

The Big Five Personality Traits and Job Performance

Author: Thandeka Madziwanyika . September 2020

Introduction

After much research in psychology, scientists today believe that there are five major *personality traits*. Well-known scientists such as Smith (1967) and Goldberg (1981) have found these traits to be the prevalent ones in humans, although on different scales for each. These scales are what differentiate one person from the other. The *big five personality traits* are famously known under the acronym “OCEAN” but others use the acronym “CANOE”. Whichever acronym is used does not make a difference as these two stands for the following traits: [Openness](#); [Conscientiousness](#), Extraversion, [Agreeableness](#), and [Neuroticism](#).

This article will explain what each personality trait entails and will further elaborate on how these can affect job performance in the workplace.

What is personality?

Before we go on to explain the various *personality traits*, 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 “OCEAN” explained

The *big five personality traits* are explained below. As mentioned before, people have these traits on varying levels on a scale. Following the explanation of the personality trait, a table will compare the types of individuals who possess these traits on the low or high end of the spectrum as explained by Travers (2019).

Openness

This trait features characteristics such as imagination and insight. People who are high in this trait also tend to have a broad range of interests. They are curious about the world and other people and eager to learn new things and enjoy new experiences. Individuals who are high in this trait tend to be more adventurous and [creative](#). People low in this trait are often much more traditional and may struggle with abstract thinking.

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

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

Conscientiousness

Standard features of this dimension include high levels of thoughtfulness, good impulse control, and goal-directed behaviors. Highly [conscientious](#) people tend to be organized and mindful of details. They plan, think about how their behavior affects others, and are mindful of deadlines.

High	Low
Spends time preparing	Dislikes structure and schedules
Finishes important tasks right away	Makes messes and doesn't take care of things
Pays attention to detail	Procrastinates important tasks
Enjoys having a set schedule	Fails to complete necessary or assigned tasks

Extraversion

[Extraversion](#) or extroversion is characterized by excitability, sociability, talkativeness, assertiveness, and high amounts of emotional expressiveness. People who are [high in extraversion](#) are outgoing and tend to gain energy in social situations. Being around other people helps them feel energized and excited.

People who are [low in extraversion](#) (or introverted) tend to be more reserved and have less energy to expend in social settings. Social events can feel draining and introverts often require a period of solitude and quiet to "recharge."

High	Low
Enjoys being the centre of attention	Prefers solitude
Likes to start conversations	Feels exhausted when having to socialize a lot
Has a wide social circle of friends and acquaintances	Carefully thinks things through before speaking
Say things before thinking about them	Dislikes being the centre of attention

Agreeableness

This personality dimension includes attributes such as trust, [altruism](#), kindness, affection, and other [prosocial behaviours](#). People who are high in agreeableness tend to be more cooperative while those low in this trait tend to be more competitive and sometimes even manipulative.

High	Low
Has a great deal of interest in other people	Takes little interest in others
Cares about others	Doesn't care about how other people feel
Enjoys helping and contributing to the happiness of other people	Insults and belittles others
Assists others who need help	Manipulates others to get what they want

Neuroticism

Neuroticism is a trait characterised by sadness, moodiness, and emotional instability. Individuals who are high in this trait tend to experience mood swings, anxiety, irritability, and sadness. Those low in this trait tend to be more stable and emotionally [resilient](#).

High	Low
Experiences a lot of stress	Emotionally stable
Worries about many different things	Rarely feels sad or depressed
Experiences dramatic shifts in mood	Doesn't worry much
Struggles to bounce back after stressful events	Is very relaxed

Which traits predict job performance?

The American Psychological Association (2020) outlines what researchers have for years indicated will predict [job performance](#). It has been understood that within the *big five personality traits*, conscientiousness is the best predictor of a job. This is because being an individual with this trait guarantees to be responsible, dependable, organised, and persistent—which is generic to success. While this is true, it is not fit to generalise this to all jobs.

Travers (2029), highlights that research conducted by The University of Toronto indicated that 98% of the results were in favour of conscientiousness being a good predictor of job performance. Although this personality trait showed good prediction in job performance, an interesting point was revealed. The researchers found that conscientiousness is a weaker predictor of job performance in “high-complexity” occupations (think, for instance, of professions that require a high degree of ‘brain power’ such as an analyst or lawyer). It is the low- to moderate-complexity occupations – for example, customer service jobs – that are particularly well suited to the conscientious personality.

Further to the University’s findings, Travers explains that for some jobs, particularly creative ones, conscientiousness may be a liability, rather than an asset. Some research shows that while conscientiousness predicts performance in realistic and conventional jobs, it impedes success in investigative, artistic, and social jobs that require innovation, creativity, and spontaneity. This aligns with the research conducted by The University of Toronto.

Contextual performance is something that psychologists are moving towards and paying more attention to. This leads to good job performance as the context of an individual job is looked at while analysing the individual’s personality for that role. performance means doing things beyond the simple job performance, such as volunteering, putting in extra effort, cooperating, following rules and procedures, and endorsing the goals of the organisation (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Conclusion

No two people are the same. Everyone has an ‘OCEAN’ (the *big five personality traits*) in them but it varies from one person to the other. When looking at job performance, it may be right to use the most commonly used personality trait: conscientiousness but it is equally important to analyse the job and its environment and benchmark it against the person who will be occupying it. Contextual job performance

should be used widely to get the best prediction of performance. It may take up some time to conduct all the necessary tests but in the end, it will be worth it. Rather than being surprised once the individual is on board.

Lastly, you could also take a free personality test at Mypersonality.net if you genuinely want to better your work performance and understand your personality. Discovering your Big Five Personality equivalent from the MBTI 16 personality types and gaining a deeper understanding of yourself would enable you to improve both personally and professionally.

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/The-Big-Five-Personality-Traits-And-Job-Performance>