



# The relationship of the big-five with workplace network resources: More quadratic than linear



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 27 May 2016

Received in revised form 22 August 2016

Accepted 24 August 2016

Available online 5 September 2016

### Keywords:

Personality

Big-five

Network resources

Workplace

Expressive

Instrumental

Quadratic

Linear

## ABSTRACT

The relationship of the big-five of personality with workplace expressive and instrumental network resources was investigated in 183 individuals working for a large organization. Nine out of the ten identified relationships were of quadratic nature, U-shaped or inverted U-shaped, clearly indicating that linear only considerations provide an incomplete if not misleading picture. There were some differences in the patterns and strengths of associations for expressive and instrumental network resources, and big-five traits accounted for somewhat greater variance in expressive resources. With respect to emotional stability, openness and agreeableness, the findings indicated that they are the individuals who score around the middle of the trait distribution rather than those near the low end who are most disadvantaged in terms of workplace network resources. On the other hand, they were the moderately strong, but not the highest, levels of conscientiousness that appeared most beneficial. The relationship of extraversion with network resources had a positive overall trend, though at very strong levels it may prove detrimental for instrumental network resources.

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The importance of relationship ties in the form of network resources for well-being and success has been established and stressed extensively that is now a truism (e.g., Batty, 2013; Porter & Woo, 2015). The focus of the present work was on workplace network resources that are unequivocally linked with work well-being and professional success (Bozionelos, 2015). In turn, well-being and success at work affects personal life and general well-being (e.g., Pierce, Garnder, & Crowley, 2016).

A task for scholars has been the identification of individual characteristics that increase the likelihood of accumulating network resources. Personality is such a factor (e.g., Gibson, Hardy, & Buckley, 2014; Roberts, Wilson, Fedurek, & Dunbar, 2008). Accumulation and maintenance of network resources depends on interaction with others, and personality plays a major role in inter-personal interaction (e.g., Wiggins & Trapnell, 1997). Personality traits being antecedents of network resources means that certain individuals have an inherent advantage (or disadvantage) in developing and maintaining such resources.

Extant research, and notwithstanding how well designed it has been, has assumed a linear relationship (see, for example, the recent meta-analysis by Fang et al., 2015). This assumption, however, may lead to under-estimations of the magnitude and breadth of the relationship (e.g., Iversen, Malchow-Moller, & Sorensen, 2010; Vasilopoulos, Cucina, & Hunter, 2007). In addition, it may also lead to misconceptions about the complexity of the association.

## 1. The present study

This study investigated the relationship between the big-five of personality and workplace network resources from both a linear and a quadratic perspective. Along with the fundamental traits of emotional stability and extraversion identified by Eysenck (e.g., Eysenck, 1967) the big-five also includes, openness to experience (hereinafter “openness”), agreeableness and conscientiousness, and has accumulated substantial acceptance among scholars (e.g., John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008).

Workplace network resources are distinguished into expressive and instrumental (Bozionelos, 2003, 2015). The main function of the former is the provision of socio-emotional support to the individual, while the main purpose of the latter is the advancement of one’s professional and career interests (Fombrun, 1983; Ibarra, 1993; Kram & Isabella, 1985). These constructs relate to the notions of strong and weak relationship ties (Granovetter, 1973). Strong ties are characterized by high frequency of interaction, strong reciprocity and high intimacy, while weak ties contain weak emotional attachment and low reciprocal obligation (Granovetter, 1973, 1995). Strong ties are more likely to provide expressive resources while weak ties are more likely to offer instrumental ones such as bridging between individuals (Granovetter, 1995). On the other hand, this distinction is not exclusive: strong ties often provide instrumental assets (e.g., information and influence) while weak ties may occasionally provide socio-emotional benefits (e.g., Krackhardt, 1992; McGuire & Bielby, 2016). For this reason, the notions of expressive and instrumental network resources were chosen.

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## 2. Hypotheses development

Considering that studies testing curvilinear relationships between the big-five and outcome variables are scarce, hypotheses were naturally developed using research that assumed linear associations. Nevertheless, effort was spent to include empirical studies that incorporated non-linearity, where these were available.

Low emotional stability (or neuroticism) encompasses suspiciousness, irritability, and hostility, along with lack of confidence and composure, features that dissipate and reverse as emotional stability increases. Because of their suspicious nature and lack of confidence, individuals who score low on the trait should hesitate to approach others. Indeed, low scores on the trait are associated with distancing social behaviour (Brookings, Zembar, & Hochstetler, 2003). In addition, others may find these individuals difficult and unpleasant to associate and work with. Therefore, a relationship of overall upwards trend with workplace network resources, expressive and instrumental, is expected. On the other hand, individuals low on emotional stability may invoke feelings of sympathy (Holmqvist, 2000), hence, they may benefit from others' conscious attempts to provide them with help and social resources. In addition, those low on emotional stability are more likely to abide to and honour social norms and conventions (Watson & Casillas, 2003), which should help establishing and maintaining relationship ties. This means a negative relationship with network resources in the range of low scores on the trait that turns positive as one approaches its mean.

