*Chapter 7*

# PERSONALITY AND TELEWORK

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Whether an organisation has employees with the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities to effectively do their jobs, depends, at least in part, on the quality of its recruitment and selection processes. When employers are looking for employees, we often hear them say "I'm looking for the 'right' person for the job." or "I want someone with the 'right' personality." They do so because personality is an important influence on behaviours at work. This is not diminished for teleworkers.

In Chapter 1 we presented a typology of telework and sample jobs to demonstrate that there are different forms of telework and different kinds of jobs that exemplify these different forms. Is there a 'right' personality for each of these different types of telework? For example, let us say we have an employee who is effectively engaged in telework that involves off-site work with little intra-organisational and external communication (for example, data entry). Would the same person adapt as well to the form of telework that involves highly changing work, such as mobile work, with high external communication (always meeting new people) and work with high intra-organisational communication (for example, sales representative)? You might say, "Well, obviously not." We then have to ask the question "*Why* not?"

Like so many of the issues that involve teleworking as a form of work, there is a paucity of research to guide us in answering this question. Instead, we need to rely on existing research

in relation to personality and work more generally. This chapter looks to answer the question "Is there a 'right' personality for each of the different types of telework?" by examining notions of personality, its significance in relation to work behaviours, and the extent to which different personalities adapt to different forms of teleworking. Before we address the question, it is important to establish a framework within which these issues will be discussed.

*Figure 7.1*: The relationship between individual, and environmental variables, and work performance (adapted from Blumberg and Pringle, 1982).
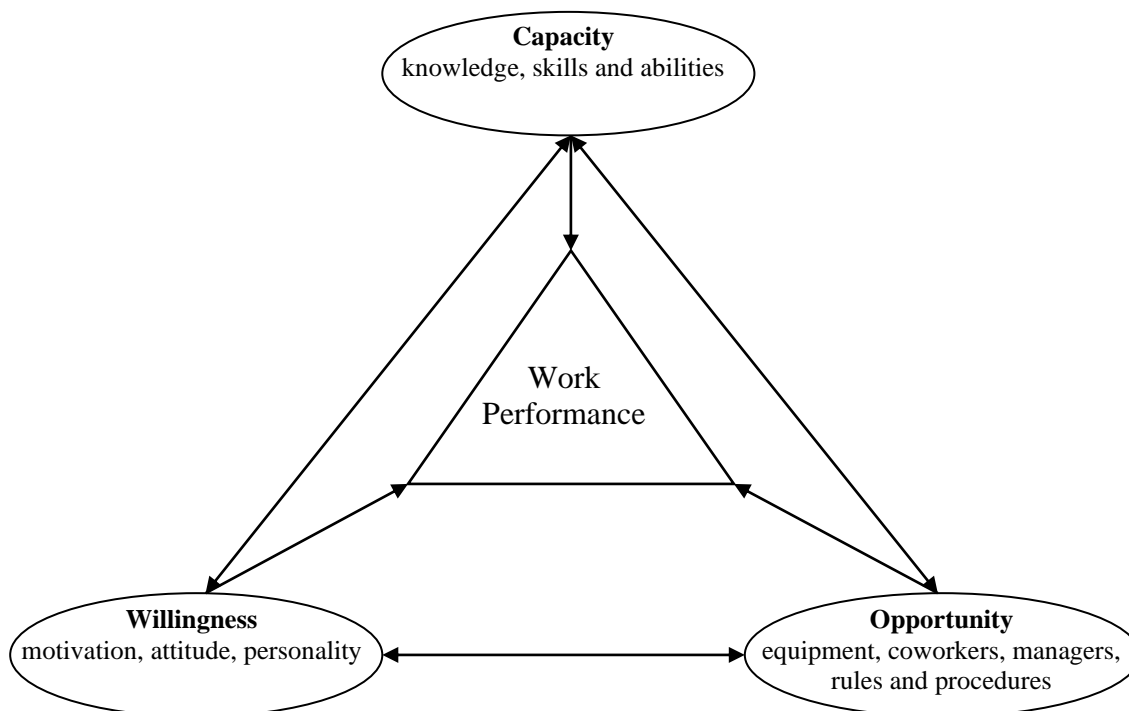


As shown in Figure 7.1, work performance is the product of the interaction between individual variables – the employee's *capacity* to perform (knowledge, skills and abilities) and the employee's *willingness* to perform (motivation, attitude, personality) – and environmental variables – the *opportunity* for the employee to perform (equipment, coworkers, managers, and the organisational rules, policies and procedures) (Blumberg and

Pringle, 1982).  While this chapter focuses on the capacity and willingness of individuals to perform, the material presented should be understood in this wider framework.


## WHAT IS "PERSONALITY"?

A useful definition of personality for our purposes is that given by Statt:

> "The sum total of all the factors that make an individual human being both individual and human; the thinking, feeling and behaving that all human beings have in common, and the particular characteristic pattern of these elements that makes every human being unique." (1994, p169)


We are talking then, about the characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that make individuals unique.  There are many theories of personality, but two which have been given wide attention in the workplace literature are the "Big 5"model of personality (Barrick and Mount, 1991) and the psychological type (Demarest, 1997). They represent two very different but very valuable approaches to understanding personality in the workplace.  They are now considered in turn.


### The 'Big 5' model of personality

This approach to personality says that personalities can be summarized or classified in terms of five basic dimensions (the 'Big 5') – extraversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience (Barrick and Mount, 1991).  The kinds of traits typically associated with each of these dimensions are listed in Table 7.1.  Individuals vary in their characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling and behaviour along these different dimensions to the extent that they are more or less extraverted, emotionally stable, agreeable, conscientious and open to experience.

*Table 7.1* The 'Big 5' personality dimensions (adapted from Barrick and Mount, 1991)

| Dimension | Characteristic traits |
|---|---|
| Extraversion | Sociable, gregarious, talkative, assertive and active |
| Emotional Stability | Calmness, security |
| Agreeableness | Courteous, flexible, trusting, good-natured, cooperative, forgiving and tolerant |
| Conscientiousness | Dependable, organised, thorough, hard-working, achievement-oriented and persistent |
| Openness to Experience | Imaginative, cultured, curious, original, broad-minded and artistically sensitive |

## Psychological types

This approach aims to classify individuals according to a typology derived from their preferences in regard to how they come to know and understand the world, and how they make decisions based on that information. Developed from the work of Carl Jung (1971), this approach has been popularised through the use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers and McCaulley, 1985), or the MBTI as it is more commonly known. The MBTI dimensions, or preference scales, are summarised in Table 7.2. Based on individuals' scores on each of these dimensions, they are classified as one of 16 different types. For example, people who prefer to be energised by the outside world (E), who prefer to take in information indirectly through intuition (N), who prefer to make their judgements on the basis that they 'make sense' (T), and who prefer approach life in an orderly fashion (J) would be described by the psychological type ENTJ. People who prefer to focus their attention on their inner world (I),

*Table 7.2* The MBTI preference scales (adapted from Demarest, 1997)

| Extraversion | Introversion |
|---|---|
| People with a preference for extraversion focus their attention on the outer world and are energized by interaction and activity | People with a preference for introversion focus their attention on their inner world and are energized by reflection and solitude |
| **Sensing** | **Intuition** |
| People with a preference for sensing become aware *directly* through the five senses. They turn to and put most trust in concrete and verifiable information about what is or has been | People with a preference for intuition become aware *indirectly* through hunches, imagination and inspiration. They turn to and put most trust in flashes of insight, abstractions, theory and notions of what could be |
| **Thinking** | **Feeling** |
| People with a preference for thinking decide based on logic and analysis of causes and effects. For them a good decision is one that "makes sense" | People with a preference for feeling decide based on human values and the anticipated effects of the decision on people. For them a good decision is one that "feels right" |
| **Judging** | **Perceiving** |
| People with a preference for judging like to reach closure, to decide and to approach life in an orderly and structured fashion | People with a preference for perceiving like to gather information and generate alternatives, to keep their options open as long as possible and to approach life in an unstructured and flexible manner |

