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Review

Personality and job performance: A review of trait models and recent trends

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Personality traits are among the strongest non-cognitive predictors of job performance, but many trait models exist that are used to predict different performance outcomes. To structure and synthesize this vast amount of research, we review empirical evidence and emerging trends regarding the relations of the Big Five, HEXACO, and Dark Triad traits with three indicators of job performance (i.e., task performance, organizational citizenship behavior [OCB], and counterproductive work behavior [CWB]). We find that personality traits explain most variance in CWB, followed by OCB, and then task performance. Conscientiousness is the strongest predictor across performance outcomes, and the HEXACO traits explain more variance in job performance than the Big Five or Dark Triad traits. Yet, traits do not operate in isolation, but rather interact with situational characteristics in guiding behavior (e.g., trait activation). As such, accounting for situational characteristics can further increase the validity of personality for performance. Moreover, we review recent trends in personality-performance research, such as personality development and dynamics, non-self-rated personality measures, and the use of artificial intelligence (AI). We conclude by highlighting practical implications of our findings for personnel selection and for increasing person-job fit.

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For decades, organizational psychologists have tried to optimize the prediction of job performance with the goal of recruiting those individuals who function optimally in their new job, and scientific interest in the criterion-related validity of personality traits for job performance has been increasing ever since the seminal meta-analysis by Barrick and Mount [1] about the relations of the Big Five traits with job performance. However, researchers and practitioners struggle to navigate the vast amount of research because many different personality traits have been identified as predictors of different performance outcomes. In this review, we organize and evaluate the state-of-the-art on personality-performance relations, focusing on the major broad personality models (i.e., Big Five, HEXACO, and Dark Triad) and key indicators of job performance (i.e., task performance, organizational citizenship behavior [OCB], and counterproductive work behavior [CWB]). We will review foundational insights and highlight recent developments and practical implications.

Personality and job performance

Personality describes relatively stable differences in individuals' tendencies to think, feel, and act [2]. In the late 20th century, researchers reached brief consensus that personality could be captured best by the Big Five (or Five-Factor Model) traits (see Table 1 for descriptions of all traits) [3,4]. In the beginning of the 21st century, Lee and Ashton [5] found evidence for six rather than five factors, which were combined in the HEXACO personality inventory. Most notably, the HEXACO captures ethical and moral personality variance through the trait Honesty-Humility better than the Big Five model does [6]. Around the same time, Paulhus and Williams [7] identified three related but distinct Dark Triad traits that capture socially aversive personality traits, which overlap significantly with Honesty-Humility [8]. All three major broad personality models have been used to predict job performance.

Job performance describes goal-directed behaviors under the control of employees that contribute to overall organizational performance [9]. It is commonly conceptualized as consisting of core task performance [10], contextual performance or OCB [11], and CWB [12] (see Table 1 for definitions). Although other conceptualizations of job performance exist (e.g., adaptive performance, creativity), we focus on task, contextual, and counterproductive performance because these capture the performance space concisely and because they are most commonly predicted using personality traits [13].

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Table 1

Definitions of key constructs.

Dimensions	Definition
Big Five	
Openness	The tendency to be curious, imaginative, open-minded, and receptive to new ideas, experiences, and unconventional values.
Conscientiousness	The tendency to be organized, responsible, dependable, goal-directed, and self-disciplined.
Extraversion	The tendency to be outgoing, energetic, sociable, assertive, and experience positive emotions.
Agreeableness	The tendency to be compassionate, cooperative, trusting, and forgiving in interpersonal interactions.
Neuroticism	The tendency to experience negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, or depression; low emotional stability.
HEXACO	
Honesty-humility	The tendency to be sincere, fair, modest, and avoid manipulating others for personal gain.
Emotionality	The tendency to experience fear, anxiety, dependence, and sentimentality.
eXtraversion	The tendency to be outgoing, enthusiastic, confident in social situations, and to experience positive emotions.
Agreeableness	The tendency to be forgiving, tolerant, gentle, and patient, and to avoid anger or conflict in interpersonal interactions.
Conscientiousness	The tendency to be organized, diligent, disciplined, careful, and reliable in pursuing goals.
Openness to experience	The tendency to be curious, imaginative, creative, and open to unconventional ideas and new experiences.
Dark triad	
Narcissism	The tendency to experience a grandiose sense of self-importance, entitlement, and a constant need for admiration; often accompanied by arrogance.
Machiavellianism	The tendency to be manipulative, strategic, and calculating in interpersonal interactions while being focused on self-interest, deception, and exploitation.
Psychopathy	The tendency to be impulsive, lack empathy or remorse, and to exhibit antisocial behavior and shallow emotional responses.
Job performance	
Task performance	Contractually required behaviors that employees engage in to complete their goals, such as completing tasks accurately or using job-specific skills and knowledge.
OCB	Discretionary behaviors that go beyond formal job requirements and contribute to the effective functioning of the organization.
CWB	Voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in doing so threatens the well-being of the organization or its members.

