

# THE IMPACT OF PERSONALITY ON EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

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## Abstract

Research on employee well-being has predominantly focused on health and individuals' work lives. Complementing past research on employee well-being, the impact of personality on overall well-being was examined. The objectives of the study were to determine the relationship between personality domains (neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness) and well-being. It was also aimed at determining significant personality domains that contribute towards well-being of lecturers. A total of 117 lecturers from a public university in Malaysia were chosen as participants. The NEO-FFI Personality Inventory by Costa and McCrae (1992) was utilized to measure five personality domains while The 5F Wellness by Myers and Sweeney (2005) was employed to measure well-being. Results indicated that all personality domains correlated significantly with well-being. Openness to experience and conscientiousness were found to contribute significantly to well-being of lecturers followed by extraversion. The impact of these findings signifies that personality plays an important role in determining individual well-being.

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**Keywords:** Personality, well-being, lecturers

## Introduction

Studies on well-being had focused on the affective experiences of subjects based on subjective evaluation towards individual everyday life (Ilies, Dimotakis, De Pater, 2010). Even though well-being is part of important life elements, focus has not zoomed on personality factors as determinants of overall psychological well-being among employees in organisations. Researchers have suggested that the differences in psychological well-being at work could be attributed to individual differences or personality.

Traditionally, the role of academicians has been one of nurturing and developing students' potential. In order to do this, they must remain physically and psychologically fit. However, there is apparent dissonance

between academicians' perceived capabilities and role expectations. This may have implications on their physical and psychological well-being. Academicians' work task in higher learning institutions is increasing as institutions strived to compete among themselves. Therefore, the role of personality and its relationship to well-being is significant since it may determine the final outcome of employees' work performance. With increasing work load such as teaching, research and consultation, publication and community work, the effect on well-being is nonetheless imperative to be studied.

In this study, the five-factor model of personality, often termed the Big-Five consist of Neuroticism (the tendency to exhibit poor emotional adjustment such as anxiety, impulsivity and fear), Extraversion (the tendency to be active, sociable, assertive and directive), Openness to Experience (the tendency to be creative, autonomous and curious), Agreeableness (the tendency to be cheerful, likeable and cooperative) and Conscientiousness (the tendency to have a sense of achievement and dependability).

Psychological well-being refers to overall well-being of individual that consists of : i) creative self (intelligence, control, emotions, work, positive humour); ii) coping self (leisure, stress management, self-worth, realistic beliefs); iii) social self (friendship, love); iv) physical self (nutrition, exercise) and v) essential self (spirituality, gender identity, culture identity, self-care).

DeNeve and Cooper (1998), in their meta-analysis study demonstrated the existence of a relationship between personality and several dimensions of subjective well-being which were affective and cognitive. Agreeableness and conscientiousness were said to increase the probability of positive experiences in social and achievement situations which directly related to well-being. On the other hand, openness to experience should lead a person to experience more positive emotional state. Similarly, extraversion has an influence on positive affect while neuroticism negatively influences well-being.

Marchand, Demers and Durand (2005) reported many people had physical consequences that were attributable to long-term exposure to stressful situations in the workplace. According to Maslow (1970), socialization was a significant element of wellness. This was confirmed by Campbell (1981). Both agreed that friendships were positively related to higher levels of satisfaction with life. Meanwhile, Crose, Nicholas, Gobble and Frank (1992) revealed possible relation between various elements which were social support, health behaviours, self esteem, personal control and the immune system. Employees who detached from others and conversely who were so connected as to be completely enmeshed with others, were outside the normal range of socialization and were considered less well.

Findings of another research by McWhirter (1990) pertaining to interpersonal relationships, revealed decreased activity of certain cells in the immune system and higher vulnerability to illness and were correlated to loneliness, as well as mild upsets and moodiness. Revelation of research by Maslow (1970) indicated a healthy (self-actualized) person in a self actualizing model as someone that showed deep feelings of sympathy and affection for human beings as well as a person who was enjoying profound interpersonal relationships. These two studies suggested social interaction and quality relationships between individuals at work or anywhere could directly related and formed part of the development of wellness since personality play a major role in shaping the entire social relationship.

