Personality Traits’ Predictors of Outstanding Performance in the Public Sector

**Abstract**

This research provides Human Resources Managements with a tool to identify outstanding performers according to personality traits. The model has been empirically tested in the Israeli Public Administration sector. The innovative paired sample is composed of a variety of elite performersfrom 14 different government offices. Questionnaires were administered to a total of 742 participants, which comprised 189 pairs of outstanding employees and their supervisors, and 182 pairs of normative employees and their supervisors. Whereas the supervisors rated the job performances of their employees, these self-reported on their 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 one. In addition, agreeableness emerges as a positive predictor of normative employees’ performance. As to its practical outcomes, this research assists public administrations in locating outstanding employees for successful planning.

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

# Introduction

Over the last years, there has been a growing body of scholarly studies discussing performance in the public sector (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 theoretical relation to Human Resource Management (HRM) (Op de Beeck et al., 2018). They have also enlightened the notions of performance’s efficiency, effectiveness (Aversano et al., 2018; Belle et al., 2017; Parrado, 2018; Vogel & Hattke, 2018), and evaluation, along with that of employees’ turnover intentions (Wang & Sun, 2020). Moreover, scholars disagree as to the successful application of performance management systems in the above sector. Recent objections have included: their disadvantageous (J. Heckman et al., 2011) and insubstantial impact on performance’s improvement (Gerrish, 2016; Hvidman & Andersen, 2016; Jin & Rainey, 2020), the promotion of wrong work values (Radin, 2006), and their inefficient (D. G. Frederickson & Frederickson, 2006; H. G. Frederickson et al., 2003), and at times, politically mediated implementation (Lavertu & Moynihan, 2012).

To tackle the above, recent studies have shown the advantages of employing behavioral approaches in the public sector (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2017). Nonetheless, no research study has yet offered a theoretical account combining different scholarly approaches into an applicable model (Faulkner et al., 2019). The present study fills this gap by discussing the notion of personality and performance as expressed by normative and outstanding employees, which it compares. Studies have revealed that such a tool could assist public managers in identifying outstanding employees, who in turn, may contribute to the improvement of their organization’s productivity and effectiveness (Eshet, 2017).

More concretely, this paper’s contribution is: Recent studies have shown that there is a lack of clear systematic knowledge concerning the improvement of personnel management processes in the public sector (Gökalp et al., 2020). Hence, some researchers have contended that personnel’s successful quality management requires a comprehensive reconceptualization and restructuration of its practices (Gökalp et al., 2019). This study’s model offers a practical innovative solution for this. For 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). In this context, scholars could confirm (Guay et al., 2013) that conscientiousness, one of the traits informing the Five Factor Model (FFM) on which this study relies, influences performance significantly (van Aarde et al., 2017). Studies could also establish the positive impact of assessing competency-based performance in light of personality traits, as this increases the likelihood that HR units place the right employee in the right job (Shahhosseini & Sebt, 2011). In addition, research has identified the significant value of self-evaluations. Scholars could determine that self-esteem (Ferris et al. 2015 in Pandey, 2019) and positive affectivity have a considerable impact on job performance (Lin et al. 2014 in Pandey, 2019).

Moreover, the public administration is a major provider of services. Hence, the importance of improving its performances and management policies, as this allows greater efficiency (Goodman et al., 2015; Raadschelders et al., 2015). As a result, seeking outstanding employees has become key in this sector (Eshet, 2017). More concretely, scholars hold that personality, on which this research focuses, is the best predictor among different covariates (Callen et al., 2015) and factors affecting job performance (Belle et al., 2017; Razzaq et al., 2018). And that is the reason, assessing and measuring personality has become crucial in public sector practices (Christopher A Cooper et al., 2017).

