

# Selecting for Creativity

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Creativity is the ability to come up with novel yet valuable ideas and solutions to organizational needs and problems. It is an important outcome for many organizations, particularly those competing on the basis of an innovation strategy. Organizations can and do take many actions to foster creativity: selecting people for their creative orientation, setting performance goals for innovation, rewarding creativity, creating a climate for creativity, etc. The focus of this paper is on the first of these interventions, selecting for creativity.

If one thinks about creativity as an outcome, what are the individual characteristics that are related to it? Fortunately, there is a lot of research that has focused on identifying individual differences that are part of a “creative persona,” and some of the findings are surprising. For example, general mental ability (“g”) has long been assumed to be an important characteristic associated with creativity. The research, however, suggests that “g” has if anything a small positive relationship with creativity. In other words, smart people might be a little more creative, but not by much. A much more important characteristic is that of “divergent thinking,” or the ability to generate many alternative solutions to a problem. Particular success in predicting creativity has come from using tests of divergent thinking that are tailored to something job-related (e.g., developing marketing ideas) and scored for both the quality and quantity of ideas.

In addition to the aforementioned cognitive abilities, there are numerous personality characteristics, or individual differences, that can be used to select for creativity. For example, openness to experience is related to creativity. People scoring high on this trait tend to be curious, imaginative and non-conformist, and seek out novelty in their environments. Another individual difference that is related to creativity is associated with risk. A risky versus risk-averse processing style seems to be related to triggering one’s memory for more novel responses. Additionally, preference for risk results in individuals searching for more strategies, and as a consequence they generate more ideas.

Conscientiousness has an interesting relationship with creativity. People who are higher in achievement orientation (a component of conscientiousness) are more creative than those who are lower. The other side of conscientiousness, deliberation, has had an inconsistent relationship with creativity ranging from nonexistent to negative. In other words, while high achievers do tend to be slightly more creative, those who follow the rules are often less so. Unfortunately, because many measure only conscientiousness, and not its components, these conflicting relationships are often unclear.

Another component of personality that has been predictive of creativity is creative self-efficacy. Creative self-efficacy, or the perception of oneself as creative, predicts creativity above and beyond job self-efficacy. These results suggest that by simply asking individuals about their beliefs in their ability to be creative may result in identifying individuals who may perform more creatively than those individuals who do not perceive themselves as creative.

Finally, the context in which creativity will be exercised should be considered in that people can be identified and selected for their “fit” with the prevailing environment. For example, individuals who work on a new product development project in an area where the company has no experience may need to have a very strong tolerance for ambiguity. Other efforts, such as quality improvement within an organization will require individuals who have a better sense of problem identification in order to be successful. Another caveat to keep in mind is whether or not the actual creative process will occur individually or within groups. If the nature of the creative process occurs in groups, there are additional facets to consider. Specifically, successful creativity in group work relies heavily on the sharing of information, the willingness to communicate divergent opinions from the group, and the ability to successfully integrate different viewpoints. Some research has found that extraversion predicts successful group output, both at the individual and group levels, so the addition of extraversion to the assessment may be beneficial.

So far, the focus has been on identifying the attributes organizations should select to facilitate creativity. How to measure these attributes is another aspect that should be examined. Some of these attributes lend themselves well to the traditional "paper-pencil" method, where a stem is presented along with multiple response options. The advantages of using closed-ended assessment methods are that they can be administered in a variety of formats (e.g., paper-pencil, web, computer-based, etc.), machine scored quickly and accurately, and saved in a database for later use (e.g., search, research, etc.). Other creativity-related traits, however, require more open-ended measurement methods, where the applicant does not select from a list of options but expresses him/herself more freely. Problem definition, for example, requires individuals to identify the aspects of the problem scenario. An individual's ability to define the situation can be assessed through methods such as a structured interview or a problem solving exercise. Although these methods allow for a much greater range in responses, they do require trained assessors to interpret and score the assessment output. Because open-ended assessment is less convenient and typically more expensive, many organizations use a multiple hurdle approach. Only applicants scoring in the successful range on the closed-ended assessments (e.g., web-based measures of general mental ability and personality) are invited to complete the open-ended components (e.g., an exercise and structured interview).

There hasn't been an exhaustive list of individual attributes that we can reference when we decide that we want to hire creative employees or select current employees to participate in creative ventures. The interest in creativity, however, has resulted in more research efforts focusing on contributions to workplace creative outcomes. We do know, however, that identifying employees who believe that they can be creative, and who would like to develop their creativity, often results in these employees unleashing their innovative instincts and being more creative. ■

### About the Author

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Anne E. Herman, Ph.D., serves as a research consultant for the Kenexa Research Institute. Dr. Herman worked previously for two years as a research consultant for Kenexa's survey team. She has extensive consulting experience in performance management, organizational assessment and change, creativity and innovation, employee selection and promotion, organizational strategy, program evaluation and statistical methodology. Her research interests include problem solving and decision making, creativity and innovation, leadership, organizational motivation, survey design and program effectiveness. Dr. Herman has spoken at many conferences and her research has appeared in several publications. She has taught graduate and undergraduate courses in leadership, business strategy, organizational behavior and behavioral statistics.

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