



Conscientiousness: A Key Predictor of Success

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When you need something done – and done right - you probably know which member of your team to call on. Most business leaders have someone they can tap for help at a moment's notice – their most conscientious employee.

What exactly is “conscientiousness?” Conscientiousness is defined as “the state of being thorough, careful, or vigilant.” It includes tendencies that favor self-discipline, carefulness, and thoroughness. People who are conscientious display highly developed degrees of organization and industriousness.

Organizational research has found that conscientious people are the most likely to succeed in their careers. Why? They make things happen! They keep teams on track and pay attention to little details that can spell the difference between success and failure for any particular project or endeavor.

Conscientiousness is the one personality trait that consistently leads to success.

How does having conscientious employees benefit your organization?

In the book, *Average Is Over*, author Tyler Cowen states, “Team production makes the quality of ‘conscientiousness’ a more important quality in [employees.] Managers need workers who are reliable. If you have a team of five, one unreliable worker is wrecking the work of four others. If you have a team of 25, one unreliable worker can negate the work effects of 24 others.”

Additional benefits include:

1. **Performance ratings.** Highly conscientious workers tend to receive higher performance ratings. They earn substantially higher income and have higher job satisfaction.¹
2. **Reduced absenteeism/healthier workforce.** Conscientious people live longer than the average population. They are sick less frequently, are less stressed, smoke and drink less, have fewer strokes, lower blood pressure, and a lower incidence of Alzheimer's disease.
3. **Less likely to participate in counterproductive work behaviors.** Conscientious people organize their lives and are extremely industrious at work. Disorganized, un-conscientious workers typically waste time, while conscientious people are thorough and efficient. They require lower levels of supervision, work autonomously, and get the job done correctly the first time.
4. **More ethical workforce.** Conscientious people are more honest and ethical at work. And they commit fewer crimes than the general population.
5. **Punctual workforce.** Conscientious employees arrive at work on time and consistently meet deadlines.
6. **Stronger ability to achieve corporate goals.** Conscientious employees excel at setting goals and persisting until they are achieved.
7. **Ability to plan for success and failure.** If a conscientious person encounters a setback, they redouble their efforts. When they confront a failure, they have a plan on how to deal with it.
8. **Ability to influence and lead.** A recent University of Cambridge² study indicates that conscientiousness is the determining factor in driving influence on Twitter. Conscientious people think like a leader.

According to Brent Roberts, professor of psychology at the University of Illinois and the leading researcher on conscientiousness, "Highly conscientious employees do a series of things better than the rest of us."

Conscientious people are assets to almost every team and essential at all levels of a firm. For example, think of a customer service representative who is meticulous, dependable, calm, and kind after a customer service mix-up. Or a business development specialist who is more likely to set and commit to goals, leading to higher sales growth.

How should you support a conscientious employee?

1. **Keep track of their projects.** Ensure that you are not overwhelming them with extra tasks and assignments just because you know they will take care of them.

¹ 2009 study by the National Institute of Mental Health, Kohn, Melvin L., and Carmi Schooler. 1969. "Class, Occupation and Orientation." American Sociological Review 34 (October): 659-78.

² <http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/~dq209/publications/quercia11twitter.pdf>

2. **Provide them with an organized work environment.** Conscientious people need to know that they are meeting your expectations. They prefer to have precise job descriptions. And they want expectations and goals to be spelled out. They work best in an environment where tasks and projects can be measured and followed through to completion. They like to have a process and a consistent routine to follow.
3. **Reward them.** Give them time and space to work on projects and tasks. That autonomy and appreciation will strengthen their bond to you and your firm. It will also give you more opportunities to determine where they can make the greatest contribution to your organization.
4. **Never criticize a conscientious employee.** Be patient, persistent, and diplomatic when disagreeing with them. Because they take great pride in being accurate and correct, criticism deflates them. Motivate them, instead, with well-informed research. Show them the logic of your position supported by specific facts. Give them clear parameters and instructions for working on and completing projects.
5. **Demonstrate goal-focused leadership.** Provide cues to your employees to shape their expectations about work behavior. Conscientious employees will rapidly pick up on your conscientious-valued cues. By demonstrating goal-focused leadership, the conscientious employee will express their natural conscientious personality tendencies...especially when you model achievement, diligence, planning, persistence, and other related behaviors.

How does conscientiousness make a good leader?

Conscientiousness predicts success for managers and supervisors. Leaders, who pair conscientiousness with creativity, are more likely to lead organizations that survive over time.³ They are more honest and ethical in their behavior, inspiring others not just through words but through consistent actions. They build their organization based on trust – both with employees and with clients. And create relationships that make success attainable for the entire team.

