Identifying Top Talents within a Group of Successful Managers

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ABSTRACT

Personality is important for effective leadership. An important part of a selection process is therefore to assess the candidate's personality in order to (try to) predict future behaviour. The results from this study indicate that personality testing will be better used in the early phase of the recruitment process distinguishing between potential low performers and potential high performers, than in the last phase of the process distinguishing between the top candidates.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, we have become increasingly aware of the importance of leadership for organisational success (Hogan and Kaizer, 2005). Accordingly, many researchers have looked into the individual characteristics of successful managers. A number of researchers focusing on personality traits have found the Five Factor Model (FFM) to be a useful model in predicting leadership effectiveness (Salgado 1997). This study has a closer look on a group of 188 successful managers to see whether the framework of FFM can be used to predict top talents within this group of successful managers.

There is an overwhelming body of research inspecting the link between personality and job success carried out with FFM instruments. Barrick and Mount's meta-analysis from 1991 found the factors conscientiousness and extraversion to be associated with job success for most positions. Salgado's (1997) meta-analysis of personality and job performance in the European community revealed similar results. In all these studies, *conscientiousness* stands out as the best predictor of job success. In line with previously mentioned studies, Judge et al.'s (2002) meta-analysis focusing on leadership effectiveness found a predictive power (explained variance) of 0.24 for *extraversion*, 0.24 for *openness*, 0.21 for *agreeableness*, 0.16 for *conscientiousness*, and – 0.22 for *neuroticism*. Based on all this research it seems fair to conclude that FFM has proven to be a useful model for predicting managerial effectiveness.

However, even though there are correlations between the five factors and job success this does not necessary means that more is better.

Research question:
Can the FFM be used to identify top talents in a group of successful managers?

The answer to this question will be useful for many practitioners working with selection and promotion of managers in the work place. As little research is done in this area, the present study is explorative in nature.

METHOD

The sample consists of 188 Norwegian managers below 40 years identified by their superior as high performers. All managers have been in their position for more than 12 months, and were responsible for at least five employees. 85% of the participants were from the private sector and 15 % from the public sector. Average age was 35.7 year, SD = 3.5. The sample consisted of 61.5 % males and 38.5 % females. The data was collected over three years from October 2009 to December 2011 with approximately 1/3 of the data collected every year.

A Norwegian version of NEO FFI (Martinsen et al. 2005) was used to measure personality. Data of job performance was collected by a ten items questionnaire (Kuvaas and Dysvik, 2009) distinguishing between effort and quality, and was collected from three sources, self-report, direct reports and superior.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The raw scores of the respondents were transformed to t-scores in order to compare the scores of this group with the norm group. The results presented in Table 1 reveal that this group of successful managers had an average score on neuroticism (40.10) about one SD below the norm group, and a score on extraversion (59.36) and conscientiousness (60.55) both about one SD above the norm group, and a score on openness (46.29) and agreeableness (50.93) which is more or less around the mean for the norm group.

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Table 1

N=188	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Neuroticism	28	59	40,10	5,936
Extraversion	26	75	59,36	7,852
Openness	24	65	46,29	9,536
Agreeableness	27	75	50,93	9,760
Conscientiousness	27	75	60,55	8,085

These results are consistent with the findings of Salgado (1997) and Judge et al. (2002).

A correlation analysis between the performance measures and the five personality factors resulted in only three significant correlations out of 30 possible combinations. The results are presented in Table 2 below. The three correlations were between self-reported performance measures (focus person), effort- extraversion (0.210), effort-conscientiousness (0.251) and quality-conscientiousness (0.179).

Table 2.

Correlations between effort and FFM

N = 188		N	E	O	A	C
Focus Effort	Pearson Correlation	-,003	,210**	-,012	,028	,251**
Focus Quality Total	Pearson Correlation	-,035	,056	-,021	-,025	,179*

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

DISCUSION AND CONCLUSION

Previous research has identified a link between several of the factors in the FFM, but it has been unclear what the ideal scores on the different factors are. This study indicates that the FFM might not be suitable to use to distinguish top talents from a group of successful managers, indicating that personality tests are better used in the first phase of the selection process. The findings also suggest that the higher score is not necessarily better. Enough is enough. It seems like being enough extroverted and conscientiousness is enough. The result might be used to make a profile of a successful manager. Having a t-score between 50 and 70 on extraversion and conscientiousness seems to be ideal. Scoring too low on extraversion

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might mean that the manager avoid situations that require a more outgoing behaviour, and scoring to high might mean that the manager needs most of the attention. Scoring too low on conscientiousness might mean the manager cannot be trusted, and scoring too high might mean he/she is working too hard to achieve goals and targets and put too much pressure on him-/herself. Furthermore, having a t-score between 35 and 45 on neuroticism seems to be fine. Scoring too low might mean that a manager never shows emotions, and does not have any worries, or does not see any reason for developing him-/herself, and scoring too high could mean being emotionally instable. Ideal scorings are suggested in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Suggested Ideal NEO-scorings for managers

	20	30	40	50	60	70	80
Neuroticism	▪	▪	▬▬	▪	▪	▪	▪
Extraversion	▪	▪	▪	▬▬▬▬		▪	▪
Openness	▪	▪	▬▬▬	▪	▪	▪	
Conscientiousness	▪	▪	▪	▬▬▬▬		▪	▪
Agreeableness	▪	▪	▬▬▬	▪	▪	▪	

The strength of this study is collecting information of performance from several sources. Not being able to identify any major links that characterise top talent is a bit surprising. It might be that the variance in personality and performance is too small to identify these links. Furthermore, a limitation of this study is that personality is measured on the broad five-factor level. Measuring more narrow personality traits (i.e. facets) might have been beneficiary.

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