

Challenges and Concerns with International Personality Assessments

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**Challenges and Concerns with
International Personality Assessments**
– Need of Personality Instruments for
entry-level hiring in India

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Introduction

Personality inventories and assessments are used all over the world for the purpose of employee recruitment, organizational development and promotions. They provide objective and standardized inputs, which can be used together candidate biodata, performance with in the company, 360 degree feedback, etc. to make effective decisions.

Many retail organizations in the USA use inventories based on the five-factor model (*Autor, et.al., 2008*) for selecting frontline staff in stores. Personality instruments are widely used for selection of sales personnel as well. Several meta-analysis (*Barrick, Mount, 1991*) show that the traits of Extraversion and Conscientiousness strongly correlate to on-job sales performance. Recent evidence shows that Agreeableness is negatively correlated with sales performance in some cases. Personality tests are also used within the company for employee counselling and mid-management promotions, where use of forced-choice inventories has been common.

Many Internationally constructed inventories are available in the market. Some of these such as NEO-PI-R, 16PF MBTI, etc. have been constructed in universities whereas others such as GALLOP, OPQ32, etc. are commercially developed. A lot of time and effort has gone in to developing and validating these inventories.

Personality Assessment in India: The need

There is a huge need for personality inventories to recruit entry-level¹ personnel in India and facilitate their first promotion.

There has been tremendous requirement of entry-level sales and customer relationship personnel in banking, finance and insurance sector. The retail sector is getting organized and sees a large requirement of frontline staffs in stores. On the other hand, there are businesses targeting the rural markets such as those in agriculture and microfinance, which require customer-interaction personnel in big numbers.

Personality is an important discriminator for job-success in such profiles. Since employees in these profiles are part of the 'profit center' in the company and their performance directly influences the top line for the company. For scaling up the organization efficiently, an objective personality instrument can bring the much-needed consistency and quality-assurance in the hiring process.

Promotion within 1-2 years of joining is common in many of these job profiles. In sales roles in the insurance sector, on average two promotions happen within the

¹ By entry-level, we mean candidates who are applying for their first job.

Personality in an important factor for job success in sales, operations and customer interaction profiles, hence directly influencing the top line of the organization.

Not only is the understanding of English an issue in imported personality tests but also the context can be entirely wrong. For e.g. no one is India wants to be a construction worker or live in the woods.

first three years of joining. Microfinance institutions also see very quick promotions. Promotions serve as a mechanism for incentivizing good performance and providing a steep growth path for high performers.

The first factor for deciding promotions is objective sales performance, which is a short-window measure. Additionally, more fundamental measures with regard to the product-knowledge and personality of the candidate are required to predict long term success of the candidate.

Given the current Indian market scenario, personality instruments will become a necessity for the industry in the upcoming days.

Non-native (Non-Indian) Solutions

The tremendous need of personality instruments in the industry has led Indian corporates to use non-native personality inventories developed outside India. The rationale is the global acceptance of these inventories, the effort gone into their construction and some indication of their validity in India.

Though this is driven by right intent, a closer look at these inventories brings out many obvious issues with using them in their current form in the Indian context.

First and foremost, the **English of these inventories is very difficult for the entry-level applicant to understand.**

Consider that a commercially available

inventory asks the candidate to choose between either being *empathetic* or *sympathetic*. Unfortunately, most applicants do not know the meaning of words like *empathetic* and cannot differentiate it from *sympathetic*. Another inventory has a question (to the effect of) whether the candidate often *feels light-hearted*. Again, such a phrase is not generally used in India and is hard to understand for applicants. Many such items are there in most non-native inventories. They introduce noise in the scale, decrease its reliability and effectiveness and demotivate the applicant.

Secondly, **the context of many questions does not make sense.** One academically constructed inventory popularly used in India asks the question whether the candidate would like to have a vacation in Las Vegas. The average Indian does not what it means to have a vacation in Las Vegas. Inventories ask questions about applicants' interest in art galleries, museums, ballets, etc. which again resonate to a part of the urban population, but are completely out-of-context in larger part of the country.

Another problem **is that inventories are designed to evaluate people who have worked before.** They would ask the candidate's reaction if their boss asks them to do a particular task or their colleague behaves them in a certain way. Entry-level candidates who form the

largest chunk of the workforce have never faced such a situation. They try to imagine such a situation and give a hypothetical answer. Such questions are not appropriately answered since the candidate does not know his/her own behavior in such situations. It is a guess, make the assessment inaccurate.

The third problem is **cultural differences in India vis-à-vis that in the West**. For instance, the usage of 'sorry' and 'thank you' are way higher in the West as compared to India. Not saying 'sorry' or 'thank you' does not mean Indians are not polite, but that politeness is expressed differently here. Consider that an inventory asks questions (to the effect of) as to whether the person will like to be a construction worker or if he/she would like to live in the woods. The cultural and socio-economic perceptions of these things are very different in India. These cultural differences not only change the norms (which would have been acceptable), but change the item-to-trait correlation. This requires that the inventory is constructed with the Indian cultural sensibilities in mind and the item-to-trait correlation be empirically determined (using techniques such as factor analysis) on an Indian sample.

The fourth problem is the **abuse of personality inventories for purposes they are not meant for**. Most available inventories have not been developed or validated for recruitment purposes. They

are primarily for self-diagnostic and counseling purposes. For instance, MBTI is not recommended for employee selection purposes. In fact, its job-performance validity is as low as 0.12, whereas the average validity of personality instruments is 0.29. These inventories are also easy to fake under job-application conditions, since they assume honest test-takers. It is futile to use such instruments for recruitment.

To summarize, the problems with using non-native inventories are numerous. They include:

- a. Difficult to understand English
- b. Out of context for Indian population
- c. Out of context for entry-level candidates
- d. Non-inclusion of cultural differences
- e. Not for the purpose of recruitment with little validation

These issues clearly show that non-native inventories are inappropriate to use in their current avatar for entry-level talent acquisition. The issues get exacerbated in pan-India hiring where the need for multi-lingual instruments is largely felt. Such needs are not addressed by any inventories as of now.

We now discuss a preliminary case study, where the reliability of a non-native inventory was studied in Indian scenario.

Typical foreign inventories are for self diagnostics, which render them useless for recruitment or promotions. They expect the candidate to be completely honest!!!

Conclusion

There is a large requirement of objective personality inventories in India for entry-level recruitment and promotions. However, using non-native personality inventories directly is not the solution. Such inventories may fail miserably due to multiple reasons discussed.

There is a strong requirement of inventories built with the Indian context in mind with questions simple-enough for the average Indian to understand. There is a requirement to sample these inventories

in India, re-do scale-analysis and validate their psychometric properties on an Indian sample.

There is also a need for Indian-language personality inventories for the non English market, which is growing extensively.

As a final word, these inventories have to be validated with on-job-performance in various sectors, which remains the holy-grail for recruitment assessment emancipation!

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