Personality Traits as Predictors of Outstanding Performance in the Public Sector

**Abstract**

This research provides Human Resources Management (HRM) teams with a tool to identify outstanding performers according to personality traits based on a model empirically tested in the Israeli public sector. The study is based on an innovative paired sample composed of a variety of elite performersfrom 14 different government offices. Questionnaires were administered to a total of 742 participants: 189 pairs of outstanding employees and their supervisors and 182 pairs of normal employees and their supervisors. The supervisors rated the job performances of their employees and the latter self-reported on their own personality traits. The results show that two out of five personality traits – “extraversion” and “emotional stability” – are positive predictors of outstanding performance, while “openness to experience” is a negative. In addition, “agreeableness” emerges as a positive predictor of normal employees’ performance. The outcomes from this research will practically assist public administrations in identifying outstanding employees for successful planning purposes.

**Keywords:** Outstanding Performance; Big Five Factor; Personality Trait;Public Sector

# Introduction

* 1. Existing Research and the Study’s Unique Contribution

There is a growing body of scholarly studies of performance in the public sector in recent years (Bhardwaj & Kalia, 2021; Hassan et al., 2018; Llorens et al., 2018; Steccolini et al., 2020; Van Loon et al., 2018; Van Thiel & Leeuw, 2002). Studies have focused on performance’s relation to Human Resource Management (HRM) in theoretical terms (Op de Beeck et al., 2018). They have also enhanced conceptions of performance efficiency and effectiveness (Aversano et al., 2018; Belle et al., 2017; Parrado, 2018; Vogel & Hattke, 2018), along with its evaluation and assessment of employees’ career intentions in relation to staff turnover (Wang & Sun, 2020). However, scholars often disagree on how to successfully apply performance management systems to the public sector. Some have contended that they are disadvantageous to (Heckman et al., 2011) or have an neglible positive impact on performance (Gerrish, 2016; Hvidman & Andersen, 2016; Jin & Rainey, 2020). Others have contended that they promote inappropriate work values (Radin, 2006), or promote inefficiency (Frederickson & Frederickson, 2006; Frederickson et al., 2003), and that, at times, their implementation is politically mediated in an infelicitous way (Lavertu & Moynihan, 2012).

Recent studies have shown the advantages of employing behavioral approaches to address these issues in the public sector (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2017). Nonetheless, no study has yet offered a theoretical account that combines different scholarly approaches in order to delevop a practically applicable model (Faulkner et al., 2019). indicatehelpsector wouldThe present study addresses this research gap by comparitively discussing the notion of personality and performance as expressed in both normal and outstanding employees.

Recent studies have shown that no clear, systematic understanding of how to improve HRM in the public sector has yet been developed (Gökalp et al., 2020). Some researchers have contended that HR quality management requires comprehensive reconceptualization and practical restructuring in order for it to be successful (Gökalp et al., 2019). The concrete contribution this study makes is in providing a model that offers a practical, innovative solution to addressing this issue. There is scholarly evidence that, along with incentives[[1]](#footnote-2) and motivation (Jin & Rainey, 2020), personality traits play a crucial role in determining job performance in the public sector (Callen et al., 2015), including competency-based performance (Consiglio et al., 2013). The model set out in this paper will allow scholars to confirm (Guay et al., 2013) how and in what ways “conscientiousness,” one of the traits informing the Five Factor Model (FFM) on which this study relies, significantly influences performance (van Aarde et al., 2017). It will also aid studies seeking to establish the positive impact of assessing competency based performance in light of personality traits, since it would increase the likelihood that HR units would place the right employee in the right job (Shahhosseini & Sebt, 2011). Research has also identified the significant value of self-evaluations. Scholars could, through the model set out in this paper, determine how self-esteem (Ferris et al., 2015 in Pandey, 2019) and positive affectivity significantly affect job performance (Lin et al. 2014 in Pandey, 2019).

The public sector is a major provider of services, so the importance of improving its performance and management policies to produce greater efficiency is clear (Goodman et al., 2015; Raadschelders et al., 2015). Employing outstanding staff in this sector has become key (Eshet, 2017) and some scholars hold that personality is the best predictor among various covariates in this regard (Callen et al., 2015) for excellent job performance (Belle et al., 2017; Razzaq et al., 2018). Thus, assessing relevant personality traits has become crucial for the public sector (Cooper et al., 2017).

 The FFM allows the effective identification of workplace outcomes in relation to matters such as job performance and competency based skills (Consiglio et al., 2013). Studies have shown that individuals possessing some or all of the FFM personality traits – “extraversion,” “agreeableness,” “openness to experience,” “emotional stability,” and “conscientiousness” – find greater meaning in their jobs. This enhances their task-related motivation and improves their performance (Barrick et al. 2013, in: Frieder, Wang, & Oh, 2017). Performance presupposes certain competency skills such as motivation, positive attitude, appropriate values, skills, talents, intelligence, ability, knowledge, know-how, insight, experience, social roles, positive self-image, and positive personal characteristics (Lišková & Tomšík, 2013). These are expressed through specific behaviors which, in turn, are reflected in the way individuals perform successfully in various circumstances (Bartram, 2005 in: Consiglio et al., 2013).