who prefer to take in information directly through their senses (S), who prefer to make their

judgements on the basis that they 'feel right' (F), and who to approach life in an flexible

manner (P) are described by the psychological type ISFP. These are not, however, simply types that result from E+N+T+J or I+S+F+P. Each is a unique and dynamic combination of the four dimensions into a distinctive system and ENTJs will have a very different characteristic way of thinking, feeling and behaving to ISFPs (Demarest, 1997).

## PERSONALITY AND PERFORMANCE

Using both these approaches to personality, researchers have been able to identify different kinds of predictive relationships between personality constructs and job-related criteria, reflecting the different approaches. Again we will examine these in turn.

### The 'Big 5' model of personality

Perhaps not surprisingly, analysis of research across a range of occupational groups and job performance criteria in the US, Canada and Europe has shown that conscientiousness is strongly related to job performance (Barrick and Mount, 1991; Salgado, 1997). Characteristics such as being persistent, careful, responsible and hardworking have been shown to be important for accomplishing work tasks in all jobs. Extraversion has been shown to be a valid predictor of performance when the work involves high levels of interaction or cooperation with others (e.g. in sales or management). Along with extraversion, openness to experience (Barrick and Mount, 1991) and conscientiousness (Behling, 1998) are related to performance in training programs.

We might also expect that those who are more open to experience to be more successful in coping with changing demands in the workplace and for learning those new and different skills. It is important to note here that the focus of this style of research has been on the relationship between personality and outcomes such as performance (assuming some

common associated behavioural set) rather than between personality and the process (behaviours) by which those outcomes are achieved.

There appears to be a complex set of relationships between emotional stability and work performance (Barrick and Mount, 1991). On the other hand, a recent study by Spector *et al* (1995) examined the possibility that individuals with certain personality traits tend to be found in certain types of jobs. They found that people who were high in trait anxiety (one of the traits associated with emotional stability) tended to be in jobs characterized by *low* autonomy, variety, identity, feedback, significance, and complexity, while those who reported high levels of optimism were in jobs with *high* autonomy, variety, identity, feedback, significance, and complexity.

**Psychological types**

Just as Spector *et al* (1995) found a link between personality traits and job types, so research with psychological type has found certain occupations appear to attract certain psychological types (Demarest, 1997). For example, it is estimated that, in the US population, 50-55% have a preference for Extraversion, while 45-55% have a preference for Thinking, 55-60% for Judging, and 65-70% for Sensing (Demarest, 1997 p45). Amongst managers, administrators and supervisors though, while 51% have a preference for Extraversion, 73% have a preference for Thinking, 71% have a preference for Judging, and only 56% have a preference for Sensing (Demarest, 1997 p46). On the other hand, amongst marketing personnel, 67% have a preference for Extraversion, 72% have a preference for Thinking, 67% have a preference for Judging, and only 41% have a preference for Sensing (Demarest, 1997 p46). Unlike the trait research, the focus of the predictions and observations about psychological type and work have centred on *how* the work is carried out – different types work at different

paces, seek varying amounts of external stimulation and interaction, and communicate in different ways (Demarest, 1997 p53). For example, given a project that will take three days, sensing types will work at a steady pace over the three days, while intuitive types are more likely to have periods of high energy and productivity, followed by apparent lulls. Given work to do, introverts describe themselves as liking fairly long periods of time for concentration – someone or something that interferes with concentration is experienced as an interruption. On the other hand, extraverts look for something of interest in the outside world so that an 'interruption' is seen as welcome stimulation or a break. Indeed, they may go in search of stimulation and seek interaction with others. When speaking about an organisation's directions for the future, those with a preference for intuition may speak of 'creating a vision' while people with a preference for sensing are more likely to talk about 'formulating goals and objectives. In the same way, during appraisals, thinking types are likely to point out 'weaknesses', while feeling types will see 'areas for improvement' or 'opportunities for growth'.