**Hypothesis 1.** : The relationship of emotional stability with workplace expressive (H1a) and instrumental (H1b) network resources will be U-shape, while the overall trend of the relationship will be positive (upwards) for both expressive (H1c) and instrumental (H1d) resources.

Extraverts seek social encounters, hence, they should initiate and establish relationship ties in the workplace. Due to their optimistic and warm nature, extraverts should also be approached by others. Therefore, a relationship of overall upwards trend with workplace network resources is expected. However, although extraversion should offer a general advantage, very high levels of it may not be of benefit. Strong extraversion makes the person unable to inhibit impulsive and socially inappropriate behaviours (Zabelina, Robinson, & Anicha, 2007), which may be to the detriment of forming relationship ties. Furthermore, extraversion is associated with ambition (Akhtar, Boustani, Tsvirikos, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2015; John, 1990), hence, extreme extraverts may be too ambitious for others to consider forming meaningful relationships with them. Indeed, Grant (2013) found an inverted U-shaped relationship between extraversion and sales performance, and attributed it to the tendency of extreme extraverts to be over-assertive, impulsive and domineering. Hence, as scores on extraversion approach the high pole of the trait the relationship with network resources may turn negative.

**Hypothesis 2.** : The relationship of extraversion with expressive (H2a), and instrumental network resources (H2b) will be of inverted U-shape, and the overall trend for both expressive (H2c) and instrumental resources (H2d) will be positive.

Openness encompasses inquisitiveness, attraction to novel ideas and points of view, multiplicity of interests, imagination and propensity to find outlets to express one's emotions and ideas (John, 1990). Naturally, these people should seek ties with others to discuss their views and find an outlet for their emotions. Indeed, those who score high on openness show preference for establishing numerous workplace ties as means to satisfy their needs for accessing novelty and for expressing their own ideas and emotions (Dougherty, Cheung, & Florea, 2007). This suggests an overall positive trend in the relationship with network resources, expressive and instrumental. Furthermore, it does not appear any reason to assume that the relationship may change to negative either at high or low levels of openness.

**Hypothesis 3.** : The relationship of openness with expressive network resources (H3a) and instrumental network resources (H3b) will be linear and positive.

The characteristics of agreeableness should render high scorers prone to approach others, to offer to others and to reciprocate positive acts (Ben-Ner & Halldorsson, 2010). In addition, because of their modesty, altruism and sensitivity agreeable people would be preferable as social ties (Selfhout et al., 2010). Therefore, the overall trend in the relationship with network resources, expressive and instrumental, should be positive. However, low agreeableness encompasses self-serving tendencies along with machiavellianism (O'Connor, 2013). Hence, low agreeableness individuals may see workplace ties as instrumental towards fulfilling their own career ambitions and other interests, and may develop analogous tactics to develop such ties. Thus, at low levels of agreeableness we might witness a reversal of the slope, so as agreeableness approaches its low pole individuals report more instrumental network resources.

**Hypothesis 4.** : The relationship of agreeableness with expressive network resources will be linear and positive (H4a), with instrumental network resources will be U-shaped (H4b), while the overall trend of that relationship will be positive (H4c).

Conscientiousness should make the individual attractive as a workplace tie, which is suggestive of an overall positive trend in the relationship with network resources, expressive and instrumental. On the other hand, very high levels of conscientiousness may act as an impediment in the formation and maintenance of relationship ties. Highly conscientious people tend to display perfectionism (Egberink, Meijer, & Veldkamp, 2010) and excessive pre-occupation with their tasks (Aziz & Tronzo, 2011). Such tendencies may lead them to neglect social interaction while may make them appear aloof that can repel others. Recent research identified an inverted U-shaped relationship between conscientiousness and organizational citizenship behaviours (Le et al., 2011), which represent the extent to which individuals go beyond their formal work duties to help others in the workplace. This means that very conscientious individuals are less likely to engage in socially constructive behaviours, and that may be detrimental to formation and maintenance of relationship ties.

**Hypothesis 5.** : The relationship of conscientiousness with expressive (H5a) and with instrumental network resources (H5b) will be of inverted U-shape, while the overall trend for both expressive (H5c) and instrumental (H5d) resources will be positive.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Setting and participants

Participants were 183 (72 women and 111 men) full-time employees in the Information Systems function a large British financial services company. These were selected from 201 respondents on the basis of having more than two years of tenure, the minimal length of time required for detectable personality effects on social outcome, such as networks (Helmreich, Sawin, & Garsrud, 1986). Table 1 presents descriptive statistics.

### 3.2. Measures

#### 3.2.1. Big-five traits

These were assessed with the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992) that includes 60 personal statements in a 5-point response format (1: strongly disagree, 5: strongly agree). Cronbach alphas were 0.87, 0.81, 0.79, 0.83 and 0.86 for emotional stability, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness, respectively.

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