Research has shown that there is a strong relationship between competency based skills and the FFM traits (Consiglio et al., 2013). This provides for a consistent theoretical framework for grounding competency based models applicable to different kinds of roles and organizations. More concretely, Consiglio et al., among other studies, show that proactivity is related to “extraversion,” teamwork to “agreeableness,” innovation to “openness” and “experience,” management of emotion to “emotional stability,” and accomplishment to “conscientiousness” (Consiglio et al., 2013). Studies of the public sector have also discussed the relation between personality traits and job satisfaction (Irissappane & Aravazhi Kavitha, 2014), topics such as managerial context (Manaf et al., 2018), organizational health context (Miller et al., 1999), motivation (Van Witteloostuijn et al., 2017), deviant behavior (Abdullah & Marican, 2016), emotional intelligence (Danaeefard et al., 2018), teaching (Cooper et al., 2017), and decision making (Filiz & Battaglio, 2017). FFM studies have centered on its ability to explain and predict various behaviors. Yet, key questions relationship relating to job performance and personality still remain unanswered by research (Hung, 2018).

This study addresses these gaps in the research by revealing which personality traits predict outstanding performance, thus offering an innovative analysis that expands the FFM’s range of applicability. The study’s theoretically informed tool combines the FFM with empirical data on a group of employees, their personality traits, and their performance. Our expanded model has been tested in Israel which, in line with other OECD countries, has adopted performance appraisal systems (Belle et al., 2017). Our practical and innovative tool can assist public sector HRM units in recruitment programs, personnel training, and staff retention, as it facilitates assessment of personality traits and their relation to predicting outstanding performance.

* 1. Performance Evaluation

Scholars tend to associate performance with the way employees conduct their duties (Razzaq et al., 2018) and have developed various approaches to performance over the last half-century (Abner et al., 2017; Dyckhoff & Souren, 2020; Graham & Bourne, 2014). Employee evaluation has been identified as a fundamental tool for effective organizational administration (Bouckaert & Peters, 2002) as it improves organizational practices when applied to distinguishing outstanding from normal employees (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019).

The implementation of “new public management,” a practice adopted from the private sector, has transformed both decision making and developmental criteria in the public sector (Bouckaert & Jann, 2020; Minassians & Ghazaryan, 2018). Data from monitoring and assessing individual and organizational performance (Belle et al., 2017; Van der Hoek et al., 2018) are used to assess past and predict future performance, provide feedback, and establish organizational goals (Belardinelli et al., 2018; Micheli & Pavlov, 2020). Recent studies have revealed the positive impact which intergovernmental strategies have on fostering managerial awareness and enhancing performance management strategies in the public sector (Ateh et al., 2020). Scholars could additionally demonstrate that the integration of community indicators with performance measurement systems leads to more accurate budgetary decisions, greater trust and credibility, and positive changes in agency behavior and service delivery (De Lancer Julnes et al., 2020).

There is no scholarly consensus on how to measure governmental effectiveness (Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017). Scholars have formulated various performance and evaluation models for the public sector (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019; Kotchegura et al., 2019). Some contend that the performance data available from the public sector are characterized by low quality and credibility (Lee, 2020), something Israeli scholars have claimed in relation to the Israeli public sector specifically (Mizrahi & Minchuk, 2019).[[2]](#footnote-3) Moreover, studies have shown that this has led to controversies over effective resource allocation decisions (De Lancer Julnes, 2006) and policy implementation, which are also usually influenced by political and cultural criteria (De Lancer Julnes et al., 2020), including values (Christensen et al., 2020). In this context, scholars have also questioned the public sector’s ability to incorporate sustainable performance measurement systems into their decision making frameworks (Holzer et al., 2019).

Our research offers a different insight and stems from Motowidlo, Borman, and Schmit’s (1997) job performance model, which divides employee performance into task and contextual categories. Our model presents personality as a primary and reliable predictor of both (Motowidlo et al., 1997). In addition, it describes the relationship between task and contextual performance as providing a mechanism through which contextual activities shape organizational activities (Bhardwaj & Kalia, 2021; Cepiku et al., 2017). This has been confirmed by various studies revealing that contextual behavior not only affects performance, but overall performance parameters too (Atatsi et al., 2019; Ones et al., 2018). Our research briefly discusses three major, paradigmatic cases of occupational groups and work contexts in the Israeli public sector, providing results with empirical rigor. These groups and work contexts comprise the education, welfare, and health care and defense sectors (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

The Jewish population in Israel is composed of both immigrants (mainly from the former Russian Federation, North Africa, Western Europe, the United States, and South America) and those born there. Thus, a culturally heterogeneous Jewish majority lives together with a large albeit also culturally and religiously diverse Arab minority comprising Muslims, Christians, Druze, and Bedouins (Sharkansky, 2002). Due to its ethnic and cultural diversity, Israeli society provides an interesting case for studying the antecedents of outstanding performance in the public sector.

