Personality assessments can be a strong predictor of job performance and oftentimes are superior to job interviews. They can also demonstrate less potential for adverse impact than cognitive ability tests. Therefore, it is not surprising that the use of personality assessment for personnel selection is becoming increasingly popular among organizations. In fact, 75 percent of recently surveyed organizations are currently using, or have considered using, personality assessments for executive selection and development. Appropriate, validated personality assessments are attractive selection tools because they provide a data based, non-subjective method for identifying high-potential employees who will also fit well within a particular work environment. It is critically important to note that while the term “personality assessment” is used generically, not all personality assessments are suited for personnel selection. Personality assessments that measure traits are appropriate for selection purposes; measures of psychological type are not designed for, and should not be used in, selection applications. This paper will offer brief answers to questions like this that are often asked when personality assessments are used in personnel selection decisions, including:

• What is personality?
• How is personality measured?
• How is personality related to job performance?
• How accurate is personality assessment in predicting job performance?
• What are the advantages of using personality assessments?
• How are personality assessments implemented in selection systems?

WHAT IS PERSONALITY?

Personality has been defined by N. Brody and H. Ehrlichman as “those thoughts, feelings, desires, intentions, and action tendencies that contribute to important aspects of individuality.”5 Think of some people you know well. Disregarding physical attributes, how would you describe them individually? Do they enjoy crowds or being alone? Do they keep a strict schedule or go with the flow? Are they self-conscious or confident? Your answers to questions such as these provide insight to their personality. Personality comprises the psychological preferences, temperaments, and predispositions that, in part, motivate and govern people’s behavior. Whether they attend social functions, pursue creative endeavors, or follow a regimented schedule is determined, in part, by their personality. Indeed, other factors influence behavior (e.g., social setting, mood, recent events) as well, but personality is a major force behind individual differences in behavioral tendencies.
HOW ARE PERSONALITY MEASURES DEVELOPED?

A vast assortment of personality assessments measure an equally vast collection of personality characteristics. Each assessment, because it is developed according to the author’s unique theory/perspective, offers a different approach to personality measurement. Some common elements, however, exist across almost all approaches. Personality is a combination of internal, intangible characteristics and therefore cannot be measured directly. Instead, psychologists rely on self-reports of a person’s thoughts, feelings, preferences, and/or behaviors to assess personality—that is, they ask people questions about themselves, assign numerical values to their responses, and use these values to generate a portrait of the person taking the assessment.

Each question included in a validated personality assessment will have been carefully crafted to tap a specific personality characteristic. For example, “I enjoy being the center of attention,” may be one indicator of sociability or the extent to which a person is gregarious and outgoing. Single items, however, are not sufficient to assess broad personality characteristics; instead, psychologists look at the pattern of responses across several items. The goal of personality measurement is to describe individuals as they are seen by others. Responses to personality assessments help classify and differentiate individuals, providing a basis for understanding prior actions and predicting future behavior.

It is important to note that not all personality assessments are created equal. Any personality assessment used in selection applications must, at a minimum, demonstrate adequate reliability and validity. An assessment is considered reliable if scores remain consistent over time—that is, if an individual were to complete the assessment on multiple occasions, his or her score should be approximately the same each time. An assessment is considered valid if it is related to other important constructs (e.g., job performance). If a test is used to select individuals for employment, there must be validity evidence to support the accuracy and job relatedness of inferences made on the basis of scores on that assessment.

HOW IS PERSONALITY RELATED TO JOB PERFORMANCE?

How would you describe a typical accountant? Most people think of accountants as conventional and reserved. How about a typical salesperson? Usually, we think of salespeople as outgoing and ambitious. Both occupations seem to be filled, in general, with people possessing decidedly different personality characteristics. These differences are clearly illustrated by the data presented in Figure 1, in which the CPI 260® scale scores of a sample of accountants and of a sample of sales professionals are compared. The scores represent each sample’s mean percentile ranking based on a normative sample of the U.S. working population. A score of 72 on a particular scale, for instance, would indicate that the sample, on average, scored higher than 72 percent of the U.S. workforce on that scale.
As the figure shows, significant differences exist between the accountant and sales professionals on several personality characteristics as measured by the respective scales. In general, sales professionals are more assertive (Dominance scale), enterprising (Capacity for Status scale), outgoing (Sociability scale), spontaneous (Social Presence scale), optimistic (Self-acceptance scale), cheerful (Well-being scale), entrepreneurial (Achievement via Independence scale), and comfortable with managerial authority (Managerial Potential scale). Accountants, on the other hand, are more likely to conform to societal norms (Social Conformity scale), exhibit emotional stability (Self-control scale), and value privacy (Orientation Toward Others Vector 1).