Note. OCB = Organizational citizenship behavior, CWB = Counterproductive work behavior.

The criterion-related validity of personality for job performance

Many meta-analyses have examined the criterion-related validity of personality traits from the three broad personality models for the three job performance outcomes. To pool and compare these validities, we constructed a correlation matrix consisting of meta-analytic correlations from published meta-analyses, including inter-correlations among all personality traits (see Table 2). All correlations were based on self-ratings of personality and performance. We could not locate meta-analytic correlations of the Big Five and Dark Triad traits with self-rated OCB. Whenever multiple meta-analyses were available, we used correlations based on the largest number of participants. Based on this correlation matrix, we estimate the amount of explained variance in task performance, OCB, and CWB (and conducted relative weights analyses, see supplement) using the relative weights analyses ShinyApp [14]. This provides insights about the usefulness of different personality models and traits when predicting job performance, and allows us to answer the following questions.

How much variance do broad personality models predict in job performance?

The criterion-related validity of personality traits is strongest for CWB, followed by OCB, and weakest for task performance. For example, the HEXACO traits explain 20.1 % of the variance in CWB and 17.2 % in OCB, but only 6.7 % in task performance. This is not

Table 2

Constructed sample size-weighted meta-analytic correlation matrix.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.
1. Mach	–													
2. Narc	0.38[a]	–												
3. Psy	0.54[a]	0.27[a]	–											
4. B5-O	−0.02[a]	0.13[a]	−0.03[a]	–										
5. B5-C	−0.19[a]	−0.00[a]	−0.24[a]	0.10[b]	–									
6. B5-E	−0.02[a]	0.31[a]	0.01[a]	0.25[b]	0.23[b]	–								
7. B5-A	−0.40[a]	−0.18[a]	−0.47[a]	0.18[b]	0.27[b]	0.19[b]	–							
8. B5-N	0.13[a]	−0.05[a]	0.08[a]	−0.08[b]	−0.29[b]	−0.34[b]	−0.24[b]	–						
9. HH	−0.53[a]	−0.42[a]	−0.47[a]	0.10[b]	0.20[b]	−0.04[b]	0.40[b]	−0.11[b]	–					
10. E	−0.12[a]	−0.12[a]	−0.27[a]	−0.02[b]	0.00[b]	−0.05[b]	0.19[b]	0.53[b]	0.04[b]	–				
11. X	−0.09[a]	0.37[a]	−0.06[a]	0.21[b]	0.25[b]	0.78[b]	0.25[b]	−0.52[b]	0.01[b]	−0.14[b]	–			
12. A	−0.31[a]	−0.17[a]	−0.35[a]	0.06[b]	0.12[b]	0.07[b]	0.55[b]	−0.36[b]	0.30[b]	−0.12[b]	0.16[b]	–		
13. C	−0.18[a]	0.01[a]	−0.31[a]	0.13[b]	0.75[b]	0.11[b]	0.19[b]	−0.17[b]	0.20[b]	0.03[b]	0.17[b]	0.07[b]	–	
14. O	−0.09[a]	0.07[a]	−0.05[a]	0.73[b]	0.03[b]	0.13[b]	0.11[b]	−0.08[b]	0.10[b]	−0.06[b]	0.16[b]	0.07[b]	0.11[b]	–
15. TP	−0.06[c]	−0.02[c]	−0.08[c]	0.09[d]	0.19[d]	0.10[d]	0.08[d]	−0.07[d]	0.06[e]	0.03[e]	0.08[e]	0.01[e]	0.24[e]	0.11[e]
16. OCB	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	0.18[f]	−0.00[f]	0.30[f]	0.18[f]	0.27[f]	0.16[f]
17. CWB	0.20[c]	0.35[c]	0.06[c]	−0.07[g]	−0.31[g]	−0.04[g]	−0.29[g]	0.16[g]	−0.35[h]	−0.08[h]	−0.08[h]	−0.17[h]	−0.33[h]	−0.05[h]

Note. The correlations reported here are sample size-weighted meta-analytic correlations. We did not correct them for unreliability, as we were able to locate a greater number of sample size-weighted correlations. NA = meta-analytic correlation not available; Mach = Dark Triad Machiavellianism, Narc = Dark Triad Narcissism, Psy = Dark Triad Psychopathy, B5-O = Big Five Openness, B5-C = Big Five Conscientiousness, B5-E = Big Five Extraversion, B5-A = Big Five Agreeableness, B5-N = Big Five Neuroticism, HH = HEXACO Honesty-Humility, E = HEXACO Emotionality, X = HEXACO Extraversion, A = HEXACO Agreeableness, C = HEXACO Conscientiousness, O = HEXACO Openness to Experience, TP = Task performance, OCB = Organizational citizenship behavior, CWB = Counterproductive work behavior.