The Israeli public administration was established in 1943. It adopted aspects of the Ottoman and British Mandate era structures and combined them with the traditions of the Jewish National Offices of the Jewish-Yishuv community of Palestine (Kfir, 2002). The Israeli public administration is a centralized body (Gilad & Cohen, 2018) and has multiple duties and responsibilities supervised and coordinated by various staff units, some relatively autonomous (Sharkansky, 2002). The Israeli public sector is a provider of stable employment and is characterized by its high professionalism (Stier, 1998 in Okun, Oliver, & Khait-Marelly, 2007). “New public management” criteria have been applied to its work in recent decades, significantly transforming it (Hammerschmid et al., 2019). Nonetheless, many of its administrative systems remain highly centralized and controlled by different ministries (Mizrahi et al., 2009). The application of “new public management” doctrine demands that employees in the public sector become performance oriented and highly attentive to client needs (Eldor, 2018). In this context, a recent study has revealed that Israel’s effective application of performance management policies in the public sector is the result of its citizens’ trust in and satisfaction with the different services this offers (Beeri et al., 2018; Mizrahi et al., 2009).

## Outstanding Employees

Outstanding employees’ main value lies in their effective contribution to improving organizational performance. The degree of their exceptional performance is determined by their particular levels of ability, personal qualities, and attitudes (Elliot, 2005). Outstanding employees perform their duties with excellence “above and beyond the call of duty” (Van Loon et al., 2018) and achieve high contextual and task performance levels.

## Personality Traits as Predictors of Outstanding Performance

Personality traits refer to one’s style of interpersonal interaction via behavior and thinking. Traits develop during one’s childhood and adulthood and are predictors of conduct throughout one’s life (Kajonius & Johnson, 2018). The FFM is a highly influential approach to analysing traits, offering a comprehensive taxonomy of them (Feher & Vernon, 2021; Watson et al., 2019), with each of them made up of many specific features. The FFM divides personality into five categories: “agreeableness,” “conscientiousness,” “openness,” “extraversion,” and “emotional stability.” Beneath these higher categories lie several subdivisions of correlated personality traits. In recent decades, various predictors have proven relevant to the assessment of job performance (Feher & Vernon, 2021). However, the ability to predict job performance is still imperfect, demanding further research on potentially relevant predictors (Harzer et al., 2021).

Employing the FFM model has a number of methodological advantages. It is the leading scholarly paradigm used for the study of personality. Scholars in various fields (psychology, political science, sociology, public administration, and so on) have demonstrated its reliability, validity, and usefulness (Feher & Vernon, 2021; McCrae & Costa, 2006). Validations of the FFM model have also included longitudinal studies and research has shown that its factors are stable over time and are universally evinced. All have been attested as present in both sexes and across different age groups and ethnicities (Cooper et al., 2017). Studies have additionally replicated the applicability of the model in more than fifty cultures (McCrae, 2011) and across Hofstede’s dominant cultural dimensions model (McCrae & Terracciano, 2005 in Islam, 2019), establishing its validity cross-culturally (Funder, 2001; Thompson, 2008 in: Islam, 2019).

Recent scholarly work has shown the FFM’s suitability for predicting job satisfaction, ability in managerial decision making, and organizational citizenship behavior. Despite its notable absence from scholarly research on public administration, scholars are certain of its ability to predict behavior and attitudes in this field (Cooper et. al., 2017). A reason for this may be the model’s greater reliability when compared with others, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), the empirical-theoretical limitations of which are considerable (Cooper et al., 2013). In this context, the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI), on which this and many other studies of public administration rely, has shown great promise (Gosling et al., 2003). The TIPI is a brief self-reporting measure of personality developed to measure FFM traits. It consists of ten items with five dimensions, each of which is assessed via two of those items. The TIPI’s construction has been developed through rigorous statistical procedures (Myszkowski et al., 2019). Although somewhat inferior to standard multi-item instruments, its developers have provided evidence of its adequate test/retest reliability and convergent validity. More specifically, this model’s instruments achieve adequate levels in terms of: (1) convergence with widely used FFM measures in self, observer, and peer reports, (2) test/retest reliability, (3) patterns of predicted external correlates, and (4) convergence between self and observer ratings (Gosling et al., 2003). All of this provides for reliability and validity in relation to this study. Below we provide further details of the FFM personality traits.