## PERSONALITY AND TELEWORKING

As we observed at the beginning of this chapter, the importance of having the 'right person for the job' is recognised in many organisations, and this is no less true for teleworking. For example, in January 1997, a report on teleworking (or telecommuting in the language of the report) was presented to the University of Michigan by its Telecommuting Task Force (Bolletino *et al*, 1997). Among other things, the report contained a series of recommendations concerning the personal qualities that should be possessed by teleworkers. Specifically, it advocated that the employees suitable for teleworking are those who:

- are mature, self-disciplined, and capable of working with little on-site supervision;

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- can demonstrate the ability to maintain productive work habits (i.e. working 8 hours per day, or the agreed amount per day or week);

- can effectively use work time to complete projects, and must be flexible;

- have strong verbal and written communication skills;

- have appropriate knowledge of the use of e-mail and faxes and other computer technology;

- have consistent, productive, and organised work habits, along with the ability to make independent decisions and access appropriate technological support.

Some the personal qualities listed by the task force are those which constitute the *capacity* of the teleworker – the knowledge, skills and abilities – to carry out the job (for example, appropriate knowledge of the use of e-mail and faxes and other computer technology). The others deal with the *willingness* of the teleworker to carry out the job (for example, by being mature, self-disciplined, and capable of working with little on-site supervision). We are, of course, concerned here with the latter qualities. Before we consider the specifics of the relationship between personality and teleworking, let us return briefly to the forms of telework and the contexts within which telework takes place. In Chapter 1, we defined telework as a form of working which varies along five dimensions:

*Location* - the amount of time spent in different locations – home, office or nomadic;

*ICT usage* - extent of use of information and communication technologies (ICTs);

*Knowledge intensity* - extent of knowledge required and autonomy of work;

*Intra-organisational contact* - extent (range and intensity) of intra-organisational contact;

*Extra-organisational contact* - extent (range and intensity) of extra-organisational contact.

Armed with these dimensions, and our information regarding the relationships between personality and work performance, we can make some predictions about the likely relationships between personality and success in different forms of teleworking.

**The 'Big 5' model of personality**

The less time spent in the office, the more *self*-management becomes a critical process for getting work done. The trait characteristics associated with conscientiousness, such as being persistent, careful, responsible and hardworking, all have been shown to be important for accomplishing work tasks. These are equally applicable to the self-management involved in teleworking, where significant periods of time are spent in unsupervised work (both because of distance and the autonomy associated with high knowledge intensity work).

Also, the greater the extent of ICT usage, the more knowledge about ICTs is required. This is, of course, a quality relating to capacity, but personality becomes an issue in regard to how that knowledge is gained. We know from previous research that, along with extraversion, openness to experience and conscientiousness are related to performance in training programs (Barrick and Mount, 1991; Behling, 1998). From this same research, we would also expect that people who work in jobs with high levels of intra- and/or extra-organisational communication are likely to be more successful if they are higher on extraversion, agreeableness and openness to experience. Behling's (1998) concurrent finding that intelligence is positively related to work performance, while unsurprising, reminds us that intelligence is likely also to be a predictor in regard to teleworker training outcomes in regard to success in high knowledge intensity, high ICT usage jobs.

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Given the findings by Spector *et al* (1995) in relation to trait anxiety and job type, we can speculate that those individuals with lower emotional stability are more likely to seek, be selected or be suited to those teleworking jobs with low knowledge intensity (those with low autonomy and complexity), while those with higher levels of emotional stability would be more likely to seek, be selected or be suited to jobs with high knowledge intensity (those with high autonomy and complexity).