Now, the FFM is an effective theory allowing the identification and prediction of work outcomes such as job performance and competency-based skills (Consiglio et al., 2013). Scholarly studies have shown that individuals possessing some of the FFM personality traits (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Openness to Experience, Emotional Stability, and Conscientiousness) find greater meaning in their jobs. This increases their task-motivated behaviors and improves their performances (Barrick et al.2013, in: Frieder, Wang, & Oh, 2017). Moreover, performance presupposes certain competency skills such as motives, attitudes, values, skills, talent, intelligence, abilities, knowledge, know-how insight, experience, social roles, self-image, and personal characteristics (Lišková & Tomšík, 2013). The above are expressed through specific behaviors, which in turn, reflect the way individuals perform successfully in different 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 a consistent theoretical framework for grounding competency-based models applicable to different kinds of roles and organizations. More concretely, studies have revealed that proactivity (i.e., rapidly deciding, starting, and continuing one’s own work) is related to Extraversion, that teamwork (i.e., effectively cooperating with colleagues, supporting them, and integrating their contributions to one’s work perspective) is related to Agreeableness, that innovation (i.e., creatively handling work problems and situations) is related to Openness to Experience, that emotion management (i.e., effectively facing work stress, and emotionally effortful situations, such as negative feedback or deadline pressure) is related to Emotional Stability, and that accomplishment (i.e., purposefully organizing and persisting in completing one’s work activities) is related to Conscientiousness (Consiglio et al., 2013).

Moreover, studies in the public sector have discussed the relation comprising personality traits and job satisfaction (Irissappane & Aravazhi Kavitha, 2014). They additionally addressed topics such as managerial context (Manaf et al., 2018), organizational health context (Miller et al., 1999), motivation (van Witteloostuijn et al., 2017), deviant behavior (A. Abdullah & Marican, 2016), emotional intelligence (Danaeefard et al., 2018), teaching (Christopher A Cooper et al., 2017), and decision making (Filiz & Battaglio, 2017). As to the FFM’s research, studies have centered on its potential explanations and predictions of different behaviors. Yet, research questions still remain open as to the relationship comprising job performance and personality (Hung, 2018).

This study closes the above gap by revealing which personality traits may predict outstanding performance, thus offering an innovative explanation that expands the FFM’s applicability. Its theoretical tool combines the FFM with the empirical data provided by a group of employees, personality traits and performance. [. Our expanded model has been tested in Israel, which following other OECD countries has adopted performance appraisal systems (Belle et al., 2017). Specifically, we offer a practical and innovative tool, which could assist HRM units in the public sector in recruitment programs, personnel training, and personnel retention. As it allows policymakers and HRM units to assess personality traits and predict outstanding performances, thus positively influencing organizational policies and opening the road for financial development.

## Performance Evaluation

Scholarly studies tend to associate performance with the way employees work on their duties (Razzaq et al., 2018). Scholars have developed multiple performance approaches over the last half-century (Abner et al., 2017; Dyckhoff & Souren, 2020; Graham & Bourne, 2014). Employees’ evaluation has been identified as a fundamental tool for effective organizational administration (Bouckaert & Peters, 2002). As it improves organizational practices when applied to the performance distinction of common and outstanding employees (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019).

Moreover, the implementation of the New Public Management, a managerial practice adopted from the private sector, has transformed both the decision-making and the developmental criteria employed in the public sector (Bouckaert & Jann, 2020; Minassians & Ghazaryan, 2018). The information generated by monitoring and assessing individual and organizational performance (Belle et al., 2017; van der Hoek et al., 2018) is used to evaluate past performance, monitor future performance, provide feedback, and establish organizational goals (Belardinelli et al., 2018; Micheli & Pavlov, 2020). In addition, recent studies have revealed the positive impact which intergovernmental strategies have on fostering managerial awareness and increasing the employment of performance management strategies in the public sector (Ateh et al., 2020). Scholars could additionally determine that the integration of community indicators with performance measurement systems leads to more accurate budget information decisions, greater trust and credibility, and positive changes in agency behavior and service delivery (de Lancer Julnes et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, there is no scholarly consensus concerning how to measure governmental effectiveness (Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017). Scholars have formulated different 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). Israeli scholars have claimed the same concerning the Israeli public sector (Mizrahi & Minchuk, 2019).[[2]](#footnote-3) Moreover, studies have shown that the foregoing has led to controversies as to effective resource allocation decisions (de Lancer Julnes, 2006) and policy implementation, which in addition, are 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 and persistently sustain performance measurement systems into their decision-making frameworks (Holzer et al., 2019).

