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Sensation seeking as an inhibitor of job performance

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Abstract

In a study of self-reports from 233 workers at four service companies, sensation seeking, as measured by Zuckerman's (1979) Sensation Seeking Scale—Form V, impeded perceived workplace adaptation and subsequent perceived job performance. After controlling for job experience and the extent of change in the workplace, hierarchical regression analyses indicated that disinhibition (an aspect of sensation seeking) hindered workplace learning, which in turn diminished workplace socialization and subsequent job performance. The theoretical models explained 41% of the variance in overall job performance, 39% of the variance in technical job performance, and 27% of the variance in interpersonal job performance. The results extend Barrick and Mount's (1991) findings that personality can affect job performance. Human resource professionals can use these results to improve employee orientation and training efforts. The authors speculate that sensation seeking may be more advantageous in dynamic workplaces.

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1. Introduction

Individual differences in personality can predict important organizational outcomes such as job performance (Barrick, Stewart, & Piotrowski, 2002). In their seminal meta-analytical work linking the “Big Five” personality dimensions (Extraversion, Emotional Stability, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience) to job performance, Barrick and Mount (1991) found that Conscientiousness consistently predicted job performance across all occupational groups and performance criteria (job proficiency, training proficiency, and personnel data). Extraversion and Openness to Experience best predicted the extent to which workers benefited from training, but only weakly predicted job proficiency and job performance.

In 1998 Mount and Barrick noted that the field had overlooked a promising finding in their original 1991 study: the relationship of Openness to Experience to training and learning outcomes. In their view, being open to new experiences (broad-minded, curious, imaginative) “may lead individuals to be more involved in training and, consequently, learn more,” thereby increasing the likelihood of optimal job performance (p. 851). Answering Mount and Barrick’s call for research into the relationship between personality and learning outcomes, we investigated how sensation seeking, a personality trait often linked to Openness to Experience and Extraversion (Zuckerman, 1994), might relate to job performance, a key outcome of workplace learning.

We attempt to extend Barrick and Mount’s (1991) work in three ways. First, Barrick and Mount did not clearly address the possibility that other variables might influence the relationship between personality and performance. For example, workplace socialization predicts a number of significant organizational outcomes, including job performance (Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992). During workplace socialization, employees must learn the norms, values, procedures, and technical and interpersonal proficiencies that foster successful adaptation to the organization. Acquiring socialization-related information (e.g., norms, proficiency requirements) is primarily an informal *learning* process (Marsick & Volpe, 1999) and is best accomplished through proactive information seeking (e.g., by being curious) (Morrison, 1993). In this exploratory study, we investigated whether perceived workplace socialization and adaptation affects the relationship between sensation seeking and perceived job performance.

Second, Barrick and Mount (1991) did not investigate whether context affects job performance. Mounting evidence indicates that change and unexpected occurrences can be challenging to both individuals and organizations (Reio & Wiswell, 2000). Change is associated with risk taking. In a rapidly changing workplace (e.g., a start-up company), employees may need to embrace change and take risks to solve new, ill-defined problems. High sensation-seekers, who prefer change, tend to thrive in such conditions (Van Vianen, Feij, Krausz, & Taris, 2003). Therefore, we investigated whether the extent of change in the workplace affects the relationship between sensation seeking and perceived job performance.

Finally, Barrick and Mount (1991) did not explore the possibility that job performance might be multidimensional. Recent theoretical developments and extensive empirical research indicate that job performance consists of two dimensions: one task and the other contextual (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Conway, 1999). Borman and Motowidlo explained that task-related technical competencies enable workers to develop goods and services (technical performance), while contextual (interpersonal) performance contributes to the organization’s social and psychological welfare. Based on this evidence, we examined perceived technical and interpersonal job performance as dependent variables.

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