

# Study: Being conscientious is one of the strongest predictors of success in the workplace

November 5 2019

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he study, led by a recent post-doctoral researcher at U of T Scarborough, offers the most comprehensive look yet at what we know about conscientiousness and its relationship to work-related variables. Credit: CC0 Public Domain.

Organizations are always looking for the ingredients that make a good

employee, with many turning to personality tests as a means to find out.

Now, a University of Toronto study suggests one of the big five personality traits stands above the rest in predicting [performance](#) across a host of different occupational settings: conscientiousness.

"Conscientiousness is the most potent, non-cognitive predictor of [workplace](#) performance," says Michael Wilmot, a recent post-doctoral researcher in U of T Scarborough's department of management who led the study.

"Researchers have known some of this for a while, but questions remain about its defining characteristics, its function in occupational settings, and whether its relationship to performance differs across occupations."

The study, published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, offers the most comprehensive look yet at what we know about conscientiousness and its relationship to work-related variables. These variables (175 in total) include things like motivation and values, emotional well-being, counterproductivity and performance.

Data were taken from 92 meta-analyses, which included studies from multiple countries, from various occupations and across different career moments including education, job application and on the job evaluations.

As a personality trait, conscientiousness is defined as being hard-working, orderly, responsible to others, self-controlled and rule-abiding. Past research has shown it's a strong predictor for positive outcomes in life including academic performance, physical health and mortality, work performance, marital stability and well-being.

What's really unique about conscientiousness is that it has a much

stronger effect across all these work-related variables compared to other personality traits such as extroversion, which is also influential in predicting [success](#).

"One of the more interesting things is that it predicts an absence of counterproductivity really well," says Wilmot, who recently became a research scientist at the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO) in Minneapolis.

"People who are higher in conscientiousness just don't engage in those types of destructive, disruptive behaviors."

The study confirms a lot of what we know—that persons high in conscientiousness tend to be very goal-oriented, seek to be reliable and dependable, and want to work well with others in order to achieve a shared goal.

But conscientiousness does appear to have its limits.

Even though it predicts success across most occupations reasonably well, the effect appears weaker in high complexity jobs, says Wilmot. He adds an important next step for the research will be to look more closely at the specific characteristics of complex jobs that compliment conscientiousness.

"It will be important for organizations to consider other measures, such as cognitive ability measures or other personality measures like openness to better forecast performance in more complex jobs," he says.

Wilmot says it's important to precisely understand the role conscientiousness plays, especially as companies increasingly rely on personality assessments as part of selection and placement efforts.

In recent years a lot of attention has been paid to the importance of specific traits, including self-control and grit, but he says the evidence suggests that these and other traits can be subsumed by conscientiousness.

"It's kind of like conscientiousness is the mother construct and these are the children—these sub-traits fall under the umbrella of [conscientiousness](#)."

**More information:** Michael P. Wilmot et al. A century of research on conscientiousness at work, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2019). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1908430116](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1908430116)

Provided by University of Toronto

Citation: Study: Being conscientious is one of the strongest predictors of success in the workplace (2019, November 5) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-11-conscientious-strongest-predictors-success-workplace.html>

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