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

The Jewish population in Israel is composed of Jewish immigrants (mainly from the former Russian Federation, North Africa, Western Europe, USA, South America, etc.) and native Jewish residents. Thus, a culturally heterogeneous Jewish majority lives together with a large, albeit 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 structural aspects of the Ottoman and the British Mandatory authority 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). It has multiple duties and responsibilities, which are supervised and coordinated by different staff units, some of which are relatively autonomous (Sharkansky, 2002). Moreover, 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 has been applied during the last decades to significantly transform it (Hammerschmid et al., 2019). Nonetheless, many of its administrative systems have remained highly centralized and controlled by different ministries (Mizrahi et al., 2009). More specifically, the application of the New Public Management doctrine demands that employees in the public sector become performance-oriented and highly attentive to client’s 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 asset is their human capital, which they use effectively to contribute to the improvement of organizational performance. Their exceptional performance is determined by different abilities, personality 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 exhibit high levels of contextual and task performance.

## Personality Traits as Outstanding Performance Predictors

Personality traits refer to one’s style of interpersonal interaction via behavior and thinking. Traits develop during one’s childhood and adulthood, thus enabling a prediction of conduct throughout one’s life (Kajonius & Johnson, 2018). The Five-Factor Model (FFM) is a highly influential approach offering a comprehensive taxonomy of psychological traits (Feher & Vernon, 2021; Watson et al., 2019), each of which is composed of many specific features. The FFM divides personality into five different categories: Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Openness, Extraversion, and Emotional Stability. In addition, its higher categories are subdivided into several correlated personality traits. Over the last decades, various predictors have proven relevant for job performance (Feher & Vernon, 2021). Yet, the ability to predict job performance is still imperfect, thus demanding further research on potentially relevant predictors (Harzer et al., 2021). More specifically, employing the FFM has multiple methodological advantages. The FFM is the leading scholarly paradigm used for the study of personality. Scholars in different fields (psychology, political science, sociology, public administration, etc.) have shown its reliability, validity, and usefulness (Feher & Vernon, 2021; McCrae & Costa, 2006). FFM’s validations have also included longitudinal studies. Moreover, research has shown that this model’s factors are stable over time and are universally evinced. All of them have been attested in both sexes, as well as in different age groups and ethnicities (Christopher A Cooper et al., 2017). Studies have additionally replicated the model’s structure in more than fifty cultures (McCrae, 2011), and across Hofstede’s dominant cultural dimensions model (McCrae & Terracciano, 2005 in Islam, 2019), thus establishing its sound cross-cultural character (Funder, 2001; Thompson, 2008 in: Islam, 2019). As to its scanty application to the public administration field, 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 in the scholarly research of the 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 to other measurement models such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), the empiric-theoretical limitations of which are considerable (C.A. 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 a great promise (Gosling et al., 2003). The TIPI is a short self-report measure of personality developed to measure FFM traits. It consists of ten items with five dimensions, each of which is assessed by two items. Moreover, the TIPI’s construction has gone through rigorous statistical procedures (Myszkowski et al., 2019). Although somewhat inferior to standard multi-item instruments, its developers have provided evidence about its adequate test-retest reliability and convergent validity. More specifically, this model’s instruments have reached 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 which provides reliability and validity to this study.

The FFM’s personality traits are: Agreeablenessrefers to sympathetic, compliant, cooperative, and trusting people. Individuals scoring high on agreeableness are adaptive, good at establishing cooperative relationships, and at 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 the same way they trust others (McCrae & Costa, 2006). Moreover, agreeableness predicts task performance (Eshet & Harpaz, 2021; Monzani et al., 2015) and has a significant positive effect on task and contextual performance (I. 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, deliverability, responsibility, and goal achievement. Employees who score high on conscientiousness perceive themselves as well-organized, hard-working, and careful persons (Frieder et al., 2017).Scholarlyresearch has shown that there is a relationship between civic duty, commitment to the public interest, and higher conscientiousness (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 context, 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 to outstanding performance.*

Openness *to Experience.* These are 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). That is the reason openness to experience fosters challenging appraisals leading to positive outcomes (Frieder et al., 2017). Studies have discussed the importance of this trait for predicting employee performance (I. Abdullah & Rashid, 2013). They could establish its positive relation to organizational citizenship behavior (Pletzer, 2021). Although scholars agree as to the latter’s positive outcomes, they disagree as to how this relation is established. Therefore, we hypothesize:

##### *H3: The higher the levels of Openness to experience the higher the levels of employees’ performance leading to outstanding performance.*

