

# **MODERATING EFFECTS OF CULTURAL VALUES ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERSONALITY AND JOB PERFORMANCE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper proposes a new model explaining the effects of cultural values on the relationship between personality and job performance based on the five-factor model of personality and Hofstede's cultural value dimensions. The model focuses on the three personality traits that have been found to be sensitive to situational factors—extraversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience—and the three cultural dimensions that have been shown to influence the personality-performance relationship—collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance—and explains potential interactions among them. Specifically, the model proposes that the relationship between extraversion and job performance and the relationship between openness to experience and job performance are negatively moderated by the three cultural dimensions, whereas the relationship between agreeableness and job performance are positively moderated by them. The practical implication of this model in terms of employee selection is discussed.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The five-factor model of personality (Digman, 1990) is a comprehensive yet parsimonious theoretical framework that can be used to systematically examine the relationship between specific personality traits and job performance (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001). Moreover, its cross-cultural generalizability has been supported through an empirical study (McCrae & Costa, 1997), even though some argue for the need for expanding the model, for example, to incorporate the sixth factor, namely “dependence on others” (Hofstede, 2007).

However, the fact that the five-factor model is applicable to a variety of cultural environments does not guarantee that the relationship between personality traits and job performance will be identical across different cultural environments. Besides affecting national variance in personality (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004), cultural environment may potentially affect the relationship between personality traits and job performance as well, acting as a moderator. To examine the potential influence of culture, Salgado (1997) explored the relationship between personality and job performance in the European Community through a meta-analysis of previous studies. Even though his study expanded the empirical domain of the personality-job performance research to Europe from North America, the study is still limited in that it only

focused on one region instead of devoting attention to the potential role of cultural difference among many different countries of the world.

In this paper, we propose a model explaining the potential moderating effect of culture on the relationship between personality and performance. To theoretically examine the effect, we use Geert Hofstede's cultural values framework (Hofstede, 2001), which is perhaps the most influential of cultural classifications (Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006). Even though criticisms have been raised against it (for a recent example: Ailon, 2008), numerous empirical studies incorporating the framework have been published (Kirkman et al., 2006). However, there seems to be none that examine the moderating effect of culture on the relationship between personality and job performance. Hofstede himself suggested a couple of ways to relate the five-factor model and his cultural values framework (i.e., measuring the cultural dimensions in individuals and measuring personality traits at the cultural level), but he did not mention the possibility of looking at cultural values as potential moderators (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004). Gibson, Maznevski, and Kirkman (2009) suggested the possibility of culture serving as a moderator, and Farh, Hackett, and Liang (2007) examined the moderating effect of power distance and Chinese traditionalism on relationships between perceived organizational support and work outcomes. However, the possibility of culture as a moderator has not been examined regarding the relationship between personality and job performance.

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, it extends the existing research on the relationships between personality traits and job performance by explicitly considering cultural values as moderators. Second, by proposing that cultural values affect the relationship between personality traits and job performance, it provides a new perspective of appreciating the importance of cultural diversity. Third, in practical terms, it provides insights on the types of people that are most likely to perform well in a given cultural setting. This knowledge has great practical significance in that it can be applied by organizations to improve their selection processes, thereby contributing to a well-managed corporate environment. We believe it is a vital issue in this age of globalization and high mobility.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND SCOPE OF INQUIRY**

### **The Five-Factor Model of Personality**

If a consensual structure of personality traits is ever to emerge, the five-factor model is probably it (Judge & Ilies, 2002). The five-factor model of personality is not a result of an individual effort, but a collective outcome of independent endeavors of several researchers. Digman (1990) notes:

Thus more than 20 years ago, the domain of personality attributes had been successfully analyzed, not just once, but by five competent, independent investigators, all of whom came to the same general conclusion: that the domain could be adequately described by five superordinate constructs. (p. 420)

According to Digman (1990), fairly good agreement exists concerning the number of necessary dimensions, even though different terms have been used for each dimension.

The five factors in the model are (1) extraversion, which consists of sociability, dominance, ambition, positive emotionality and excitement seeking; (2) agreeableness, which is defined by cooperation, trustfulness, compliance and affability; (3) emotional stability, which is defined by the lack of anxiety, hostility, depression and personal insecurity; (4) conscientiousness, which is associated with dependability, achievement striving, and planfulness; and (5) openness to experience, which is defined by intellectance, creativity, unconventionality and broad-mindedness (Barrick et al., 2001).

