

Personality and Work Performance

Personality is very stable after around eighteen years of age. If you're a parent, you probably think it's more like eight! In fact, some personal psychologists are now saying that the child you see at three will be the adult you see at thirty – frightening if you have an unruly three year old! But it's safe to say once we hit late teens we are “stuck” with who we are.

What is personality? Are we born with a specific personality or do we develop our personality? Can we change and can you predict what an individual will do in the future by understanding their core personality? These are questions that have fascinated organisational psychologists over the last 70 odd years.

Personality research has had a rocky road, but since the early 90s the theory of personality has, at last, gained an acceptable taxonomy. This is commonly referred to as the ‘Big Five’ model. In brief our personality can be described through five higher order dimensions, easily remembered through the acronym, OCEAN - Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Extroversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism (emotional stability). Under each of these five dimensions, sits six sub-facets. Our total personality make-up can be described through 30 attributes.

However, it is not necessary to understand every personality attribute to be able to predict an individual's behaviour. The medical diagnosis is a good analogy. The doctor doesn't need to drain your body of blood to determine your condition. In most cases, a vile will confidently predict your future health.

This is akin to using measures of personality in the hiring process. If we are trying to ‘select out’ individuals who do not fit the role early in the selection process, cost, time and volume of applicants may dictate a more concentrated picture of their personality; whereas, if we are ‘selecting-in’ from say, three or four final candidates, a more in-depth observation may be more helpful. This will also depend on the specific job role and volume of applicants.

Can we change our personalities to “fit” certain situations? Yes we can, but we will always revert back to “home-base.” Let me give you an example. Suppose we had an administrator whose personality was very accommodating, they lacked high assertiveness and strong resilience. The company they work for has suppliers who are dragging the chain, paying their accounts. The boss gives the administrator a list of bad debtors and asks them to call all of these people and tell them their supplies have been stopped, effective immediately, and they need to settle their account within 24 hours to reinstate delivery.

I bet this person is going to hate doing this task. It's not in their nature to be so forthright and aggressive but they will force themselves to do it – its part of their

job. However, if they had to do this task day-in and day-out, they would soon lose internal motivation and decide this job is not for them and leave.

During hiring seminars I use the analogy of folding your arms to explain how our personality works. When directed, people will always fold their arms the same way. But if ask to fold their arms the opposite way, most will find this difficult and uncomfortable – try it now - it can be done, but as soon as practical, the audience will revert to their comfortable fold.

Moving to our second question, is personality genetic or environmentally shaped? In psychology, this is the famous 'nature/nurture' debate. A new study completed by a team of psychologists at the University of Edinburgh, lead by New Zealander, Tim Bates found compelling evidence that our personality is equally influenced by our genes and the environment.

This team studied 1,000 pairs of identical and fraternal twins. Because identical twins have the same genes and fraternal twins do not, the researchers could identify common genes that result in certain personality traits – they were concentrating on happiness.

What the study showed was that identical twins in a family were very similar in personality and in well-being, and by contrast, the fraternal twins were only half as similar. This finding strongly implicates genes as a major driver of personality traits. So, if you're a worry wart, you can lay 50 percent of the blame on your mum or dad and probably the other 50 percent on the way they brought you up!

As psychologists, we have always known the huge role personality plays in a person's work performance. As a lay person at the coal face, you can observe this in action every day. Stop right now and think about your problem employees. I bet the issue is attitude and/or general mental ability – the "who they are," not "what they know."

Most managers will always hire on aptitude but fire on attitude. Personality influences attitude and attitude drives behaviour. The problem with most hiring managers is that they tend to rely on emotional judgement (gut feel) to assess attitude during a hiring interview.

It's impossible to "read" a person's personality when we first met them. Yes, as humans we are predisposed to do this – known as the "fight or flight" concept, do we like this person, or are we going to move on?. Sometimes we get it right, many times we get it wrong. It is often dangerous to jump to instant conclusions. In psychology, this is referred to as Implicate Personality Theory. We tend to judge people by association – We know Anne is attractive, intelligent, chances are we will judge here as likeable, as opposed to not likeable. What about Matthew, bold, defiant and (extroverted/introverted); or Sue, cheerful, positive and (attractive/unattractive).

When selecting new staff, it's important to ascertain if the person has the knowledge, skills and experience to do the job. But, it's *more* important to understand how that knowledge, skill and experience will be put into practice. What are the personality characteristics of the candidate and does this "fit" the job?

As a practicing organisational psychologist, I have found my 'tree analogy' a simple way of explaining the importance of assessing personality as part of a structure hiring system. The fruit of the tree represent the knowledge, skill and experience (KSEs) required to the job. In other words, CAN the candidate perform the specific competencies required for the job? As KSEs are observable and therefore coachable and trainable, they can be easily validated through the job application, CV and background checking.

The roots of the tree represent the candidate's personality, general mental ability, motives, values and attitudes. These are innate and cannot be observed during the job interview. Many hiring managers think they can "read people" and tend to form opinions of these dispositions based on gut feel and emotion. This is very dangerous! The only way to understand the roots of the tree is through a valid psychometric assessment. Most managers will hire on the fruits, but usually terminate or have problem employees based on roots.

Personality is a valid predictor of future workplace performance, but it is not a panacea. Personality assessments become very powerful when they are aligned to the specific personality attributes required for the job role. This is gained through what psychologists call a concurrent validity study. This involves the testing of current employees and benchmarking results to performance data. Benchmarking can also be achieved through a behavioural-based job analysis survey.

Incremental validity is then achieved by adding a general mental abilities test, motivations and attitude assessments into the mix. PeopleCLUES and Prevue are good example of assessments that can accomplish this in under an hour, online with instant reporting that is aligned to your specific job role.

There are many personality measures available. It's vitally important that you choose the right ones for the role and that the instrument is specifically designed for selection. There are many cheap, or free, pop psychology tests available on the internet or sold by people with no psychological background. Using teambuilding tools like Myers Briggs and DISC should never be used for hiring. These tools cannot be normed against specific populations or jobs, plus they lack reliability, that is, they are inconsistent. They are great at telling you the 'make and model of the car', but poor at telling you the condition of the 'engine'.

Test reliability and validity is extremely important when choosing an employment

assessment. I use the term assessments or profiles; a test implies pass or fail and personality measures used in the selection process are about whether the person will "fit" the job, not if they are a good or bad person – a failure. Selection assessments are also not designed to highlight abnormal psychological behaviour.

Using a valid personality assessment and a test of general mental ability, benchmarked to the job, alongside a multi-rated, behavioural-based interview and a diligent background check will ensure you get an excellent performing employee about 75 to 80 percent of the time.

These odds are a damn sight better than relying on a general meet-and-greet and unstructured interview that is at best a friendly chat. Your odds of a successful hire in the latter case is about .5 to 15 percent at best. So, which path do you want to go down?

Jobs are different. People are different. Sometimes, even the right person can't do the job as well as expected. It's the individual differences that discriminate between top and average performers in the workplace. It's about what separates the best from the rest and in most cases, it is not about what the person knows, but who he or she is - their personality.

***Rob McKay – MA(Hons) Director of AssessSystems Aust/NZ Ltd
Leaders in employee selection and development tools.***

To understand more about psychometric assessments, download a complimentary copy of "How to Avoid Putting Square Pegs Into Round Holes" at www.tipsforhiring.com/profiling