“Agreeableness”is a quality of sympathetic, compliant, cooperative, and trusting people. Individuals scoring high on agreeableness are adaptive, good at establishing cooperative relationships and creating supportive networks with others (Huang et al., 2014). They exhibit prosocial behaviors and attitudes, as well as high levels of altruism and sympathy (Hamidullah et al., 2016). Agreeable people trust themselves in the same way as they trust others (McCrae & Costa, 2006). Agreeableness predicts positive task performance (Eshet & Harpaz, 2021; Monzani et al., 2015), having a significantly positive effect on both task and contextual performance (Abdullah & Rashid, 2013; Eshet & Harpaz, 2021), as well as on “organizational citizenship behavior” (Pletzer, 2021). Based on the above, we hypothesize:

##### H1: The higher the levels of “agreeableness” the higher the levels of employees’ performance, leading to outstanding performance.

“Conscientiousness” refers to an individual’s level of self-discipline, dutifulness, commitment to delivery, responsibility, and goal achievement. Employees who score high on conscientiousness perceive themselves as well organized, hard working, and careful (Frieder et al., 2017).Scholarlyresearch has shown that there is a relationship between a sense of civic duty and commitment to the public interest on the one hand, and a higher level of conscientiousness on the other (Hamidullah et al., 2016). In addition, studies suggest that conscientiousness and positive job performance are related (Oh & Berry, 2009; Ramdani et al., 2021). In this regard, Wilmot & Ones (2019) have shown that conscientiousness is the most important personality trait predicting job performance. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

##### H2: The higher the levels of “conscientiousness” the higher the levels of employees’ performance, leading up to outstanding performance.

“Openness to experience” relates to individuals who seek new kinds of experiences and pursuit of novelty in new environments. They are culturally adaptive and do not restrict themselves to specific values (Costa & McCrae, 1992). This is the reason openness to experience fosters challenging appraisals that lead to positive outcomes (Frieder et al., 2017). Studies have discussed the importance of this trait for predicting employee performance (Abdullah & Rashid, 2013) and have established its positive correlation with positive organizational citizenship behavior (Pletzer, 2021), though they disagree on how this correlation comes about. Therefore, we hypothesize:

##### H3: The higher the levels of “openness to experience,” the higher the levels of employees’ performance, leading up to outstanding performance.

“Extraversion” relates to individuals with a tendency to be sociable, assertive, and energetic. Extroverted employees are likely to initiate change and effectively present their ideas in an approachable, communicative, and sympathetic manner. Due to their sociability, they tend to establish working relationships with a wide range of people, thereby creating contact networks (Wihler et al., 2017). In addition, extroverted individuals welcome challenges and adapt to change and stress (Frieder et al., 2017). Not all scholars agree on how extraversion predicts excellence, but it has been shown that it predicts positive job performance outcomes. Some scholars hold that extraversion also predicts high levels of teamworking performance (Monzani et al., 2015), along with outstanding performance in leadership and managerial performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Others contend that extraversion is strongly related to public policy making (Hamidullah et al., 2016) and correlates positively with positive organizational citizenship behavior (Pletzer, 2021). Consequently, we hypothesize:

##### H4: The higher the levels of “extraversion,” the higher the levels of employees’ performance leading to outstanding performance.

“Emotional stability” is a quality of calm and placid individuals who tend to be confident and optimistic in new or challenging situations, including in their professional relationships (Wihler et al., 2017).Individuals who score highly on emotional stability exhibit high self-esteem, optimism, and resilience to stress. In addition, they tend to master distracting emotions, notably those damaging to work performance (Johnson et al., 2017). Emotional stability is also related to workplace adaptability characteristics such asteamwork (Barrick et al., 2001; Hamidullah et al., 2016), knowledge implementation in new tasks, and adjustment to new, potentially stressful contexts (Johnson et al., 2017)**.** Eshet and Harpaz (2021) have found thatemotional stability predicts positive contextual and task performance. Based on this, we hypothesize:

##### H5: The higher the levels of “emotional stability,” the higher the levels of employees’ performance, leading up to outstanding performance.

## The Present Research

The literature discussing employee performance and the factors affecting and predicting it is extensive (Atatsi et al., 2019; Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019; Jacobsen & Andersen, 2019), though there are clear research gaps (Atatsi et al., 2019). Scholars have not yet adressed the FFM traits’ ability to predict outstanding performance. Nor have they determined whether all or only some of the FFM’s traits predict outstanding performance and, if only some, which of them and how. The goal of this study is to identify and empirically test the above mentioned model of outstanding employee performance. It discusses three major paradigmatic cases in relation to occupational groups and work contexts in the Israeli public sector, thus providing results with greater empirical rigor. Its sample has been tested in the non-metropolitan Israeli public administration. It assesses its diverse population as part of a globally integrated economy (Lord, 2010). Our research model of outstanding employees (Figure 1) includes the dependent variables of task and contextual performance, as well as the independent variable of FFM personality traits.