The five-factor model of personality is generally believed to be applicable across different cultures and languages. McCrae and Costa (1997) assessed the cross-cultural generalizability of the five-factor model by comparing data from German, Portuguese, Hebrew, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese samples with the American factor structure and found that the American factor structure was closely reproduced. They argued that because the samples studied represented highly diverse cultures with languages from five distinct language families, these data strongly suggest that personality trait structure is universal (McCrae & Costa, 1997).

### **Hofstede's Cultural Value Framework**

Hofstede's cultural value framework originated from his book, *Culture's Consequences*, originally published in 1980. The book statistically analyzed approximately 117,000 questionnaires collected in 1967 and 1973 from employees working in forty IBM subsidiaries around the world, and came up with four value dimensions for representing differences among national cultures: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, and masculinity/femininity (Ailon, 2008). Long-term versus short-term orientation was added later (Hofstede, 2001). This new dimension was based on a study among students in 23 countries around the world, using a questionnaire designed by Chinese scholars (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004).

According to Hofstede and McCrae (2004), the definitions of the first four value dimensions are as follows: (1) *Power distance* means the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally; (2) *Uncertainty avoidance* indicates to what extent a culture programs its members to feel uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations; (3) *Individualism* versus its opposite, *collectivism*, refers to the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups; (4) *Masculinity* versus its opposite, *femininity*, refers to the distribution of emotional roles between the sexes. Regarding long-term versus short-term orientation, Hofstede and McCrae (2004) just state that values associated with long-term orientation are thrift and perseverance and values associated with short-term orientation are respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations, and protecting one's face.

## **Interaction between Personality and Culture**

As House, Shane, and Herold (1996) note, the most persuasive explanations for organizational behavior have been interactional ones that account for dispositional factors as well as situational factors. Culture is probably one of the most pervasive situational factors anyone can think of. Therefore, it is reasonable to think that personality and culture will have interactions that will affect job performance variables. Hofstede and McCrae (2004) suggest the way personality traits are typically expressed can be dramatically different across cultures. If their logic makes sense, it follows that it is not enough for researchers to examine personality traits without considering cultural influences placed on them. Moreover, different cultural dimensions may differently affect each facet of personality, making some facets more salient while making others less relevant. Therefore, there is an important need to examine the culture's impacts on the relationship between personality and job performance.

### **The Scope of Inquiry**

#### ***Predictor variables and moderators.***

Since there are five personality traits in the five-factor model and five cultural values in Hofstede's framework, there is a possibility of 25 interactions. However, we will focus on the interactions among three of the five personality traits (extraversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience) and three of the cultural values (collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance).

Conscientiousness and emotional stability are not included in the inquiry here because there is some evidence that they may not be affected much by situational factors. Meta-analyses on the relations between the five personality traits and job performance mostly find conscientiousness and emotional stability positively correlated with job performance in most jobs (Barrick et al., 2001). The fact that conscientiousness and emotional stability are positively related to overall performance across different jobs insinuates that the two traits are relatively immune to differences in work environment, and in extension, to cultural differences. In contrast, extraversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience have generally been regarded less influential than conscientiousness and emotional stability on the levels of overall job performance, but they are suggested to have bigger effects in certain occupations and situations (Barrick et al., 2001). Since these three personality traits are found sensitive to situational factors in general, we believe it is reasonable to expect that they will also have differential effects on job performance under different sets of cultural values.

We excluded masculinity-femininity and long-term versus short-term orientation from the study for largely two reasons. First, few, if any, reliable measures at the individual level exist for the dimensions. Masculinity-femininity and long-term versus short-term orientation have not been

widely used in past research. As Kirkman et al. (2006) note, most researchers focused exclusively on individualism-collectivism at the individual levels of analysis. Farh et al. (2007) noted the marginal reliability even for power distance measures, even though individual level power distance orientation had been studied in several previous studies. Since masculinity-femininity and long-term versus short-term have been measured less often than power distance at the individual level, the situation is likely to be worse for these dimensions.

