

Personality traits as antecedents of Employees' Outstanding Performance in Organizations

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Abstract

Organizations seek to recruit employees who are identified as outstanding performers and who are dedicated to their job and workplace. This research purpose is to provide a model that demonstrates employee's personality traits as antecedents of employees' outstanding performance. The unique sample to which the researcher obtained access was composed of a variety of elite top performers from 156 organizations at the national level. Questionnaire was administered to 289 pairs of outstanding employees and their supervisors as well as to a control group of 202 pairs of ordinary employees and their supervisors. The results show that three out of five dimensions of personality namely agreeableness, extraversion, and openness to experience, affect outstanding performance. The study's conclusions enable organizations to locate outstanding employees in their workforce and may assist in locating candidates for succession planning.

Introduction

Growing competition in the job market during the 21st century has led to the development of employees' performance measurement in organizations (Lawler, 2000). Organizations seek to recruit employees who are identified as outstanding performers and who are dedicated to their job and workplace. Such employees are recognized today as the organizations' greatest assets (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007). Outstanding performance or excellence is recognized as a dynamic situation in which mental frameworks consisting of values, ideas, and knowledge, which are the basis for people's thoughts and actions, are accompanied by constant movement toward self-improvement, quest for and transmission of knowledge (Anninos, 2007). Excellent employees are defined as people whose main asset is their human capital and who use it effectively in order to improve organizational performance (Lawler, 2000). Such employees are described as high or top performers according to a variety of performance measures (Fletcher, 2001) and their performance is perceived as a function of motives, abilities, personality, attitudes, and environment (Elliot, 2005)

The aim of this research is to provide a model that demonstrates employee's personality traits as antecedents of employees' outstanding performance. Over the past few decades, organizations have been increasingly assessing personality traits in human resource selection and development. This is in part, due to Costa and McCrae's (1985) Five Factor Model (FFM or the "Big Five"), which provides an efficient classification of numerous personality traits (Borman, 2004). This model refers to five independent measures of human's

traits: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience (Barrick & Mount, 1991). According to Evolutionary Personality Psychology theory, the Big Five personality theory is the result of “species-typical, relatively domain-specific psychological mechanisms that have evolved over human evolutionary history, because they solved the adaptive problems ancestral humans confronted” (Michalski & Shackelford, 2010, p. 511). In short, personality is an individual variable that characterizes basic and dynamic tendencies, which foster in reaction with the environment (McCrae & Costa, 1987).

The relationship between personality traits and excellent employee performance has been explored in various studies. Moreover, empirical research provides multiple combinations of the personality traits that may effectively predict job performance (Abdullah et al., 2013; Witt et al., 2002).

Agreeableness characterizes sympathetic, cooperative, and trusting individuals (Costa & McCrae, 1992) who are more directed toward social interactions which pursue effective team work (Mount, Barrick & Stewart, 1998). Agreeableness is important in interpersonal interactions as it has an effect on the group environment (Nettle, 2006). Individuals high in agreeableness may be more adaptive as they are good at establishing cooperative relationships and fostering supportive networks with others (Huang, Ryan, Zabel & Palmer, 2014). Research literature shows that agreeableness has a positive relationship with OCB- Organizational Citizenship Behavior (Organ & Ryan, 1995). Agreeableness can predict an employee’s performance as well. The researchers found that agreeableness can best predict an employee’s performance in the field of sales, as it is a cooperative, tolerant, and courteous trait that is relevant when working with people. (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Furthermore, Abdullah and colleagues (2013) found that agreeableness has a significant positive effect on the employee’s task and contextual performance. In addition, Monzani, Ripoll, and Peiró (2014) found that agreeableness predicts performance on interpersonal tasks and positively interacts with both task performance and organizational citizenship behavior.