*Extraversion* is the tendency to be sociable, assertive, and energetic. Extroverted employees are likely to take initiatives towards change and to effectively present their ideas in an approachable, communicative, and sympathetic manner. Due to their sociability, these tend to establish work relationships with a wide range of persons, thereby creating contact networks (Wihler, Meurs, Momm, et al., 2017). In addition, extroverted individuals welcome challenges and adapt to changes and stress (Frieder et al., 2017). Not all scholars agree as to how extraversion predicts excellence. Nonetheless, it has been shown that it predicts positive job performance outcomes. Some scholars hold that extraversion can also predict high levels of teamwork 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 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.* These are calm, distressed, and placid individuals. They tend to show confidence and optimism in new or challenging situations, including their professional relationships with their colleagues (Wihler, Meurs, Momm, et al., 2017).Individuals who score high on emotional stability exhibit high self-esteem, are optimistic persons, and are resilient to stress. In addition, they tend to overcome distracting emotions, and in particular, those potentially harming work performance (Johnson et al., 2017). Emotional stability is also related to several adaptive situations at work, such asteamwork (Barrick et al., 2001; Hamidullah et al., 2016), knowledge implementation in new tasks, and adjustment to new stressing contexts (Johnson et al., 2017)**.** Eshet and Harpaz (2021) found thatemotional stability predicts contextual and task performance. Based on the foregoing, we hypothesize:

##### *H5: The higher the levels of Emotional Stability the higher the levels of employees’ performance leading to outstanding performance.*

## The Present Research

The literature discussing employee performance and the factors affecting or predicting it are extensive (Atatsi et al., 2019; Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019; Jacobsen & Andersen, 2019). Nonetheless, clear research gaps can be found in both (Atatsi et al., 2019). Scholars have not yet discussed the FFM traits’ ability to predict outstanding performance, as the present study does. Nor have they determined whether all FFM’s traits predict outstanding performance or only some of them do. If the latter is the case, a question may remain open: 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 briefly discusses three major paradigmatic cases of occupational groups and work contexts in the Israeli public sector, thus providing its results with greater empirical rigor (see Results). Its sample has been tested in the nonmetropolitan 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 Personality Traits (FFM).

[Figure 1 here]

# Research Methods

## The Research Context

Outstanding employees were selected by a committee consisting of 18 experienced professional members headed by the president of the National Labor Court. These employees come from the following public sectors: public services, health care services, local authorities, public transportation, higher education, and the military industry.

## Data Sources

Questionnaires were administered to the participants. The systematic sampling consists of 742 participants, including 189 pairs of outstanding employees and their supervisors, and 182 pairs of common employees and their supervisors as a control group. Thesample was selected from the finalists of the ‘Excellent Worker Prize of Israel’ sponsored by *Ma’ariv,* a daily Israeli newspaper. The employment sectors chosen include public services, health care services, local authorities, public transportation, higher education, and the military industry. As a first step, department managers in each organization were asked to choose their best employees. A committee consisting of the Human Resources Manager, the chairperson of the employees’ union or workers’ council, and the organization’s director general, selected the most outstanding worker of their organization. Each organization selected its top-performing employees. These were contacted by phone and invited to participate in the current study. A questionnaire was 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 common 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 are married with children (87%) and are labor union members (80%). About half of them are men (55%) holding academic degrees (55%). Outstanding employees' average age is 54.5 (SD=9.12). Their average seniority in the public administration is 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 show better task and contextual performance levels than those not holding one. There is no difference in task and contextual outstanding performance between men and women.

## Measurements

*Independent Variable:* Personality Traits were measured according to the widely used (Schult et al., 2019) Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI) (Gosling et al., 2003) due to its sufficient levels of convergence 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). More specifically, employees indicate to what extent they agree or disagree with each of the TIPI statements. Thereby, they rate the pair of traits that apply to them the most (Gosling, 2021), i.e., they self-reported on their own personality traits. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient is 0.72.

*Dependent Variables:* Task Performance was measured with Williams and Anderson, (1991) seven-item scale. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient is 0.88 (Jawahar & Ferris, 2011).Contextual Performanceswere 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 common employees. No multicollinearity was found between the independent variables.