[Figure 1 here]

# Research Methods

## The Research Context

Outstanding employees were selected by a committee consisting of 18 experienced professionals, headed by the president of the National Labor Court. The employees work in public services, health care services, local authorities, public transport, higher education, and the military industry.

## Data Sources

Questionnaires were administered to the participants. The sample consists of 742 participants: 189 pairs of outstanding employees and their supervisors, and 182 pairs of normal employees and their supervisors as a control group. Thesample of outstanding employees was selected from the finalists of the ‘Excellent Worker Prize of Israel’ sponsored by *Ma’ariv,* an Israeli daily newspaper. Department managers in each organization were asked to choose their best employees. A committee consisting of the HR manager, the chairperson of the labor union or workers’ council, and the organization’s director general selected the most outstanding worker in their organization. These were contacted by telephone and invited to participate in the current study, with a questionnaire sent to them via e-mail after obtaining their consent. The questionnaires were completed separately by the employees and their immediate supervisors. In addition, each supervisor selected one normal subordinate employee and evaluated his/her overall performance. The dropout rate was 38%.

[Table 1 here]

As shown in Table 1, most of the outstanding employees were married with children (87%) and labor union members (80%). About half of them were men (55%) holding academic degrees (55%). The outstanding employees’ average age was 54.5 (SD=9.12) and average seniority in the public administration 23 years (SD=8.76). Cramer’s V Correlation shows a medium correlation between outstanding employees and their supervisors’ gender, education level, marital status, and labor union membership.

As shown in Table 2, outstanding employees holding an academic degree showed better task and contextual performance levels than those who did not. There was no significant difference in task and contextual outstanding performance levels between men and women.

[INSERT TABLE 2]

## Measurement

Independent Variable: Personality traits were measured according to the widely used (Schult et al., 2019) Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI) (Gosling et al., 2003), given its adequate compatibility with the FFM (Andersen, 2020). The TIPI consists of 10 items assessing each of the FFM’s personality traits, thus proving a very brief measure thereof (Hjortskov, 2021). Employees specifically indicated to what extent they agreed or disagreed with each of the TIPI statements and thereby self-reported the pair of traits that apply to them the most. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient is 0.72.

Dependent Variables: Task performance was measured on the Williams and Anderson (1991) seven-item scale. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient is 0.88 (Jawahar & Ferris, 2011).Contextual performancewas measured with the Moorman and Blakely (1995) ten-item scale. Job performance was rated by the supervisors. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient is 0.91.

All scales were applied using a seven-point Likert scale (from 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree”).

## Data Analysis

We analyzed the data using Correlation tests and T-tests via SPSS version 25, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), using AMOS version 25.

# ­­Results

Table 3 shows the bivariate correlation coefficients among all the study variables, as well as descriptive statistics for all the variables concerning outstanding and normal employees. No multicollinearity was found between the independent variables.

[Table 3 here]

The results indicate a significant difference between outstanding and normal employees in two personality traits: “Conscientiousness” [t (369,0.95) = 2.02, p< 0.05], so that outstanding employees are at a significantly higher level in “conscientiousness’ (M = 4.39) than normal employees (M = 4.17) confirming H2; “emotional stability” [t(369,0.95) = 2.78, p< 0.01], so that outstanding employees are at a significantly higher level in emotional stability (M = 4.29) than normal employees (M = 4.00), confirming H5. Contextual performance has a significantly positive correlation with task performance (rp=0.461, p<0.001).

 [Table 4 here]

Table 4 shows that high levels of “agreeableness” in outstanding employees have a significant and positive effect on both task (β = 0.232, p<0.05) and contextual performance (β = 0.240, p<0.05) in the field of education. High levels of “emotional stability” in outstanding employees have a significant and positive effect on task performance (β = 0.163, p<0.05) in the field of healthcare and welfare services, partially confirming H1. In addition, high levels of “openness to experience” in outstanding employees have a significant and positive effect on and task performance (β = 0.446, p<0.01) in the field of defense (the army, police, and fire and rescue service), partially confirming H3. However, high levels of “agreeableness” (β = -0.600, p<0.01) and “extraversion” (β = -0.441, p<0.01) have a significant and negative effect on task performance in the field of defense. As to the latter’s contextual performancein this same field, it has a significant and positive effect on “conscientiousness” (β = 0.381, p<0.05), along with a significant and negative effect on “extraversion” (β = -0.440, p<0.01).

