

# Curiosity can predict employees' ability to creatively solve problems, research shows

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Employers who are looking to hire creative problem-solvers should consider candidates with strong curiosity traits, and personality tests may be one way to tease out those traits in prospective employees, new research from Oregon State University shows.

People who showed strong curiosity traits on [personality tests](#) performed better on creative tasks and those with a strong diversive curiosity trait, or curiosity associated with the interest in exploring unfamiliar topics and learning something new, were more likely to come up with creative

solutions to a problem, the researchers found.

The findings contribute to a growing body of evidence suggesting that testing for curiosity traits may be useful for employers, especially those seeking to fill complex jobs, said Jay Hardy, an assistant professor in OSU's College of Business and lead author of the study.

As workplaces evolve and jobs become increasingly dynamic and complex, having employees who can adapt to changing environments and learn new skills is becoming more and more valuable to organizations' success, he said.

"But if you look at job descriptions today, employers often say they are looking for curious and creative employees, but they are not selecting candidates based on those traits," said Hardy, whose research focuses on employee training and development. "This research suggests it may be useful for employers to measure curiosity, and, in particular, diversive curiosity, when hiring new employees."

The findings were published recently in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*. Co-authors are Alisha Ness of University of Oklahoma and Jensen Mecca of Shaker Consulting Group.

Past research has shown that curiosity is a strong predictor of a person's ability to creatively solve problems in the workplace. But questions remain about how, why and when curiosity affects the creative process, Hardy said. The latest research helps to pinpoint the type of curiosity that best aids creative problem-solving.

Diversive curiosity is a trait well-suited to early stage problem-solving because it leads to gathering a large amount of information relevant to the problem. That information can be used to generate and evaluate new ideas in later stages of creative problem-solving. Diversive curiosity

tends to be a more positive force.

On the other hand, people with strong specific curiosity traits, or the curiosity that reduces anxiety and fills gaps in understanding, tend to be more problem-focused. Specific curiosity tends to be a negative force.

For the study, researchers asked 122 undergraduate college students, to take personality tests that measured their diversive and specific curiosity traits.

They then asked the students to complete an experimental task involving the development of a marketing plan for a retailer. Researchers evaluated the students' early-stage and late-stage creative problem-solving processes, including the number of ideas generated. The students' ideas were also evaluated based on their quality and originality.

The findings indicated that the participants' diversive curiosity scores related strongly to their performance scores. Those with stronger diversive curiosity traits spent more time and developed more ideas in the early stages of the task. Stronger specific curiosity traits did not significantly relate to the participants' idea generation and did not affect their creative performance.

"Because it has a distinct effect, diversive curiosity can add something extra in a prospective employee," Hardy said. "Specific curiosity does matter, but the diversive piece is useful in more abstract ways."

Another important finding of the research, Hardy noted, is that participants' behavior in the information-seeking stage of the task was key to explaining differences in creative outcome. For people who are not creative naturally, a lack of natural diversive [curiosity](#) may be overcome, in part, by simply spending more time asking questions and reviewing materials at the early stages of a task, he said.

"Creativity to a degree is a trainable skill," he said. "It is a skill that is developed and can be improved. The more of it you do, the better you will get at it."

**More information:** Jay H. Hardy et al, Outside the box: Epistemic curiosity as a predictor of creative problem solving and creative performance, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2016.08.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.08.004)

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