

The Future of Success Is Psychological: What 2.25 Million People Just Proved

Why understanding personality isn't just useful, it's the foundation of career success
Despite ever-growing investment in leadership training, coaching programmes, and upskilling initiatives, real behavioural change remains elusive.

Why? Because most initiatives focus on *what* to teach, not *how people are wired to learn and grow*. Without a grounded understanding of the psychological drivers behind development things like personality traits, emotional stability, and adaptability even the most well-designed programmes fail to stick.



Still sceptical about personality tests?

Let me stop you right there.

The most comprehensive analysis in personality psychology **ever conducted** has just dropped, and it's rewriting everything we thought we knew about success.

And thanks to Dr. Reece Akhtar's *Forbes* piece, more people are finally paying attention to what psychologists have known for decades:

"Your personality is the single most consistent predictor of how you'll perform, relate, lead, and live."

The new study (Schult et al., 2025) synthesises 3,300+ studies and 2.25 million participants to deliver the most robust evidence yet that personality traits predict life and career outcomes. Across 17 domains. Across the globe.

Key Takeaways (You'll Want to Screenshot This)

This meta-analytic “mega-analysis” did something no other paper has done:

- Mapped **Big Five personality traits** (OCEAN) against **17 distinct life outcomes** not just work performance, but leadership, education, relationships, mental health, wellbeing, income, volunteering, and more.
- Showed that **different domains require different personality profiles**.
- Found that **Conscientiousness** is *consistently the strongest predictor* of achievement-oriented success, but it's far from the only one that matters.
- Demonstrated that **personality is just as predictive as IQ** in many contexts and much easier to measure meaningfully in applied settings.

There's No Universal “Success Profile” Traits Predict Differently by Domain

One of the most striking findings from Schult et al. (2025) is that **each domain of life success has a distinct personality blueprint**. The traits that predict success in leadership aren't the same ones that drive satisfaction in relationships, income growth, or physical health.

Leadership → High *Extraversion*, High *Openness*, Moderate-to-Low *Agreeableness*

Income → High *Conscientiousness* and *Emotional Stability*

Life Satisfaction → Low *Neuroticism*, High *Extraversion*, High *Agreeableness*

Physical Health → High *Conscientiousness*, High *Extraversion*

Romantic Relationships → High *Agreeableness*, High *Emotional Stability*

This blows up the myth that there's one fixed “ideal” personality. Instead, success is **contextual and multi-dimensional** which is exactly why **standardised leadership models fall short**.

At [**The Work Psychologists**](#), our **Deep Leader of the Future Assessment** goes far beyond generic profiling. It identifies **which traits support success in your context**, flags potential derailers, and provides tailored development insights using validated Big Five and Dark Triad measures.

Because real leadership isn't about ticking boxes it's about knowing your psychological edge, and using it wisely.

2. Conscientiousness Is a Performance Powerhouse (But Context Still Rules)

Across most achievement-oriented outcomes (occupational success, income, education), **Conscientiousness** is the strongest trait predictor. It's associated with:

- Self-discipline
- Goal-setting
- Reliability
- Delayed gratification
- Healthier behaviours

But, critically the study also shows that **Conscientiousness isn't always a silver bullet**. In highly innovative, dynamic, or ambiguous roles, high *Openness*, *Extraversion*, and *low Neuroticism* often play a more crucial role.

That's why our assessments don't just score traits they interpret *trait-context alignment*. A high-Conscientiousness profile might be perfect for strategic execution roles but could bottleneck adaptability in innovation or transformation work.

When Lower Conscientiousness Helps

Surprisingly, **lower conscientiousness** isn't always a liability in fact, in certain business roles, it can be a hidden asset. Especially in environments that reward **creative risk-taking**, rapid iteration, and thinking outside the box:

- **Innovation leads** and **R&D strategists** need freedom to experiment, tolerate failure, and move quickly over-planning can stifle agility.
- **Product managers** in early-stage ventures may benefit from being adaptable rather than highly structured, responding to shifting user needs in real time.
- **Brand strategists** and **advertising creatives** often thrive on divergent thinking, working best with less structure and more space to explore.
- **Growth hackers** and **performance marketers** succeed by constantly testing, iterating, and exploiting fast-moving trends not following rigid processes.
- **Business development reps** and **networking-driven sales roles** benefit from charm, opportunism, and quick decision-making even if that means less methodical planning.