***Hypothesis 1:** Outstanding employees that are identified with high levels of Agreeableness perform higher levels of contextual performance.*

Conscientiousness refers to an individual’s level of responsibility, reliability, dependability, dutifulness, self-discipline, goal achievement, and loyalty to organizational rules and procedures (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Employees who are high in conscientiousness perceive themselves as “careful, well-organized, and hard-working” (Johnson & Ostendorf, 1993, p. 573). In contrast, employees who are low on conscientiousness are “easily distracted, disorganized, careless, and apathetic” (Perry, Witt, Penney & Atwater, 2010, p. 1146). Conscientiousness has been found to be positively related to job performance (Judge & Ilies, 2002), but this relationship seems to be non-linear (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Moreover, Witt and colleagues (2002) examined the interactive effects of conscientiousness and agreeableness with overall job performance in different work environments and found that there is a strong positive relationship between conscientiousness and job performance and that it is stronger for those who are high in agreeableness. They concluded that highly conscientious employees are not as effective in their jobs if they lack interpersonal sensitivity when their job requires frequent interactions with others. (Witt et al, 2002).

Conscientiousness has also been found to have a positive effect on different types of job performance (Abdullah et al., 2013; Barrick & Mount, 1991; Costa & McCrae, 1992). For

instance, Judge, Heller, and Mount (2002) found that conscientiousness is the strongest predictor of job performance on multiple task types, and Demerouti (2006) found a connection between both task and contextual performance and conscientious employees. Similarly, empirical studies demonstrate strong correlations of conscientiousness with organizational citizenship behavior (Organ & Ryan, 1995), task performance and counterproductive work behaviors (Le et al., 2011). At the same time, it was also found that the magnitude of the effect of conscientiousness on job performance was quite small (Barrick, Mount & Gupta, 2003). Other researchers have found that conscientiousness has an indirect effect on task performance through motivational characteristics, such as high self-goals (Barrick, Mount & Strauss, 1993), effort and persistence (Mount & Barrick, 1995).

***Hypothesis 2:** Outstanding employees that are identified with high levels of conscientiousness perform higher levels of contextual performance*

Openness to experience characterizes people who are independent, curious, and creative, have high imagination, innovative abilities, oriented toward learning, and seek variety (Barrick & Mount, 1991). In other words, openness to experience is the tendency toward exploration, originality, and thinking outside the box (Costa & McCrae 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1987). This personality trait can influence an individual's metacognitive and cognitive intelligences as it embodies a pursuit of novelty, complexity, and new environments and allows a person to be culturally adaptive and not restricted to values (McCrae & Costa, 1987). Thus, it can offer an advantage for evolutionary adaptation (Nettle, 2006; Ones & Viswesvaran 1997), a different approach orientation to stressors, and can foster challenge appraisals which can positively impact outcomes, such as performance (Schneider, Rench, Lyons & Riffle, 2012).

There is a debate in the research concerning the importance of openness to experience as a predictor of employee performance. While McCrae and Costa (1997) argued that this personality trait should be an important measure in personnel selection processes, Organ and colleagues (2006) suggested the opposite. However, a recent meta-analytic research demonstrated that 'open' employees have high job performance, display citizenship behaviors, and contextual performance as well (Abdullah et al., 2013; Judge et al., 1999). Openness to experience predicts not only contextual and environmental features of performance, but also has a positive and significant effect on task performance (Abdullah et al., 2013), leadership, and managerial performance (Barrick et al., 2001). Other studies found that openness to experience predicts job performance when job features include communication and interaction among employees (Nikolaou, 2003).

***Hypothesis 3:** Outstanding employees that are identified with high levels of openness to experience perform higher levels of contextual performance*

Extraversion refers to the degree to which an individual is sociable, ambitious, energetic, and active and has a high level of dominance (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Watson & Clark, 1997). In the organizational context, extroverted employees are more likely to take the initiative toward change and to effectively present their ideas, while being approachable, communicative, and sympathetic (Oh & Berry, 2009). Due to their sociability, they build work relationships with a wide range of individuals and quickly create network of contacts (Oh & Berry, 2009). They focus on their external surroundings (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008) and have a high affiliation motive to initiate the social activities and interactions they need in order to build deep relationships with others (Winter, John, Stewart, Klohnen &

Duncan, 1998). Extraverted people tend to welcome challenges and adapt to change and stress (Huang et al., 2014; Schneider et al., 2012). This trait has been also associated with reward seeking and exploratory activities (Nettle, 2006). Extraversion has been proven as a significant positive predictor of an employee's job performance, especially where interpersonal interactions in teamwork are high (Abdullah et al., 2013; Monzani et al., 2014; Schneider et al., 2012). Some scholars found that extraversion does not predict task performance but predicts leadership and managerial performance (Barrick et al., 2001; Judge et al., 2002). In contrast, Abdullah and colleagues (2013) found that extraversion has a significant positive effect on task performance. Furthermore, extraversion was found to be strongly related to contextual performance (Abdullah et al., 2013).

