Personality Tests

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What are personality tests?

In an employment context, personality tests are tools that assess candidates' or employees' enduring dispositional traits, for the purpose of hiring, training, or employee development. Personality is generally thought to reflect one's authentic personal disposition and lasting mental structure (Allport & Odbert, 1936). Although individuals may behave differently in different conditions and environments and may experience passing moods, personality is thought to be displayed through broad patterns of behavioral tendencies over time in each individual (Allport & Odbert, 1936). Though there are hundreds of individual personality traits and measures in existence, the majority of those that are relevant to the workplace fall into six major personality factors: conscientiousness, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, emotional stability, and honesty-humility. The first five factors are known as the Big Five (Goldberg, 1990) or the five-factor model of personality (FFM; Digman, 1990), and the last one is a more recently identified factor from the HEXACO model of personality (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Both models were developed through a process of analyzing the commonalities and differences among personality-related terms in the English language. Thus, the six personality variables can best be defined by their related adjectives.

- Conscientiousness: Hardworking, reliable, orderly, self-disciplined, careful (McCrae & Costa, 1987).

- Extraversion: Sociable, fun-loving, affectionate, friendly, talkative (McCrae & Costa, 1987).

- Openness to Experience: Original, creative, imaginative, daring, having broad interests (McCrae & Costa, 1987).

- Agreeableness: Soft-hearted, forgiving, acquiescent, selfless, good-natured (McCrae & Costa, 1987).

- Emotional Stability: Calm, relaxed, secure, hardy, even-tempered (McCrae & Costa, 1987).

- Honesty-Humility: Fair, honest, sincere, modest, not greedy (Lee & Ashton, 2004).

There are many commercial and academic personality tests available, and they typically require respondents to assess their level of agreement with various statements such as "I see myself as someone who… 1) "Does a thorough job" (conscientiousness), 2) "Is talkative" (extraversion), 3) "Has an active imagination" (openness to experience), 4) "Is generally trusting"

(agreeableness), and 5) "Remains calm in tense situations" (emotional stability; John & Srivastava, 1999). Tests vary in terms of length, from a short 10-item measure (e.g., Ten-Item Personality Inventory; Gosling et al., 2003) to a comprehensive 240-item measure (Revised NEO Personality Inventory; Costa & McCrae, 1992). Longer tests may provide a more complete measure of personality but can lead to test fatigue and inattention, whereas shorter tests will be easier on test takers but may not be as accurate. Individuals seeking to measure personality should consider which length of test will best serve their unique purposes.

Why are personality tests valuable?

Personality tests are valuable because they are able to indicate where an individual falls on the spectrum of a certain personality trait (e.g., from highly extraverted to highly introverted). Employees who possess certain personality traits may then be more likely to have better outcomes in the workplace. Though the optimal personality traits may vary by job, there are also universal associations across jobs, and they are detailed further below.

- Conscientiousness is moderately related to greater organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), task performance, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction and to less counterproductive work behavior (CWB; Lee et al., 2019; Rubenstein et al., 2019). Conscientiousness is modestly related to less turnover (Rubenstein et al., 2017).

- Extraversion is modestly related to greater OCB and task performance and moderately related to greater organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Lee et al., 2019; Rubenstein et al., 2019). Extraversion is not significantly related to CWB or turnover (Lee et al., 2019; Rubenstein et al., 2017).

- Openness to experience is modestly related to greater OCB, task performance, organizational commitment, and turnover (Lee et al., 2019; Rubenstein et al., 2017). Openness is modestly related to less CWB and is not significantly related to job satisfaction (Lee et al., 2019; Rubenstein et al., 2019).

- Agreeableness is modestly related to greater OCB, task performance, and job satisfaction and less CWB (Lee et al., 2019; Rubenstein et al., 2019). Agreeableness is moderately related to greater organizational commitment and is not significantly related to turnover (Rubenstein et al., 2017; Rubenstein et al., 2019).

- Emotional stability is modestly related to greater OCB and task performance and less turnover (Lee et al., 2019; Rubenstein et al., 2017). Emotional stability is moderately related to greater organizational commitment and job satisfaction and less CWB (Lee et al., 2019).

- Honesty-Humility is modestly related to greater OCB and task performance and is moderately related to less CWB (Lee et al., 2019).

What are the challenges with personality tests?