[Figure 2 here]

Figure 2 shows that “emotional stability” (β = 0.57, p<0.01) and “extraversion” (β = 0.46, p<0.01) have a significant and positive effect on outstanding employees’ performance (The hypotheses H4 andH5 were confirmed). However, “openness to experience” (β = -0.48, p<0.01) has a significant and negative effect on outstanding employees’ performance, so hypothesis H3 was not confirmed. The data fitted the outstanding employees’ measurement model well (χ2 = 26.4, n = 189, df = 13, p < 0.01, CFI =0.91, RMSEA =0.07). The estimate of squared multiple correlations in the analysis is 14 percent.

The findings also show that “agreeableness” (β = 1.33, p<0.05) has a significant and positive effect on common employees’ performance. The data fitted the common employees’ measurement model well (χ2 = 10.5, n = 182, df = 13, p < 0.01, CFI =0.97, RMSEA =0.01). The estimate of squared multiple correlations in the analysis is 11 percent.

# ­Discussion and Conclusion

Our research contributes to the HRM field. First, it enriches the scientific literature on personality traits in relation to employees’ outstanding performance as tested in the Israeli public sector. Second, it expands the applicability of the FFM by showing its effectiveness in assessing performance in the public administration sector. This enhances scholarly knowledge, both theoretically and practically.

The findings show that two out of five personality traits – “extraversion” and “emotional stability” – have significantly positive effects on employee’s outstanding performance. “Emotional stability” (H5) is a dominant predictor of outstanding performance, especially in the healthcare sector (Chaudhry et al., 2017). This may be due to this trait’s correlation with the ability to adjust to (Johnson et al., 2017) and cope with stressful contexts and situations (Ruisoto et al., 2021). In addition, this trait correlates with a tendency to adopt positive attitudes towards new or challenging situations, as well as the establishment of good collegial relationships (Wihler et al., 2017). One may argue that working in the public sector means constant involvement in dynamic working environments, along with constant adaptivity in job performance. Nursing is an example, in which one finds multiple social interactions and dynamic work conditions. One may argue that “extraversion” meaningfully contributes to performance in professions demanding high levels of personal initiative, that is, the ability to adapt to unexpected events, crises, and innovation demands (Frieder et al., 2017), all of which are typical of public sector jobs. In line with the research literature, our research shows that extraversion (H4) is a positive predictor of outstanding performance (Wihler et al., 2017). Nonetheless, this does not apply to the defense sector, in which it is a negative predictor, as shown in other recent research (Ohlsson et al., 2017).

“Openness to experience” is a significantly negative predictor having a negative impact on performance, though not in the defense sector. Individuals open to experience, one may contend, have little preference for conventional tasks, are characterized by their low levels of self-assessment, are less structured, and tend not to stick to routines, such as working in nine-to-five jobs (Hildenbrand et al., 2018) as often demanded by the public administration sector. Yet, the foregoing does not apply to the defense sector, in which innovative behavior and being open-minded are requirements (Sabahattin Mete, 2020).

In addition, this paper’s findings reveal that “agreeableness” (see H1) is not a positive predictor of general outstanding performance. However, this does not apply to outstanding employees in the education sector when compared to common employees’ performance. As argued in some research literature (Kim et al., 2018), being a sympathetic and cooperative person leads to positive outcomes.

According to the research literature, “conscientiousness” is the best general predictor of job performance (Sartori et al., 2017; Van Aarde et al., 2017). Employees who score highly on this trait are likely to be responsible, civic duty-oriented, committed to the public interest, organized, and hardworking (Filiz & Battaglio, 2017). However, the results of this study show that high levels of “conscientiousness” (see H2) are not a positive predictor of outstanding performance (see Figure 2). Outstanding employees score higher on this trait than normal employees (see Table 2). The reason for this may be that managers and supervisors are often more interested in their employees’ effectiveness and immediate results than in the way these are obtained. This requires a clarification. As argued earlier, “conscientiousness” is the most significant and generalizable predictor of work performance. Nonetheless, its impact varies according to its degree. Studies have shown that employees scoring high on “conscientiousness” tend to maintain their performance levels when facing greater and more varied kinds of challenge and stress. In this context, “conscientiousness” has been identified as a buffer against abusive supervision (Nandkeolyar et al., 2014) and overt politics (Hochwarter et al., 2000)‎. In addition, “conscientiousness” has a positive effect in those operating in hostile environments, dealing with negative ‎emotions, and negotiating adverse working situations (Abbas & Raja, 2019). However, employees scoring too high on “conscientiousness” are more likely to leave their jobs if required to confront stressful and challenging situations (Abbas & Raja, 2019). More specifically, remarkably highly conscientious employees exhibit low job performance levels when experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion, acute family-versus-work conflict, and other psychologically negative situations ‎‎(Abbas & Raja, 2019). On the other hand, employees scoring low on “conscientiousness” tend to show high-performance levels when confronting obstacles and stress.