**Psychological types**

The question of which psychological type is best suited to telework does not have a straightforward answer – it too depends on which form of teleworking you are considering. For example, you might want someone for a teleworking job where much of the time will be spent working away from the office. Using this criterion by itself, you would probably decide that you need a person with a preference for introversion – someone that prefers to work alone. If this job also involved low intra- and extra-organisational contact (for example, an information systems developer) you would be right, but if the reverse is true (high intra- and extra-organisational contact, as in the case of a sales manager), then you need a person with a preference for extraversion (note the overlap here with the 'Big 5' approach). The same complexity is true when you start to look at the four-way combinations of preferences. The key here then, is to look at the combination of dimensions that identify the specific form of telework as a basis for deciding the appropriate type.

A detailed explication of the relationships between the hundreds of combinations of telework dimensions and the 16 personality types is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, Table 7.3 summarises some predictions about the relationships between particular combinations of the dimensions of telework and specific personality types. In the two examples shown in

*Table 7.3* Personality types and telework combinations

| Combination of Telework Dimensions | Predicted Compatibility of Personality Types | |
|---|---|---|
| High ICT Usage<br><br>High Knowledge Intensity<br><br>High % teleworking (high degree of autonomy)<br><br>High Intra-organisational Communication (teamwork)<br><br>High Extra-organisational Communication<br><br>*Sample job*: sales manager | *Compatible*<br><br>ESTJ<br><br>ENTJ<br><br>ENFJ | *Incompatible*<br><br>ISTP<br><br>ISFP<br><br>INTP |
| High ICT Usage<br><br>High Knowledge Intensity<br><br>High % teleworking (high degree of autonomy)<br><br>Low Intra-organisational Communication (independent)<br><br>Low Extra-organisational Communication<br><br>*Sample job*: information systems developer | *Compatible*<br><br>ISTJ<br><br>ISFJ<br><br>INTJ | *Incompatible*<br><br>ENFP<br><br>ENTJ<br><br>ENFJ |

Table 7.3, we see the key difference is in the extent of the intra- and extra-organisational communication (IOC and EOC, respectively). Not surprisingly perhaps, it is the types with a preference for extraversion which are identified as more likely to be compatible with

telework involving high levels of IOC and EOC, while the types with a preference for introversion are identified as more compatible with telework involving low levels of IOC and EOC. Beyond this, the extent to which the high IOC involves close teamwork may determine whether the Thinking or Feeling preference combines more effectively with the preference for Extraversion. On the other hand, individuals with a preference for Perception rather than Judging are unlikely to be compatible with either of these two forms of teleworking, which demand a high degree of self-imposed goal-setting and structure.

**A point about personality, teleworking and teams**

Teams and team based work systems have been recognised as the dominant organisational initiative of the last decade for enhancing the organisation's ability to achieve its goals (Townsend *et al*, 1998). We would be remiss, in this light, if we did not devote some space here to considering the implications of personality for team based working in a teleworking context.

Two examples of research based on the 'Big 5' approach show the relationships between personality and successful team performance. In their study of product design teams, Kichuk and Wiesner (1997) found that the individuals who constituted successful teams had higher levels of extroversion and agreeableness, and lower levels of neuroticism than their unsuccessful counterparts. Thoms *et al* (1996) used a questionnaire survey of 126 workers in a manufacturing organisation that was planning the implementation of self-managed work groups. They found that emotional stability, extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness were significantly related to perceived self-efficacy for participating in self managed work groups.

The psychological type researchers also identify differences in team dynamics according to the personalities of the individuals in the teams. Demarest (1997) details some of these differences as they might show themselves during the four stages of team development – forming, norming, storming and performing. For example, during the forming stage, time is spent by team members learning about each other and forming relationships. This is an important time for those whose psychological types mean that they are people and process-oriented and that they tend to do their best work when they feel a sense of relationship with their coworkers (e.g. NFs). On the other hand, those psychological types who are more task-oriented and who place less emphasis on attending to group processes and forming relationships (e.g. STs) may be frustrated and want to 'get down to business'.