Second, there are conceptual problems. The concept of masculinity-femininity was originally developed for countries (Hofstede, 1980). Measured at the individual level, it would inevitably reflect differences between male and female, which may bias the result. In the case of the more recently devised long-term versus short-term orientation, Hofstede and McCrae (2004) do not even discuss the dimension when they relate dimensions of culture to personality factors. Additionally, it has not been measured as widely as the other four dimensions even at the country level (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004).

### ***Dependent variables.***

We use the term *job performance* in a broad sense in this paper. Three different facets of job performance are considered: performance rating by supervisors, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). These are basically identical to the measures that were used by Farh et al. (2007) when they examined individual-level cultural values as moderators of perceived organizational support-employee outcome relationships.

## **THEORY AND PROPOSITIONS**

### **Moderation on the Extraversion-Job Performance Relationship**

Features of extraversion include sociability, dominance, ambition, positive emotionality, and excitement-seeking (Barrick et al., 2001). According to Barrick et al.'s (2001) meta-analysis, the relationship between extraversion and job performance could not be distinguished from zero based on the lower bound 90% credibility value. Barrick et al. (2001) initially expected that higher scores on extraversion would be related to higher training proficiency, teamwork, sales work performance, and managerial job performance, partly based on Barrick and Mount (1991). They found support for their expectations except for the relationship between extraversion and sales work performance (Barrick et al., 2001).

### ***Moderating effect of collectivism.***

Sociability is undoubtedly an important part of extraversion, but Lucas, Diener, Grob, Suh, and Shao (2000) argue that extraverts' sociability may be a by-product of reward sensitivity rather

than the core feature of the trait. In collectivistic cultures, in which feelings and emotions have less influence compared to norms and roles, social contact may not be seen as fun and rewarding (Lucas et al., 2000). This has implications on the relationship between extraversion and job performance. People with high extraversion are expected to excel in certain jobs mainly because of their interpersonal skills. When norms and roles, rather than feelings and emotions, dominate the society, the potency of their skills will be significantly weakened, leading to lower job performance.

Additionally, ambition, another feature of extraversion, may not be regarded favorably in collectivistic cultures. In collectivist societies, people are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004). Unquestioning loyalty sometimes means that one has to place the interest of in-groups before his or her own. The ambitious nature of people with high extraversion will be likely to clash with the unquestioning loyalty required and adhered to in collectivistic cultures.

Barrick and Mount's (1993) finding that the degree of autonomy on the job moderates the validity of extraversion also suggests that the relationship between extraversion and job performance will be negatively moderated by collectivism, because in cultures of high collectivism, the degree of autonomy is likely to be limited.

*Proposition 1a. Collectivism moderates the relationship between extraversion and job performance such that the relationship is weaker when collectivism is higher, rather than lower.*

### ***Moderating effect of power distance.***

Extraversion is expected to be positively related to performance in jobs with an important interpersonal component (Barrick et al., 2001). However, power distance limits the degree to which people with high extraversion can interact with those higher in rank than them. Since power distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations accept and expect that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004), people with high extraversion, namely people that are dominant and ambitious, will be likely to have difficulty assimilating themselves to cultures with high power distance. They will have to either have troubles with people higher in rank than them or pretend that they are not ambitious or dominant. This will lead to negative emotions, which further conflict with one of the features of extraversion: positive emotionality. All these conflicts that people with high extraversion experience under cultures with high power distance may lead to lowered levels of job performance outcomes.

*Proposition 1b. Power distance moderates the relationship between extraversion and job performance such that the relationship is weaker when power distance is higher, rather than lower.*

### ***Moderating effect of uncertainty avoidance.***

Societies with high uncertainty avoidance have lower tolerance for ambiguity (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004). Excitement-seeking, one facets of extraversion, is likely to be problematic under cultures with high uncertainty avoidance. Excitement-seeking is inherently related to ambiguity. There is no excitement if there is no ambiguity at all. To comply with the norms of cultures with high uncertainty avoidance, people with high extraversion will have to either self-regulate their excitement-seeking nature to a minimum not to create ambiguity that goes over societal tolerance levels or face the consequences. This tension is likely to impair job performance outcomes of people with high extraversion in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance.