These findings provide managements with the following practical insights: First, knowing one’s employees’ personality traits allows HRMs to adopt the strategies needed for cultivating outstanding employees. As argued above, these employees play a key role in attaining organizational goals. Accordingly, it is crucial for organizations to identify those employees capable of excellence, nurture them, and integrate them into suitable working contexts, as explained by our model. If not, outstanding employees may not blossom, the impact of their outstanding qualities may become dissipated, and they could be eventually lost to their organizations (Fowler & Birdsall, 2019).

Second, we suggest encouraging outstanding employees’ personality traits and adopting the strategies needed for their organizational functioning. HR departments may accordingly apply psychometric measurement as diagnostic in order to enhance decision making and policy. In this context, there is extensive scholarly evidence that personality traits are malleable. Traits can serve as stable predictors, but also as actionable targets for organizational policy change and intervention (Bleidorn et al., 2019). More specifically, sociogenic approacheshave shown that environmental influences (Roberts & Wood, 2006) and life experiences can lead to changes in personality traits (Bleidorn et al., 2018; Denissen et al., 2019). This makes it possible to purposefully modify, interrupt, or redirect life trajectories by identifying psychological features and strategically altering patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior (Allemand & Flückiger, 2017; Geukes et al., 2018). HR departments may thus strengthen non-cognitive attributes and improve the effectiveness of service delivery (Callen et al., 2015). The FFM is a useful psychological resource for sorting and organizing various groups of behavior, thereby allowing HR departments to rethink and reshape organizational strategies and goals (Hopwood et al., 2009; Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2007; Roberts et al., 2007 in Bleidorn et al., 2019). In other words, the FFM, on which this study relies, provides a reliable theoretical framework for guiding HR departments in targeting specific traits and managing them according to their strategic aims (Bleidorn et al., 2019).

We conclude that, in the long run, nurturing outstanding performers is a better strategy than hiring and training new employees, as the latter leads to new expenditure of resources and time. In line with the literature (Hung, 2018), we suggest nurturing relevant personality traits, leading organizations to certain ways of working and levels of expectation, and thus to outstanding performance.

# Contribution and Limitations

 This study contributes to the understanding of the impact that FFM’s traits have on outstanding employees in the public sector. Our enriched application of this model provides organizations with a more accurate, practical tool for identifying, recruiting (see Bromberg & Charbonneau’s (2020) application of the FFM to public service motivation and public managers’ hiring decisions), and identifying future outstanding employees, thereby strengthening public services through identifying personality traits (Callen et al., 2015). In addition, this study adds to accumulated knowledge on workplace behavior.

Despite its practical and theoretical contributions, this study has limitations that could be addressed in future research. First, it assumes the general validity of personality measurement of job performance criteria in the Israeli public sector.[[3]](#footnote-4) The FFM is a universally agreed personality trait model, applicable to everyone, everywhere, irrespective of cultural background. Nonetheless, additional research centering on the influence of specific cultural backgrounds on personality traits should be conducted. Second, the individual determinants of performance may not be innovative in themselves. However, the system of determinants presented in this study has significant implications. Like any other empirical model, ours is a specific theoretical construct analyzing and reflecting a given practice and offers a particularized, theoretical perspective of a general, socio-cultural phenomenon. This entails that other research, theoretical development, and practice could benefit from similar testing in other contexts and employing different predictors. Third, job applicants may exaggerate their skills and motivation, thus questioning the reliability of selection devices. Nonetheless, current study has shown that the reliability of traditional psychometric approaches for personnel selection can be enhanced with newly developed devices such as the Ideal Employee Coefficient which, by extracting social meaning, provides a supplement to traditional scorings of responses relating to personality aspects (Marcus et al., 2019). Thus, interviewees’ self-presentations can supply HRMs with additional useful information about candidates. Rather than detracting, this reinforces the contention in this paper that measuring personality traits is beneficial for recruiting and managing outstanding employees in the public sector.

Fourth, there may be ethical issues in identifying personality traits for selection purposes. In democratic countries such as Israel, people living with disabilities including autism, cannot be discriminated against. The extent of applicability of these restrictions may vary according to countries, states, and provinces. In this context, it may be added that there is growing evidence that normative personality and personality disorder phenomena are common continua. Although scholars have suggested that identifying FFM traits can help to diagnose personality disorders, HRMs need to exercise caution when assessing personality measures in recruitment and assessment processes (Melson-Silimon et al., 2019).

