

THE REAL TRUTH ABOUT PERSONALITY ASSESSMENT

Fact Sheet



Personality has become trendy. Online channels, social media, and dating apps buzz with quick personality surveys and fun results to share with friends.

But, as assessment becomes more widespread, so does the opportunity for misinformation. Korn Ferry would like to share some truths about personality assessment, based on our deep understanding of the well-established science of personality. Our approach to personality assessment is rooted in science, fairness, and inclusivity. These 11 true statements will clear up some common misunderstandings.

1. Everyone has a personality

Personality is an important part of who we are. It involves our characteristic patterns of feeling, thinking, and behaving, including how we typically interact with others and approach different situations. These patterns are shaped by nature *and* nurture. Although personality reflects relatively stable aspects of “who people are,” personality characteristics, or traits, can be changed slowly over time as people are motivated to take on new challenges. For example, an introverted person who wants to build networks or exert more influence may consciously reach out to meet new people and make an effort to speak up. As this example shows, personality characteristics differ from skills or capabilities.

2. Models of personality have stood the test of time

Building a personality assessment begins with choosing what to measure. This means picking a model or approach to thinking about personality. Since personality has been formally studied for

more than 100 years, there are many different theories to choose from, including Jung’s theory of personality types and the HEXACO model of personality.

The Five Factor Personality Model or “Big Five” has been clearly established as a premier personality framework that is relevant around the world. Although the Big Five constructs are sometimes described or conceptualized differently, they are most commonly known as Stability (or Neuroticism), Agreeableness, Openness to Experience, Extraversion, and Conscientiousness. The Big Five framework is based in the lexical tradition, which assumes the important descriptors differentiating people will be represented in natural language. This framework is a descriptive conceptualization of personality with narrow traits nested within broader traits known as super factors. It differs from psycho-dynamic theories such as those developed by Freud and Jung. The scales in the primary Korn Ferry trait measure are based on the “Big Five.”¹

1. Like the “Big Five” model, the Korn Ferry trait scales are intended to assess personality traits within the normal range, not to diagnose any mental disability or medical condition. Clinical personality batteries are used to assess psychological disorders and should not be used in the workplace.

3. Good personality assessments are supported by strong research

“Pop psychology” quizzes are everywhere, claiming to report insights on who you are relative to popular characters or groups in books and movies. They are designed for fun and offered for free on the internet. We enjoy the parts that seem relevant and tend to overlook the rest, so they may seem generally accurate and meaningful.

But personality assessments used for research and job-related insights need to meet well-established professional standards. These include ensuring the reliability, validity, accuracy, and fairness of results. A test is reliable if results are consistent and dependable. A test is valid if it really measures what it intends to measure. No personality assessment is perfect, but good ones offer repeatable and valid feedback to all.

When robust personality insights are wanted, an assessment should always be grounded in science. Look for assessments which offer strong psychometric-based properties, clear technical documentation, and even independent reviews or endorsements by third parties such as the British Psychological Society (BPS).

Korn Ferry offers reliable and valid personality assessments. Additional information about our personality trait measure and scales, including reliability and validity information, can be found in our technical manuals.

4. Personality assessments have many work-related purposes

Personality is measured for a range of applications, and in many different contexts, including therapy, vocational and career counseling, school psychology, and the workplace. Researchers have spent decades investigating how personality affects behavior at work. It is now well-established that personality traits influence a variety of work-related outcomes, including satisfaction, engagement, performance, and more. Which traits matter most varies somewhat from job-to-job and across organizations. Certain personality traits tend to predict some work-related outcomes better than others. Personality 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.

If used appropriately, personality assessments can be used fairly at work for many purposes, including:

- Self-awareness, including how a person likes to approach their work, interacts with others, and handles stress and challenges.
- Personal development, including leadership development.
- Team building by increasing awareness of self and others.
- Succession planning to determine who is ready for leadership roles.
- Identification of people with high potential for future leadership opportunities.
- Creating career paths and determining readiness and fit for the next step.
- Hiring, based on fit with, and motivation for a given role.

In many roles, personality is a noteworthy predictor of job performance. Combining personality information with data from other assessments, interviews, and resumes offers powerful insights to inform decisions about people at work.

5. It's important to pick the right report for the situation

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.

Reports from personality assessments should be aligned with both the intended use of the assessment, as well as the target audience. For example, if an assessment is being used to recruit for a particular job, the feedback reports for the hiring manager should provide detailed information about candidates' personality profiles. If, on the other hand, an assessment is designed to provide general insights about strengths and development opportunities, then the report should share highlights to maximize self-awareness for the participant.

6. Simple feedback can help people understand themselves

One common way people enjoy receiving their personality feedback is through typologies or categories, what Korn Ferry calls “Personas”. These descriptions are broad like a small, medium, or large T-shirt rather than a tailored suit. They offer a starting point for people to understand themselves and give a general frame of reference for how they are similar to or different from others.

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 be descriptive. They are not precise enough to predict job fit or performance, for example.

