

Openness to Experience: The Trait That Matters in Innovation

Author: Thandeka Madziwanyika . November 2020

Introduction

Have you ever thought of what kind of people are more innovative than others? There are the personality factors found in the OCEAN (Openness; Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism) [Big Five Personality Factors](#). According to Nekljudova (2019), openness to experience describes the “ability to adequately take ideas, situations, and lifestyles, even if they are completely new and unusual”. This article will explain what openness to experience is and how it impacts innovation.

What is personality?

Before we go on to explain what openness to experience is, there needs to be a good understanding of [what personality is](#). While there is no one agreed-on definition of what personality is, a general definition is that personality is the characteristic sets of behaviors, cognitions, and emotional patterns that evolve from biological and environmental factors (Very Well Mind, 2020). This filters down to the result of the different people we come across every day. No two people are the same and this is because of:

- 1) personality traits that vary across a scale from one person to another and
- 2) environmental factors that influence how individuals behave such as society and culture

The concept of the OCEAN personality traits stands for:

- [Openness to Experience](#): the extent to which individuals exhibit intellectual curiosity, self-awareness, and individualism / non-conformance.
- [Conscientiousness](#): the extent to which individuals value planning, possess the quality of persistence, and are achievement-oriented.
- [Extraversion](#): the extent to which individuals engage with the external world and experience enthusiasm and other positive emotions.
- [Agreeableness](#): the extent to which individuals value cooperation and social harmony, honesty, decency, and trustworthiness. Agreeable individuals also tend to have an optimistic view of human nature.
- [Neuroticism](#): the extent to which individuals experience negative feelings and their tendency to emotionally overreact.

Related: [What does conscientiousness mean?](#)

Openness to Experience

Now that we have looked into what personality is and linked openness and personality, *openness to experience* will be looked at in more depth.

High	Low
Very creative	Dislikes change
Open to trying new things	Does not enjoy new things
Focused on tackling new challenges	Resists new ideas
Happy to think about abstract concepts	Dislikes abstract or theoretical concepts

When looking at openness to experience there are other areas of importance that need to be taken into consideration. These are:

- Openness to action is characterized by participation in various events and the enjoyment of being original in various situations;
- Openness to ideas shows greater flexibility in “information processing and environmental research;
- Openness to values is defined by researchers as the degree of a person’s susceptibility to change. People with a high degree of openness to values will most likely reject non-traditional norms and traditions.
- Openness to aesthetics is one of the most emotional aspects, which is described as the ability to evaluate various forms of art, but this aspect does not apply to the assessment of particular types of art. Openness to aesthetics turned out to be deeply connected with cognitive flexibility and intelligence. Some studies have found that high scores on the aesthetic scale of openness are significantly associated with creative activities.

Related: [Openness to experience: Everything you need to know](#)

The openness of fantasy Like openness to aesthetics, openness to fantasy is also strongly associated with a person’s emotional predisposition. It covers the tendency to be:

- Involved in fantasy, which not only includes a developed picture of thinking, but also a high level of creativity and certain emotions;
- Openness to feelings is recognised by many researchers, as the most difficult aspect. Such people appreciate emotions, are more sensitive to emotional events, and also experience most emotions is usually higher than among men has not been confirmed.

When all the aspects of *openness to experience* are put together, we can see why it is seen to have a positive impact on creativity within individuals.

Can innovation be improved?

Because personality is influenced by nature or nurture, it is possible that innovation can be improved, even though it is influenced by *openness to experience*, a personality characteristic. Innovation and creativity (which is at the heart of innovation) can be improved by various methods. These can be used in schools by teachers, at home by parents and guardians and even in the workplace by leaders and colleagues. Below, are some ways to improve innovation and creativity as outlined by Kampylis and Berki (2014).

- Role modelling creative habits - Nothing is more important than a leader exemplifying good habits, behaviours and thinking that they want others to demonstrate. They need to exemplify creative traits such as curiosity and the development of creative skills.
- Appreciating the critical importance of questions – This looks at both their own and those asked by others.
- Treating mistakes as [learning opportunities](#) and encouraging learners to take sensible risks in the classroom – Rather than acting on mistakes with emotions, mistakes are an opportunity to better one’s behaviour constructively. Encouraging people to take ‘sensible risks’ in their work is important for [building up creative confidence](#). It is important that this takes place in a supportive environment, and that the two parties have discussed what boundaries are acceptable in their context.
- Giving people sufficient time to complete their work - Sometimes ideas need time to develop before becoming valuable. providing the scope to come up with ideas can be challenging for both parties. Someone will need time to think and work independently of the other. It is important to delay judgement of one’s ideas until they have had time to work them out properly.
- Preparing tasks carefully to provide the appropriate level of challenge - Ideally, a leader should try to design tasks that help someone to cross over into this area by ‘scaffolding’, or supporting them at first, and then withdrawing support so that the learner can increasingly achieve the task on their own.

For these tasks to be successful, there needs to be a degree of openness among the individuals, for them to be able to reciprocate the efforts put across to improve innovation. Openness to experience has an impact on innovation, based on the personality aspect of individuals. This means that innovation is not set in stone, it can be improved and in some negative environments, it can be damaged.

Look around and see if the [environment promotes innovation](#) and creativity by the way processes are done and people are taught.

Thandeka Madziwanyika is a Consultant at Industrial Psychology Consultants (Pvt) Ltd, a management and human resources consulting firm.

Phone +263 (242) 481946-48/481950 or

Cell number +263 78 318 0936 or

Email: thandeka@ipcconsultants.com or

Visit our website at www.ipcconsultants.com.

<https://thehumancapitalhub.com/articles/Openness-To-Experience-The-Trait-That-Matters-In-Innovation>