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# Figures and Tables

## Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the employees and their supervisors’ SES variables

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Variable** | Outstandingemployees | Employees’ supervisors | Normalemployees | Correlation |
| Gender | Female | 104 | 55% | 86 | 45% | 131 | 72% | 0.24\*\*\* |
| Male | 85 | 45% | 103 | 55% | 51 | 28% |
| Education | High school | 42 | 22% | 9 | 5% | 35 | 19% |  |
| Tertiary | 42 | 22% | 15 | 9% | 58 | 32% |  |
| Bachelor | 44 | 23% | 51 | 29% | 42 | 23% | 0.22\*\* |
| Master | 51 | 27% | 76 | 43% | 46 | 25% |  |
| PhD / MD | 10 | 5% | 26 | 15% | 2 | 1% |  |
| Marital status | Single | 8 | 4% | 2 | 1% | 18 | 10% |  |
| Married without children | 2 | 1% | 0 | 0% | 18 | 10% |  |
| Married with Children | 161 | 87% | 164 | 92% | 138 | 76% | 0.25\*\* |
| Divorcee | 11 | 6% | 10 | 6% | 7 | 4% |  |
| Widower | 4 | 2% | 3 | 2% | 0 | 0% |  |
| labor union | Yes | 151 | 80% | 121 | 64% | 118 | 65% | \*\*\*0.28 |
| No | 38 | 20% | 68 | 36% | 64 | 35% |  |

Note: n = 189 outstanding employees and their supervisors, n= 182 common employees and their supervisors,  \* P<0.05, \*\* P<0.01, \*\*\* P<0.001

## Table 2: Sociodemographic Background



## Table 3: Pearson Correlations and T test analysis

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variables | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** |
| 1. Extraversion | == |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2. Agreeableness | 0.258\*\*\* | == |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3. Conscientiousness | -0.027 | -0.010 | == |  |  |  |  |
| 4. Emotional Stability | 0.183\*\* |  0.086 | 0.031- |  == |  |  |  |
| 5. Openness to Experiences  | -0.172\*\* |  0.026 | 0.068- | -0.274\*\*\* | == |  |  |
| 6. Task Performance | -0.079 | -0.031 | 0.011- |  0.064 | -0.038 |  == |  |
| 7. Contextual Performance  | 0.057 | 0.096 | 0.088- |  0.077 |  0.017 | 0.461\*\*\* |  == |
| **Outstanding Employees** | Mean | 4.29 | 4.82 | 4.39 |  4.29 | 5.28 | 6.19 | 5.89 |
| S.D. | 1.04 | 0.85 | 0.87 |  0.85 | 1.12 | 0.76 | 0.82 |
| **Common Employees** | Mean | 4.23 | 4.79 | 4.17 |  4.00 | 5.51 | 5.96 | 5.60 |
| S.D. | 0.86 | 0.96 | 0.69 |  0.73 | 0.95 | 0.75 | 0.80 |
| **Independent T test** | 0.50 | 0.17 | 2.02\* |  2.78\*\* | -1.73 | 2.31\* | 2.69\*\* |

Note: n = 189 outstanding employees and their supervisors, n= 182 common employees and their supervisors,

\* P<0.05, \*\* P<0.01, \*\*\* P<0.001

## Table 4: Pearson Correlations Personality Traits and Performance of the Outstanding Employees

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Task Performance** |  | **Contextual Performance** |
| Variables  | Educationn=71 | Healthn=50 | Defensen=43 |  | Educationn=71 | Healthn=50 | Defensen=43 |
| 1. Extraversion | -0.107 | 0.002 | -0.441\* |  | -0.179 | -0.156 | -0.440\* |
| 2. Agreeableness | 0.232\* | 0.168 | -0.600\*\* |  | 0.240\* | 0.162 | -0.116 |
| 3. Conscientiousness | -0.150 | -0.122 | -0.190 |  | 0.081 | -0.184 | 0.381\* |
| 4. Emotional Stability | 0.059 | 0.163\* | 0.013 |  | -0.030 | 0.020 | -0.028 |
| 5. Openness to Experiences  | -0.026 | 0.026 | 0.446\*\* |  | -0.067 | 0.129 | 0.012 |

Note: \* P<0.05, \*\* P<0.01, \*\*\* P<0.001

## Figure 1: Research model of Personality Traits as predictors of Employees’ Outstanding Performance in the Public Sector

**Outstanding Employees**

Task Performance

Contextual Performance

Agreeableness

Conscientiousness

Emotional Stability

Extraversion

Openness Experiences

**Personality**

## Figure 2: Outstanding Employees Model in Relation to Common Employees



1. A recent study on the public sector revealed that higher incentives for personnel tend to improve the quality of organizational performance, though at the expense of higher governance costs. With that in mind, it is crucial that public managements strike a balance between low incentives which lead to fewer benefits and high incentives which raise administrative costs and benefits, albeit encouraging gaming and various kinds of perverse response (Musso and Weare, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. A similar situation can be found in nonprofit organizations. A recent study suggests that the data collected to meet external accountability requirements in this sector do not provide the required type of information organizations need to improve their performance (M. Kim et al., 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The Israeli Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities” Law for the Public Services was passed in 1998. It represents a decisive milestone in the legal recognition of the rights of persons with disabilities within the Israeli legal system (*Ministry Of Justice - Equality and Inclusion*, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)