The Impact of Personality and the Merit Principle on Employer Satisfaction

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**Abstract**

Personality can act as a predictor for human behaviour. Further analysing individual differences may allow for more specific identification of work variable outcomes. The aim of the current study was to shed light on how effective the Big Five personality traits were as a predictor for how satisfied and happy an individual was with their employer. One hundred and eighty-four participants took part in an anonymous online survey in order to measure their employer satisfaction and happiness, personality traits, and individual differences regarding the merit principle. A Pearson’s Correlational Analysis was performed. The findings revealed that those who value the merit principle are more likely to report greater employer satisfaction and happiness. Furthermore, of all the Big Five personality traits analysed, only emotional stability (low/reverse neuroticism) was shown to have a significant correlation to employer satisfaction and happiness. These findings highlight both the importance and the feasibility of individuals finding an effective system for predicting an optimal career path.

**Personality Analysis of Individual Differences and their Correlation to Work Variables**

Individual differences refers to the unique or shared characteristics which can be used to define an individual (e.g. height or gender). In psychology, individual differences typically refer to the characteristics which constitute an individual’s personality – which is in turn defined as a set of stable and enduring characteristics, often referred to as traits (Twenge & Campbell, 2020). These personality traits have been broken down into five major personality factors known as the Five Factor Model – extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness – which can be measured using the IPIP Personality questionnaire (Goldberg, 1999).

A previous study by Ozer & Benet-Martinez (2006) supported the theory that measurements of the Five Factor Model – otherwise known as the Big Five – can act as a predictor for various real-world outcomes such as relationship success, health, and professional success. This was achieved by using the Big Five personality traits in a correlational study to identify real-world outcomes, including occupational choice and performance. However, while the study was able to find strong predictors in regards to occupational choice and performance using the Big Five, the study did not analyse a correlation between individual differences in relation to satisfaction and happiness in their job. The importance of such a possible correlation could potentially be paramount in identifying what career path is best suited to an individual based on their individual differences. This is especially true if an individual holds more value to the merit principle, whereby they wish to be made aware of the true extent of their options based on their individual strengths and weaknesses. Identifying what career is best suited to an individual early on in their life can be critical in assisting them to consider optimal career options before setting out on a career path.

The current study aims to address this by specifically examining the relationship between the Big-Five personality factors and how satisfied and happy an individual is with their employer. This study also examines the relationship between preference for the merit principle and how satisfied and happy the individual is with work. It is expected that extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, intellect (similar to openness), emotional stability (low/reverse neuroticism), and preference for the merit principle will be positively associated with being satisfied and happy.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants consisted of 184 people recruited by undergraduate university students. Of these 184 participants, 96 were male and 88 were female. The participant’s age ranged between 18 and 74 years of age, with a mean age of 36.9 (*SD* = 13.6).

**Measures and Materials**

A scale for how “satisfied” participants were with their current employer and an identical scale instructing participants to rate how “happy” participants were with their current employer, with 1 (not at all satisfied) being the lowest rating and 9 (very satisfied) being the highest. Since these ratings were nearly perfectly correlated, they were combined to make a 2-item scale, “satisfied and happy”, by averaging the ratings of both measurements.

The IPIP Personality (Five Factor Model) questionnaire (Goldberg, 1999) was employed to gauge where each participant falls in each of the Big Five personality traits. The Preference for the Merit Principle Scale questionnaire (Davey et al., 1999) was also employed in order to measure how much each participant values a preference for the merit principle.

A webpage was set up for the questionnaires to be completed online.

**Procedure**

Undergraduate university students underwent training in ethics before recruiting potential participants with a link to an online survey. Participants were instructed to read an information letter and give informed consent before undertaking the online survey at a time and place of their choosing.

The online survey had participants enter their demographic details (e.g. age and gender) before beginning the survey anonymously. The survey began with a scale instructing participants to rate how “satisfied” and “happy” they were with their current employer. The survey then had participants fill out the IPIP Personality questionnaire followed by the Preference for the Merit Principle questionnaire. Once the participant had concluded with the survey, the data from their online survey was automatically collected.

**Results**

Table 1.

*Pearson Correlation Coefficients, Means, and Standard Deviations for the Examined Variables*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Satisfied and happy | Preference for the merit principle | *M* | *SD* |
| Extraversion | .131 |  | 3.3 | 0.7 |
| Agreeableness | .010 |  | 3.9 | 0.5 |
| Conscientiousness | .051 |  | 3.6 | 0.6 |
| Intellect | .024 |  | 3.5 | 0.5 |
| Emotional stability | .227\*\* |  | 3.2 | 0.8 |
| Satisfied and happy | \_ | .154\* | 6.4 | 1.9 |
| Preference for the merit principle |  | \_ | 5.3 | 0.5 |

\**p* < .05

\*\**p* < .01

A Pearson correlational analysis was conducted in order to test the hypotheses. The findings shown in Table 1 reveal that extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and intellect had a weak positive nonsignificant correlation with the “satisfied and happy” variable. The results displayed in Table 1 show a weak positive significant correlation between emotional stability and the “satisfied and happy” variable. Furthermore, the results found a weak positive significant correlation between the “satisfied and happy” variable and the “preference for the merit principle” variable.

**Discussion**

Reviewing the results demonstrated no supporting evidence for the hypotheses stating that extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and intelligence would be positively associated with satisfaction and happiness at work, due to the Pearson correlational analysis showing no significant results. However, the results do support the hypothesis that emotional stability would be positively associated with satisfaction and happiness, since the results show a weak positive significant correlation between the two variables.

The results also show evidence supporting the hypothesis that there would be a positive association between preference for the merit principle and satisfaction and happiness. This is because the results showed a weak positive significant correlation between the two variables. This supports the theory that individuals who hold greater value to the merit principle place a greater emphasis on finding the right employer who will recognise their individual strengths and weaknesses, and thus find more satisfying work in their occupation. These findings also point towards the possibility of an effective system for predicting an individual’s optimal career path, since it can lead to wider job satisfaction and happiness.

It should be noted that of all of the Big Five personality factors, emotional stability was the most significant factor in employer satisfaction and happiness. The implication of this finding depends on determining the causation of this finding: does emotional stability lead to people feeling greater satisfaction and happiness with their employer, or does having the right employer better allow for emotional stability in an individual? While correlational research can never truly identify causation, future research should endeavour to find which of the two variables has the more powerful effect on the other. It is possible that the two variables serve as a cycle of positivity (e.g. people are emotionally stable because they are satisfied and happy with their employer, and they’re satisfied and happy with their employer because they are emotionally stable, etc.). This is particularly plausible considering that one limitation of this study was that it relied upon participants self-reporting how they felt on a simple survey, which did not allow for proper insight into a deeper potential correlation, e.g. a more objective view of how they felt and how much it had to do with their current employer as opposed to extraneous variables which could affect their view, such as their home life. This may be achieved by having individuals agree to regular psychological check-ups that report on their wellbeing anonymously for the duration of a longitudinal study, so long as the participants continue to consent.

A previous study (Bowling et al., 2010) on the causal relationship between job satisfaction and attributes similar to emotional wellbeing found a greater causal relationship from those attributes to job satisfaction than the causal relationship from job satisfaction to those attributes. While this study was longitudinal, it still heavily relied on self-reporting measures, and further admitted the need for more data on the topic, especially if that data could be analysed more objectively.

In conclusion, the study’s findings revealed that those who value the merit principle are more likely to report greater employer satisfaction and happiness, supporting the theory whereby focusing on an individual’s strengths and weaknesses are important in finding an optimal occupation for the individual. Furthermore, of all the Big Five personality traits analysed, only emotional stability (low/reverse neuroticism) was shown to have a significant correlation to employer satisfaction and happiness. This finding emphasises the role of this personality trait over any of the other Big Five personality traits in employer satisfaction and happiness. The overall results of the study highlight both the feasibility of and the need to develop an effective system for predicting an individual’s optimal career path.

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