

# Does Personality Matter in Nursing?: *Assessing Suitability as Well as Eligibility When Hiring*

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Nursing is a profession in which communication, empathy, reliability, and attention to detail are essential, yet difficult to measure, in a potential employee. Nurses are the primary caregivers for patients at their most vulnerable, and the degree of nursing care can mean the difference between life and death, or quality of life after illness. As a result, healthcare

organizations and nurse leaders are beginning to consider how best to determine and assess traits essential to optimal patient care and outcomes. Nursing has also proven to be a challenge in regards to organizational recruiting and retention, therefore the right personality traits and its congruence with healthcare organizations' values is critical in improving nurses' mental and physical well-being, and job satisfaction that may be a predictor of improved performance, i.e., care of patients, relationship with coworkers, etc. In writing this article, we wish to discuss some of the current methods used to assess trait suitability in nursing professionals, the evidence supporting these methods, and our plan to incorporate and evaluate suitability measures as part of the hiring process.

## ELIGIBILITY VS SUITABILITY

Suitability<sup>1</sup> is a term used to describe behavioral competencies and determines whether a person *will* do the job. Some of the traits<sup>1</sup> associated with suitability include interpersonal skills, motivation, emotional balance, personal honesty, values, and ethics. By contrast, eligibility<sup>1</sup> describes technical competencies and determines whether a person *can* do the job. Eligibility<sup>1</sup> is often measured by education, previous work

experience, licensure, and certification. A nursing candidate may possess high eligibility, which is more easily measured, but low suitability. In regard to nursing, healthcare organizations traditionally rely heavily on eligibility measures when hiring, but give little thought to reliable measurements of suitability. Organizational nursing leaders are often put in the position of using the interview process to assess suitability where they tend to rely more on “gut instinct” approaches to

nurse selection. This can prove to be unfavorable for the applicant because conscious or subconscious bias may exist. Skills in interviewing as well as knowledge of behavioral traits vary widely across organizational nurse leaders, possibly resulting in less consistent and valid suitability estimates. Moreover, such improper hiring practices can lead to an adverse impact resulting in consequent litigation.

Instruments that measure personality, particularly those using a trait approach to personality such as the five-factor model,<sup>2</sup> can offer organizations a reliable and valid method of assessing suitability in nursing candidates. Personality refers to the pattern of thoughts, feelings, social adjustments, and behaviors consistently exhibited by a person over time.<sup>3</sup> Personality traits are dimensions of those individual differences across people.<sup>2</sup> Five-factor refers to the 5 traits of personality, and their related dimensions, seen consistently in people around the world through research over the past several decades. Instruments based on the five-factor model have shown very good reliability and validity scores, globally and cross-culturally, for over half a century in adults of both sexes across their lifespans. Further evidence of validity correlates biological factors and the five-factor model. Twin studies<sup>4</sup> found a mean percentage of heritability for all 5 dimensions of personality, ranging from 42% to 57%. Longitudinal studies of the five-factor model suggest that personality stabilizes<sup>5</sup> for working-age individuals within 4 years of starting work. Some research has even looked at brain structures and the relationship to five-factor traits, showing positive and negative relationships of traits to certain areas of the brain.<sup>5,6</sup> The 5 factors globally identified<sup>2</sup> are shown in Table 1. People answer a set of questions and are scored along the continuum based on their responses. Each trait has various dimensions, each of which contributes to the total trait score.

## SUITABILITY AND PERSON-JOB FIT

A similar construct worth considering when hiring nursing personnel is that of person-job (PJ) fit and its similarities to suitability. PJ fit is described when an individual has skills to meet the demands of a specific job (demands-abilities fit), or when the job meets the needs of the individual (needs-supplies fit).<sup>7</sup> There is another dichotomy of PJ fit referred to as subjective and objective fit.<sup>8</sup> Subjective PJ fit refers to how employees feel about their match to the job. This definition can be juxtaposed to suitability that may translate into how well they *will* perform based on their subjective PJ fit. Similarly, objective PJ fit is that of how well an individual's characteristics and preferences are linked to that of an incumbent nurse that is performing the job well and thus seems to be a model for what the organization and the incumbent nurse would consider optimal eligibility and suitability. We felt it necessary to consider the PJ fit literature in regard to suitability. Similar to the research on suitability, there is a paucity of research with regard to PJ fit and personality, albeit a few noteworthy studies,<sup>9-12</sup> but no known studies with regard to nursing or the healthcare industry.

## CURRENT USE OF SUITABILITY MEASURES IN NURSING

It is difficult to determine the extent or degree to which suitability measures are being used to assess nurses. There is very little published on suitability or personality in nurses. Anecdotally, we hear from nurses hired at our facility that they are taking different types of tests when they apply at different organizations. The nurses state that they do not know what the tests are measuring, and they are not given feedback on the results once they complete the tests. In asking other institutions directly about methods of nursing assessment, we are told that some suitability measures are starting to be used, but these measures are not consistent; therefore, reliability and validity of the instruments being used is not reported. Also not broadly disseminated are any results of the measures being used and possible correlations with job performance, job satisfaction, and/or patient care.

## RESEARCH ON PERSONALITY TRAITS AND NURSES: WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SAY?

A quick search of the Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL) database, using the terms *personality* and *nursing*, revealed 65 initial articles. After selecting for research articles that used instruments with the underlying five-factor theory and screening for correlations with nursing practice or any aspect of professional nursing, 11 articles were found that are discussed in terms of their evidence and relationship to measuring suitability in nurses. Two of the 11 studies involved American nurses. The remaining studies were in Asia and the United Kingdom.

### Nurses Personality Related to Caring, Excellence, and Stress

Caring is a component of empathy, a quality hypothesized to exist more in healthcare professionals than perhaps other professions. One UK study found that nurses scored statistically significantly higher than nonnurses in extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, and lower in neuroticism.<sup>13</sup> Researchers from China studied nurses from 3 hospitals in an effort to identify the personality traits of excellent versus average nurses.<sup>14</sup> Excellent nurses had higher scores in openness, extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. In Belgium, statistically significant results indicated more positive attitudes and less stress in those scoring lower in neuroticism and higher in conscientiousness.<sup>15</sup> Those higher in extraversion and conscientiousness were also more interactive with others. In Taiwan, researchers studied job stress in 129 advanced practice nurses (described as nurse specialists) from 7 acute care teaching hospitals, while statistically controlling for personality traits.<sup>16</sup> Findings indicate that conscientiousness and extraversion significantly predicted job satisfaction.

### Nurses and Job Satisfaction

In India, a researcher looked at 150 nurses and 150 nursing students, examining the relationships between extraversion, neuroticism, and job satisfaction.<sup>17</sup> Results indicated a positive relationship between extraversion and job satisfaction,

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