

Conscientiousness: Everything you need to know

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Conscientiousness is a personality trait known for being organized, goal-focused and achievement-oriented. Becoming conscientious can help a person stay organized and handle complex tasks. Highly conscientious people tend to be ambitious, reliable, and thoughtful, making them great planners and potential leaders in the workplace (Roberts et al., 2018).

A person with high conscientiousness realizes that his actions will affect others and cares for them. They work hard, hope to do their job well, take their obligations to others carefully and comply with regulations (Roberts et al., 2018).

What is Conscientiousness?

Conscientiousness includes orderliness, the pursuit of achievement, self-discipline, and careful consideration. Costantini, Sarauli, and Perugini (2020) describe conscientious people as "goal-oriented, determined, punctual and reliable."

Conscientiousness is also defined as a range of constructs that describe individual differences in the propensity to be rule-abiding, hardworking, self-controlled, orderly, and responsible to others (Roberts, Jackson, Fayard, Edmunds, and Mainz, 2009).

Conscientiousness is related to better health, fewer criminal activities, and better economic, interpersonal, and workplace outcomes (Roberts et al., 2009, Chapter 25).

According to Roberts, Hill, and Davis (2017), revealing conscientious behaviour is essential for several reasons. First, it will increase our understanding of the trait itself because it can clarify or enhance the range of potential aspects that constitute the field of conscientiousness.

[You can download the white paper for this article](#)

Second, it provides an alternative method for evaluating traits. For example, behaviour can be considered the state performance of personality traits, so it can better characterise personality variability. Moreover, specific conscientious behaviours may help clarify why conscientiousness is associated with living longer and more tremendous career success (Costantini et al., 2020), as it may have to do with specific actions they take rather than attitudes or feelings they possess.

Compared to a person with low conscientiousness, a highly conscientious individual would have greater achievement in academic and professional life. An individual with low conscientiousness is characterised as inconsistent, careless, and sloppiness in their approach.

How people can improve Conscientiousness at Work

- **Cultivate strong professional ethics**

People can improve their professional ethics by focusing on current tasks, managing time to complete tasks, and developing execution plans for more difficult or complex projects (Jaworski et al., 2021).

Eliminating distractions can help people make meaningful progress at work and focus more on getting the job done. For example, if someone is working on a computer, they can add an extension to their browser to prevent themselves from visiting distracting websites during the day.

- **Be reliable**

By completing tasks with a consistent quality level, actively communicating with team members, and practising self-management, people can become reliable at work (Moore & Shute, 2017).

Responsible employees realise that the quality of their work is reflected in the organisation, while others rely on them to complete their work (Moore & Shute, 2017). For example, suppose they encounter a problem that they know will prevent them from submitting a team project on time. In that case, they can proactively communicate with team members and let them know about the problem immediately, and make adjustments accordingly.

- **Be organised**

People can keep their work organised by marking the upcoming deadlines on the calendar, approaching each workday with a to-do list of basic tasks and daily goals, and arranging time during the day to handle specific tasks (Roberts et al., 2018).

They can also organise their emails, essays, and workspaces as needed to make files and messages easy to find. If a person realises what he needs to prioritise each day and estimates how much time it will take, he can better avoid distractions and make meaningful progress at work.

- **Set realistic goals**

One way to set realistic goals is to imagine the path to achieve the goal, plan the required steps and identify any obstacles (Roberts et al., 2017). When a person sets realistic goals, they practice conscientiousness by paying attention to where they spend their time.

If the path to the goals seems challenging, people can reassess how they will reach the end before working towards the goal. On the contrary, before executing the plan, people can take the time to gather the necessary materials and plan the various steps.

- **Be on time**

People can practice punctuality through shifts and meetings on time or early. They can also set reminders for upcoming deadlines on their work calendars to budget for the time they will need to work on the project (Roberts et al., 2009).

Punctuality demonstrates professionalism and shows that one values the time of others. For example, people can set aside extra commuting time to help ensure that they are on time even if they encounter delays. If a person holds several meetings in a row, they can set aside extra time between meetings to attend the next meeting on time, even if the meeting ends later than expected.

