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As the war for talent continues to escalate, many public sector agencies are scrambling not only to find talent, but also to maintain the talent they already employ.

A 2013 study (Blessing White Research, 2013) of employee engagement found that two of the top three reasons employees remain with an organization are job fit (i.e., meshing well with the work and/or organization) and development opportunities with the potential for advancement. Interestingly enough, these themes perfectly align with two of human resources’ biggest challenges: recruitment and retention. Fortunately, there is a highly versatile tool available that fits neatly within the entire suite of HR practices and has many uses beyond making hiring decisions – the personality assessment. Where a properly validated personality assessment really shines is in its ability to identify high-potential individuals and the specific work environments where they are most likely to thrive and grow.
Across several decades of research and application, a general model of personality has emerged. A taxonomy, commonly known as the Five-factor Model (FFM) (Tupes & Cristal, 1961) has been shown to be consistently accurate across cultures, languages and even time (John & Naumann, 2008). The five umbrella traits that make up this model are described below:

1. **Openness to Experience**: Describes the breadth, depth, originality and complexity of an individual’s mental and experimental life
2. **Conscientiousness**: Describes socially prescribed impulse control that facilitates task- and goal-directed behavior, such as thinking before acting, delaying gratification, following norms and rules and planning, organizing and prioritizing tasks
3. **Extraversion**: Implies an energetic approach toward the social and material world and includes traits such as sociability, activity, assertiveness and positive emotionality
4. **Emotional Stability**: Contrasts emotional stability and even-temperedness with negative emotionality, such as feeling anxious, nervous, sad and tense
5. **Agreeableness**: Contrasts a frank and sincere orientation toward others with antagonism and includes traits such as altruism, sympathy, concern for others, trust and modesty

The science behind personality – the study of individual differences – employs a trait-based perspective that centers on better understanding and predicting contextual human behavior. In the context of human resources, the focus is on human behavior at work. In its simplest form, personality can be defined as the interplay between traits that guide an individual’s actions and motivations in specific situational settings.
Why Personality?

Take a moment and try to think of a position in which an employee’s individual characteristics have no influence on his or her ability to excel within a role. Consider the detail-orientation of a record-keeper, the charisma of a sales representative, the gregariousness of an event planner – there are very few examples, if any at all, in which trait expression does not play a significant role in how one performs a job.

Now more than ever, employers seek individuals who better fit within the job and organization, who will be highly engaged and will apply their talents in innovative ways. Fit is important, and research has found that there is a strong, negative correlation between person-organization fit and intent to quit (Kristof-Brown & Zimmerman, 2005). Furthermore, the cost of employee turnover can debilitate an organization’s forward momentum. To boot, professional organizations (e.g., SHRM, CAP) estimate that the real economic cost of losing talent can exceed twice the former employee’s salary (Boushey & Glynn, 2012). These estimates, however, do not even begin to compare to the wisdom and historical knowledge that walks out the door with departing talent.

To summarize, personality assessments serve as widely used, valid instruments specifically designed to measure individual characteristics. When used correctly, these assessments best lend themselves to identifying the appropriate contexts driving employees’ workplace successes.
Many Uses

Typically, the words testing and assessment immediately steer one’s thoughts directly to tools used in selection-specific scenarios. A common misconception is that personality-based inventories are most applicable in a hiring context, but their utility is much broader than that. Incorporating trait-based measurement into your suite of HR processes can result in benefits across the board – from recruitment and selection to leadership development to improved teamwork and efficiency.

**SELECTION**

The majority of tests used for selection are designed to measure cognitive competencies related to the technical content and knowledge areas that are necessary for an individual to be successful in a role. However, knowledge tests only capture a sliver of the overall picture in predicting an applicant’s ability to successfully fill a position. Relying on a cognitive test as the principal selection tool, however, leaves other important domains largely untapped. The candidate’s intrapersonal, interpersonal and leadership characteristics are primarily made up of non-cognitive competencies that are more appropriately assessed using a measure of personality. A 2015 CPS HR testing and recruitment practices survey found that the majority of public agencies use cognitive or job knowledge tests, but found that only 34 percent of responding agencies use tests designed specifically to assess non-cognitive competencies (e.g., personality tests, biodata instruments). An important question that emerges from these results is how public agencies are assessing non-cognitive competencies (i.e., personality) that are important job performance predictors of potential employees. In practice, most agencies rely on interviews to assess these competencies (Hogan & Kaiser, 2010). However, the problem with assessing personality in an interview is that job candidates are typically rated on internally developed rating scales that tend to be subjective and intuitive. Research has shown that despite people’s beliefs, they are not typically effective judges of talent when it comes to evaluating potential employees (Highhouse, 2008). In fact, the use of intuitive judgment to rate job candidates may actually decrease the likelihood that the best job candidate is selected. Given the problems of intuitive judgment, this evaluation is best accomplished, and more reliably so, through the use of an established, validated measure of personality.