In their discussion about 'virtual teams', Townsend *et al* (1998) describe the shift to 'virtual interaction' – email and document sharing replaces face to face meetings and geographic proximity, as new ways of communicating and interacting. They point out that virtual team members still need traditional teamwork – effective communication skills, goal clarity and performance orientation – but they need to learn new ways to express themselves and understand others in an environment with a 'diminished sense of presence'; they need to develop superior team participation skills, *inter alia*, because fluid membership requires quick assimilators; and they need to develop a degree of cultural sensitivity, since geographical dispersion may include national (and cultural) boundaries.

A key dynamic underpinning the virtual teams of Townsend *et al* (1998) is the constancy of change, not only in terms of the fluidity of membership, but also in the way they transcend traditional fixed functional roles and carry out a changing variety of assignments and tasks. We should, therefore, also explore the capacity of our teleworkers to adapt to that kind of

change. From the perspective of the 'Big 5', we know that extraverts and those who are more open to experience are more likely to adapt successfully to these kinds of changing circumstances (Barrick and Mount, 1991; Salgado, 1997). We would therefore be keen to ensure that the members of our team score high on these traits.

*Table 7.4* Psychological type and postures to change (adapted from Demarest, 1997)

| Introversion Sensing (IS) | Introversion Intuition (IN) |
|---|---|
| "Let's keep things as they are" | "Let's look at this another way" |
| **Extraversion Sensing (ES)** | **Extraversion Intuition (EN)** |
| "Let's get on with it" | "Let's change things" |

Differences in the posture of the different psychological types to organisational change have also been identified (Demarest, 1997). Some of these broad differences are summarized in Table 7.4. One of the differences between the sensing types ('Let's keep things as they are') and the intuitive types ('Let's change things') is the result of the sensing types wanting data or experience to support the new direction, while the intuitive types are comfortable proceeding based on a general idea or a hunch. On this basis, in the language of psychological type, we would be looking to populate our teams with Ns rather than Ss. Similarly, those with preference for extraversion are action oriented and want to move ahead

more quickly, while those with a preference for introversion move ahead more slowly, wanting time to reflect.

## CONCLUSION

Clearly, there are particular forms of teleworking and teleworking contexts that individuals will find more or less stimulating and to which they will be more or less suited. When making our selection decisions, we are not just talking about individuals or the jobs we want them to do; we are talking about the 'goodness of fit' between those individuals and their jobs (Billsberry, this volume). The more people feel that their jobs are stimulating, rewarding and challenging, the more they will respond with their best efforts and creativity (they will be satisfied and productive); the more they feel their job is stultifying or beyond their capabilities or interests, the more dissatisfied and unproductive they will be (Statt, 1994 p101). We are looking less for the 'right' person for our teleworking job, than we are for the right 'match' between the person and the job. Table 7.5 summarises the expected relationships between the personality traits and types and the dimensions of telework, based on the earlier discussion.

Teleworkers, like all workers, need to be conscientious, but perhaps need, to a greater extent, to be self-reliant and self-motivated. They also need to be disposed towards the different coworker and supervisory relationships and different communication patterns that off-site work requires. Telework, of itself and in its different forms, will not, therefore, suit all workers equally. It behoves us to ensure that we use our insights to get a match between the right person and the right teleworking job.

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Table 7.5 Personality traits, types and their links to dimensions of telework

| Telework Dimension | Personality Traits | Personality Type Dimensions |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Information and Communication Technology | Openness to Experience | Sensing-Intuition Introversion-Extraversion |
| Knowledge Intensity | Emotional Stability | Sensing-Intuition |
| Location | Conscientiousness | Introversion-Extraversion Judging-Perceiving |
| Intra-organisational Communication | Extraversion, Agreeableness, Openness to Experience | Introversion-Extraversion Thinking-Feeling |
| Extra-organisational Communication | Extraversion, Agreeableness, Openness to Experience | Introversion-Extraversion Thinking-Feeling |

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