



Moderation effects of perceived organisational support on curvilinear relationship between neuroticism and job performance



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ABSTRACT

The relationship between neuroticism and job performance is often assumed to be negative and linear. The current research challenges this assumption conceptually and empirically and tests a curvilinear relation between neuroticism and job performance. Further, the present work also hypothesizes that perceived organisational support (POS) moderates the curvilinear neuroticism–job performance relationships such that the inflection points after which the relationship disappears will be lower for low POS than that for high POS. By using samples from two time periods (T1 = 505; T2 = 481) of sales employees from Indian Life Insurance Industry, the present study found a curvilinear relationship between neuroticism and job performance and the support for moderation effects of perceived organisational support on this relationship. Implications of the study to theory and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, there has been a growing consensus regarding the usefulness and importance of personality traits for predicting various facets of job performance (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001; Berry, Kim, Wang, Thompson, & Mobley, 2013; Saggino & Balsamo, 2003; Van den Berg & Feij, 2003). The major personality dimension of neuroticism however, does not appear to have a clear relationship with job performance. The association between neuroticism and job performance has been demonstrated by researchers as either negative (Judge & Ilies, 2002; Salgado, 1997); positive (Bendersky & Shah, 2013; Smillie, Yeo, Furnham & Jackson, Smillie, Yeo, Furnham and Jackson, 2006); weak (Barrick & Mount, 1991) or absent (Barrick, Stewart, & Piotrowski, 2002; Salgado, 2003).

Other researchers (Cucina & Vasilopoulos, 2005; Vasilopoulos, Cucina, & Hunter, 2007; Ones, Viswesvaran, Dilchert & Judge, 2007) suggest that the inconsistent validity estimates for neuroticism might indicate a non-linear relationship between neuroticism and job performance. In the meta-analytic review conducted by Barrick and Mount (1991) demonstrated the possibility of a non-linear relationships between neuroticism and job performance. This view was supported by Murphy (1996), and Murphy and Dzieweczynski (2005) who questioned the implicit assumption of linearity of the personality–job performance relationship and speculated that some personality traits may be curvilinearly related to job performance.

Despite the plausibility of the issue and its potentially significant theoretical and practical implications, there is a dearth of empirical studies that investigate the curvilinear relationship between neuroticism and job performance. Results from the few available studies are mostly inconclusive. For example, several studies did not directly examine job performance as a criterion, but they tested the curvilinear effect between neuroticism and a performance-related criterion such as college GPA (Cucina & Vasilopoulos, 2005; Ferguson et al., 2014; Robbins, Allen, Casillas, Peterson, & Le, 2006); training performance (Vasilopoulos et al., 2007) and adaptability (Widiger & SN, 2008).

Furthermore, given the elusiveness of the curvilinear effect of neuroticism on job performance in past research, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of the conditions that potentially determine this effect. That is to say, it is essential to examine potential moderators of the curvilinear effect. Bendersky and Shah (2013) suggest that neurotic individuals perform more effectively when organisational settings allow for peer support and feedback. Additionally some other researchers observed that pro-social characteristics of organisations reduce the harmful effects of job related anxiety among neurotic individuals by providing a sense of security (Kahn, 1990) and role clarity (Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007). Although, there are reasons to believe that the relationship between neuroticism and job performance is contingent upon organisational level support, surprisingly, research in this area is only suggestive.

Therefore, the current research investigation has twofold objectives. Firstly, it proposes a curvilinear relationship between neuroticism and job performance and suggests that neuroticism at low to moderated levels may relate positively with job performance, but this relationship may taper off for excessively high levels of neuroticism. Secondly, it

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assesses the moderation effects of organisational support on the relationship, i.e., the variation in the strength of the curvilinear relationship between neuroticism and job performance according to high and low levels of organisational support. With the aim of evaluating the proposed relationships, the current investigation analysed and tested survey data obtained at two time periods (T1 = 505; T2 = 481) from (a) sales executives belonging to a life insurance firm in India, and (b) an archival measure of job performance.

2. Literature review

Neuroticism is characterised by anxiety, emotionality, and worriedness (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Judge & Ilies, 2002), because of which neurotics are commonly attributed with low job performance. However, this may not always be true.

The two main characteristics associated with neuroticism viz., anxiety and worriedness, are considered as unpleasant and negative states. However, the same characteristics can be beneficial for neurotics since they are trait-consistent states (Tamir, 2005; Tamir & Robinson, 2004). The trait consistency theory predicts that when affective traits (e.g. neuroticism) and states (e.g. worriedness) match, the individual experiences less affective confusion and in turn, is effective in evaluating problem situations and in giving a better performance.

To add weight to this opinion, cognitive psychologists (Eysenck & Calvo, 1992) suggest that whereas a high level of worriedness imposes constraints on the storage and processing capacity of the working memory system available for a concurrent task, low to moderate levels of worriedness instigate an increment in on-task effort and activities designed to improve performance.