- **Reframe the way you view tasks**

If they think that doing something is essential, fun, and consistent with their values, it will be easier to change a person's behaviour (Roberts et al., 2017). For example, if responding to emails seems to be a trivial part of the job compared to tasks requiring more time and deep thinking, it's essential to consider that responding to emails is an important task and how it stays in line with their values.

If responding to general inquiries promptly impacts the company and may bring in potential new customers, it can be considered an important task, and it would feel good to check their to-do list.

- **Build relationships with colleagues**

By regularly and actively interacting with colleagues, you can build stronger connections with them (Jackson and Roberts, 2017). It is important to practice mindful communication by actively listening, paying attention to colleagues' tone of voice, and communicating their thoughts clearly and respectfully.

Asking colleagues questions, such as what they are doing, and spending time with them outside of work, can help build a working relationship that supports others' goals and ideas. Knowing that colleagues have their struggles at work, one can more easily sympathise with them and even try to help them

Methods for Assessing Conscientiousness

The most common way towards measuring conscientiousness is to use self-reports. Additionally, observer ratings of knowledgeable friends and family members can be used to complement observer ratings (Vazire, 2006). Researchers can also use indices that are more "objective", such as those derived from experiments, or even use implicit methods that are believed to be less susceptible to prejudice to evaluate constructs. The methods are reviewed as follows:

1. Self-Report Measures

According to the analysis level of the researcher's approach to a task, self-report measures may vary. The most common method is to use global personality trait self-report ratings. Three false assumptions are often made by researchers about self-report measures.

First, the majority of people believe that personality trait ratings reflect estimates of the frequency of

specific behaviours. Most personality scale measures for conscientiousness include mixed thoughts, feelings, and behaviour items. In addition, these items are naturally heuristic (for example, "I believe people should be punctual").

What can be said about extensive personality checklist ratings is that they either explicitly or implicitly and require global, stable, and internal attribution (Goldberg, cited by Pickett, Hofmans, Debusscher, and De Fruyt, 2020). Presumably, these global attributions can unearth what researchers are looking for.

Another common misunderstanding is how self-report items can be chosen for the Global Personality Scale. Some researchers mistakenly believe that items are selected for high test-retest reliability. Items are usually evaluated for internal consistency. Presumably, the test-retest reliability of a scale is usually a by-product of requesting for general, global, internal attribution.

2. Implicit Measures

The fourth viable alternative to self-reporting or observer reporting is implicit measures to measure conscientiousness. Historically, implicit measures have relied on projection tests, such as subject perception tests or picture story exercises (Schultheiss & Pang, 2008).

Since there is no functionally equivalent projection test for conscientiousness, this approach seems to have little or no evidence. However, newer implicit assessment methods, such as implicit association tests, have been applied to accountability assessment (Vianello, Robusto, and Anselmi, 2010).

Implicit and explicit conscientiousness measures are relatively unrelated, and both can predict test scores prospectively. Therefore, these two methods seem to capture uncorrelated but effective variance. One of the main methodological challenges in the future is to solve the mystery brought about by these findings, namely whether these two types of measures use the same structure, and if so, why are they not related?

3. Experimental or Behavioral Approaches

Finally, experimental methods can be used to evaluate the structure of the conscientiousness family. Experimental conscientiousness measures include standardised laboratory-based computerised tasks to assess specific behaviours of interest directly.

Recent evidence indicates that these assessments can be divided into three main areas: impulsive decision-making, inattention, and disinhibition (de Wit, 2009; Reynolds, Penfold, & Patak, 2008). Decision-making measures usually involve participants choosing between delayed/immediate or probabilistic/determined rewards.

In contrast, the measurement of inattention does not involve the participant making a choice but instead assessing the participant's ability to remain alert and receptive to a particular stimulus or stimulus change.

These findings illustrate the importance of the multidimensional conceptualisation of these measures,

similar to the factor structure determined by self-reported conscientiousness measures.

Although disinhibition measures are generally not considered, the related structure of pain intolerance also has an emerging history of behavioural assessment (Lejuez, Kahler, and Brown, 2003). These tasks are designed to assess a person's ability to adhere to a goal-orientation behaviour in the context of emotional distress. They can provide a model to consider the impact of the current emotional state on conscientiousness.

These conscientiousness experiments and behavioural measures have several advantages over self-reported measures for certain types of research questions. The advantage of these measures is that they are suitable for repeated use in treatment research and within-subject design (Dougherty, Marsh-Richard, Hatzis, Nouvion and Mathias, 2008), and follow the appropriate methodology and statistical corrections to learn the effects and test-retest stability.

