Another important issue in understanding the validity of cognitive ability tests is the nature of specific versus general abilities. Historically, evidence has suggested that specific abilities add little to the prediction of job performance beyond the general factor. More recently, however, this conclusion has been challenged. Researchers in one study argued that specific abilities are sometimes more important than GMA, and another research study suggested that specific cognitive abilities may matter to certain narrow criteria (e.g., perceptual accuracy may predict the degree to which an editor spots errors).[37] Thus, while GMA is the most important predictor of job performance in nearly every situation, there may be situations in which specific abilities are important.

Potential Limitations. If cognitive ability tests are so valid and cheap, why don't more organizations use them? One of the main reasons is concern over the adverse impact and fairness of these tests. In terms of adverse impact, regardless of the type of measure used, cognitive ability tests have severe adverse impact against minorities. Specifically, blacks on average have scored 1 standard deviation below whites, and Hispanics on average have scored .72 standard deviation below whites. This means that only 10% of blacks have scored above the average score for whites.[38] Historically, this led to close scrutiny—and sometimes rejection—of cognitive ability tests by the courts. The issue of fairness of cognitive ability tests has been hotly debated and heavily researched. One way to think of fairness is in terms of accuracy of prediction of a test. If a test predicts job performance with equal accuracy for two groups, such as whites and blacks, then most people would say the test is fair. The problem is that even though the test is equally accurate for both groups, the average test score may be different between the two groups. When this happens, use of the test will cause some degree of adverse impact. This causes a dilemma: Should the organization use the test because it is an accurate and unbiased predictor, or should it not be used because it would cause adverse impact?

Research shows that cognitive ability tests are equally accurate predictors of job performance for various racial and ethnic groups.[39] But research also shows that blacks and Hispanics score lower on such tests than whites. Thus, the dilemma noted above is a real one for the organization. It must decide whether to (1) use the cognitive ability test and experience the positive benefits of using an accurate predictor, (2) not use the cognitive ability test, to avoid adverse impact, and substitute a different measure that has less adverse impact, or (3) use the cognitive ability test in conjunction with other predictors that do not have adverse impact, thus lessening adverse impact overall. Unfortunately, current research does not offer clear guidance on which approach is best. Research suggests that while using other selection measures in conjunction with cognitive ability tests reduces the adverse impact of cognitive ability tests, it by no means eliminates it.[40]

Although the apparent trade-off between diversity and validity is not likely to disappear anytime soon, there have been three positive developments in the cognitive ability testing area. First, one study suggests that tests constructed in an