

Candidates test-drive virtual jobs

New technology using simulations allows companies to view prospective workers in action,
KIRA VERMOND finds

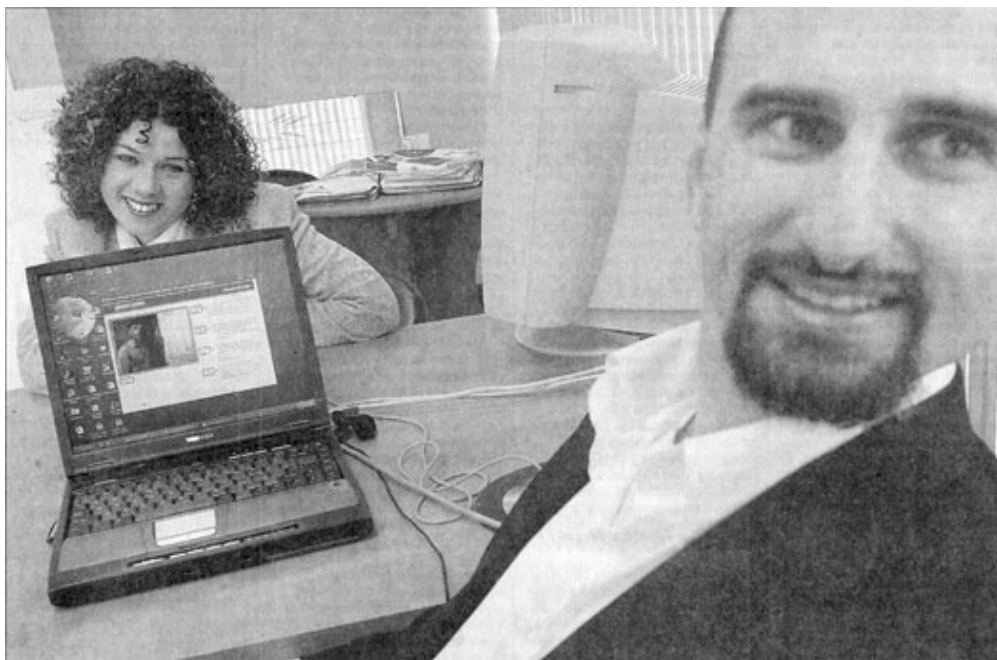
Picture this. You're a real estate agent sitting across the table from your client, a middle-aged man in a blue shirt and tie. His company is transferring him to your city and he needs to find a house, fast.

"I really didn't like the one on Hillview. The other ones were interesting. What did you think of them?" he asks, hoping you'll make his decision easier.

Selling a house is pretty tricky business — building rapport, handling rejection and closing the sale — but, luckily, this isn't real life. It's a computer simulation created by a Toronto human resources company, Upward Motion Inc., to help employers gauge how successful a potential employee might be in sales.

The company has also built a similar tool for corporate sales and is working with Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce on a call centre multiple-choice simulation test.

"The assessment is not about figuring it out," says Kim Ades, president of Upward Motion. "It's not like one answer is better than the next. We want to see what your orientations are. What



Kim Ades and Igor Kotlyar of Upward Motion with an on-line training simulator. 'We want to see what your orientations are. What is your style? What is your approach?' says Ms. Ades

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From database software that sorts through thousands of résumés to on-line personality assessments and video simulations that let people test-drive the job, technology is beginning to transform the way people are being hired. It's also changing the way HR professionals and others who are in charge of their company's hiring practices do their jobs.

Keith Church, a broker for Prudential Grand Valley Realty in Cambridge, Ont., has been using Upward Motion's real estate video simulation software since July. Mr. Church is considered a bulk user and pays a monthly fee for unlimited use. Clients who prefer to sign on for pay-per-use, however, can expect to fork over between \$39.95 and \$49.95 (U.S.) a test, depending on how often they use it.

Mr. Church's goal is to find and test five potential agents a month, but the test isn't only for his benefit, he says. Before turning their career paths 180 degrees — and spending up to \$4,000 to log at least four months of class time to become a licensed agent — interested candidates get something out of taking it, too: insight into their own abilities.

"If you're thinking about this as a career, this is a good way to see if you have an aptitude for it," he says. And he doesn't mind footing the bill, as he likes to have at least 30 future agents in the pipeline at any time. Mr. Church sees it as an investment in his company's future.

Ms. Ades says the tests can also be used to help companies determine how well their current employees are doing — and where they could use more training.

While Upward Motion's product is innovative because it's on-line and assesses soft skills such as how well a candidate listens, the concept is not new.

Pilots have used computerized flight simulation technology for years, thanks to companies like Ergometrics & Applied Personnel Research Inc., a 22-year-old U.S. firm with a similar video-based product. In Canada, the Toronto Transit Commission is considering using Ergometrics' technology, and the federal government's corrections department already has.

The tests are mostly for jobs in the public service, such as firefighters, police and corrections officers, and public transit employees.

For example, the law enforcement assessment, called FrontLine, is a video-based multiple choice test. It takes the candidate through 54 scenarios often faced on the job. One story line involves breaking up a screaming match between a husband and wife.

Most tests are delivered on site using a computer or television screen. Answers are marked on paper.

But if these tests are simply souped-up versions of multiple-choice questionnaires and situational interviews, why go the technology route at all? Wouldn't it be just as effective to hire actors?

Mr. Church isn't so sure. The software marks the tests for him, and using the exact same scenarios with each person means there's little room for subjectivity.

Maureen Townson, vice-president and managing director of the McQuaig Institute in Toronto, thinks people like taking these tests better than being left in a small room with a paper and a pencil. Her company develops on-line behavioural assessment questionnaires so

companies can have a window into their candidates' personalities. The test — although the company doesn't like to use that word — can be performed in the user's home.

"People seem to enjoy going on-line for these kinds of things. When you're doing it in a company office, sometimes it's more stressful," Ms. Townson says.

Igor Kotlyar, Upward Motion's chief executive officer, agrees, and also tries to avoid the word test. "We're finding some people don't like to be tested, but they don't mind being assessed," he says.

But there are some problems when it comes to allowing people to take the assessments anytime, anywhere and away from supervision. How do you ensure that the person taking the test is the real candidate?

After all, it would be easy to hand over a user name and password to a sales-savvy friend.

Ms. Townson says the solution is to choose the right follow-up interview questions, which her company provides. If, for example, the candidate states on-line that he is competitive, the live follow-up question might be: Tell me about a situation where you had to face competition.

"If they are who they say they are, they should be able to give you several illustrations," Ms. Townson says.

Lavalife, an international telephone and on-line dating company based in Toronto, also uses technology to help find employees. Jamie Erickson, vice-president of human resources, says the company pays about \$15,000 a year for résumé-sorting software called TalentFlow, developed by Toronto firm Brainhunter.com. TalentFlow takes all the résumés in the company's database and plucks out an A-candidate list.

Mr. Erickson says the software was used with 40 per cent of all hires last year.

And he estimates it saved tens of thousands of dollars, not only in headhunter costs but also in hours poring over hundreds of actual résumés.

"The people hours attached to that are absolutely huge. The cost goes through the roof and slows down productivity. This eliminates a huge step," he says.

But all the technology in the world can't take the place of a live interview. And companies such as Upward Motion and the McQuaig Institute don't even try to say it can.

On-line assessments should be used in addition to the face-to-face meetings rather than replacing them, they say.

"You want to be sure that you don't use it as a substitute for good interviewing, but it really does help the interviewer know where to probe," Ms. Townson says.