7. Benchmarked personality feedback can inform work-related decisions

Making decisions about people at work is consequential and reporting from personality results for this purpose needs to be more precise and tailored, like the custom-fit suit. This typically involves comparing a person to what good looks like, or what is required for success through benchmarking and norms. Norms reflect the average score of a specific population, and a high or low score is defined by the distance from the average or “norm” for that population. In addition, it is important to take into consideration the specific demands of the job. This can be reflected through benchmarks, or a profile for what success looks like.

Consider the use of a personality assessment in a recruiting context. Let’s assume that the open position is a customer service representative at an insurance company. The report should show how a job candidate’s results compare to both 1) the norm group, and 2) the customer service job’s target profile or “benchmarks” for personality traits. The ideal profile for this position might include higher than average scores on personality traits such as empathy, adaptability, trust, and humility, particularly in comparison to other jobs requiring less interpersonal interaction, such as an accountant or data scientist.

Remember that personality is only one of the many attributes which contribute to success at work. Better prediction can be achieved when combining personality insights with information on additional job-related characteristics.

8. Personality assessment response options have trade-offs

Information about personality can be collected in a variety of ways. Here are a few commonly used formats, each of which has pros and cons.

The relatively simplistic *dichotomous* test format offers two alternatives for each item. A person is presented with a single statement and asked to select “True” or “False” or “Yes” or “No”. This response format is fast, but sometimes requires completing many items. Some people don’t enjoy just having two response options to choose from.

Assessments with *Likert-type* scales give multiple response options that are ordered on a continuum. For example, people are given a statement and asked to choose one of five response options, ranging from “Strongly Disagree” on the left to “Strongly Agree” on the right. People often prefer to have multiple choices, but sometimes differ in the extent to which they use the full range of responses. Additionally, some people may answer as they would like to be, rather than how they truly see themselves.

The *forced-choice response* test format asks participants to rank their choices according to which are most like them to least like them. This approach reduces the chances that a person will be able to manipulate their responses to produce a result that they think is ideal. Here is an example:



Items that force a participant to choose can be scored in different ways. Forced-choice item response theory (FC-IRT) methods are the gold standard for maximizing insights from scores. Korn Ferry’s primary trait self-assessment uses FC-IRT.

9. Well-designed personality assessments are fair

Personality assessments are often recognized for being fair and equitable. When used properly, they offer objective, impartial insights useful for informing workplace talent decisions which are free from the conscious and unconscious biases that can affect human judgments, such as

recommendations or manager nominations. Put simply, appropriate assessments should not show differences where differences do not exist. In addition, assessments must be deployed in line with best-practice guidelines. For a hiring process to be fair, many factors must be considered in addition to having a well-designed assessment.

These include applying an inclusive, equitable, and consistent recruitment process across all candidates.

- We are committed to helping clients remove bias from talent decisions.
- We write our assessments using equitable and inclusive language and evaluate for readability.
- We've worked with experts to ensure our assessments meet standards for accessibility.
- We routinely examine our assessments for group differences to support and uphold professional and legal standards.
- We work with expert legal counsel to review our methods of evaluating adverse impact.
- We are transparent about the validity of our assessments and can provide technical manuals and psychometrician support at any time.
- We work closely with our clients to ensure they are using the appropriate assessments.
- We regularly conduct research on our assessments to ensure that they are related to outcomes such as work engagement, organizational commitment, job performance, and company performance.
- We offer local validation studies for a fee when clients are interested in more specific validation.

10. Artificial intelligence (AI) scoring should be monitored

The term 'AI' is often used to describe scoring computations that have been developed by a computer. There have been instances in which AI-developed recruitment algorithms have inadvertently trained themselves to be biased against certain groups, leading to skepticism about this technique. It is important to check AI-developed algorithms for inappropriate group differences. Regardless of whether the scoring of a personality assessment is developed through AI

or more traditional approaches, fairness should be evaluated by scientists and third-party experts. An algorithm is simply a function that tells a computer what to do to generate a particular outcome. AI-derived algorithms can be fair, and not all assessment scoring algorithms are created using AI.

11. Use best practices for the best results

Like any product or tool, there are right and wrong ways to use personality assessments. Korn Ferry follows and recommends these best practices for using assessments in the workplace:

1. **Transparent.** The purpose of a personality assessment needs to be clearly stated, and informed consent must be obtained from each person who takes one.
2. **Fair and equitable.** Personality assessments can offer objective talent insights. Robust personality assessments are built to be fair, equitable, and inclusive for all participants.
3. **Psychometrically sound.** Only personality assessments that are grounded in science are robust. Ensure there are technical manuals which document the reliability and validity of any personality assessment. A quick quiz on a social media platform is almost certainly not as scientifically sound as an assessment you may be asked to take for work, even if some of the questions seem similar.
4. **Applicable.** The personality assessment must be "fit for purpose." In other words, the assessment and its reporting should be applied for the uses for which it has been developed and validated.

Personality assessment is powerful because people like learning about themselves and others. Well-designed and fairly used personality assessments are a valuable tool for a variety of workplace applications. We hope these 11 core truths help people understand, evaluate, and use personality assessments to maximize the potential of people and organizations.

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About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organization structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers.