

The importance of highly focused personality tests

We're looking at introducing personality tests into our recruitment and development processes. I'm a little confused as to what to go for and how to use the scores we're going to get out of it.

It often surprises me that there seems to be so little rigour associated with personality tests. Furthermore, when they are used, there is often a lack of understanding as to what the scores mean. To help you out, let's look at what personality tests should be measuring and how to use them.

Personality tests are very useful when it comes to selection and development. They play an important role in human resources and in the psychology of work. There are five broad dimensions that are measured in most well developed personality questionnaires: openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism (you can use the acronym OCEAN to help you remember them). They are also known as the 'five factor model' of personality.

Below these broad dimensions are more narrow preferences which describe a person's characteristics and behaviour, for example, within the broad dimension of 'conscientiousness' you have the more narrow preferences of 'industriousness' and 'orderliness'.

Two questions then arise, firstly, should we use the personality dimensions at the lower or higher level of the hierarchy. The view we take in our consulting at the Centre for High Performance Development is that it depends on what we are trying to predict. If your model of job performance is broad, then it makes sense to use broad personality dimensions to predict performance. If your model of job performance is detailed, then you are more likely to have success using narrower more targeted personality dimensions.

Secondly, should we focus on certain preferences more than others? The knowledge, skills and abilities required for effective leadership are numerous and diverse. Because of this, in our view, it is unrealistic to expect single personality dimensions, on their own, to predict leader effectiveness. Rather, the personality dimensions that are known from research to distinguish leaders from non-leaders need to be considered collectively. Just as leadership is a complex issue,

the combinations of individual traits, both inherited and learned, that predict leadership are more accurately represented by multiple personality dimensions. We take this approach in much of our organisational development work, where personality profiles are integrated with behavioural capabilities and career interests to create career streams for individuals.

In summary, your best approach would be to use a personality questionnaire that covers both broad and narrow dimensions of personality. Then look at the specific role that you are recruiting for or developing someone into and identify some of the more narrow dimensions that would give you an insight into how someone is likely to perform in that role. Finally, combine your personality questionnaire with questionnaires or analysis of behavioural capabilities and career preferences/motivations. After all that, you should have the most robust analysis on which to base your decisions.

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