[Table 3 here]

The results indicate a significant difference between outstanding and common employees in two Personality Traits: Conscientiousness [t (369,0.95) = 2.02, p< 0.05], so that outstanding employees are significantly higher in Conscientiousness’ level (M = 4.39) than normative employees (M = 4.17) confirming H2, and Emotional stability [t(369,0.95) = 2.78, p< 0.01], so that outstanding employees are significantly higher in emotional stability level (M = 4.29) than normative 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]

The findings in table 4 show 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 health care and welfare services, partially confirming H1. In addition, high levels of Openness to Experiences 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 (the army, police, and fire and rescue service). 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]

The findings in figure 2 show 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 (The hypothesis H3 was not confirmed). The data fit 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 fit 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 field of human resources management. 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 Five-Factor Model 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 ability to adjust to (Johnson et al., 2017) and cope with stressful contexts and situations (Ruisoto et al., 2021). In addition, this trait is characterized by its tendency to adopt positive attitudes towards new or challenging situations, as well as by the establishment of good collegial relationships (Wihler, Meurs, Momm, et al., 2017). One may argue that working in the public sector demands constant involvement in dynamic work environments, along with constant adaptive job performance. An example may be the nursing context, in which one finds multiple social interactions and dynamic work conditions. One may argue that extraversion meaningfully contributes to performance in professions demanding a high personal initiative, i.e., 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, Meurs, Wiesmann, et al., 2017). Nonetheless, the latter does not apply to the defense sector, in which it is a negative predictor as shown in recent research (Ohlsson et al., 2017).

In contrast to Hypothesis 3, Openness to Experience is a significantly negative predictor having a negative impact on performance, though not in the defense sector. Open to experience individuals, one may contend, show a low preference for conventional tasks, are characterized by their low levels of self-assessment, are less structured, and manifest a low tendency to stick to routines, such as working on nine to five jobs (Hildenbrand et al., 2018) as 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 required (Sabahattin Mete, 2020). In addition, this paper’s findings reveal that Agreeableness (H1) is not a positive predictor of general outstanding performance. Nonetheless, the latter does not apply to outstanding employees in the education sector as compared to common employees’ performance. As argued in the research literature (L. E. 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). Yet, the results of this study show that high Conscientiousness (H2) is not a positive predictor of outstanding performance (see Figure 2). Outstanding employees score higher on this trait than normative employees do (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.

The above conclusion 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 keep their performance levels when facing higher challenges, different kinds of hindrances, 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 positive effects while interacting with hostile environments, negative ‎emotions, and negative work situations (Abbas & Raja, 2019). Yet, employees scoring too high on Conscientiousness are more likely to leave their jobs if required to confront stressfully challenging situations (Abbas & Raja, 2019). More specifically, remarkably high conscientious employees exhibit low job performance levels while facing high emotional exhaustion, high family-to-work conflict, and psychologically negative situations ‎‎(Abbas & Raja, 2019). One may additionally add that, on the other hand, employees scoring low on Conscientiousness tend to show high-performance levels when confronting obstacles and stress.

In sum, our research contributes to the field of human resources management. 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 Five-Factor Model by showing its effectiveness in assessing performance in the public administration sector. This enhances scholarly knowledge, both theoretically and practically.

The present findings provide managements with the following practical insights: First, knowing one’s employees’ personality traits allows Human Resource Managements to adopt the strategies needed for cultivating outstanding employees. As argued above, these employees play a key role in reaching organizational goals. Accordingly, it is crucial for organizations to identify those employees leading to excellence, nurture them, and integrate them into suitable working contexts as explained by our model. Without this, outstanding employees may not blossom, their outstanding qualities may be weakened, and they could be eventually lost to their organizations (Fowler & Birdsall, 2019).

Second, we suggest fostering and considering outstanding employees’ personalities and adopting the strategies needed for their organizational functioning. HR departments may accordingly apply psychometric measures as diagnostics as part of their advancement decisions and policies. In this context, one may recall that there is wide scholarly evidence that personality traits are malleable. Traits can serve as stable predictors, but also as actionable targets for organizational policy changes and interventions (Bleidorn et al., 2019). More specifically, sociogenic approacheshave shown that environmental influences (Roberts & Wood, 2006) and life experiences could lead to personality trait change (Bleidorn et al., 2018; Denissen et al., 2019). In principle, this makes it possible that people’s life trajectories could be purposefully modified, interrupted, or redirected by identifying their psychological features and strategically altering their patterns of thought, feelings, and behavior (Allemand & Flückiger, 2017; Geukes et al., 2018). The foregoing may be employed by HR departments to strengthen non-cognitive attributes and potentially improve the effectiveness of service delivery (Callen et al., 2015). It may be added that the FFM is a useful psychological resource for sorting and organizing different groups of behaviors, thereby allowing HR departments to rethink and change 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 trustful theoretical framework for guiding HR departments in targeting specific traits and managing them according to their strategic interests (Bleidorn et al., 2019).

