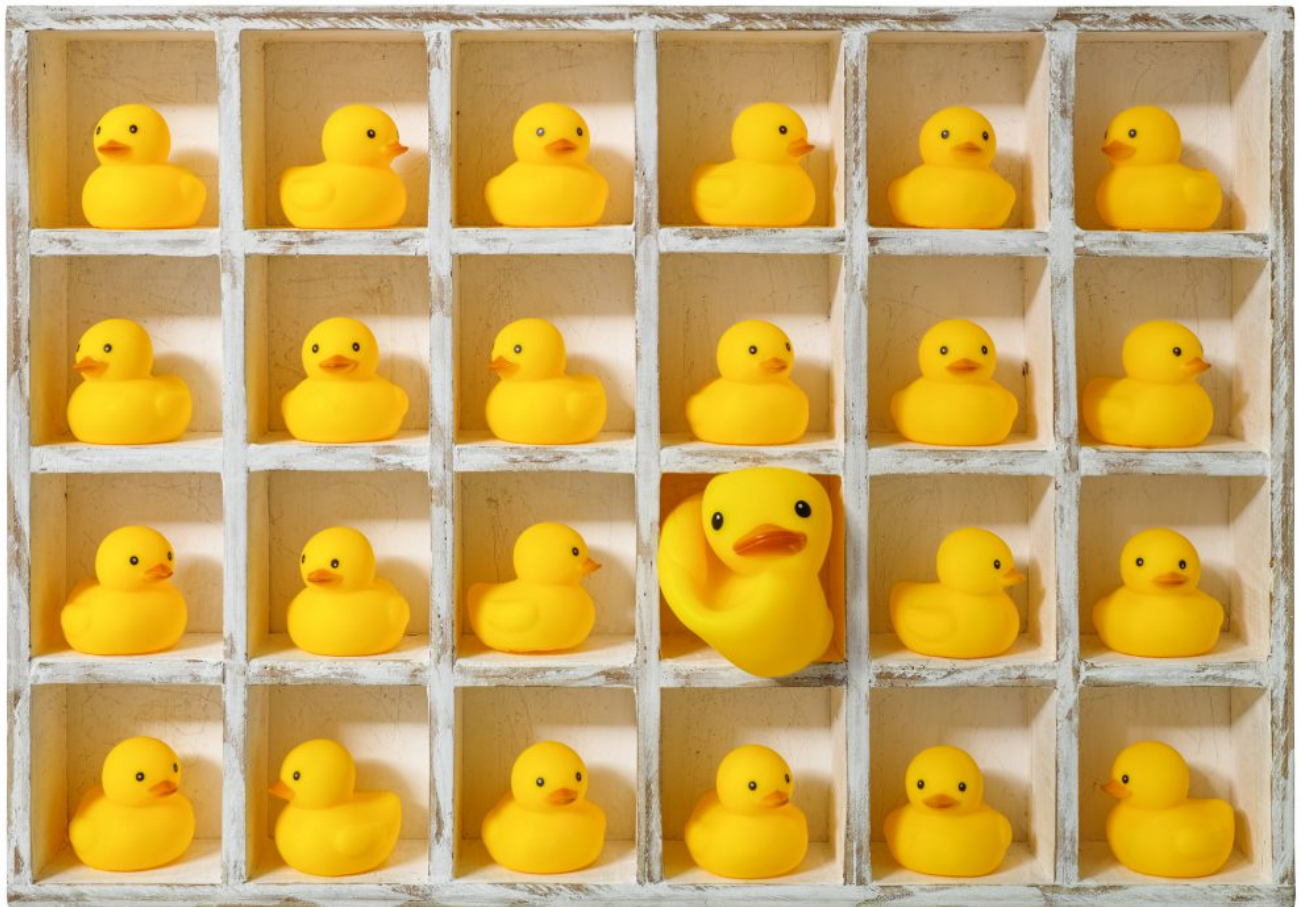


For Professionals, Personality May Be Best in Moderation

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It's easy to see how someone with low levels of conscientiousness or extraversion might struggle in the workplace. An employee who can't stay organized might lose track of important papers or miss a critical meeting, while those who prefer solitude can struggle to make the professional connections needed to advance in their careers.