Emotional encounters form part of all people's everyday life, as well as the working lives of employees. Emotional experiences can be draining or promotional for employees. The body's basic health and healing mechanisms respond favourably to positive emotions (love, hope, optimism, and joy) and negatively to negative ones (hate, hopelessness, anxiety, depression, loneliness). The longer negative emotions prevail, the more harmful their influence on the health of individuals. Continuous negative emotions cause people to experience negative well-being that leads to disease in the long run. Frederickson (2002) argues that people should cultivate positive emotions in themselves and in those around them, towards fostering and achieving psychological growth and physical health. Research by Cartwright and Holmes (2006) supports the fact that when emotions and personality are properly managed, they will drive trust, loyalty, team spirit and improved organizational accomplishments.

Schutte, Malouff, Simunek, McKenley and Hollander (2002) mention the importance of cultivating positive emotion and higher self-esteem as characteristic of well-being among leaders. Most organizations produce highly stressful and pressured working conditions robbing employees of positive emotional experiences and inhibiting the well-being of employees. Positive emotions are facilitated by managerial actions that support clear outcome expectancies, give basic material support, encourage individual contribution and fulfilment, develop a sense of belonging, as well as promote a chance to progress and learning continuously (Harter, Schmidt & Keyes, 2003). Workplace attitudes that relate most to high-performing business-unit outcomes are the four positive emotions of joy, interest, contentment and love (Frederickson, 1998). These emotions also constitute part of the personality domains.

In contrast, emotional deficiency can lead to uncertainty, low morale, lack of initiative, creativity and innovation, poor work performance, stress, burnout and poor relationships between employees (Jonker and Scholtz, 2004). Negative personality emotions may limit cognition, but positive

personality and emotions may broaden and build human potential (Frederickson, 2003). Positive emotions affect information-processing strategies, influences creative thinking and broaden cognitive potential (Fiedler, 1988). Smith (2002) reports that optimistic thinking can lead to well-being in people despite the fact that they sometimes do experience stressful situations. He states that neuropathy of functional salutogenic mechanisms can provide strategies to improve health and wellness. Neglecting the role of cognition and mental development can impact negatively on the well-being of employees.

Researchers argue that as much as a quarter of the variation in adult life satisfaction can be accounted for by satisfaction with work (Campbell, Converse and Rodgers, 1976; Spector, 2012). Employee surveys (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin & Schwartz, 1997; Shantall, 2002) clearly show that a majority of employees desire greater meaning and personal development from their work and suggest that few employees see their work as enjoyable, fulfilling and socially meaningful. Job insecurity leads to downward spirals of lower morale, less commitment and under performance, higher turnover as well as higher levels of social conflict (Schreurs, Van Emmerik, Notelaers, and De Witte, 2010). This lead to lower psychological well-being. In conclusion, personality and well-being is an integral part of a bigger entity in determining work performance and job satisfaction.

Based on the above issues, the objectives of this paper is to examine the relationship between the five factors of personality and psychological well-being as well as looking at personality dimensions as predictor for well-being among lecturers in higher learning institution.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Participants were 117 lecturers (academicians) of a public university in Malaysia. They were chosen based on a random sampling technique distributed across three major academic colleges. Questionnaires were distributed through the use of research assistants to each department according to the number of possible participants. Participants were given one week to complete the questionnaire.

### ***Instruments and Data Analysis***

In this study, questionnaires were utilised as the main data source for analysis. Therefore, an instrument was formulated to integrate three parts. Part A consists of demographics information. Part B encompasses measurement on personality domains (The NEO-FFI Personality Inventory) by Costa and McCrae (1992). The inventory consisted of 60 items (12 measuring each domain). The five domains are neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness. Cronbach's alpha values in the present sample were 0.80 (Neuroticism), 0.68

(Extraversion), 0.76 (Openness), 0.71 (Agreeableness) and 0.87 (Conscientiousness). Part C measures well-being of samples through The 5F Wellness Inventory by Myers and Sweeney (2005) and consisted of 72 items (originally 73 items but one item was taken out due to culture-inappropriateness factor). The Cronbach Alpha value was 0.94. Descriptive and inferential analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

