

ity in predicting job performance were nonlinear, such that there were diminishing returns to increasing levels of these traits (extremely conscientious employees do not necessarily perform better than highly conscientious employees). Thus, correlation coefficients (which assume linearity) may understate the true validity of personality tests. Practically, when choosing between two applicants, it may make sense to consider where they are on the distribution of each trait.¹⁸

Finally, there is evidence that the validities of the Big Five may be improved by contextualizing the measures. Most personality inventories ask about behaviors in general, ignoring the context in which those behaviors occur. Researchers argue that tailoring items to ask about behaviors specific to the workplace, or asking applicants to report on how they behave at work only, will strengthen the validities of the Big Five. A recent meta-analysis found support for this notion, demonstrating that the validities of each of the Big Five traits increased when the measures were contextualized. Specifically, for four of the Big Five traits—extraversion, agreeableness, emotional stability, and openness to experience—the validity of contextualized measures was twice as high compared to more traditional, decontextualized measures. Although measures of conscientiousness specific to the workplace also improved validities, those improvements were not as strong as the others, presumably because traditional measures of conscientiousness already reference people's work behaviors.¹⁹

Faking. Another frequent criticism of personality measures is that they are “fakeable,” meaning applicants will distort their responses to increase their odds of being hired. This concern is apparent when one considers personality items (see Exhibits 9.1 and 9.3) and the nature of the traits. Few individuals would want to describe themselves as disagreeable, neurotic, unconscientious, and unconfident. Furthermore, since answers to these questions are nearly impossible to verify (e.g., imagine trying to verify whether an applicant prefers reading a book to watching television), the possibility of “faking good” is quite real. This then leads to the perverse outcome that the applicants most likely to be hired are those who enhanced their responses (faked) the most.

There is a voluminous literature on faking. The results of this literature can be summarized as follows. First, there is little doubt that some faking or enhancement does occur. Studies suggest that applicants consistently score higher on socially desirable personality traits (like conscientiousness, emotional stability, and agreeableness) than do current employees (in most situations, there is no reason to believe that applicants should score more favorably on personality tests than employees—if anything, the reverse would be expected). Also, when individuals are informed that their scores matter (might be used in selection decisions), their scores on personality tests increase.²⁰

But what is the outcome of this enhancement? Does the fact that some applicants fake their responses destroy the validity of personality measures in selection? Interestingly, the answer to this question appears to be quite clearly no. In short,