*Proposition 1c. Uncertainty avoidance moderates the relationship between extraversion and job performance such that the relationship is weaker when power distance is higher, rather than lower.*

### **Moderation on the Agreeableness-Job Performance Relationship**

Features of agreeableness include cooperation, trustfulness, compliance, and affability (Barrick et al., 2001). According to Barrick et al.'s (2001) meta-analysis, the relationship between agreeableness and job performance could not be distinguished from zero based on the lower bound 90% credibility value. Barrick et al. (2001) initially expected agreeableness to have high predictive validity in jobs that involve considerable interpersonal interaction. In the study, agreeableness was found to predict teamwork (Barrick et al., 2001).

### ***Moderating effect of collectivism.***

Cultural situations with cohesive in-groups and required unquestioning loyalty will likely be relatively favorable for people with high agreeableness, since they are more inclined to cooperate, trust, and comply with existing social structures. In-group cohesiveness will likely promote and reward agreeableness since disagreements will be regarded as factors that threaten the cohesiveness. Furthermore, in contrast to people with high extraversion, placing the interest of in-groups before their own will be natural for these people. Therefore, their affable nature will likely contribute more toward their job, enhancing the performance rating. Barrick and Mount's (1993) finding that the degree of autonomy on the job moderates the validity of agreeableness also supports this conclusion because in cultures of high collectivism, the degree of autonomy is likely to be limited.

*Proposition 2a. Collectivism moderates the relationship between agreeableness and job performance such that the relationship is stronger when collectiveness is higher, rather than lower.*

### ***Moderating effect of power distance.***

People with high agreeableness will not have much trouble in high power distance situations. It will be easier for them to accept and expect that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004). In addition, in high power distance cultures, leaders are likely to favor those subordinates with high agreeableness. This will lead to positive leader-member relationships. According to Ilies, Nahrgang, and Morgeson (2007), a high-quality leader-member exchange (LMX) relationship not only predicted higher levels of performance, but also organizational citizenship behaviors. Thus, it is likely that high power distance will positively moderate the relationship between agreeableness and job performance.

*Proposition 2b. Power distance moderates the relationship between agreeableness and job performance such that the relationship is stronger when power distance is higher, rather than lower.*

### ***Moderating effect of uncertainty avoidance.***

Uncertainty-avoiding cultures try to minimize the possibility of unusual situations by strict laws and rules, by safety and security measures, and by a belief in absolute truth (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004). Thus, compliance, one of the facets of agreeableness becomes highly salient in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance. Since the tendency to comply is in their nature, people with high agreeableness score will not go through much tension when they are faced with myriads of rules and regulations to follow. This will enable them to focus on their job without distraction, leading them to achieve relatively more in high uncertainty avoidance cultures.

*Proposition 2c. Uncertainty avoidance moderates the relationship between agreeableness and job performance such that the relationship is stronger when uncertainty avoidance is higher, rather than lower.*

## **Moderation on the Openness to Experience-Job Performance Relationship**

Features of openness to experience include intellectance, creativity, unconventionality, and broad-mindedness (Barrick et al., 2001). According to Barrick et al.'s (2001) meta-analysis, the relationship between openness to experience and job performance could not be distinguished from zero based on the lower bound 90% credibility value. Barrick et al. (2001) found moderate effects of openness to experience for training proficiency.

### ***Moderating effect of collectivism.***

Unquestioning loyalty that is associated with collectivism does not go well with unconventionality and creativity inherent in people with high openness to experience. People with high openness to experience will not feel comfortable in situations in which they cannot question the status quo and seek for solutions that open new opportunities for them. Therefore, their job performance is likely to be impaired by high collectivism.

*Proposition 3a. Collectivism moderates the relationship between openness to experience and job performance such that the relationship is weaker when collectiveness is higher, rather than lower.*

### ***Moderating effect of power distance.***

Unconventionality and creativity also do not go well with power distance, since power distance requires less powerful members of organizations to accept the unequal distribution of power. Therefore, high openness to experience is a threat rather than a welcome trait in cultures of high power distance. Additionally, according to Burke and Witt (2002), the relationship between openness to experience job performance is moderated by extraversion. As explained earlier, the role of extraversion gets limited in cultures of high power distance. Under a high power distance situation, employees will have fewer opportunities to manifest their high openness to experience. Therefore its influence on job performance will be negatively moderated by power distance.