Why are there such stark differences? The answer is relatively simple: the duties and responsibilities of each occupation (i.e., accountant vs. salesperson) require people in those roles to behave in specific ways for successful performance. Because personality helps determine preferences, temperaments, and behavior, personality influences job performance by determining whether an individual has a natural inclination for job duties and/or will enjoy the job. Certainly, other personal characteristics (e.g., cognitive ability, education, experience) also influence job performance, but personality plays an important role.

A person who is quiet and reserved (e.g., an accountant) may be uncomfortable performing duties typically associated with a sales position: presenting in front of large groups, entertaining prospective clients, or networking. Similarly, a person who is outgoing and ambitious (e.g., a salesperson) may be uncomfortable with the solitude, structure, and discipline required for preparing accounting records. In general, research confirms that workers are most effective when their personality characteristics match the job requirements.8
Personality also helps determine who will enjoy a job. People find the ability to express their personality intrinsically rewarding; that is, people enjoy being themselves. Therefore, people enjoy work environments that allow them to be themselves. People who are quiet and reserved may be able to work in sales, but they would probably not find the work intrinsically rewarding and enjoyable. Over time, these individuals are more likely to leave in favor of a position more suited to their preferences. Personality assessment can help ensure success by identifying the right individual for each work environment.

In summary, different jobs require different types of behaviors for successful performance. Personality, in part, determines who has a natural inclination for certain jobs and certain work environments. People’s differing personality characteristics help determine whether they will be a good fit for a certain position. The goal of personality assessment in personnel selection is to identify which individuals, in general, will be successful performers and remain on the job.

**HOW ACCURATE ARE PERSONALITY ASSESSMENTS IN PREDICTING JOB PERFORMANCE?**

Personality assessment is based on statistics and probabilities. Therefore, we cannot infer, with 100 percent certainty, whether an applicant will be successful based solely on assessment scores. We can, however, make inferences about who is more likely to become a successful performer. These inferences are based, in part, on the results of validity studies. The purpose of validity studies is to demonstrate the accuracy and job relevance of assessment scores.

A common method of validating psychological assessments is to calculate correlation coefficients between assessment scale scores (e.g., Dominance, Sociability) and job performance measures (e.g., job performance ratings, sales quota achievement, etc.). Correlation coefficients are standardized continuous values that indicate the strength and direction of the relationship between two variables (e.g., assessment scale scores and job performance ratings) and range from -1.0 (strong negative relationship) to 0 (no relationship) to 1.0 (strong positive relationship).

As one example of the accuracy of personality assessment, a recent validity study by M. G. Anderson investigated the relationship between the scales of the CPI 260 tool and the performance dimensions of the Benchmarks’ 360-degree feedback tool. Personality profiles, consisting of the most predictive CPI 260 scales for each job, were developed for sales executives (including CPI 260 scales Social Presence, Amicability, Empathy, and Insightfulness) and accounting managers (including CPI 260 scales Self-control, Social Conformity, Communality, Well-being, and Amicability). The corrected correlation coefficients between fit with the sales and accounting profiles and overall performance ratings were .41 and .45, respectively. To put these correlations into perspective, these relationships are virtually the same as the relationship between weight and height for U.S. adults ($r = .44^{13}$), higher than the relationship between sleeping pills and short-term improvement in chronic insomnia ($r = .30^{14}$), and far above the correlation between job interviews and job performance ($r = .26^{15}$). That is, the personality profile–job performance relationship in this
study is stronger than well-accepted medical procedures and a common alternate method of employee selection.

Correlation coefficients are relatively easy to interpret; to determine how much variance in job performance is explained by scores on the CPI 260 scales, simply square the correlation coefficient. Take, for instance, the correlation between the accounting manager profile and overall job performance of .45. This means that approximately 20 percent (.45 x .45 = .2025) of the difference in job performance ratings for this job is due to personality characteristics measured by the CPI 260 scales. In this validity study, further analysis revealed that sales executives and accounting managers who matched their respective personality profiles were 3.64 and 4.56 times, respectively, more likely to be a top-performing employee. Considering these results, the initial validity evidence provides strong support for the accuracy and job relatedness of inferences made from CPI 260 assessment scores for these job types.

**WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF USING PERSONALITY ASSESSMENTS?**

Beyond predictive validity, personality assessments offer several advantages over other types of selection tools. Perhaps most important is that, unlike other types of assessments (e.g., cognitive ability), personality assessments demonstrate little or no adverse impact; that is, they generally do not discriminate against members of protected groups or classes. Cognitive ability tests, for example, have generally resulted in adverse impact on certain demographic groups. This is especially troublesome given the “Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures” requirement that alternative selection methods must be investigated in order to reduce adverse impact as long as the accompanying reduction in validity is not too large. Personality and integrity tests, however, typically demonstrate only slight differences between important demographic groups (e.g., age, ethnicity, gender). Therefore, personality assessments can be implemented into selection procedures as a way to increase predictive validity and reduce the potential for adverse impact.

**HOW ARE PERSONALITY ASSESSMENTS IMPLEMENTED IN SELECTION SYSTEMS?**

While it is important to remember that any assessment used to make personnel decisions must adhere to certain legal and professional guidelines (e.g. EEOC guidelines), personality assessment for the purpose of personnel selection generally involves a straightforward series of steps:

1. **Conduct a job analysis.** A job analysis commonly includes one or more methods (e.g., standardized questionnaire, behavioral observation, job shadowing) of soliciting information from subject-matter experts (e.g., incumbents, supervisors) about the job requirements. The purpose of a job analysis is to identify the personal characteristics and professional competencies required for successful performance in a specific work setting. The results of the job analysis help determine the actual assessment scales that are included in the selection procedures.

*Note: The four-step process outlined here and the discussion of legal implications are specific to the United States. Applicable law and the appropriate process in other countries may differ significantly. In any event, organizations considering the use of assessments in hiring should consult counsel. This article is not intended as legal advice.*
2. **Conduct a validity study.** A validity study provides empirical support for the accuracy and job-relatedness of the assessment scales. As mentioned previously, validity studies generally include correlating assessment scale scores with some form of performance criteria (e.g., supervisor ratings, sales quota achievement). In situations where local validation studies are impractical or unfeasible (e.g., too small a sample of workers or no performance criteria), validity generalization is an accepted practice. Discussion of validity generalization practices is beyond the scope of this discussion; the point is that there are several options that allow for the proper validation of personality assessments for any job.

3. **Use results of the job analysis and validity study** to create a personality profile. The profile includes the personality scales that will be used to make selection decisions, specifically scales that demonstrate predictive validity of job performance, are representative of important aspects of job performance, and/or are characteristics important for successful job performance. Cutoff scores are established for each scale based on information from the job analysis and the organization’s desired pass rates.

4. **Conduct adverse impact analyses** to ensure that cutoff scores do not discriminate against any protected demographic group or class. Most commonly, adverse impact is assessed by comparing mean assessment scale scores among demographic groups. If group means are not significantly different, there is no apparent adverse impact. Alternatively, the personality profile can be applied to a representative sample of the U.S. workforce to calculate pass rates for each demographic group. If the pass rate for each protected group is not less than 80 percent of the group with the highest rate, then there is no apparent adverse impact.

**SUMMARY**

It must be stressed that personality assessments are not to be used as the sole source of information in personnel decisions. Adding other sources of information (e.g., interviews, simulations) will increase the likelihood of hiring a successful candidate. Following the steps outlined in this paper, personality assessments can be a valuable part of a legally and ethically sound selection process that can help determine whether an applicant can perform the job and/or will enjoy the job—increasing predictive validity and reducing the potential for adverse impact.

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NOTES


4. Personality assessments that measure traits are appropriate for selection purposes; measures of psychological type are not designed for, and should not be used in, selection applications.


12. Correlation coefficients for sales and accounting profiles were corrected for criterion unreliability.
16. Correlations for the relationship between height and weight and the relationship between sleeping pills and insomnia were not corrected for unreliability. These correlations, however, do not need to be corrected because the reliability of these criteria is at or about 1.00. The correlation between interviews and job success is a meta-analytic mean estimate and was corrected for criterion unreliability.
22. See EEOC, “Uniform guidelines on employee selection procedures,” 38290–38315. Organizations that use any type of assessment for selection purposes should continually monitor demographic information and pass rates to conduct periodic adverse impact analyses.