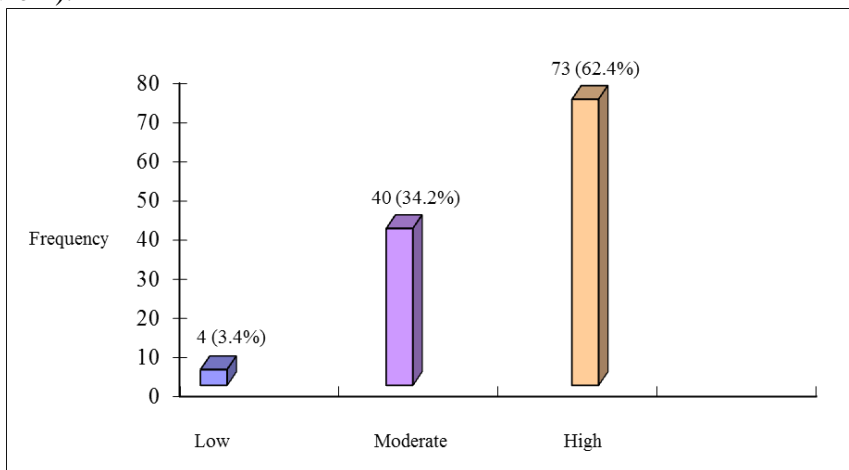
**Results and Discussion**

**Demographics**

Among the respondents, 52 (44.4%) were males while 65 (55.6%) were females. Their age ranged from less than 30 years old to more than 50 years old with 45 respondents (38.5%) did not reveal their age. A total of 97 respondents (82.9%) were married while 17 (14.5%) were single and 3 (2.6%) were divorced. Thirty one respondents (26.5%) were holding administrative post (deans, heads of department, coordinators, directors etc.).

**Level of Well-Being**

Overall level of well-being was categorised into three categories namely low, moderate and high. A total number of 73 respondents (62.4%) were found to have a high level of well-being compared to 40 (34.2%) having moderate level of well-being and only 4 (3.4%) having low level (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Level of well-being

In general, the results demonstrated that majority of respondents for this study experienced high level of psychological well-being at work. As a public higher learning institutions monitored by the government, steps have been taken to ensure that academicians and lecturers were given full support to execute their work. In line with individual key performance indicator as benchmark for work performance, adequate facilities were provided to ensure the delivery of quality teaching, research and publication of lecturers.

However, it is not surprising to admit that some respondents still experience moderate level of psychological well-being. These are acceptable since the university authority will not be able to fulfil and satisfy everyone.

### ***Relationship Between Personality and Well-Being***

Correlations between personality domains and well-being were calculated. Neuroticism was negatively correlated to well-being while other domains (Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness) were found to be positively correlated to well-being (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Correlations for personality and well-being

	Neuroticism	Extraversion	Openness	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness
Well-Being	-0.40**	0.45**	0.42**	0.36**	0.54**

\*\*p<.01

The above findings supported studies done by DeNeve and Cooper (1998), and, Booth-Kewley and Vickers (1994) in terms of significant relationship between personality and psychological well-being.

As can be seen in Table 1, Neuroticism was found to be negatively correlated to well being ( $r=-0.40$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Lecturers who are prone to have irrational ideas, less able to control impulses and have poor coping with stress will definitely experience poor self-creative and self-coping. Low psychological well-being is also related to instability, anxiety, moodiness and irritability at work. Negative emotional state due to neurotic traits will limit cognitive potential, create anxiety and depression. In addition, continue negative emotions will lead to negative psychological well-being.

Positive correlation between extraversion and well-being ( $r=0.45$ ,  $p<.01$ ) signified the existence of certain traits that contribute towards psychological well-being. Extraverted individual are more sociable, talkative, assertive and have high amounts of emotional expressiveness. Therefore, they are able to share their feelings with others and balance their unwanted emotional feelings. In that sense, they manage to have a better coping mechanism to absorb negative thinking that might affect their overall well-being. Lecturers with high Extraversion traits will develop positive personality and have better interaction with students, therefore, will acquire better psychological well-being.