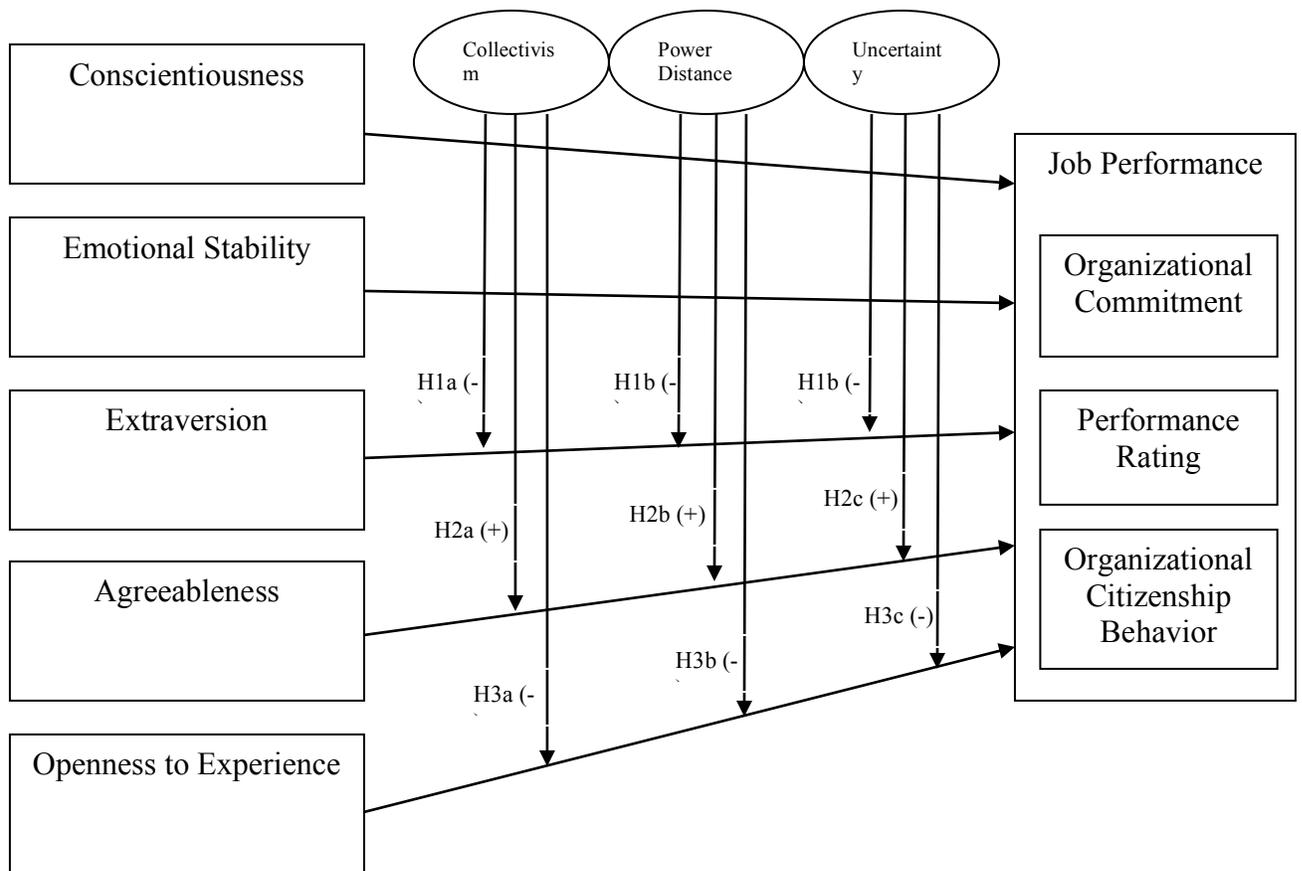
*Proposition 3b. Power distance moderates the relationship between openness to experience and job performance such that the relationship is weaker when power distance is higher, rather than lower.*

### ***Moderating effect of uncertainty avoidance.***

For people with high openness to experience, unstructured situations are exactly where they can thrive. However, in high uncertainty avoidance cultures, unstructured situations are avoided because of their low tolerance for ambiguity. People with high openness to experience will have a hard time utilizing their intellectual, curious, and imaginative side in their work settings under the pressure of uncertainty avoidance.

