

Reputation is key to predicting performance, but it's often overlooked by employers

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Brian Connelly, an associate professor at U of T Scarborough, says organizations have historically relied on self-descriptions of personalities and traits to gauge future employees, but may be missing a key performance indicator. Credit: Ken Jones

Organizations spend significant time, money and resources searching for

the right workers. Yet, according to a new University of Toronto study, they may be overlooking the key ingredient in determining the success of future employees: reputation.

"Our reputation seems to be the most important and accurate part of predicting performance," says Brian Connelly, an associate professor in the department of management at U of T Scarborough and lead author on the study.

"It's also one that's largely been ignored in the past by [personality assessments](#)."

The research, published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, asked 455 military cadets in South Korea to rate their own [personality](#) while also having their personality rated by three fellow cadets. The researchers also collected ratings on citizenship behaviors as well as academic and job performance.

Not surprisingly, the cadets who were conscientious (hard-working and reliable) and agreeable (friendly and co-operative) tended to be the highest performing. But the researchers found it was the cadets' reputation—not their [personality traits](#) or identity—that was the most accurate predictor of that success.

"There is overlap in the way you see your personality and the way others see your personality, and that overlap is important," Connelly says.

"Reputation, on the other hand, is uncovering the stuff that individuals might not be seeing about themselves.

Connelly says [personality research](#) and the way personality measures are practiced have traditionally focused on traits, assuming that the best way to measure it is to ask people to describe themselves. Connelly adds that organizations have also largely relied on such self-descriptions—but

when it comes to identifying talent, the approach risks leaving out what could be the most important part.

"Personality isn't fixed or uniquely 'owned' by the self—it emerges in the roles we occupy and the relationships we build with others," says Connelly, who is an expert on how organizations can best use personality measures to address workplace challenges.

"Our findings suggest that it's those emergent aspects of reputation that are the most important for employers and employees to consider."

Connelly says there could be several reasons why reputation is such an accurate predictor of success. It could be that others are better at picking up on information that individuals tend to distort when looking at themselves. "Kind of like the way you hear your voice is different from others—there's a vibration in your ear when you talk that actually distorts your voice," Connelly says.

Peers also judge reputation based on behavior. They don't necessarily know an individual's thoughts, feelings, goals or past experiences—they're only witnessing performance. And, in the case of the workplace, that performance is only being viewed in one specific context.

That doesn't mean that one's [reputation](#) is set in stone—even if its is being determined by others. That's because a person's personality can and does change over time.

"It can shift in response to the demands or circumstances of life," he says, pointing to research showing that as people reach their late-20s, for example, they become more agreeable and conscientious.

People can change aspects of their personality by setting goals, adds

Connelly. If they want to be more assertive for example, they can set goals on how to achieve that in their interactions with others.

"It's not necessarily the case that you are born with a specific personality stamped on you," he says.

"I find it inspiring that you are not this fixed person, it's more about what you do—and that you can change what you do in order to achieve these higher levels of performance."

More information: Brian S. Connelly et al, A multirater perspective on personality and performance: An empirical examination of the trait–reputation–identity model., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000732](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000732)

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