

## The use of personality measures in personnel selection: What does current research support?☆

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### Abstract

With an eye toward research and practice, this article reviews and evaluates main trends that have contributed to the increasing use of personality assessment in personnel selection. Research on the ability of personality to predict job performance is covered, including the Five Factor Model of personality versus narrow personality measures, meta-analyses of personality–criterion relationships, moderator effects, mediator effects, and incremental validity of personality over other selection testing methods. Personality and team performance is also covered. Main trends in contemporary research on the extent to which applicant “faking” of personality tests poses a serious threat are explicated, as are promising approaches for contending with applicant faking such as the “faking warning” and the forced-choice method of personality assessment. Finally, internet-based assessment of personality and computer adaptive personality testing are synopsized.

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**Keywords:** Personality assessment; Personnel selection; Five factor model; Personality and job performance prediction

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Personality measures are increasingly being used by managers and human resource professionals to evaluate the suitability of job applicants for positions across many levels in an organization. The growth of this personnel selection practice undoubtedly stems from a series of meta-analytic research studies in the early 1990s in which personality measures were demonstrated to have a level of validity and predictability for personnel selection that historically had not been evident. In this article we briefly review available survey data on the current use of personality measures in personnel selection and discuss the historical context for the growth of this human resource practice. We then review the important trends in research examining the use of personality measures to predict job performance since the publication of the meta-analytic evidence that spurred the resurgence of interest in this topic. Of particular interest throughout this review are the implications for human resource practice in the use of personality measures for personnel selection.

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☆ Preparation of this article was supported by grants from The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to Mitchell G. Rothstein and Richard D. Goffin.

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## 1. Current use of personality measures in personnel selection

Although we can find no reports of research using systematic sampling procedures to determine with any measure of certainty the extent that personality measures are currently being used by organizations as part of their personnel selection practices, a number of surveys of human resource professionals, organizational usage, and industry reports may be combined to provide a reasonably good picture of the degree that such measures are being used. A survey conducted of recruiters in 2003 indicated that 30% of American companies used personality tests to screen job applicants (Heller, 2005). Integrity tests, a particular type of personality assessment, are given to as many as five million job applicants a year (a number that has been growing by 20% a year), and are reported used by 20% of the members of the Society of Human Resource Management (Heller, 2005). Another survey of the Society for Human Resource Management indicated that more than 40% of Fortune 100 companies reported using personality tests for assessing some level of job applicant from front line workers to the CEO (Erickson, 2004). These results seem to indicate a change in attitude among human resource professionals since a survey conducted by Rynes, Colbert, and Brown (2002) in which participants reported more pessimism about the use of personality testing for predicting employee performance. Still another survey indicated that every one of the top 100 companies in Great Britain reported using personality tests as part of their hiring procedure (Faulder, 2005). Beagrie (2005) has estimated that two thirds of medium to large organizations use some type of psychological testing, including aptitude as well as personality, in job applicant screening.

Industry reports are consistent with these surveys indicating increased usage of personality testing. It has been estimated that personality testing is a \$400 million industry in the United States and it is growing at an average of 10% a year (Hsu, 2004). In addition to questions concerning usage of personality testing, numerous surveys have been conducted attempting to determine the reasons for the positive attitude toward personality testing for employment purposes. The most prevalent reason given for using personality testing was their contribution to improving employee fit and reducing turnover by rates as much as 20% (Geller, 2004), 30% (Berta, 2005), 40% (Daniel, 2005), and even 70% (Wagner, 2000). It is of considerable interest that evidence for the validity of personality tests for predicting job performance is rarely cited (see Hoel (2004) for a notable exception) by human resource professionals or recruiters. On the other hand, criticisms of personality testing are often cited in many of the same survey reports, most often with little analysis or understanding of the technical issues or research evidence (e.g., Handler, 2005). For example, the use of the MMPI is often cited for its inability to predict job performance and potential for litigation if used for such purposes (e.g., Heller, 2005; Paul, 2004), despite the fact that this is well known among personality researchers who provide clear guidelines for the proper choice and use of personality tests for employee selection (Daniel, 2005). Thus, it appears that personality testing is clearly increasing in frequency as a component of the personnel selection process, although human resource professionals and recruiters may not entirely appreciate the benefit accrued by this practice nor the complexities of choosing the right test and using it appropriately.

## 2. Are personality measures valid predictors of job performance? A brief summary of the meta-analytic evidence

The impetus for the numerous meta-analytic studies of personality–job performance relations has most often been based on an influential review of the available research at the time by Guion and Gottier (1965). On the basis of their narrative review, Guion and Gottier concluded that there was little evidence for the validity of personality measures in personnel selection. In the decades following the publication of this paper hundreds of research articles challenged this conclusion and attempted to demonstrate the validity of predicting job performance using a seemingly endless number of personality constructs, a variety of performance criteria, and many diverse jobs and occupations. The first attempt to summarize this literature using meta-analysis was undertaken by Schmitt, Gooding, Noe, and Kirsch (1984). They obtained a mean uncorrected correlation of .15 across all personality traits, performance criteria, and occupations, a finding that led these authors to conclude that personality measures were less valid than other predictors of job performance. By the 1990s however, methodological innovations in meta-analysis and the emergence of a widely accepted taxonomy of personality characteristics, the “five factor model” or FFM (i.e., Extraversion, Agreeableness, Emotional Stability, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience), spurred a series of meta-analytic studies that have provided a much more optimistic view of the ability of personality measures to predict job performance.

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