One of the main concerns with using personality tests as part of the hiring process is that of applicant faking. Specifically, there are concerns that job applicants may inflate their scores on certain personality traits in order to appear like the most ideal candidate for the job. For example, it has been found that individuals taking personality tests as part of a hiring process score significantly higher on traits of extraversion, emotional stability, conscientiousness, and openness than non-applicants, indicating that some exaggeration may be involved. Additionally, evidence suggests that applicants may tailor their faking to the specific role they are applying for (e.g., exaggerating one's level of extraversion for a sales position; Birkeland et al., 2006).

Two main strategies have been successfully used to minimize applicant faking on personality tests. Firstly, including a warning at the beginning of the personality test stating that any inaccurate responses will be able to be identified by the system seems to deter applicants from faking (McFarland, 2003). Secondly, personality tests that use forced-choice responses tend to be more faking-resistant (Cao & Drasgow, 2019). Whereas Likert-type response formats ask individuals to rate their level of agreement with a certain item, forced choice response formats make individuals choose which of two statements best describe them. The two statements should be equally favorable, thus making it more challenging for applicants to respond in a socially desirable manner.

QIC-WD Takeaways

- ► Personality is thought to consist of six main factors: conscientiousness, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, emotional stability, and honesty-humility.
- ► All of the personality traits are positively associated with OCB and performance and tend to be related to less CWB in the workplace (excluding extraversion).
- ► Individuals that score highly on the six factors tend to have better attitudinal outcomes in the workplace.
- ► Employees who are high in conscientiousness and emotional stability may be less likely to leave their jobs, whereas those who are high in openness are more likely to leave.
- ► Strategies to counter faking on personality tests include warning against faking at the beginning of the test and using a forced choice response format.
- ► Due to the technical and legal requirements involved in validating a personality test for use as a hiring measure, it is recommended that agencies consult with an expert for assistance.

References

Allport, G. W., & Odbert, H. S. (1936). Trait-names: A psycho-lexical study. *Psychological Monographs, 47*(1), 1–171.

Birkeland, S. A., Manson, T. M., Kisamore, J. L., Brannick, M. T., & Smith, M. A. (2006). A meta-analytic investigation of job applicant faking on personality measures. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment, 14*(4), 317–335.

Cao, M., & Drasgow, F. (2019). Does forcing reduce faking? A meta-analytic review of forced-choice personality measures in high-stakes situations. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 104*(11), 1347–1368.

Costa, P. T., & McCrae, R. R. (1992). The five-factor model of personality and its relevance to personality disorders. *Journal of Personality Disorders, 6*(4), 343–359.

Digman, J. M. (1990). Personality structure: Emergence of the five-factor model. *Annual Review of Psychology, 41,* 417–440.

Goldberg, L. R. (1990). An alternative "description of personality": The Big-Five factor structure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 59*(6), 1216–1229.

Gosling, S. D., Rentfrow, P. J., & Swann, W. B., Jr. (2003). A very brief measure of the Big Five personality domains. *Journal of Research in Personality, 37*(6), 504–528.

John, O. P., & Srivastava, S. (1999). The Big-Five trait taxonomy: History, measurement, and theoretical perspectives. In L. A. Pervin & O. P. John (Eds.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (Vol. 2, pp. 102–138). Guilford Press.

Lee, K., & Ashton, M. C. (2004). Psychometric properties of the HEXACO personality inventory. *Multivariate Behavioral Research, 39*(2), 329–358.

Lee, Y., Berry, C. M., & Gonzalez-Mulé, E. (2019). The importance of being humble: A meta-analysis and incremental validity analysis of the relationship between honesty-humility and job performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 104*(12), 1535–1546.

McCrae, R. R., & Costa, P. T., Jr. (1987). Validation of the five-factor model of personality across instruments and observers. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52*(1), 81–90.

McFarland, L. A. (2003). Warning against faking on a personality test: Effects on applicant reactions and personality test scores. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment, 11*(4), 265–276.

Rubenstein, A. L., Eberly, M. B., Lee, T. W., Mitchell, T. R. (2017). Surveying the forest: A meta-analysis, moderator investigation, and future-oriented discussion of the antecedents of voluntary employee turnover. *Personnel Psychology, 71*(1), 1–43.

Rubenstein, A. L., Zhang, Y., Ma, K., Morrison, H. M., & Jorgensen, D. F. (2019). Trait expression through perceived job characteristics: A meta-analytic path model linking personality and job attitudes. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 112*(1), 141–157.

Author(s)

Sarah Stepanek, MA, University of Nebraska at Omaha

Megan Paul, PhD, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Suggested Citation

QIC·WD QUALITY IMPROVEMENT CENTER FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT