

Workplace Big 5 Profile

Frequently Asked Questions & Answers:



What are the difference between the phrases "Five-Factor Model" and "The Big Five"?

In a word, none. Some researchers make the case that the Big Five is associated with Goldberg's work, while the FFM is associated with McCrae & Costa. Others make the case that the Big Five refers only to the five superfactors, while the FFM refers to the faceted components of the superfactors. However, these two phrases are used interchangeably throughout the literature to refer to the five superfactors. Specific faceted versions are typically referred to by the researcher's name(s), or by the name of a particular test, such as the NEO PI-R and the HPI, or, Costa & McCrae and Hogan.

On what theory is the Big Five based?

Again, in a word, none. The Big Five were identified by searching for the smallest number of synonym clusters in the English language that could account for the largest variation in individual differences in personality. Replications of this process in other languages have identified the same five synonym clusters. This is generally referred to as the 'lexical hypothesis,' which assumes that natural language contains sufficient information to account for individual differences in personality. An excellent treatment of this approach to the study of personality may be found in John, O.P, Angleitner, A., and Ostendorf, F. (1988). "The lexical approach to personality: A historical review of trait taxonomic research." *European Journal of Personality*, 2, 171-203. The Big Five is a standard vocabulary, or framework, with which to discuss individual differences. Essentially any theory may be discussed using the language of the Big Five (for example, the Id, the Ego, and the Superego may be described, respectively, in terms of low, medium, and high Conscientiousness).

I've heard that the Big Five is really just the MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) warmed over. Is that true?

No. The *MBTI* is both a test and a model that are based on the theory of Carl Jung. The Big Five is a line of research that dates back to 1937. At that time, Allport and Odbert threw out a challenge to their psychological research community. Namely, what are the smallest numbers of synonym clusters that can be reduced from the 4,500 non-evaluative trait descriptors in the English language? One of the early results of this effort was Cattell's *16PF*, but his sixteen clusters were based on manual factor analyses and were rife with error. It was not until the availability of powerful personal computers and statistical analysis software that a large number of independent researchers began to converge on the same solution to Allport and Odbert's problem. To Jung's (and the *MBTI* developers') credit (assuming that it is praiseworthy for a theory to be well-grounded in the real world), the four dimensions are strikingly similar to the Five-Factor Model. Thinker/Feeler is the weakest construct, as it appears to be a confound of two Big Five dimensions --Agreeableness and Negative Emotionality.

Why should I get interested in another personality test/model? There seems to be a new "flavor" every year. Why shouldn't I just stick with what already works and resist what appears to be the latest fad?

In fact, before the Big Five, personality psychologists had never even begun to approach agreement on a standard vocabulary to discuss individual differences in personality. Many models assumed that four dimensions were sufficient to discuss personality differences, and this tradition goes back to the early Greeks and their Four Elements--air, earth, fire, and water. But there has been no agreement on just what four dimensions to use. That is why there have been so many "flavors." Or, as some describe the plethora of popular personality tests, "alphabet soup." Now, however, general agreement exists that the Big Five provide a simple but powerful conceptual framework for talking about differences in personality. All of the so-called flavors will be expected to use the Big Five as a sort of map on which they must overlay their models. The "flavors" will define themselves in light of the Big Five. The Big Five is like a source metaphor for personality, while other models are like derived metaphors. Getting involved with the Big Five will provide stability to your professional practice. You may use the Big Five, and tests such as the *NEO PI-R*, in conjunction with any personality theory you chose. And, you will find the theory enriched as the result of being rooted in a commonly accepted vocabulary.

I've heard that the Big Five emphasizes the negative, that there are desirable and undesirable qualities that it measures. Is that true? If so, I could never use it--my clients wouldn't accept negative stuff.

First, let us emphasize that the Big Five does not include judgmental terms like smart/dumb, good/bad, attractive/ugly, or sane/crazy. It does, however, include all normal variations in individual personality traits, such as calm/worrying, disciplined/spontaneous, outgoing/reserved, and trusting/skeptical. It is not judgmental to describe someone as "a worrier." While worrying is a so-called negative emotion, it is not a personality flaw to be a "worrier." No scores on the Big Five-based tests may be construed as bad, negative, or undesirable. Any given placement on a Big Five dimension could in fact be undesirable in a particular situation. Calmness is desirable when flying an airplane, but reactivity (or worrying, fretting) is more important in customer relations. Skepticism is good for dealmakers, but beware against bringing it home. No Big Five trait is undesirable unless something occurs to render it rigid. If someone who normally is a worrier--yet able to relax periodically--loses the ability to relax and becomes a constant worrier, then that trait has become rigid and, hence, abnormal, or maladaptive. Along the same lines, a good dose of pride is crucial to successful sales performance, but if all capacity for humility is lost (i.e., the pride becomes fixed, rigid), we've crossed the threshold into narcissism. So, Big Five tests include the full range of normal personality traits, and there are not wrong scores. There can be less than optimal fits between an individual's traits and the demands of their job, family, career, etc. Our clients accept this full range of feedback appreciatively. They like the fact that the feedback is comprehensive, accurate, but not judgmental.

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