In short: **lower conscientiousness can enable speed, flexibility, and innovation** qualities that are essential in volatile, uncertain, or creative business contexts. It's not about "bad traits" it's about the right traits for the right job.

3. Personality Isn't Fixed — That's Why Changability® Matters

One of the most overlooked messages in the Schult et al. study is that **personality traits are relatively stable, but not set in stone**. Research increasingly shows that **traits like Conscientiousness and Emotional Stability can shift over time**— especially in response to structured interventions like coaching, feedback, and life experiences.

This is exactly why we created the [**Changability® psychometric**](#): to assess not just where someone is today, but how likely they are to **adapt, evolve, and grow** in response to the demands of leadership and modern work.

It identifies:

- Trait-level **psychological flexibility**
- Receptivity to **feedback and behavioural change**
- Capacity for **learning transfer and habit shift** under pressure

Because potential isn't about perfection — it's about **adaptability**. And that's something you can now measure, not just hope for.

4. Trait Validity = Or > Cognitive Ability in Real Life

This study confirms that **Big Five traits predict life outcomes at levels comparable to and sometimes stronger than intelligence**.

These are **not trivial effects**. They reflect **reliable, real-world predictiveness** and unlike cognitive ability, personality is **less prone to bias**, easier to develop, and highly scalable in assessment.

So if your people strategy focuses only on qualifications, skills, or IQ? You're missing a major part of the human equation.

Our leadership assessment tools use validated psychometrics to uncover the *latent drivers* of success not just the surface indicators.

5. Emotional Stability (Low Neuroticism) = Leadership Superpower

Across almost every wellbeing-related domain life satisfaction, relationships, mental health **low Neuroticism (high Emotional Stability)** is the strongest single predictor. But here's what's often missed in business:

Emotionally unstable leaders cost teams trust, safety, and performance especially under stress.

6. Effective Leadership Requires a Complex Trait Mix — Not Just Charisma or Grit

The study shows that high performance in leadership isn't about ticking boxes it's about **balancing complementary traits**:

- **Extraversion** → Energy, drive, influence
- **Openness** → Strategic thinking, learning agility
- **Low Agreeableness** → Willingness to challenge and confront
- **Moderate Conscientiousness** → Reliability without rigidity
- **Low Neuroticism** → Emotional self-regulation under pressure

This aligns directly with what we measure in our [Leader of the Future Assessments](#) helping organisations identify leaders with the *right mix* of psychological strengths, not just the most polished CV or loudest voice.

Bottom Line: If You're Not Using Trait Data, You're Flying Blind

This study is a once-in-a-decade piece of research. It proves — conclusively — that personality traits predict **who succeeds, where, and why**. If you're still hiring, promoting, or developing based on guesswork, gut feel, or outdated competency models, it's time to upgrade.

Learn how our **Leader of the Future** assessments can help you identify, support, and stretch your next generation of leaders — based on *real psychology*, not surface impressions:👉 <https://www.theworkpsychologists.com/leadership-assessment>

Ready to build a more evidence-based people strategy? Let's talk. Or tag a colleague who's still stuck in the 2005 hiring mindset.

Key Takeaways

- **Personality is one of the strongest predictors of success**, matching or surpassing IQ across many life and career outcomes.
- **There is no universal success profile** — different domains (leadership, income, relationships, health) require different personality trait combinations.
- **Conscientiousness is a major driver of achievement**, but lower conscientiousness can be beneficial in fast-moving, creative, or innovative roles.
- **Personality can change**, and an individual's *capacity to adapt and grow* is a measurable factor in long-term leadership effectiveness.
- **Emotional Stability (low Neuroticism) is a leadership superpower**, strongly predicting wellbeing, trust, and performance under pressure.

References:

Schult, M. J., Ones, D. S., Lievens, F., McDaniel, M. A., & Credé, M. (2025). *Mapping domains of life success: Insights from meta-analytic criterion profile analysis*. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *110*(4), 555–583. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001166>

Akhtar, R. (2025, November 30). *Why understanding personality is the foundation of career success*. **Forbes**. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/reeceakhtar/2025/11/30/why-understanding-personality-is-the-foundation-of-career-success/>
[#PersonalityScience](#) [#Leadership](#) [#BigFive](#) [#LeadershipAssessment](#) [#HRStrategy](#)
[#EvidenceBased](#) [#DarkTriad](#) [#FutureOfWork](#) [#WorkPsychologists](#)
[#TalentDevelopment](#)