[a] Correlations taken from Ref. [8].

[b] Correlations taken from Ref. [6].

[c] Correlations taken from Ref. [49].

[d] Correlations taken from Ref. [20].

[e] Correlations taken from Ref. [50].

[f] Correlations taken from Ref. [18].

[g] Correlations taken from Ref. [51].

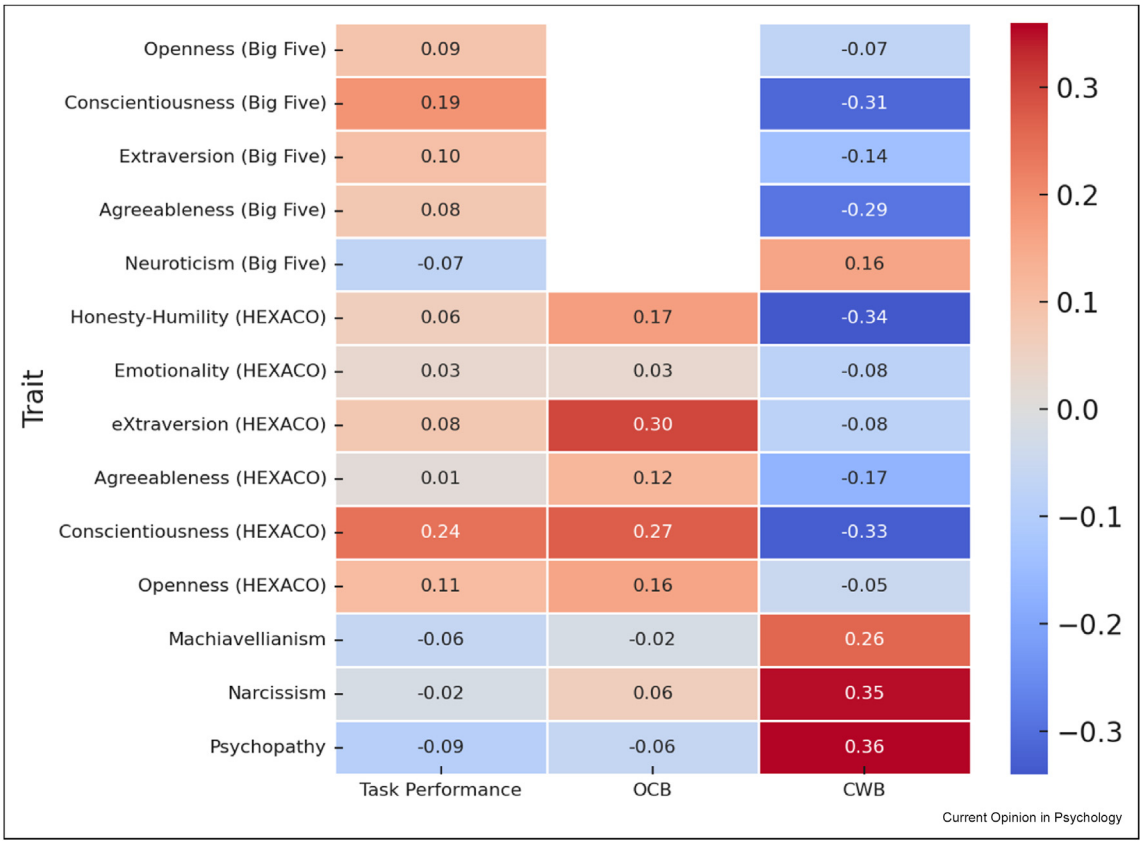
[h] Correlations taken from Ref. [19].

surprising given that task performance is non-discretionary behavior that is contractually required from employees, whereas OCB and CWB are discretionary and therefore more likely to be influenced by employees' personality traits. The HEXACO traits explain more variance than the Big Five traits in CWB (20.1 % vs. 14.9 %) and in task performance (6.7 % vs. 4.3 %). The Dark Triad traits explain very little variance in task performance (0.7 %), but similar amounts of variance in CWB as the Big Five traits (13.5 %). In the supplement, we present findings of incremental validity analyses of different trait combinations.