Openness to experience individual have more active imagination, intellectual curiosity and have independence of judgement, and, therefore do have a better judgement on their self well-being. Positive correlation was found between these two variables ( $r=0.42$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Lecturers who were often

engulfed by multiplicity of job demand, role, responsibilities and array of duties will have better judgement with this kind of personality domain. They serve better in terms of perceiving their own well-being compared to those who are low in this Openness to Experience domain and experience more positive emotional state.

Looking at Agreeableness domain, it was significantly related to well-being ( $r=0.36$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Although the strength of the relationship was rather weak, it clearly depicted the existence of bond between individual's Agreeableness traits and well-being. Agreeableness personality traits such as trust, sympathy, kindness, affection and other pro-social behaviour will increase the well-being of individual. Due to the nature of academic world that requires pleasant personality when dealing with students, high level of Agreeableness domain is needed to ensure positive well-being of lecturers in university. Kindness, affection and trust are essential elements in pro-social behaviours that need to be demonstrated by lecturers.

Lastly, conscientiousness and well-being was positively correlated ( $r=0.54$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Conscientiousness would enhance the possibility of constructive encounters at work and in return linked to individual's well-being. Their high level of thoughtfulness with good impulse control and goal-directed behaviour tend to make them organized and mindful of details. In addition, it will increase positive experiences in social and achievement situations which are directly related to well-being. As lecturers, they should demonstrate high level of thoughtfulness with goal directed behaviour as role model for students.

***Personality as Predictor for Well-being***

The influence of each personality domain on well-being was analysed using regression analysis. Results found that three personality domains namely Extraversion, Openness to Experience and Conscientiousness did have an impact on overall well-being (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Summary of regression analysis for personality domains and well-being

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
R <sup>2</sup> = .445, F = 808, $p<.001$					

(Constant)	98.038	33.811		2.900	.005
Neuroticism	-.559	.333	-.144	-1.678	.096
Extraversion	1.349	.463	.228	2.914	.004
Openness	1.866	.545	.260	3.425	.001
Agreeableness	.417	.427	.081	.977	.331
Conscientiousness	1.080	.400	.260	2.701	.008

The personality domains explain 44.5 percent of the variance (R Square) in well-being and significant as indicated by the F value of 17.808 ( $p < .001$ ). Based on the beta and t values, Openness to Experience ( $\beta = .260$ ,  $t = 3.425$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and Conscientiousness ( $\beta = .260$ ,  $t = 2.701$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were found to be the best predictor to well-being compared to Extraversion ( $\beta = .228$ ,  $t = 2.914$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The overall impact of Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness and Extraversion on well-being can be related to the nature of work and the overall environment of a higher learning institution. Day to day interaction with students required lecturers to be able to manifest personality traits that are acceptable to the student community. For example, students expect the lecturers to be having active imagination in teaching, aesthetic, attentive to inner feelings and insights (Openness to Experience). In addition, academic work requires lecturers to be prone toward planning, organizing and carrying out interesting project based learning as part of their everyday assignment since these are indicator of scrupulous and punctual behaviours (Conscientiousness). Finally, Extraversion traits require lecturers to be prototypical assertive, active, talkative and sociable in order to be able to perform well in lectures as well as dealing with individual student.

These personality domains (Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness and Extraversion) that embed specific traits may well influence the overall psychological well-being of individual in terms of creative self, coping self, social self, physical self and essential self. With high psychological well-being through these traits, better work performance and job satisfaction may be achieved.

### **Conclusion**

Unproductive administration of well-being where the management or administrators of an organization only focuses on physical well-being may impair organizational functioning namely overall work performance and job satisfaction. The negligence in looking at employees' well-being may impede the strategic development of a university. Hence, organizations are



accountable to support and encourage employees to develop and demonstrate proper personality traits in ensuring high individual psychological well-being. Support from management that includes clear outcome expectancies, basic material support, encouraging individual contribution and fulfilment, developing a sense of belonging as well as promoting a chance to progress and continuous learning is needed to ensure overall psychological well-being of lecturers. This will promote positive and healthy environment in a higher learning institution.

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