These measures are sensitive to state-related behavioural changes, including pharmacology, physiology, and environmental manipulation (Dougherty et al., 2008; Swann, Dougherty, Pazzaglia, Pham, and Moeller, 2015).

Other advantages of using responsible behaviour measures include their suitability for young children and adolescents and the availability of many non-human animal models for human measurement (Winstanley, Theo-bald, Dalley, Cardinal, and Robbins, 2006).

Young children who may not accurately complete self-reported measurements but can still complete most behavioural measurements. For the same reason (that is, no abstraction is required), many behavioural measurements for humans have non-human animal counterparts.

There are also disadvantages to using laboratory conscientiousness measures. The main disadvantage is that many measures of conscientiousness are adapted from neuropsychological assessments and are therefore sensitive to nerve damage (Roberts, Lejuez, Krueger, Richards & Hill, 2014).

Therefore, these measures may not be adequate indicators of the conscientiousness of individuals with neurological problems or mental retardation. The problems that appear to be related to conscientiousness are problems specific to nerve damage and may not be related to conscientiousness (Willner, Bailey, Parry, & Diamond, 2010).

For these reasons, relying on a certain degree of learning, especially measures for decision-making tasks, may also show deficiencies in education that are contrary to conscientiousness and people with lower IQs (Buelow and Suhr, 2009).

In addition, although these measures are indistinguishable from conscientiousness, they are associated with self-reports and observers' ratings of conscientiousness and are at such a low level that they question whether they measure the same structure (Duckworth & Kern, 2011; Edmonds et al., 2009).

Furthermore, because behavioural assessments are still in the early stages of development, there is

relatively little information regarding the validity/utility of these measures in predicting overt behaviours and long-term outcomes.

4. Observer Report Measures

Observer measures are usually collected from knowledgeable informants (including friends, colleagues, and family), and these involve a viable and often overlooked method for assessing conscientiousness constructs (Vazire, 2006). Similar to self-reports, observer ratings tend to have internal consistency, with the relatively high inter-judge agreement (Roberts et al., 2014) and the same high test-retest reliability.

In addition, observer reports often show the same level of predictive validity as self-reports (for example, Connelly & Hülshager, 2012; Lodi-Smith et al., 2010; Vazire, 2010). This is not to say that observer reports can be compared with self-reports.

As evidenced by the other self-knowledge asymmetry model (Vazire, 2010), observer reports tend to supplement self-reports under particular conditions. For certain types of attributes, self-reporting is often more effective. This is especially true for psychological characteristics that are not obvious to others.

In contrast, when the psychological characteristics are highly evaluative, the observer's score is often more accurate. Moreover, when a personality field is both observable and less appraised, the two methods seem interchangeable (Vazire, 2010).

5. Experience-sampling (ESMs) technique

The fifth technique that reflects the downward shift from the hierarchical structure to a more contextual or specific psychological field measurement method is the empirical sampling or the ecological transient analysis method (Conner et al., 2007).

Manifestation of these methods is by asking people to evaluate their behaviour, feelings, or thoughts in real-time over a pre-specified period that usually lasts from a few days to a few weeks. These methods are great for assessing people's actual thoughts, feelings, or behaviours and are generally more respected than global self-reports (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, and Stone, 2004).

Although this positive evaluation may be justified if a person is only interested in relatively thin time and mental functions, problems arise when people consider other levels of analysis in the personality hierarchy, for example, it is difficult to evaluate a person over several days or weeks to obtain the type of information needed to infer characteristics.

In addition, studies that use ESM and global methods to assess structures usually find a moderate correlation between them (Jackson et al., 2010) and provide independent sources of validity (Wirtz, Kruger, Napa-Scollon, and Diener, 2013).

Conclusion

It has been shown that conscientiousness is essential as it makes people great planners and potential leaders in the workplace. The main dimensions of conscientiousness include industriousness, orderliness, impulse control, reliability, and conventionality.

Improving conscientiousness involves being reliable, developing a strong work ethic, being organised, punctual, and creating realistic goals. More so, building relationships with colleagues is of importance; hence conscientious people engage in social interactions.

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