Aside from its predictive validity, one of the key advantages of personality assessment in the selection process is the lack of significant subgroup differences, which translates to decreases in adverse impact (Hunter & Hunter, 1984). It is important to note, however, that personality testing is not designed to replace other selection criteria, but rather serve as one more clue on the treasure map for talent. Personality assessment is best used in conjunction with knowledge-based tests that measure the cognitive components that are minimally necessary to fill the role.
TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT

A widely underutilized application of personality assessment that we have noticed in the public sector is setting a data-oriented foundation in the employee development process. As we mentioned earlier, personality traits tend to remain very stable over time. Therefore, taking a personality-based approach to career advancement or goal-setting can facilitate an employee’s self-understanding and create meaningful changes in the way individual characteristics are strengthened or leveraged in workplace settings.

Although studies have shown that personality traits are fruitful predictors of who will get the most out of a training program (Barrick & Mount, 1991 and Lievens, Harris, VanKeer & Bisqueret, 2003), individuals can also be trained to maximize their unique qualities in effectively carrying out work-related responsibilities. In order for personality-based development or training to be effective, interpersonal relationships, education, assessment and feedback are the most crucial for reinforcing the employee’s behavioral modifications and ensuring they continue. Work experiences and interpersonal relationships are the elements most likely to influence the employee’s level of engagement in the process (Noe, Wilk, Mullen, & Wanek, 1997). In order for trait-based initiatives to succeed, the nature of the work needs to be challenging to the individual – igniting the desire to grow and improve (Noe, 2008).

One of the more common methods for cementing a personality-based development program is to provide coaching or mentoring to each participant upon receiving individual personality assessment results. These initiatives tend to be successful due to their one-on-one focus and the opportunity to explore how individual characteristics manifest and affect work processes, relationships and goal achievement. Furthermore, the desired results of programs that incorporate coaching initiatives have been shown to remain months longer than their non-coaching counterparts (Evers, Brouwers & Tomic, 2006).

SUCCESSION PLANNING

The future is a constant concern in any HR department, and only 18 percent of HR professionals in a recent study indicated that their bench strength was sufficient to meet future needs (DDI Global Leadership Forecast, 2011). Furthermore, because organizational leaders and other influential employees have the opportunity to significantly impact an organization’s climate – the manner in which members experience the organization’s shared values, beliefs and behavioral expectations – it is especially critical to ensure that future leaders’ values are aligned with those of the organization (Schneider, 2008). There are several personality assessment options available that highlight the full range of leadership potential.
Many Uses (cont.)

**SUCCESSION PLANNING (CONT.)**

One of the biggest pitfalls to a succession plan that does not incorporate a valid assessment (e.g., personality testing) is that nomination-based programs (i.e., peer or supervisor nominations are prerequisites for consideration in a succession plan or leadership development program) are much more likely to result in high-potential employees being overlooked, feeling ostracized and eventually leaving. On the flip side, employees misidentified as high potentials often result in sharp decreases in efficiency and engagement. A key consideration in identifying your organization’s future leaders is that past and current performance appraisals are rarely predictive of future performance in more advanced roles (Hogan, 2012). Put another way, the strongest talent in your organization is likely untapped and sitting right in front of you.

Personality assessment allows employers to capture more holistic snapshots of its talent base. In so doing, more sound, data-driven decisions can be made about who will be best suited for carrying out the added responsibilities of upward mobility, while also driving forward the organization’s mission and values.