***Hypothesis 4:** Outstanding employees that are identified with high levels of extraversion perform higher levels of contextual performance.*

Emotional Stability (the opposite of Neuroticism) is the tendency to remain calm and avoid emotional outbursts, such as anger or aggressive behavior in difficult situations, allowing an individual to show confidence and optimism in new or challenging situations and in relationships with co-workers (Oh & Berry, 2009). People with high emotional stability have high self-esteem; they are optimistic and capable of stress resilience (Perry et al., 2010). Moreover, they are less likely to experience negative emotions, such as anxiety, depression, and anger (Kanfer & Heggstad, 1997). In addition, this personality trait helps people to overcome distracting emotions that can harm their performance at work (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989). Looking at the opposite side of emotional stability, neuroticism applies to a nervous and anxious personality. Neurotic people are more susceptible to negative emotions and tend to project them to their work (George & Zhou, 2007). Numerous studies have found that neurotic person performs worse in stressful situations in comparison to a person who is emotionally stable (Abdullah et al., 2013; Barrick et al., 2003; Le et al., 2011; Schneider et al., 2012). However, Emotional stability is linked to several adaptive situations at work, such as team work (Barrick et al., 2001), and adjustment to new contexts and stress situations (Liu, Wang, Zhan, & Shi, 2009). In the context of performance, researchers found that emotional stability predicts contextual performance, and task performance involving time pressure (Barrick, 2003). Evidence for the relationship between emotional stability and task performance was also found by Le et al. (2011), who also found that emotional stability predicts task and counterproductive work behaviors in high complexity jobs.

***Hypothesis 5:** Outstanding employees that are identified with high levels of emotional stability perform higher levels of contextual performance.*

Methodology

Sample - questionnaire was administered to 289 pairs of outstanding employees and their supervisors as well as to a control group of 202 pairs of ordinary employees and their supervisors. The sample was selected from the finalists of the 'Excellent Worker Prize of Israel' sponsored by the *Ma'ariv* daily newspaper during 2001 until 2011. The unique sample to which the researcher obtained access was composed of a variety of elite top performers from 156 organizations at the national level. During the first stage, each organization selected its top employees in terms of performance. During the second stage, a special committee consisting of 18 experienced professional members and headed by the president of the National Labor Court selected the outstanding employees. Although this type of workers

creates a new level of eminence, such research has not yet appeared in the professional literature.

Measurements - all the scales were applied using a seven-point Likert scale (from 1 - “Strongly disagree” to 7 - “Strongly agree”).

Independent Variable - Personality traits was measured with Gosling, Rentfrow and Swann Jr. (2003) developed the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI), which consists of 10 items assessing the Big Five personality factors. Employees provided their self-report regarding the five personality traits, while relating to one positive and one negative aspect of each trait. Examples for questions measuring the positive aspect of each trait: Extraversion - "Extraverted, enthusiastic"; Agreeableness - "Sympathetic, warm"; Conscientiousness - "Dependable, self-disciplined"; Emotional Stability - "Calm, emotionally stable"; and Openness to Experience - "Open to new experiences, complex". Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.72.

Dependent Variables - Task Performance was measured with Williams and Anderson’s (1991) seven-item scale. An example of a question measuring the supervisor's report on the employee's Task Performance : *"The employee adequately completes assigned duties"*. The reliability of this instrument measured by Cronbach’s alpha coefficient is 0.88 (Jawahar & Ferris, 2011). Contextual Performance was measured with Moorman and Blakely’s (1995) ten-item scale for instance: *"Actively promotes the organization’s products and services to potential users"*. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.91.

