

KORN FERRY'S PERSONAS

A SIMPLE STARTING POINT FOR DESCRIBING PEOPLE

Technical Brief



Executive summary

When determining the right fit, sometimes an occasion calls for a custom-tailored suit, with carefully measured dimensions. Other times, a close approximation—small, medium, or large t-shirt—is easier and more effective for the situation.

Personality feedback can come in a carefully measured fit or a more general fit, and which approach is preferred depends on the purpose. Conventional personality feedback is powerful, but complex. Korn Ferry's framework of eight personas offers a simpler alternative to help people start thinking about personality. At a high level, personas provide people with quick insights they can use to understand themselves and others.

Personas give a simplified view of personality by:

1. considering a few areas of personality, instead of the whole domain,
2. drawing on broad, rather than narrow, facets of personality, and
3. utilizing categories, in lieu of reporting continuous personality results.

Personas, like other personality typologies, provide broad descriptions with a high level of abstraction, enabling a more manageable, less detailed set of personality insights.

In this paper, we introduce the eight Korn Ferry personas, as well as the science behind them. We also summarize the intended uses and limitations of personas to ensure they are applied appropriately.

Introducing Korn Ferry's personas

Korn Ferry created personas as descriptive categorizations based on common scoring patterns of key aspects of personality.

Korn Ferry's eight personas are:

	Motivated to succeed, Visionaries are flexible, sociable, and positive.
	Adaptable, Architects independently work hard to achieve.
	Tolerant of risk and uncertainty, Facilitators are outgoing and interpersonally adept.
	Unobtrusive, Explorers are curious, adaptable, and flexible.
	Hardworking and focused, Advocates enjoy interacting with and motivating others to achieve established goals.
	With quiet confidence, Implementors steadfastly work to achieve clear, challenging goals.
	Connectors enjoy taking the lead on familiar tasks, bringing together people and ideas.
	Valuing consistency and reserved, Stabilizers can be counted on to support well-known tasks and established processes.

Persona-defining traits

Korn Ferry’s personas are informed by analysis of data from its state-of-the-art, forced choice, item response theory-based (FC-IRT) self-assessments. Our self-assessments can be used to provide over 50 continuously scaled, work-related insights on people. This includes information on people’s (1) traits, (2) drivers, and (3) behavioral competencies. We define personas based solely on some of the traits, using other information to provide more description of each persona.

Traits are personality characteristics that influence behavior and reflect aspects of “who people are.” They are relatively stable over time and have shown good evidence of cross-cultural/cross-regional validity.

Traits measures are perhaps the most visible and well-researched measures available in all of psychology, including, but not limited to, measures designed specifically for applied use in organizational and corporate settings. Although specific traits may be more or less critical for success depending upon the role or context, decades of research have shown positive associations between personality and many work outcomes. Trait assessments carry a considerable degree of legitimacy in diverse contexts and are often expected by clients and human resources practitioners seeking assessment services for their organizations.

One of the foundations for our FC-IRT self-assessment of traits is the well-known “Big Five” model of personality. The five broad traits comprising this model are: Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Neuroticism, and Openness to Experience. Korn Ferry’s conceptualizations of these are Agreeableness, Striving, Presence, Positivity, and Agility, respectively. We selected three of these trait super factors to define our personas.

Selecting three of the “Big Five”

Research shows that at least three of the Big Five personality constructs demonstrate consistent positive validity and applicability, both in general and with various emphasis on promotion, increased achievement, work engagement, and in understanding leadership behavior and leadership emergence. When pursuing a simple and elegant set of personality categories, our own data using the Korn Ferry trait assessment also suggest that three of the Big Five are particularly useful and widely applicable. Although Agreeableness and

Positivity (reversed Neuroticism) show good relationships with success, the Korn Ferry trait composites Presence, Agility, and Striving show the highest correlations with work engagement and management level (see Table 1), which are common outcomes of interest to talent managers and organizations.

Table 1. Bivariate correlations: Korn Ferry trait super factors, work engagement, and management level

Big Five Trait Super Factor	Work Engagement	Management Level
Agility	0.21	0.22
Presence	0.20	0.19
Positivity	0.17	0.14
Striving	0.39	0.22
Agreeableness	0.15	0.10

Note. N=27,699 professionals ranging from Entry-Level contributors to CEOs. Adapted from Lewis, Goff, Hezlett, et al., 2017.

The three trait super factors

Agility. Agility relates to a person’s capacity for novelty, adaptability, cognitive flexibility, risk, ambiguity, and change. People with high Agility tend to avoid dogmatism and rigidity. They often adapt behaviors and approaches and experiment with solutions, placing a particularly high value on learning and growing from experiences, including failures. Those lower on Agility typically support proven ideas that are likely to succeed, rather than novel, untested, and more risky approaches. They appreciate clarity and are comfortable with established procedures.

