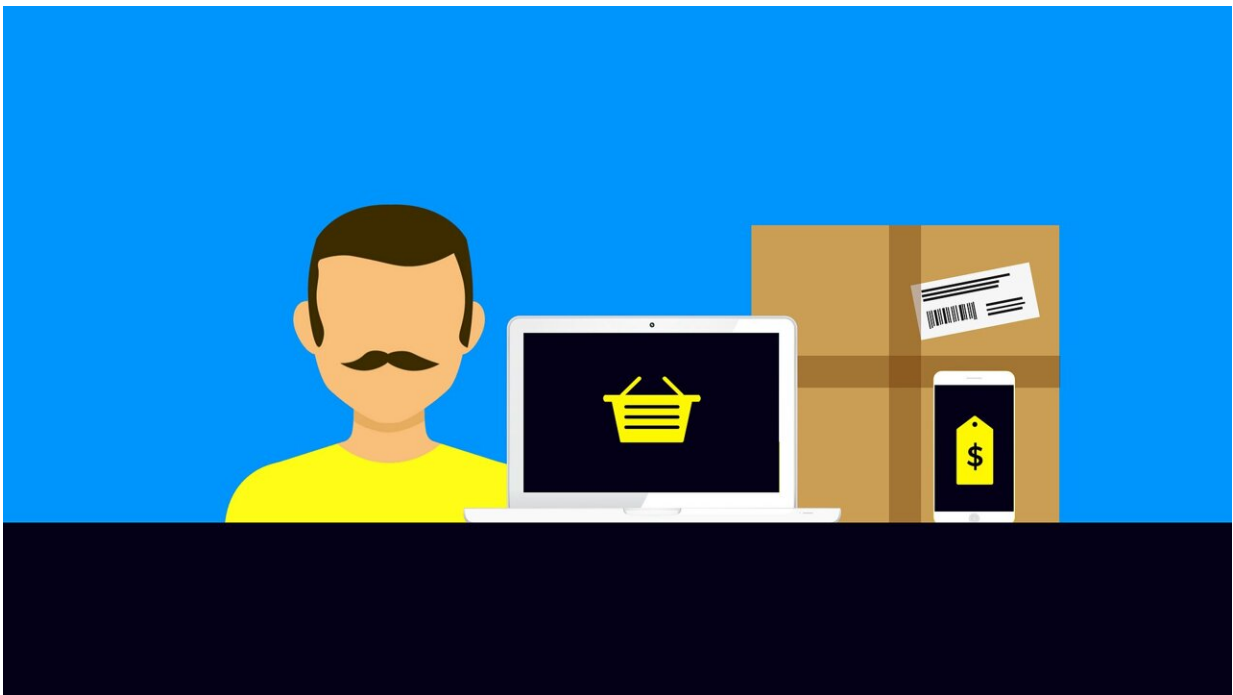


# The effect of dark traits such as Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy on salesperson performance

August 3 2022

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Researchers from University of New Hampshire, University of Kentucky, Texas A&M University, and Florida State University published a new paper in the *Journal of Marketing* that examines the effect among salespeople of three negative personality

traits—Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. The study is authored by Cinthia B. Satornino, Alexis Allen, Huanhuan Shi, and Willy Bolander.

## What makes a good salesperson?

Ads for sales jobs usually emphasize a preference for positive [personality](#) traits such as self-motivation, ability to be a team player, ethical behavior, and enthusiasm. Academic research also has traditionally focused on positive performance drivers, such as adaptiveness, conscientiousness, openness, and extraversion. Allen says that "While hiring people with these traits is desirable, it ignores the importance among [salespeople](#) of three negative traits—Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy—collectively known as the dark triad (DT)." Except for CEOs, lawyers, and celebrities, salespeople score higher on these dark traits than all other professions, which has led to sales professionals being characterized as conniving snakes.

That these dark personalities are employed by sales organizations suggests the ability of some salespeople to mask the dysfunctional manifestations of DT traits, such as callous self-interest, with more functional ones, such as charisma, during the hiring process. DT traits can offer significant advantages for some salespeople to get ahead and secure longer tenures. But there are downsides in the long run, too. Over time, the self-interested, antagonistic behaviors associated with DT traits are likely to undermine their relationships with colleagues, diminish their [social capital](#), and subsequently reduce their performance.

The researchers conducted two studies to explore how and why dark salespeople persevere, and even thrive, in organizations. They investigate: (1) how dark salespeople perform over time relative to their low DT peers and (2) how ambient social structures, such as

organizational social networks into which salespeople are embedded, influence these salespeople's performance.

The first study provides empirical evidence that narcissism and psychopathy allow dark salespeople to succeed in the short term, but eventually lead to a "fall from grace," including lost performance gains. In contrast, results show that Machiavellianism produces little in the short term, but manifests in long-term performance benefits.

The second study measures the reach efficiency of the dark personality's social network. When a person's network exhibits high reach efficiency, information about their actions becomes socially visible to others (i.e., friends of friends) who are indirectly connected to the dark personality. Low reach efficiency, however, impedes the spread of information and delays the social visibility of individual actions. Saturnino explains that "If the network structure obscures information regarding the misdeeds of a dark salesperson, it enhances the probability for performance-enhancing cooperation between the dark personality and his or her unsuspecting peers."

Results show that narcissism and psychopathy influence performance similarly, while Machiavellianism has the inverse effect. When reach efficiency is high, narcissism and psychopathy lead to decreased sales performance in subsequent periods. On the other hand, those with Machiavellianism benefit from high reach efficiency, which results in enhanced performance in subsequent periods.

The research team offers three key recommendations for chief sales officers:

- Hiring managers should be trained specifically to recognize signs of DT traits in the interview process using tools such as behavioral questions that highlight past or potential behaviors and

characteristics typical of dark personalities.

- Sales managers should be trained to be cognizant of the performance patterns that may signal a dark personality to determine if interventions are needed.
- Sales managers should leverage social networks and peer feedback to facilitate unmasking dark personalities.

**More information:** Cinthia B. Saturnino et al, EXPRESS: Understanding the Performance Effects of "Dark" Salesperson Traits: Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy, *Journal of Marketing* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/00222429221113254](https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429221113254)

Provided by American Marketing Association

Citation: The effect of dark traits such as Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy on salesperson performance (2022, August 3) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-08-effect-dark-traits-machiavellianism-narcissism.html>

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