Finally, we conclude that in the long run nurturing outstanding performers is a better strategy than hiring and training new employees, as this leads to new investments of resources and time. In line with the literature (Hung, 2018), we suggest nurturing those relevant personality traits leading organizations to certain work styles and expectations, 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 (on this point see Bromberg & Charbonneau's (2020) recent application of the FFM to public service motivation and public managers’ hiring decisions) and locating future outstanding employees, thereby strengthening public services through the avenue of personality traits (Callen et al., 2015). In addition, this study contributes to the scholarly body of knowledge by adding new cumulative knowledge on human behavior in the work context.

Despite its practical and theoretical contributions, this study has limitations, which may be addressed by future research. First, it assumes the generalizable validity of personality measurements 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, disregarding cultural backgrounds. Nonetheless, it would be recommendable to perform an additional research centering on the influence of specific cultural backgrounds on personality traits. Second, the individual determinants of performance may not be innovative per se. Yet, the overall 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 (its data). Differently expressed, our model offers a particularized, theoretical perspective of a general, socio-cultural phenomenon. This entails that research, theory, and practice could all benefit from similar tests focusing on additional contexts and employing different predictors. Third, one may argue that job applicants tend to exaggerate their skills and motivation, thus questioning the reliability of selection devices. Nonetheless, current study has shown that the reliability of traditional psychometric approaches to personnel selection can be augmented with newly developed devices such as the Ideal Employee Coefficient, which by extracting social meaning provides a supplement to traditional scorings of responses to personality items (Marcus et al., 2019). Thereby, interview’s self-presentations can supply HRMs with additional and potentially useful information about candidates. Albeit *prima facie* a drawback, the foregoing reinforces this paper’s contention as to the suitability of employing personality trait’s measures for recruiting and managing outstanding employees in the public sector.

Fourth, there may be ethical limitations in employing personality traits for selection purposes. In some democratic countries, among which Israel figures, 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 FFM traits could be used to diagnose personality disorders, HRM’s may need to exercise caution when choosing and relying on different personality measures, both in recruitment and assessment processes (Melson-Silimon et al., 2019).

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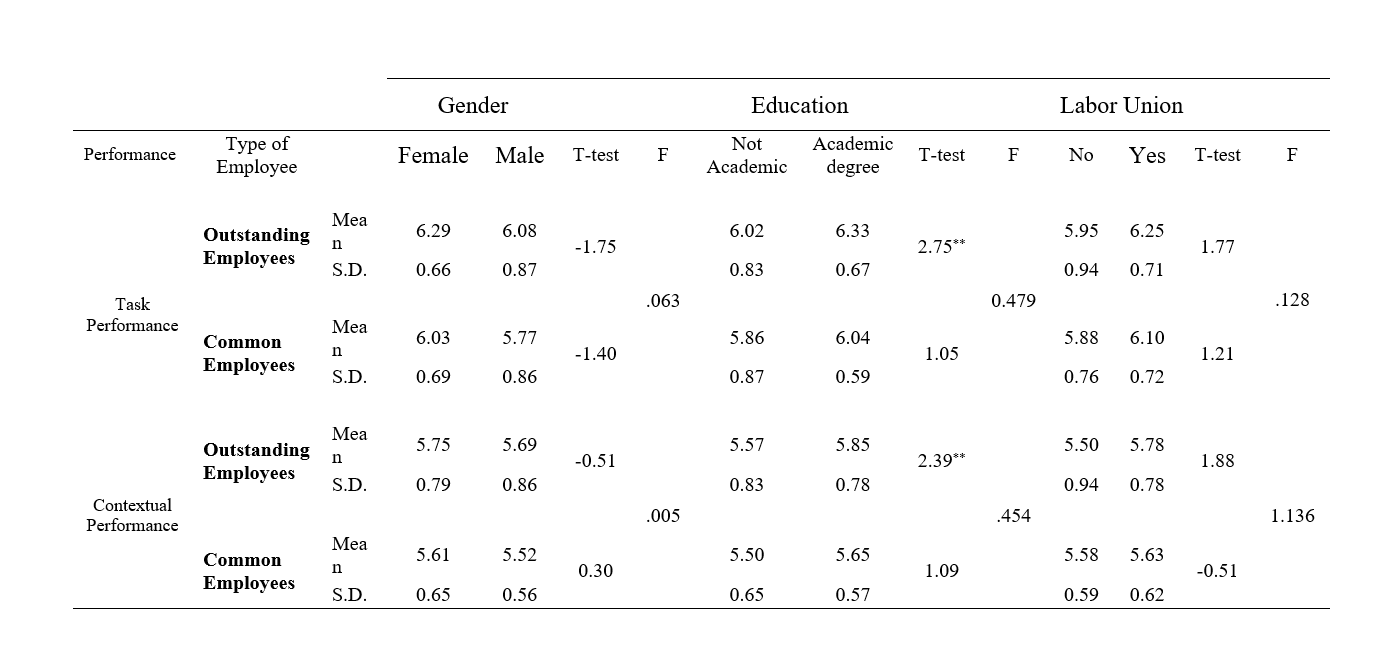
# Figures and Tables