Conscientious leaders display strategic vision and are organized, thoughtful and forward-thinking. They encourage their people to find creative solutions, make confident decisions, and think about the big picture – day in and day out.

In Search of Conscientious Employees

From entry level to top leadership roles, business leaders place high value on conscientious employees. Is this the number one trait you look for in the hiring process?

Considering the above points, here are recommendations for ascertaining if a prospective employee is conscientious:

³ The Big Five and venture survival: Is there a linkage? *Journal of Business Venturing*, Volume 19, Issue 4, July 2004, Pages 465-483

- Ask questions to determine how organized and responsible he or she is.
- Find out how and if they plan ahead.
- Notice if they ask for a job description. Conscientious people like to have their job, expectations, and goals laid out in advance.
- Determine how they react in the face of challenges – conscientious people always work hard and control their impulses.
- Ask what goals they've recently set and what their plans are for the future so that you can ensure that their goals are consistent with that of your firm. Conscientious people set goals and work toward them until they are achieved.
- See how punctual they are – conscientious people arrive on time and meet deadlines.
- Ask how they upheld the organization's standards in a previous job. Conscientious employees have high levels of integrity and stay far away from trouble.
- Listen carefully to hear if they criticize their previous job or employer. Conscientious people deal with issues and don't complain.
- Listen for cursing and temper. Conscientious people rarely swear around others or make sexual innuendos. They tend to be even-tempered.
- Ask about their passions and hobbies. Conscientious people avoid extremely risky behaviors. Research has also shown that they are more interested in music than the average population.
- Finally, ascertain how thoughtful they are toward others. Conscientious people are kind and caring toward their colleagues.

In your quest for the most productive organization, it's also important that you develop your "conscientious muscle." Fortunately, conscientiousness is the one personality trait that increases as you age.

How Conscientious Are You?

Dr. Arthur Poropat, Griffith University's School of Applied Psychology, suggests testing your own level of conscientiousness. The following quiz will give you an idea of where you fall on the conscientiousness scale. Each question identifies one aspect of conscientiousness and how it shows up in your day-to-day behavior. Give yourself one point for each statement that describes you. Make sure you answer honestly.

I am extremely organized. Yes ____ No ____

I am very responsible. Yes ____ No ____

I plan ahead. Yes ____ No ____

When challenged, I work extra hard. Yes ____ No ____

I am consistently able to control my impulses. Yes ____ No ____

I am punctual. Yes ____ No ____

I do thorough work. Yes ____ No ____

I am thoughtful toward my colleagues. Yes ____ No ____

I am good at goal-setting. Yes ____ No ____

I follow through on goals and switch to more attainable ones rather than giving up in the face of obstacles. Yes ____ No ____

I like to follow rules and norms. Yes ____ No ____

Rating your conscientiousness factor:

1–4: You're on the low end of the conscientiousness spectrum. With focus and diligence in moving each "No" to a "Yes," you will increase your success factor.

5–8: You're in the middle range, which means you contain the seeds of conscientiousness. It will take just a small effort to move up the scale and shift into a high-success mode.

9–11: You are very conscientious and poised to achieve success.

How to Improve Your Conscientiousness

If your test shows that your conscientiousness is not at the level you desire, try building your conscientious muscle by:

1. **Willpower.** Practicing small acts of will-power every day will build self-control capabilities and improve other areas of your life.
2. **Making them a habit.** When you automate conscientious traits and don't have to think about them, they will become a natural habit.
3. **Planning.** Without a clear plan, you're more likely to revert to impulsive, unfocused behaviors.
4. **Focus on specifics.** Details are important to conscientious people. Take the appropriate actions to be more punctual and organized. Pre-commit to work thoroughly and focus on the completion of tasks.
5. **Action Item.** Identify and implement one visible action to convey your passion for the job, your team, your co-workers, and your clients.
6. **Develop and maintain good relationships.** Conscientious people are not selfish. They get along with others and override impulses that are based on short-term interests.
7. **Volunteer for extra work** or special projects to help your firm meet its objectives.
8. **Model** the conscientious behavior you desire by being available and helpful to your team.

Research shows that conscientiousness is a key predictor of success, health, and happiness. Isn't it time for you to reap these benefits.

About the Author

Scott Addis, CPCU, CRA, CBWA is the CEO of Beyond Insurance and is recognized as an industry leader having been named a Philadelphia finalist for *Inc. Magazine's* "Entrepreneur of the Year" award as well as one of the "25 Most Innovative Agents in America." Beyond Insurance is a consulting firm that offers leadership training, cultural transformation, and talent and tactical development for enlightened professionals who are looking to take their practice to the next level. Since 2007, the proven and repeatable processes of Beyond Insurance have transformed individuals and organizations as measured by enhanced organic growth, productivity, profitability, and value in the marketplace.