

conscientiousness, emotional stability, and extraversion—in that order—appear to be the most useful for selection contexts. Of course, in certain situations—such as where adaptability or creativity may be highly valued, or where cooperative relations are crucial—openness and agreeableness may be important to assess as well.

Today there is widespread acceptance regarding the validity and utility of personality tests in personnel selection. This does not mean that the area is free of its critics, however. Some researchers have argued that personality traits are not useful selection tools.¹⁰ Here we evaluate three of the most important criticisms of the use of personality tests in selection decisions: the validities are trivial, faking undermines their usefulness, and applicants react negatively to them.

Trivial Validities. One set of critics has argued that the validities of personality traits are so small as to border on the trivial, rendering them of limited usefulness as selection devices. These researchers noted, “Why are we now suddenly looking at personality as a valid predictor of job performance when the validities still haven’t changed and are still close to zero?”¹¹ While this is an extreme position, it does contain a grain of truth: the validities are far from perfect. For example, our best estimate of the validity of conscientiousness in predicting overall job performance is $\bar{r}_{xy} = .24$. By no means would this be labeled a strong validity (though, in fairness, we are not aware of any personality researchers who have done so). Does this mean that the validity of personality measures, though, are trivial? We do not believe so, for five reasons.

First, because applicants can complete an entire Big Five inventory in less than 30 minutes in most selection situations, the entire Big Five framework is used, or at least more than a single trait is assessed. In addition, the Big Five traits do not correlate very highly with each other, so knowing a person’s level of one trait (for example, conscientiousness) tells you little about their level of another trait (for example, extraversion). Therefore, it is important to look at the multiple correlations between the set of Big Five traits and criteria such as job performance. For example, the multiple correlations between the Big Five and criteria such as overall job performance and leadership is roughly $r = .50$. This is hardly trivial.¹²

Second, as with any selection measure, one can find situations in which a personality trait does not predict job performance. Even though personality tests generalize across jobs, this does not mean they will work in every case. Moreover, the times when they do work and the times when they don’t are counterintuitive. For example, evidence suggests that conscientiousness and positive self-concept work well in predicting player success in the NFL, but not so well in predicting the performance of police officers.¹³ Organizations need to perform their own validation studies to ensure that the tests work as hoped. In general, personality is more predictive of performance in jobs that have substantial autonomy, meaning that individuals have discretion in deciding how—and how well—to do their work.¹⁴

Third, the Big Five do not exhaust the set of potentially relevant personality traits. Research suggests, for example, that a trait termed *proactive personality*

e in the

sen pub-
ig Five.⁹
be sum-
is advan-
they are
ness and
iousness,
vantages.
erall job
appear to
traits of

ats
n high-

conflict
gs
loyer
behaviors