses previous exposures and preexisting health conditions. The clinic will work with the employer to understand the physical demands of the job and will consider that information when performing an examination.

Elements of the exam are both subjective and objective, and can include a check of vital signs, blood work, pulmonary function, vision, hearing and flexibility. The conclusion of the
exam is a written opinion by the physician as to whether the candidate can safely perform the physical demands of the position. The employer receives this report and can still hire a candidate despite an “unsatisfactory” recommendation from the physician. However, hiring a candidate who fails to meet the physical requirements exposes the employer to more liability.

Work Simulation
Work simulation involves the construction of a simulated work environment where the essential physical activities are tested. This evaluation is commonly performed by professionals at an occupational medicine or ergonomic clinic. A candidate must perform tasks such as shoveling sand, moving full 55 gallon drums, lifting compressed gas cylinders or climbing a ladder. This is done under the observation of an ergonomist, occupational therapist, registered nurse or a physician. Heart rate and other vitals are often evaluated during the testing.

The benefits of this type of evaluation are many, including the ability to gauge how the person would perform on the job with similar tasks, endurance and body mechanics including lifting techniques. The employer gains a better understanding of where injury risk lies, which allows for targeted improvements, through training, to prevent injuries such as muscle strains and sprains.

Functional Capacity Testing
Functional capacity testing is a mechanical method of evaluating the strength and range of motion of critical body parts most susceptible to injury (e.g., back, shoulders, knees). The candidate is placed into a machine that records the force output of a series of exercises simulating push, pull and lift movements. The testing output is then compared to the position’s required physical demands. Added benefits of this testing include the ability to compare a worker’s physical condition following an injury to his/her pre-injury (baseline) performance to prevent reinjury.

Conclusion
Employers can utilize numerous practices before hiring a job candidate to account for safety risk of injury. This approach realizes the full value of “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” While crystal balls are not an option, there are ways to gain insight into a candidate’s behavior and physical ability to safely carry out job duties before being hired. Taking time to kick the tires before making a job offer can help address liability and risk posed by potential new hires.

Dan Hannan, CSP, is corporate safety director at Merjent Inc., an environmental consultancy firm in Minneapolis, MN. He has been an OSH professional for 26 years and supports program and project safety and health by applying the principles of risk management at all levels. Hannan is the author of Preventing Home Accidents, an employer resource to promote off-the-job safety. He can be reached at dhannan@merjent.com.