

Which Personality Traits Are Most Important to Employers?

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While most employers evaluate job candidates on their skills and experience, many companies are increasingly using personality measures to determine whether a candidate is a good fit. According to a survey from the Society for Human Resource Management, nearly 20% of employers say they use some type of personality test as part of the hiring process.

In a new study published in the journal *Perspectives in Psychological Science*, psychologists Paul R. Sackett and Philip T. Walmsley of the University of Minnesota analyzed several large data sets of hiring and job performance information to find out which personality attributes companies value most.

Sackett and Walmsley used a well-established model for measuring personality known as the Big Five as the theoretical basis for their study. In the Big Five model, an individual's personality can be described using measures of five personality traits: conscientiousness, agreeableness, emotional stability, extraversion, and openness to experience.

The researchers analyzed a large set of data on job interviews to find out which personality traits companies look for when they're hiring. Much of the data came from an analysis of structured job interviews, in which employers assess candidates for particular personality traits in order to make sure they're a good fit for the job and overall work environment. For example, a company that is hiring a salesperson would want to assess job candidates for the traits of extraversion and friendliness to make sure they're likely to work well with customers.

After crunching the numbers, Sackett and Walmsley found that conscientiousness—which involves being dependable, persevering, and orderly—was by far the most highly sought after personality attribute for job applicants. Agreeableness—being cooperative, flexible and tolerant—was the second most prized personality trait.

But, do these personality traits predict how well someone will actually perform on the job?

To find out, the researchers looked at the relationship between personality traits and three work performance criteria: whether an employee is able to complete their work to satisfaction, how often an employee goes above and beyond at work, and how often they engage in negative behaviors.

Again, conscientiousness and agreeableness came out on top. In the analysis, conscientiousness was the trait most closely associated with overall job performance, with agreeableness coming in second.

The researchers also analyzed data indicating the specific skills and qualities needed to be successful at over a thousand different jobs, drawn from a Department of Labor database called O*NET. They wanted to find out which of the Big Five personality traits are most often cited as important qualities for success across the entire American workforce.

The researchers found that overall attributes related to conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability were considered important for a wide variety of jobs from construction to health care.

“In conclusion, our findings provide robust evidence that attributes related to Conscientiousness and Agreeableness are highly important for workforce readiness across a variety of occupations that require a variety of training and experience qualifications,” write Sackett and Walmsley.

Although conscientiousness is, on average, the most highly valued attribute, the researchers caution that specific occupations may have different rankings for personality traits. However, Sackett and Walmsley also advise that knowing which traits are highly valued generally could be helpful information for students or people who haven’t yet decided on specific career goals.

Reference

Sackett, P. R, Walmsley, P. T. (2014). Which Personality Attributes Are Most Important in the Workplace? *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 9(5), 538-551. DOI: 10.1177/1745691614543972