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

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Variable** | | Outstanding  employees | | Employees’ supervisors | | Common  employees | | 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 | Education  n=71 | Health  n=50 | Defense  n=43 |  | Education  n=71 | Health  n=50 | Defense  n=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

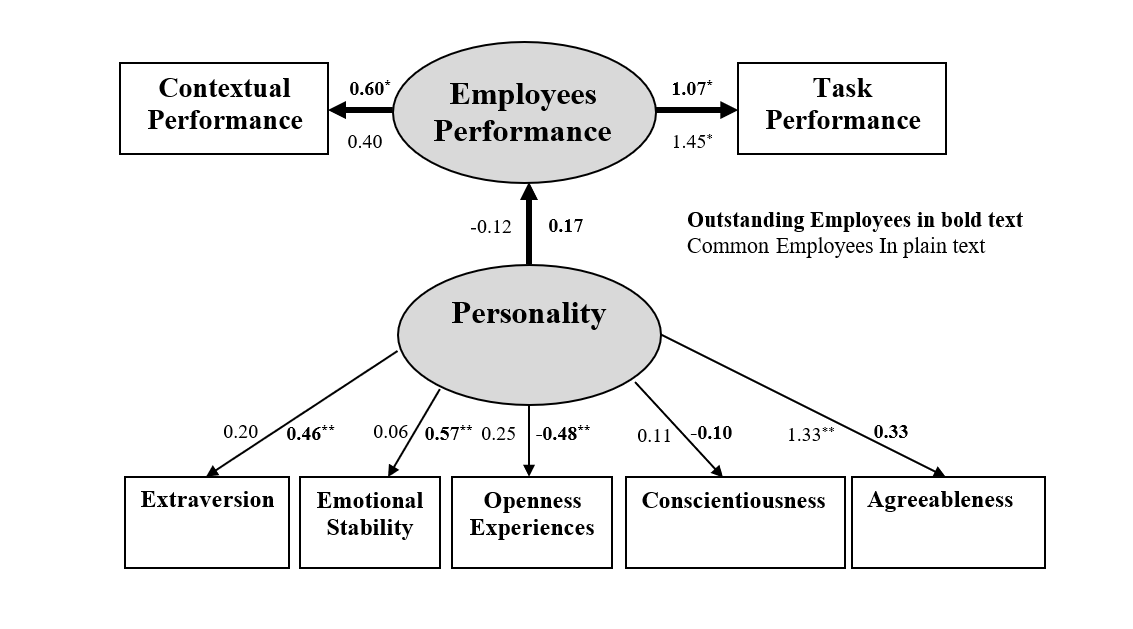
Emotional Stability

Extraversion

Openness Experiences

**Personality**

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



1. A recent research on the public sector has revealed that higher personnel incentives tend to improve the quality of organizational performance. Nonetheless, they do that at the expense of higher governance costs. With that in mind, it is crucial that public managements strike a balance between weak incentives, which lead to fewer benefits, and high incentives, which raise administrative costs and benefits, albeit encouraging gaming and different kinds of perverse responses (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)