But people who tend to score higher than average on the “Big5” personality traits – openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism — can face hurdles of their own too, write Nathan T. Carter, a professor of industrial-organizational psychology at the University of Georgia, and colleagues in [Current Directions in Psychological Science](#).

“Psychologists have generally operated under the assumption that for all traits, more is better,” the authors wrote. “It is possible that persons with moderate levels of [five-factor model] traits will see better work and life outcomes — across a variety of jobs and situations — than those at the extremes.”

Studies have already suggested a link between trait conscientiousness and obsessive-compulsive

personality disorder (OCPD), but Carter's research suggests that having very high levels of this widely valued trait can also create issues specific to the workplace. After collecting data on personality traits and job performance from 1,258 employees working at an international consulting firm through self-reports and supervisor ratings, Carter and colleagues found higher conscientiousness was, in fact, positively linked with performance—except among those who scored highest for the trait, who actually performed worse than their peers.

And there is evidence that other Big 5 personality traits show this curvilinear relationship, as well, Carter said. The trusting, altruistic natures of highly agreeable people have been found to correlate with lower salary and reduced opportunities for mentorship, for example, while incredibly outgoing individuals may feel isolated or aggravate their colleagues in less socially-oriented industries. Although openness has been shown to support creative achievement and relationship building, it can contribute to difficulty distinguishing between fantasy and reality at extreme levels.

Of all of the Big 5 traits, the potential negative impacts of scoring very high in neuroticism — a trait characterized by emotional instability, anxiety, and depression — are perhaps the most self-evident. The potential drawbacks of being incredibly emotionally stable, on the other hand, have not been so thoroughly investigated, the authors note. It's possible, they add, that a lessened ability to feel anxiety could be similarly maladaptive to the inability to feel physical pain, and may even contribute to the fearlessness of some psychopathic individuals.

Aristotle himself argued that all human qualities can be too extreme in both directions, Carter notes, and that virtues such as temperance and courage exist not at the highest levels of abstinence and bravery, but at the mean.

"I think it is really intuitive," Carter says. "There were philosophers that really thought very hard about these types of things and some of the ways that we were measuring and operationalizing took us away from that."

Personality traits are thought of as existing on a continuum with maladaptive levels at both ends, he continues, but the dominance model of measurement, which supports the view that more of a given trait is always better, prevents researchers from accounting for the full spectrum of behavior.

On a typical five-factor model (FFM) personality test, for example, a participant who disagrees with the statement "I am usually on time for my appointments" would be assumed to usually be *late* for their appointments. Someone extremely high in conscientiousness, however, might disagree with the statement because they are *always* on time for appointments.

The ideal point model of measurement, on the other hand, permits participants to indicate not only whether they disagree with a statement, but that they disagree because they perceive themselves to possess more or less of a trait than the statement allows for. It's possible that the dominance model of measurement has created a sort of false ceiling for personality scores, Carter adds, because researchers haven't been using items that allow them to measure extremely high levels of these traits.

That's not to say that extreme personalities are always bad, but they do seem to be highly dependent on context for success. Otherwise extreme levels of conscientiousness may be desirable in an air

traffic controller who is responsible for helping pilots navigate safely, for example. Carter's ongoing study on agreeableness has also suggested that results can vary between individuals of different groups, with highly agreeable women tending to be better compensated than highly agreeable men.

Just because an extreme personality benefits someone professionally doesn't mean that it isn't maladaptive in other areas of life, however, Carter noted.

"What leads to success may not always be the best thing in general for the person," he says.

Currently, Carter is investigating the relationship between extroversion and prosocial behavior in different workplace contexts, as well as how highly dutiful employees who are reluctant to "job-hop" may pay an economic penalty.

Reference

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