Which traits predict job performance best?

Figure 1 visualizes all meta-analytic trait-outcome correlations. Big Five and HEXACO Conscientiousness predict job performance across outcomes best, underscoring the notion that Conscientiousness is one of the strongest non-cognitive predictors of job performance, also across occupational groups [15,16]. Honesty-Humility is the strongest (negative) predictor of CWB, but only predicts OCB weakly and task performance not substantially. Narcissism is also a strong predictor of CWB. HEXACO Extraversion is the strongest predictor of OCB. Especially Big Five Agreeableness predicts CWB well (negatively), likely because it captures some Honesty-Humility-related personality variance [17]. Most other traits (only) exhibit moderate or weak correlations with at least one of the job performance indicators. Recent research [18–21] demonstrated that the criterion-related validity of personality for job performance can be increased by examining narrow facet–outcome relations (as opposed to broad trait-outcome relations). For example, Speer et al. [22] used machine learning to demonstrate that the predictive validity of personality for job performance can be maximized by relying on the facet level, with item-level scoring offering additional gains under appropriate conditions. Yet, researchers and practitioners then face bandwidth-fidelity dilemmas [23], a trade-off between breadth (bandwidth) and precision (fidelity) in measurement.

Figure 1



Meta-Analytic Trait-Outcome Correlations.

Situation activation, trait activation, and outcome activation

Although personality traits clearly drive performance, traits do not operate in isolation but shape and interact with the situational context. In fact, personality traits can be more predictive of job performance when accounting for appropriate situational characteristics, an idea described in detail by the situation, trait, and outcome activation (STOA) model [24]. This model explains how and when traits relate to performance by highlighting the dynamic interplay between situations, traits, and outcomes through activation processes. *Situation activation* entails that individuals perceive, select, evoke, or manipulate situations that match their personality traits. For example, Wang and colleagues [25] found that individuals low on Honesty-Humility are more attracted to organizations perceived as hazardous. In other words, traits create situations that reward the trait's expression. *Trait activation* is the process by which situational characteristics (de-)activate the expression of specific traits. For example, Extraversion is more predictive of job performance in social jobs, whereas Openness predicts performance more strongly in creative and innovative contexts [16,26]. Trait activation is influenced by both situational strength [27] and personality strength [28]: In strong situations, clear behavioral expectations reduce between-person variance in behavior by constraining trait expression, while individuals with strong personality traits show less within-person variability in behavior because they express the trait more consistently across situations. Thus, trait-relevant behavior emerges when situational cues are present and when individuals are dispositionally inclined to respond to those cues. *Outcome activation* describes the process by which the outcome becomes the activating force of the trait. This is the least studied process, but evidence from longitudinal studies linking personality traits to desired outcomes (e.g., career success) could be interpreted as indicating that a valued outcome activates trait-consistent behavior [29]. Together, these three activation mechanisms highlight that personality predicts job performance best when situations and outcomes are personally meaningful and aligned.

Emerging trends and future directions

Several trends and interesting avenues for future research in personality-performance research have emerged in recent years. First, although personality is

conceptualized as relatively stable and stable traits predict performance, accounting for personality development and variability can provide a more wholistic picture of trait—performance relations. This might further increase the criterion-related validity of personality for job performance across the broad spectrum of situations employees encounter at work. Based on the view of personality as changeable, research has demonstrated that trait levels change because of normative development (e.g., emotional stability increases after age 25, [30]), in response to life events [31], but also because of organizational events and processes, such as employment and career development [32]. For example, individuals become significantly more conscientious after starting their first job [33] and *less* narcissistic after climbing the corporate ladder [29]. Another view suggests that personality states exist as momentary or short-term expressions of personality that fluctuate over time or across situations, and individuals differ in the extent of these fluctuations (i.e., personality variability) [34]. While self-rated within-person personality variability is positively associated with self-rated job performance, other-rated within-person personality variability relates negatively to other-rated performance for individuals with a less adaptive personality, but positively for individuals with a more adaptive personality [35]. This suggests that the consequences of personality variability depend not only on who observes the variability, but also on the individual's broader personality profile—indicating that variability may be seen as flexibility in some, but as inconsistency in others. A promising avenue for future research therefore lies in identifying how personality development and variability can be used or managed in organizations to optimize job performance.