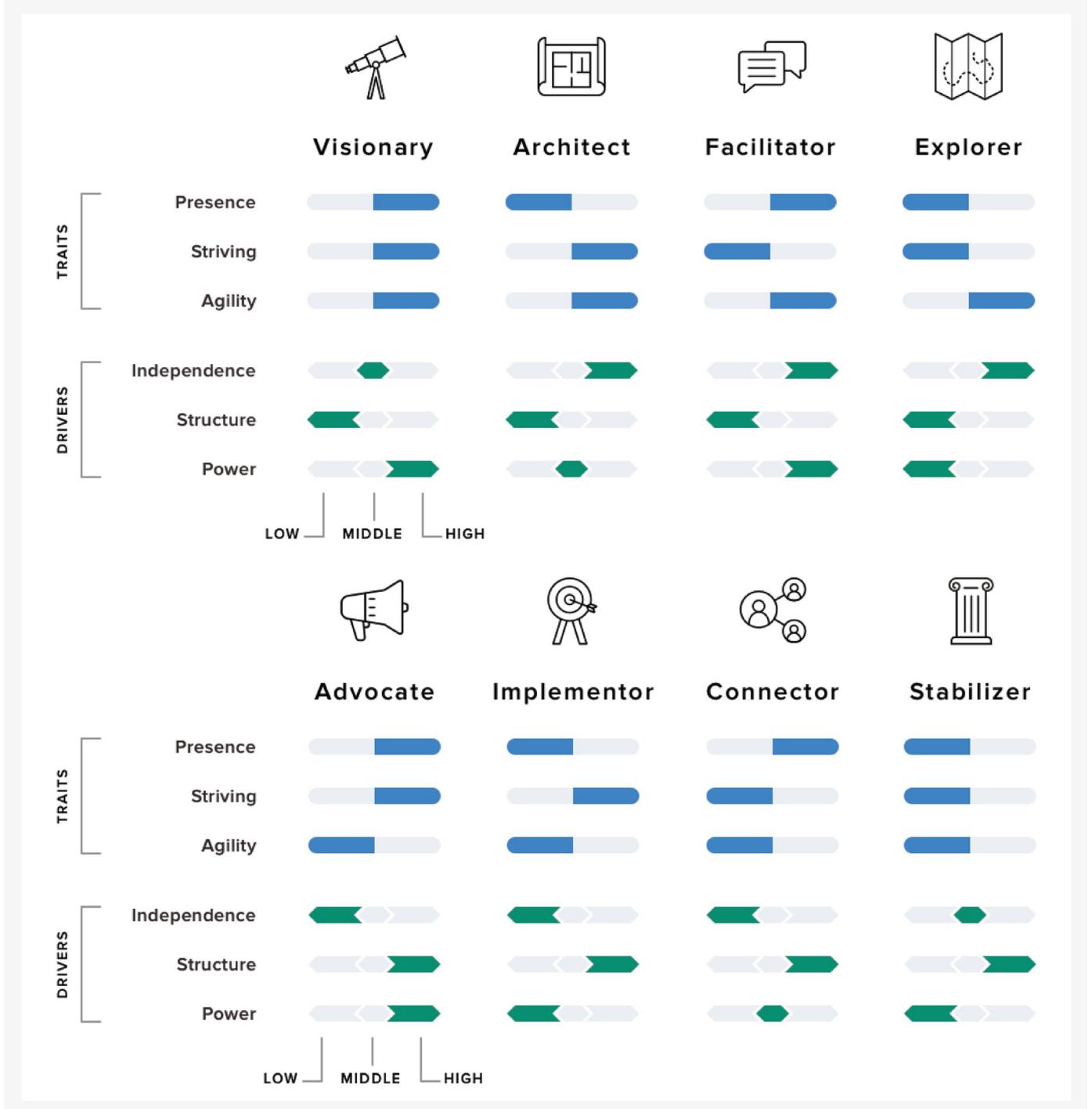
Presence. Presence relates to the degree to which a person is sociable, persuasive, commanding, and poised. Higher scorers on Presence tend to enjoy interacting with people and are often comfortable taking charge. People with a lower level of Presence are generally reserved, quiet, and passive, and may rely on a few relationships instead of a broad network to get things done. Presence-like constructs are most often associated with performance in jobs that require social interactions, sales, leadership abilities, training proficiency, and job satisfaction.

Striving. Striving relates to a person’s relative tendency to be driven, reliable, and persistent. High Striving people typically enjoy pursuing difficult goals and are likely to work persistently until they achieve them, even in the face of

setbacks. People lower on Striving often enjoy pursuing realistic goals, and they tend to be more spontaneous in their pursuit of longer-term objectives. When faced with setbacks, they may opt to adjust their goals. Among the Big Five personality traits, Striving has shown to have perhaps the most consistent, well-documented, and positive predictive utility on workplace outcomes.

Personas are based on combinations of above average or below average scores on Presence, Striving, and Agility. For example, a person who is below average on Striving and Presence, and above average on Agility is most like the Explorer persona (see Figure 1). Typologies like our personas are often used to inform self-awareness, personal and career growth, and leadership and team development, among other uses.

Figure 1
Personas: 'defining' traits and 'describing' drivers



Additional persona insights

Based on analyses of our broader assessment data, we have inferred additional insights about personas, such as the general distribution of personas across job levels and regions. We also determined the typical scoring patterns of several drivers for each persona. These are used to offer additional descriptions about the personas.

