



Selection & Assessment

Personality as a Predictor of Job Performance:
How to measure personality and select the
right employees

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Executive summary

This CQ Dossier describes how organizations can use personality tests for selection and recruitment purposes. The dossier focuses on the Big Five Personality Model and describes the research that supports use of the Big Five for validation purposes with criteria. It also discusses some of the controversies regarding use of the Big Five for selection purposes and provides advice on how best to utilize personality tests.

Personality traits are robust measures of job performance

One of the principles in management science is that top organizations attract, select and retain employees who will be a good fit for the organization (Robbins & Judge, 2016). In recruitment, organizations hire employees who are probably similar in terms of characteristics such as education, vocational interests, personality etc. The key for organizations is to utilize sound personality measures that allow them to differentiate potential top performers from those who are less useful to the organization. Over the last twenty years, scholars have focused on those personality traits that are best predictive of job performance. This area of research is useful in identifying which personality traits are robust predictors of job performance and in identifying those measures that can be utilized to measure these personality traits. This dossier focuses on the Big Five as predictors of job performance and the NEO, a robust measure of the Big Five Personality traits.

The big five personality model consists of five factors. conscientiousness shows a modest correlation with job performance.

[Many researchers and practitioners have advocated for the use of the Big Five Personality model for selection and recruitment](#) (Goldstein, Pulakos, Passmore & Semedo, 2017). The five factors are emotional stability, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness (Costa & McCrae, 1992). An interest in whether personality traits were related to work performance arose in the early 1990s

through several meta-analytic studies (Goldstein et al., 2017). One of the most influential of these studies was by Barrick and Mount (1991). Their meta-analysis found a consistent relationship between conscientiousness and job performance across a variety of domains but little relationship between the other Big Five traits and job performance. The correlations ranged from .04 for openness to experience to .22 for conscientiousness with job performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991). These correlations are relatively modest yet they provided a more optimistic view of the potential of personality traits to predict job performance. Moreover, although these correlations are modest, the magnitude of these results can still provide utility in personnel selection decisions particularly if they are considered part of a wide array of selection methods where they are shown to have incremental validity over and above other methods (Goldstein et al., 2017).

Recent research on the relationship between personality and job performance support the relevance of personality traits for selection with two major conclusions. First, Le et al. (2011) found that the relationship between emotional stability and job performance is curvilinear and not linear as widely assumed. As a consequence, it is not the maximum of emotional stability that that correlated with high job performance, but a midrange level (Le et al. 2011). In addition, Le et al. (2011) also found a mediating effect of job complexity on the relationship of conscientiousness and emotional stability with job performance. High complexity jobs show a higher threshold of both personality traits. In contrast, people that score high in conscientiousness and emotional stability in a low complexity job, tend to have a lower job performance.

Narrow personality traits tend to outperform broader traits in predicting job performance

One of the controversies over the use of personality to predict job performance is whether to use broad measures of personality or narrower, more refined measures. Researchers have examined those narrow facets that define the larger dimensions and compared their relationship with job performance. In one study, Robert and colleagues focused on conscientiousness, which is a consistent predictor of job performance. They found that the broad construct of conscientiousness is comprised of six narrower

factors and that these factors were related to a range of different criteria and showed incremental validity over the broad general dimension of conscientiousness with job performance (Roberts, Chernyshenko, Stark & Goldberg, 2005).

In fact, research examining the relationship between personality and job performance tends to support the use of narrow traits rather than the use of broad traits. The majority of research shows that narrow traits outperform broad dimensions of personality (Rothstein & Goffin, 2006). However, it is worth noting that Barrick and Mount (2003) have concluded that the issue of whether to use broad or narrow personality traits depends on the context. Based on the research, they state that there is a place for both types of focus because there is validity for both broad or narrow personality traits on job performance under the appropriate conditions. It is important for organizations to narrow down those personality traits that are the best predictors of criteria under certain conditions. Organizations can utilize those personality factors that are most relevant to their setting.

The neo personality inventory can be used to assess personality in selection

The choice of an appropriate personality measure for use in predicting job performance can be based on the theoretical model that the organization uses. For example, if narrow personality traits are best for the organizational context then the organization can choose those sub-factors that are predictive of the criteria. There are a variety of valid personality measures that can be used to assess personality. The most popular is the NEO Personality Inventory that has gone through various revisions. The NEO examines the Big Five personality traits of openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability (McCrae, Costa & Martin, 2005). There is a long and short version of the NEO with the long version consisting of 240 items and the shorter version consisting of only 60 items. The measure is suitable for use with people of all ages. One of the benefits of the use of the NEO Personality Inventory is that it can assess both broad and narrow personality traits.

One of the issues that has arisen with the use of personality measures is that applicants might fake their responses. There has been research into the effects of faking on the

validity of measures and faking does have the potential to decrease the validity of accurate hiring. However, there are ways to circumvent these problems such as employing a faking warning to job applicants or the use of a forced-choice personality test. Overall, the research shows that the validity of personality traits to predict job performance is not seriously affected by applicants faking their responses (Rothstein & Goffin, 2006). The other advancement in the use of personality testing is the availability of the Internet to administer tests (Rothstein & Goffin, 2006). Internet testing is both convenient and provides a low-cost alternative to in-person testing; in addition, research shows there are little differences in the validity of internet and paper-and-pencil administration of personality tests on job performance.

In conclusion, this research support the use of personality tests for selection purposes along with other measures that allow for identification of talented applicants. The research has identified the Big Five as a theoretical model to use in selecting tests for validation. Despite some controversy, personality traits do provide incremental validity above cognitive ability tests and there is support for a use of narrower traits of personality, depending on the organizational context.

Key take-aways

- Personality tests can be used for selection and recruitment as part of a battery of tests
- The Big Five Factor Model allows organizations to utilize broad and narrow traits of personality
- Narrow traits of personality show stronger evidence of prediction with job performance
- Organizations should choose personality tests that are aligned with job-specific criteria
- Applicants do fake personality tests but the damage is minimal

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