Procedures - Research data were collected for excellent and common employees and their supervisors. Data from 156 organizations, including 444 excellent employees and their supervisors, were collected from February 2014 to April 2015. After checking the intactness of the data, the total number of valid questionnaires left was 289 pairs of excellent employees’ questionnaires and their supervisors’. The collected data were analyzed using Correlation tests and T-tests via SPSS version 21 and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using AMOS version 21.

Results

Table 1 reports bivariate correlation coefficients among all the study variables and descriptive statistics for all the variables in regard to outstanding and common employees. No multicollinearity was found between the independent variables.

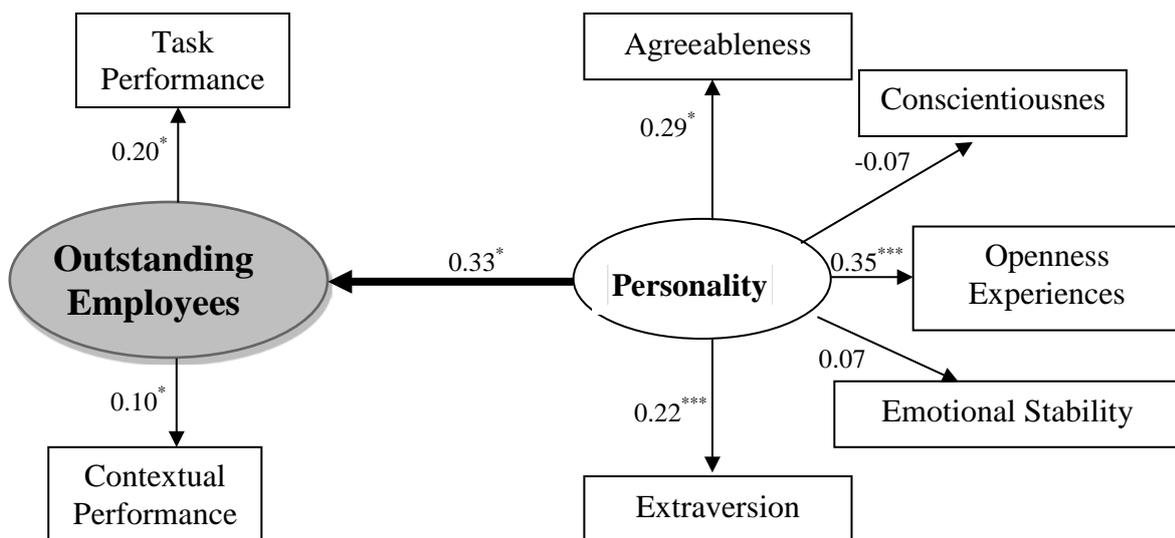
Table 1: Correlations and T test analysis

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Extraversion	==							
2. Agreeableness	0.289 ^{***}	==						
3. Conscientiousness	0.029	0.050	==					
4. Emotional Stability	0.240 ^{***}	0.130 ^{**}	0.028	==				
5. Openness to Experiences	-0.161 ^{***}	0.010	-0.059	-0.195 ^{***}	==			
6. Task Performance	-0.072	-0.022	-0.050	0.032	0.029	==		
7. Individual Contextual Performance	-0.001	0.048	-0.011	0.056	0.149^{**}	0.426 ^{***}	==	
8. Organizational Contextual Performance	-0.134^{**}	0.070	-0.003	-0.003	0.061	0.611 ^{***}	0.437 ^{***}	==
Excellent Mean	4.39	4.88	4.39	4.28	5.32	6.11	5.49	5.83

Employees	S.D.	1.09	0.74	0.82	0.85	1.12	0.74	1.09	0.83
Common Employees	Mean	4.15	4.75	4.21	4.12	5.42	5.92	5.57	5.61
	S.D.	0.85	0.86	0.68	0.76	0.99	0.71	0.74	0.77
Independent T test		2.78**	1.57	2.57*	2.24*	-1.06	2.83**	-0.85	3.20**

The results indicate that there is a significant difference between outstanding and common employees regarding three dimensions of personality. The first dimension is extraversion [$t_{(488,0.99)} = 2.78, p < 0.01$], such that outstanding employees are significantly higher in the level of extraversion ($M = 4.39$) than common employees ($M = 4.15$). The second dimension is conscientiousness [$t_{(488,0.95)} = 2.57, p < 0.05$], such that outstanding employees are significantly higher in the level of conscientiousness ($M = 4.39$) than common employees ($M = 4.21$). The third dimension is emotional stability [$t_{(488,0.95)} = 2.24, p < 0.05$], such that outstanding employees are significantly higher in the level of emotional stability ($M = 4.28$) than common employees ($M = 4.12$). Individual Contextual Performance has a significant positive correlation with one dimension of Personality - Openness to Experience ($r=0.149, p < 0.01$). Organizational Contextual Performance has a significant negative correlation with

Figure 1. Outstanding employees Personality traits



The results show that three out of five dimensions of personality. Agreeableness ($\beta = 0.29, p < 0.05$), Extraversion ($\beta = 0.22, p < 0.001$) and Openness to experience ($\beta = 0.35, p < 0.001$) were found to have a significant and positive effect on Outstanding Employees' Performance. The data fit the Employees' Excellence measurement model well ($\chi^2 = 423, n = 289, df = 166, p < 0.001, CFI = 0.87, RMSEA = 0.05$). The estimate of Squared Multiple Correlations in the analysis is 37 percent.

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to present a model that demonstrates employee's personality traits as antecedents of employees' outstanding performance. The research hypotheses refer to the influence of employee's personality on their performance. Findings show that three of five personality traits have a positive effect on employee's outstanding

performance: Agreeableness, Extraversion, and Openness to Experience. These findings are supported by previous studies, which showed a positive effect of these personality traits on contextual performance (Abdullah et al., 2013; Barrick & Mount, 1991). Based on this, a compassionate, cooperative, and trusting employee who pursues effective team work, who is dominant in social network relations, and who is curious and creative will have higher aptitude relating to contextual performance.

In contrast and despite the previous studies (e.g., Abdullah et al., 2013; Demerouti, 2006; Judge et al., 2002), the correlation between the personality trait of conscientiousness and contextual performance was not supported in the current research. Nevertheless, this phenomenon is in accord with arguments of some scholars contending that the relationship between conscientiousness and job performance is not linear (Barrick & Mount, 1991) and is oftentimes indirect while being mediated by the personality trait of agreeableness (Witt et al., 2002). The literature claims that being highly conscientious is not sufficient for performance (Perry et al., 2010), since task-related outcomes are mutually affected by conscientiousness and emotional stability (Monzani et al., 2014). Moreover, excessively conscientious people may not succeed in task performance due to their rigidity, inflexibility, and compulsive perfectionism, as they have a tendency to pay too much attention to small details instead of goal requirements (Mount et al., 1998). In addition, no significant relationship was found between the personality trait of emotional stability and contextual performance. While this finding seems to be opposed to the results of previous studies which confirmed that these two constructs are correlated (Abdullah et al., 2013), there is also evidence that the effect of emotional stability on contextual performance is quite small (Barrick, Mount & Gupta, 2003).

The Main contribution of the study is in expanding the existing literature regarding employee's outstanding performance. The unique sample of employee evaluation system at the national level, composed of hundreds of organizations by the same judges, is unprecedented in the literature. Our findings imply that as an integral part of their organizational culture and training of managers, organizations should identify, detect, care, and support employees who demonstrate the attributes listed in the study. Organizational culture should emphasize the cultivation of outstanding employees as an important and significant milestone towards achieving organizational goals. It is crucial for organizations to identify employees with characteristics that will potentially lead them to excellence, to nurture them, and to integrate them in a suitable work environment. Without fulfilling these conditions, an exceptional employee will most likely find it difficult to blossom, the employee's excellent qualities will be diminished, and eventually they will be lost to the organization. The practical implications are that the study provides organizations with tools to help identify and recruit outstanding employees. The study's conclusions enable organizations to locate outstanding employees in their workforce and may assist in locating candidates for succession planning.

Limitations and Further research

The main limitation of this study is the fact that employees were not immediately interviewed after they won the price, but after several years had passed. However, the assumption is that an outstanding employee remains such throughout their working life. Israel is a multi-cultural society future research can focus on multinational companies, at the era of globalization identifying outstanding employees become necessity. Multinational companies are fertile ground for multiculturalism which become a challenge for Human Resources managers.

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