

Conscientiousness may matter less if you're a lawyer than if you're in sales

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Personality tests are two a penny, and most of them are no more meaningful than astrology (spoken like a true Capricorn). But there are ways to study personality empirically—they just involve accepting a lot of imperfection and fuzziness.

The “Big Five” personality traits do seem to get at something meaningful about human personality. They certainly don’t capture everything, but Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism are traits that can be measured with a high degree of stability from one test to the next. They change in predictable ways across people’s lifespans and with therapy, and they seem to be related in measurable ways to people’s lives outside the context of a personality test.

One of those traits—conscientiousness—is, unsurprisingly, strongly related to how people perform at work. But why, and in what settings? A paper published this week in PNAS used the data from more than 2,500 studies to summarize what we know about conscientiousness. Unexpectedly, the authors find that conscientiousness scores make less of a difference to people’s performance when they’re in high-complexity careers. Instead,

they mainly seems to matter in low- or moderate-complexity jobs.

More than just being neat

Human personality is, obviously, an incredibly tricky thing to measure. People's personalities are somewhat stable from one week or month to the next, but how they're feeling on the day of the test will obviously change their answers to an extent. And the phenomenon of personality itself is obviously incredibly complex.

So a Big Five personality test doesn't try to carve people into distinct categories—either an extrovert or an introvert, agreeable or not. Instead, it places people on a sliding scale relative to other people on each of the five traits. You could be in the top 30% of extraverted people but still know people more extraverted than you.

Each trait breaks down into different facets that try to capture different components of it. The questions used to assess conscientiousness tap into a combination of someone's orderliness, cautiousness, self-discipline, dutifulness, achievement-striving, and a facet called "self-efficacy" (which is related to behaviors like finishing tasks properly). Together, these facets all get at slightly different angles of what it means to be "conscientious."

The Big Five traits offer a way of capturing people's personalities that is obviously imperfect, but they still have a meaningful connection with how people behave in the real world. If you take a group of 1,000 people and test their conscientiousness and then their job performance, you'll find that higher conscientiousness and higher job performance go hand in hand. If you then randomly pull one very conscientious person out of the 1,000, there's a reasonably good chance (but no certainty!) that they'll do well at a job.

Measuring conscientiousness is obviously handy for employers trying to figure out who to employ. To cut through the variability inherent in individual studies, researchers Michael Wilmot and Deniz Ones threw together a huge amount of data from hundreds of studies to get a more precise estimate on how and why conscientiousness matters.

Creatures of habit

Wilmot and Ones went a step beyond using a meta-analysis and performed a meta-meta-analysis. They used 92 meta-analyses, which pulled data from more than 2,500 studies and more than a million participants. This should provide an unusually precise estimate of just how much conscientiousness matters.

Results from the huge dataset showed that conscientiousness was strongly related to positive work behaviors. For instance, people high in conscientiousness were good at setting goals and avoiding procrastination. They were less aggressive and less irresponsible than people with low conscientiousness.

But there were some results that won't sound quite so obvious. For instance, conscientiousness is related to conformity and security, so a "preference for more predictable environments" was a strong theme in the results, the researchers write.

Perhaps because of this, conscientiousness seemed to make more of a difference in some careers than others. In jobs that were high in complexity, it didn't make much of a difference at all. Meanwhile, in jobs that were moderate in complexity, like customer service and sales, conscientiousness made a much bigger difference.

The researchers suggest that high-complexity jobs, which require creative problem solving, aren't necessarily a great match for highly conscientious people who want structure and predictability in their work. But it might also be that complex jobs tend to attract conscientious people, and so

everyone in those professions is already pretty high in conscientiousness, with less difference among them. Another possibility is that there are jobs where high conscientiousness is a minimum threshold for making it in and just one of a suite of traits that are necessary for doing well, says Marcus Credé, who researches conscientiousness but wasn't involved in the paper.

Personality change

The paper does a great job of pulling together a mountain of evidence on what researchers have suspected about conscientiousness, says Credé, but there are some caveats. The research itself isn't weak, but measuring people's personalities is just incredibly tricky. If you test someone's conscientiousness while they're filling in a job application, they're obviously going to be presenting themselves in a certain way—so their answers will reflect not just their actual conscientiousness, but also their awareness of what an employer will be looking for.

Wilmot and Ones suggest that it would be a good idea to try improving conscientiousness in schoolkids. Credé, though, isn't so sure. Conscientiousness does tend to increase with age, but changing it intentionally is a different matter. "I'm not aware of any particularly successful intervention program," he says.

It's possible that some of the facets of conscientiousness could respond to training, he adds—safety training, for instance, could possibly increase people's cautiousness. But "getting someone to be more achievement-striving? It'd be lovely if you could! You could make a lot of money if you could figure that out."

You can take a Big Five test [here](#).

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