Persona-describing drivers

Drivers are the preferences, values, and motivations that influence a person's career aspirations. Of the six drivers assessed in Korn Ferry's drivers measure, we used three to provide more insights about the eight personas: Independence, Structure, and Power.

Independence. Independence is the extent to which a person prefers to work freely, autonomously, and with limited involvement by others. People in personas lower on Independence tend to pursue group-defined goals within structured organizations and prefer to identify strongly with the organization. By comparison, people in personas higher on Independence typically prefer freedom from organizational constraints and may value employability more than identification with the company.

Structure. Structure relates to a person's preference for process-oriented, structured, and stable work environments. People in personas lower on Structure tend to prefer work characterized by breadth, ambiguity, variety, and unpredictability. People in personas higher on Structure typically seek job security, known problems and solutions, and work requiring deep or specialized knowledge and skill.

Power. Power is the extent to which a person is motivated to seek influence, recognition, and increasing levels of responsibility. People in personas lower on Power tend to be driven by intrinsic interest in their work and prefer to avoid high-visibility and/or high-pressure job roles. Conversely, people in personas higher on Power typically seek to climb to higher levels of visibility and responsibility and acquire a high degree of influence.

How 'defining' traits & 'describing' drivers come to life in a persona

Consider again the Explorer persona, characterized by below average scores on Striving and Presence, and above average scores on Agility. The driver scoring pattern associated with the Explorer persona is above average on Independence, and below average on Structure and Power (see Figure 1). This means that many Explorers value having the freedom to set their own direction. They often thrive when they have a variety of challenges, and meaningful work tends to be more important to them than status or formal recognition.

That said, it should be noted that the persona driver patterns are *inferred* and are only intended to offer descriptive insights about the personas. As such, a person whose trait scores indicate they are most like the Explorer persona may have actual driver scores that differ from those in the persona pattern.

Intended uses

Korn Ferry developed personas to offer a straightforward way of providing some personality-based feedback. We apply our personas in three ways:

1. Personas offer a starting point for people to begin to understand the broader aspects of their personality. The Persona descriptions differ from our more detailed reporting, which offer insights on the individual, narrow traits within our trait super factors.
2. Personas can offer tailored, trait-based guidance on how to approach learning and development.
3. Personas help provide people with a general frame of reference for how they are similar to or are different from others, such as their team members.

Personas in practice

When applied to individual learning, the trait levels associated with each persona can offer guidance for customizing three critical aspects of the learning environment:

1. Learning with Others (Presence)
2. Guidance (Striving)
3. Variety (Agility)

Consider the Facilitator persona, defined by high Presence, low Striving, and high Agility (see Table 2). A person aligned with this persona may prefer learning in interactive group settings (high Presence) and is likely to embrace variety and unfamiliar experiences (high Agility). In addition, Facilitators may appreciate both structured suggestions on how to commit to and apply new behaviors, as well as encouragement to persist until they have achieved their learning goals (low Striving).

Table 2
Personas: trait-based guidance for learning and development

Personas	Learning with Others (Presence) Type of preparation for, and relative involvement of, coaches, cohort peers, managers, and others.  High: More comfort with spontaneous group activity  Low: More comfort when prepared for group activity	Guidance (Striving) Level of support, direction, and “push” provided to ensure goal achievement.  High: More self-directed  Low: More guidance directions, and encouragement	Variety (Agility) Degree to which the journey is prescriptive and consistent vs. exploratory and variable.  High: Exploration and high variety  Low: Structured with consistency
Visionary			
Architect			
Facilitator			
Explorer			
Advocate			
Implementor			
Connector			
Stabilizer			

Limitations

Personas should not be viewed as an exact or complete description of a person's personality, and should not be used for talent selection, identification, or comparison purposes. They are designed to provide *descriptive*, rather than *predictive*, insights.

Personality traits *can* predict success at work, but the simplicity of the personas makes them the wrong tool for this job. Personas are a composite of a limited subset of our full trait taxonomy. In addition, they are blunt, rather than fine, tools. Remember, they are a small, medium, or large T-shirt rather than a tailored suit. By design, personas only differentiate people by scores above and below the mean on three key traits. Consider two salespeople whose traits results are most aligned with the Advocate persona. Although both individuals have Presence scores that are above average, one is at the 99th percentile, while the other is at the 51st percentile, which is just above average. The former is likely to show up as more outgoing, persuasive, and sociable at work than the latter, who is barely above average on this trait super factor.

Furthermore, personas do not take into account contextual information about a job, such as level, function, or other elements that help outline in detail "what good looks like" for a specific role. Therefore, it is unlikely that personas will ever clearly predict performance, and thus, they should not be used for that purpose.

Conclusion

Personas offer a simplified view into key aspects of personality. Defined by a subset of the full domain of traits known to be relevant to many roles, and measured using state-of-the-art tools, Korn Ferry's eight personas deliver relevant feedback in an easy-to-digest format. Their descriptive power make them well-suited for individual self-awareness and development, as they lay a foundation for deeper and broader feedback on personality.

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