Second, while most personality research initially focused on self-rated personality, recent research has increasingly relied on non-self-rated personality measures because they have higher validities for job performance and because they can overcome many of the limitations that plague self-ratings [36]. Klinger and Siangchokyoo [37] further found that the higher validity of observer-rated personality depends on the personality of observers, such that the validity for job performance increases with increasing levels of Conscientiousness and Openness to experience among observers. Wihler et al. [38] further demonstrated that a combination of self- and other-rated personality has the highest validity for job performance. Yet, some of the higher validity of observer-reports of personality for job performance could be due to shared method variance, given that personality reports and job performance ratings are often provided by observers from the same workplace [39].

Third and relatedly, recent advances in artificial intelligence (AI) have enabled new methods for assessing personality. For example, personality can be inferred from interactions with AI chatbots [40], and machine learning algorithms can be trained to infer personality traits from asynchronous job interviews that predict interview performance better than self-rated personality traits [41]. Future studies might use multi-modal AI for personality assessment, combining verbal, audio, facial, and physiological information for more ecologically valid assessments and increased criterion-related validities, although concerns about fairness, transparency, faking, and privacy of AI need to be taken seriously (e.g., [42]).

Practical implications

Findings of this review highlight several practical implications. In personnel selection, trait-based selection can help to hire those candidates most likely to perform well. Our findings suggest that this would have the highest utility for the prevention of CWB. Ideally, practitioners should prioritize Conscientiousness, as this is the trait with the strongest associations across performance indicators, and use the HEXACO model because it has higher criterion-related validity for job performance than the Big Five or the Dark Triad traits. Next to non-self-rated and AI-based personality measures, researchers have recently developed structured interviews [43], normative and situational judgment tests [44,45], and serious games [46,47] to assess personality traits, which can overcome some of the methodological limitations of self-reports that reduce their usefulness in high-stakes situations. Contextualized or facet-level personality assessment can further increase the criterion-related validity for job performance [22,48].

Practitioners can also modify situational characteristics of the job to either attract certain applicants (*situation activation*) or to (de-)activate the expression of (un) desirable traits (*trait activation*). Matching employees with trait-relevant roles (e.g., extraverted individuals in client-facing jobs) likely increases performance, while rewarding employees for good performance can function as an incentive that motivates further trait-based behavior (*outcome activation*).

Conclusion

This review summarized key findings in the literature on personality and job performance. We concluded that personality traits predict job performance, with the HEXACO model explaining most variance across performance outcomes. While personality traits already explain a substantial portion of the variance in job performance, this review highlighted several (recent) developments that offer promising directions for increasing our understanding of the personality—performance relations even further (e.g., traits shape and interact with situational characteristics to determine job performance; accounting for personality variability results in a finer-grained prediction of performance). Practitioners can use these findings in personnel selection and by

modifying situational features to attract the best candidates and to activate desirable trait-relevant behavior. Finally, emerging research on personality variability and non-self-report measures of personality promises to increase the criterion-related validity of personality for job performance.

CReDiT statement

Jan Luca Pletzer: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft.
Loes Abrahams: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known conflicts of interest.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2025.102054.

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* of special interest
** of outstanding interest

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Further information on references of particular interest

25. * This publication discusses the development of an inventory that measures the extent to which individuals are attracted to hazardous organizations (HOT-A) and perceive an organization as hazardous (HOT-P). Across four studies, the authors find that "hazardous" organizations are more appealing to individuals with low ethical standards (e.g., low on Honesty-Humility, high on Dark Triad traits).

35. ** This publication outlines how within-person variability in personality can be either adaptive or maladaptive for effective performance. Importantly, the effects of personality variability on performance seem to depend on the rater source and individuals' trait-level personality.

37. * This study examines how the personality traits of observers influence the validity of their assessments of others' personality traits for job performance. Findings indicate that observer-ratings of personality have higher relative and incremental predictive validity over self-ratings, but this depends on the personality traits of the observers, with largest effects for conscientiousness, openness, and emotional stability.

38. ** This publication emphasizes the value of combining both self- and other-ratings of personality in predicting job performance. Moreover, in some cases more narrow aspects of a personality domain predict specific job performance dimensions better than personality measured at the domain level.

40. * This paper examines the psychometric properties of an AI chatbot's ability to predict personality. Although the findings regarding reliability as well as factorial, convergent and incremental validity (over self-reported personality) were positive, discriminant and criterion-related validity were low.

41. ** This publication demonstrates that machine learning models can explain personality and interview performance variance in asynchronous video interviews. Moreover, they predict more variance in other-rated than in self-rated personality reports, and more for trait-relevant than for trait-irrelevant questions.