

# The trouble with personality tests

 By [Peter Gilbert](#)

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Personality tests are a popular component of many organisations' hiring processes. As these tests contend to measure traits and characteristics that remain stable over time, it is intuitive to believe information regarding candidates' individual differences in these areas would be helpful when making selection decisions. Yet evidence supporting the usefulness of personality tests in the hiring process has been called into serious question.

This is due to repeated findings that correlations between measures of personality and measures of job performance are not strongly related. **After nearly two decades of enthusiastic support for the use of personality assessments, there has been a call for talent management professionals to re-evaluate the merits of these tests.**

## Reminiscent

In a recent article presented by Human Resource Executive Online, Peter Capelli (2007) briefly reviews the history of using personality tests for hiring and promotion decisions. He remarks that the current popularity of this method is reminiscent of its use as a "best practice" in the 1950s, which he notes is curious, given the fact that "by the early-1960s, the consensus among researchers was that personality was not a useful criterion for assessing individuals."

During the 1960s - 1980s, "personality-based assessments ... largely disappeared from the lists of 'best practices' in human resources"; however, a resurgence of interest in, and use of, personality testing emerged in the 1990s. Yet the central issue that led to the disfavour of personality tests 40 years ago (ie, the lack of predictive validity or extent to which the assessment relates to or predicts job performance) still remains an unresolved issue.

A panel of prominent personnel psychologists, all former editors of top-tiered journals, recently collaborated on an article discussing the usefulness of personality tests in personnel selection. The one clear theme that emerged from their work was that **the validities of personality measures are so low that using them for selecting employees should be questioned**. Although research studies have demonstrated statistically significant relations between some personality factors and certain areas of job performance, the practical significance, or overall usefulness, of these relations remain as weak as those reported 40 years ago.

This finding led one author to question, "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?"

## Storm of criticism

While evidence suggesting that personality tests are not robust predictors of job success has been available for decades, the comments made by the panel of experts' article drew a storm of criticism from other researchers in the field. In a recently published follow-up to the rebuttal articles, the panel underlines that its "fundamental purpose in writing these articles is to provide a sobering reminder about the low validities and other problems in using self-report personality tests for personnel selection."

It is noted that blind enthusiasm for the use of personality testing has stemmed from researchers and practitioners alike, ignoring the basic data demonstrating that personality assessments are poor predictors of job performance. This evidence might be overlooked because of the potential for lowered adverse impact and increased criterion variance explained by the use of personality tests. However, the author's state that increases in the criterion variance explained has not been realised.

In light of these problems, it is noted that Robert Guion's comments from over 40 years ago still hold true today: "In view of the problems... one must question the wisdom of using personality as instruments of decision in employment procedures."

## ABOUT PETER GILBERT

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