**TEAMWORK & EFFICIENCY**

The easiest way to ensure that a team is effective is for everyone to get along, right? Not necessarily. Team conflict – in moderation, of course – plays a pivotal role in preventing many derailers of team performance, such as groupthink, diminished creativity and dips in motivation and engagement. While there are many differing viewpoints on how to assemble the best team, there is near-universal agreement on what not to do. The biggest threat to team efficiency is to create a unit of similar, like-minded individuals. Rather, the more diverse the traits and perspectives of its members, the more creative, productive and efficient the team is likely to be (Prewett, Walvoord, Stilson, Rossi & Brannick, 2009).

Personality testing can be used to singularly identify the traits of each person within a team, or to measure the team’s identity collectively. Team-level measures can be used to assess the team’s strengths and weaknesses, shared values and even pressure points that may cause internal strife (Hogan, 2016). Trait-level assessment is a well-established predictor of individual job performance, so it stands to reason that the same assessments can be applied to team job performance.
Common Criticisms of Personality Testing

One common criticism of personality testing concerns faking. Faking in personality tests occurs when job candidates alter their responses in an attempt to present themselves in a more desirable manner.

Critics state that it is relatively easy for candidates to fake in order to improve their scores, which decreases the validity, and subsequently, the predictive power of the test (Morgeson, Campion, Dipboye, Hollenbeck, Murphy & Schmitt, 2007). Personality researchers conducted a study with actual job applicants who were motivated to fake and found that the job applicants were just as likely to decrease their overall score as they were to increase their overall score, leading to the conclusion that trying to improve a score by faking may not be that easy (Hogan, Barret & Hogan, 2007). Proponents of personality testing say that if faking does occur, the research indicates that it has minimal effect on the predictive power of the test (Schmitt & Oswald, 2006).

Another criticism of personality testing concerns its use for employee development. Some critics believe that personality tests are not effective tools for helping employees improve job performance. It is true that personality tests by themselves are not effective for employee development. Personality tests create self-awareness, which is the key to development (Hogan & Warrenfeltz, 2003). Research has shown that in order to use this self-awareness for development successfully, a personality test should be accompanied by feedback from a coach who helps set specific development goals and that these development goals should be shared with coworkers (Smither, London, Reilly, Flautt, Vargas & Kucine, 2004).

Proponents of personality testing say that if faking does occur, the research indicates that it has minimal effect on the predictive power of the test (Schmitt & Oswald, 2006).
Key Considerations Before Using a Personality Assessment

If a public agency is considering using a personality assessment, there are certain questions that should be answered prior to selecting the tool.

1. What is the personality test designed to measure, and does it match your needs?
2. Is the personality test supported by a technical manual outlining its development and validation?
3. What process will your agency need to follow in order to determine if the personality test is appropriate for your agency’s desired purpose?
4. How are the results interpreted?
5. What kind of support will you be provided if you decide to use the test?
6. Has the test ever been legally challenged? If so, what was the outcome?

Obtaining satisfactory answers to these questions will help ensure that the personality test you have selected will improve the likelihood that your agency will hire and develop high-performing employees.

THE CPS HR SOLUTION

CPS HR has partnered with Hogan Assessments to provide quality personality assessment to public agencies. The Hogan personality assessments were the first tests of normal personality based on the Five-factor Model that was developed specifically for use in business. Some of the features and benefits of Hogan assessment tools include:

- Based on the Five-factor Model
- Developed exclusively on working adults
- Normed and validated on 99 percent of recognized job titles in the United States
- No invasive or intrusive items
- Instant scoring and reporting
- No adverse impact
- Online administration with protected access
- 15- to 20-minute completion time

Contact a CPS HR consultant to learn more about how you can implement Hogan inventories to improve the ability of your agency to hire top performers and develop existing employees.
About CPS HR Consulting

CPS HR Consulting is a self-supporting public agency providing a full range of integrated HR solutions to government and nonprofit clients across the country. Our strategic approach to increasing the effectiveness of human resources results in improved organizational performance for our clients. We have a deep expertise and unmatched perspective in guiding our clients in the areas of organizational strategy, recruitment and selection, classification and compensation and training and development.

To further discuss the importance of thoroughly studying jobs or to learn about all of the ways our job analysis expertise can benefit your organization, please reach out to us at:

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