*Proposition 3c. Uncertainty avoidance moderates the relationship between openness to experience and job performance such that the relationship is weaker when uncertainty avoidance is higher, rather than lower.*

Figure 1 graphically summarizes the theoretical model.



**Figure 1: Theoretical Model**

## DISCUSSION

This paper proposes a new model explaining the potential moderating effects of culture on the relationship between personality and job performance based on the dominant frameworks on personality and cultural value dimensions, namely the five factor model of personality and Hofstede's cultural value dimensions. The model focuses on the three personality traits that have been deemed to be sensitive to situational factors—extraversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience—and the three cultural dimensions that are expected to be influential on the personality-performance relationship—collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, and theoretically examined potential interactions among them. The model predicts that the relationship between extraversion and job performance and the relationship between openness to experience and job performance will be negatively moderated by the three cultural dimensions, whereas the relationship between agreeableness and job performance will be positively moderated by them.

This model is unique in that it is the first model that attempts to explain the moderating effects of cultural value dimensions on the relationship between personality and job performance. Culture is an informal but pervasive institution. Therefore, few, if any, variables are immune from its impact. Hofstede and McCrae (2004) have noted that cultural values affect national variance in personality. This national variance, in turn, is likely to reinforce cultural values even further. It is quite surprising then, that the moderating effect of culture on the relationship between personality and job performance has not been under scrutiny, since tension is inevitable when a person's personality and the cultural environment surrounding the person do not match. This tension will be likely to result in lowered levels of job performance. Since personality and culture are both relatively persistent over time, the problem cannot be easily solved.

This research is significant for three reasons. First, this model has great theoretical relevance in that it provides insight into the nuances of the relationship between the five-factor model of personality and job performance. Even though the three personality traits—extraversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience—that this paper focused on have not been found significant in predicting job performance in previous meta-analyses, considering cultural dimensions as moderators may reveal previously concealed relationships between personality and job performance. Future research should determine whether a relationship between these traits and job performance exists once the moderating effects of culture have been taken into consideration.

Second, it provides a new perspective on the importance of cultural diversity for multinational enterprises. Although the five-factor model of personality has been shown to be applicable across cultures, the relationship between specific Big Five traits and job performance is not necessarily the same across cultures. In fact, it would seem more likely that the relationship would depend upon the fit between the employee's personality traits and the broader societal culture where the business operates. This study examines nuances in the relationship between personality and performance, which have not been previously understood.

Third, and most important from a practical standpoint, the results of this study can be used by multinational enterprises to improve their selection processes. Most human resource

professionals would agree that identifying and selecting employees who are a cultural fit is critical for effective employee selection. However, ensuring a cultural fit can be especially challenging for multinational enterprises in situations where the job applicants come from different countries, with different cultural values. If the model presented in this paper is empirically supported, then multinational enterprises will be able to improve their employee selection and placement processes by ensuring that the applicant's personality fits the national culture of the country to where they are applying. The theory offers very specific predictions, which if correct, will result in better selection decisions when properly applied.

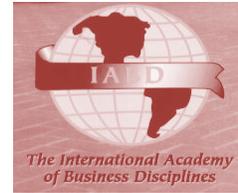
Moreover, one of the major assets of this research is its potential to influence the bottom line. As discussed herein, understanding the elemental traits that best fit with the societal culture will allow multinational enterprises to make fewer costly hiring mistakes. Employees who mesh with the broader societal culture, can serve to invigorate a company, perhaps ultimately leading to improved products and services a competitive edge, and an improved financial outlook.

Although this paper dealt with culture on a national level, future research could determine whether this model could be extended to organizations within the same culture. For example, the organizational cultures of companies such as Google and Zappos are different from that of Intel or IBM. It would only make sense that models of the relationship between scores on these Five Factor traits and performance should take the moderating effect of culture into consideration. In conclusion, this has model has theoretical, cultural, and human resources relevance and therefore warrants further investigation.

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