Clinical researchers (Ferguson et al., 2014; Widiger & SN, 2008) argue that the anxiety aspect of neuroticism is not always detrimental to task performance; in fact, a low to moderate level of anxiety can be rather supportive to good performance. While low to moderate levels of anxiety stimulate vigilant and resilient behavior, high levels of anxiety are associated with greater fear and vulnerability. In a study of medical practitioners, Ferguson et al. (2014) found that those with low to moderate levels of anxiety, were vigilant and therefore, careful, attentive and more successful in performing examinations and diagnostic tests than their counterparts who showed high levels of anxiety.

Consequently, it can be inferred that up to a certain threshold level of neuroticism, this personality trait may contribute positively to job performance; however, after attainment of a particular threshold, it will associate negatively with job performance. Hence;

Hypothesis 1. There exists a curvilinear relationship between neuroticism and job performance.

Several studies (e.g. Bendersky & Shah, 2013; Raja & Johns, 2010; Uppal, 2014) state that the strength of the neuroticism-job performance relationship is context dependent. The current research proposes that perceived organisational support (POS) will act as a resource for neurotics such that it will play a moderating role in the trait-performance relationship. POS is considered as an aid that is provided by an organisation to its employees to enhance and facilitate effectiveness of job performance whenever necessary, and to deal with stressful situations (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002: 698). To an employee, POS is an indication of the extent to which the organisation values him or her, and whether the employee is included or excluded at work (Pierce & Gardner, 2004).

Neuroticism is strongly associated with social anxiety (Costa & McCrae, 1992) and a desire to gain social status and be perceived as competent in task settings (Bendersky & Shah, 2013). Although high POS adds significantly to employees' self-esteem by enhancing their social status at work, lack of such support represents a threat and diminishes employees' sense of competence, dignity, and self-worth (Aquino & Douglas, 2003; Ferris, Brown, & Heller, 2009). Therefore, POS is likely

to motivate neurotics to exert effort, make meaningful contributions and prepare for tasks in order to avoid loss of social status.

Further, highly neurotic individuals are more vulnerable to stressors at work; this results in faster depletion of emotional resources and negative work outcomes such as withdrawal, avoidance, and disengagement (Schneider, 2004). While neuroticism appears to associate positively with over-reactivity to stressors at work, POS substantially relegates the negative effects of various task-related stressors by indicating the availability of material aid and emotional support when needed to face high demands at work (Jawahar, Stone, & Kisamore, 2007; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Therefore, it is conceivable that the level of neuroticism at which its relationship with job performance becomes negative (i.e., the inflection point) is determined by POS such that the inflection point for higher POS is likely to occur at higher levels of neuroticism than the inflection point for low perceived organisational support. Hence:

Hypothesis 2. The perceived organisational support will moderate the curvilinear relationship between neuroticism and job performance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The sample for the study comprised sales executives drawn from a life insurance firm operating in India. The firm suited the present study for the following reasons. The Indian life insurance sector was liberalised in 1999 and since then 24 private organisations have been licensed (IRDA, 2016). The insurance sector in India operates in a highly competitive business environment which is excessively stressful for employees specifically for those in the sales field. Moreover, during the data collection exercise it became known from the organisation's human resource officials that several support programmes such as counselling, training and mentoring have been designed in order to control the high attrition rate induced by the excessively pressurised work environment.

A two-wave study with a 14-month time interval was conducted. All the study variables were captured from both time periods. The firm follows an annual performance appraisal system, which explains the choice of the specific time interval. On behalf of the researcher, human resource officials of the firm communicated with their employees about the data collection exercise and requested them to participate in the study. 1300 questionnaires were distributed in each of the two time interval groups namely, T1 and T2, accompanied by a letter emphasising the confidentiality of responses and seeking permission to obtain relevant information from the firm's database. A total of 505 (response rate = 38.8%) and 481 (response rate = 37%) questionnaires were returned respectively by T1 and T2. Data from both waves was matched using a personal code that each participant had to fill in the questionnaire on both occasions. Respondents were asked to voluntarily share their personal codes with the HR officials in order to facilitate the obtaining of further information such as performance ratings from the firm's database. The HR officials subsequently linked the personal code to the respective individual surveys from respondents and finally supplied complete information to the author of the present paper.

In order to increase the response rate and improve the quality of responses (Ryu, Couper, & Marans, 2006; Willimack, Schuman, Pennell, & Lepkowski, 1995), a non-monetary incentive was promised and distributed within a week after the second wave to the participants of the survey with the help of officials of the human resource department.

Statistical power was estimated using the G*power statistical programme. At 0.05 alpha level and 0.2 effect size, the analyses revealed high statistical power for both time periods (T1 = 0.88; T2 = 0.87).

The mean age of respondents was 25.89 years (SD = 4.08) in T1 and 27.16 years (SD = 5.09) in T2. Males were coded as 1 and females as 2;

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