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Are Salespeople Born or Made?

James M. Loveland, PhD, John W. Lounsbury, PhD, Soo-Hee Park, PhD, and Donald A. Jackson, PhD

When it comes to the art of selling, there are two sharply opposed views: some view salespeople as individuals who are born with the "right" attributes, who can easily sell different products and move from firm to firm with little difficulty, no matter what is being sold. Others look at sales as a list of tasks that can be practiced and learned, and so they believe that there is no such thing as "the right people" outside of their ability to understand the customer and practice the techniques.

These philosophies have important consequences for managers, as selection, training, retention, and career development programs are all deeply influenced by whether an organization takes more of a "born" or "made" perspective of salespeople. For example, firms that believe that selling is simply a matter of learning, that great salespeople can be "made" through the right reward and training programs, utilize optimism and coping-skills training to improve performance and keep employees from becoming unhappy with their jobs. Other firms simply attempt to identify and hire those with the right personality characteristics, and allow those who don't "fit" with the work to leave. Given the consistently high variability in performance and the high turnover rates for salespeople, the debate of fit versus training has very high stakes.

One way that we can assess how well people fit in their profession is to measure their job and career satisfaction. These measures tend to be strong indicators of how well people do on the job and about how positive the feedback they are getting from their work is. In short, people enjoy doing work they are good at, and for which they receive positive feedback--even if they dislike a particular job, people tend to stick with careers that they enjoy.

Personality is another way that we can assess fit-- looking at what personality traits are related to job success, be it performance or satisfaction, helps us infer what job characteristics are stressful and who is able to deal with those problems. For example, we know that salespeople have to face a lot of rejection, and optimistic salespeople who believe that they can get better at selling more easily adapt to these stressors (Dixon and Schertzer 2005). We also know that certain personality characteristics have a strong biological basis, and that these traits can cause levels of arousal, stress, and anxiety at a neural level, even though the individual might not notice the change overtly. For example, individuals who are lower in emotional stability produce more cortisol (a stress hormone) than their more emotionally stable counterparts when having to maintain calm.
while under stress (Brown, Tomarken, Orth, Loosen, Kalin, and Davidson 1996). Taken together, one starts to wonder the extent to which personality plays a role in workplace outcomes, and what extent biologically-based personality traits influence these outcomes relative to non-biologically based traits.

To address these questions, we conducted a latent profile analysis with several personality traits across 299 salespeople. Our results identified two distinct profile groups. With the outcome variables of job and career satisfaction, these groups were similar along trainable attributes such as teamwork, work drive, and customer service orientation; however, they differed substantially along the biologically-based traits of optimism, emotional stability, and extraversion. Thus, we contend that while certain aspects of sales can be learned, biologically-based traits are crucial to intrinsic career success and that people who do not exhibit "fit" with the sales profession do so along traits that are biologically-based.

**What It All Means**

Although it seems counter-intuitive, it is in career fields where people have more control over their work-related behavior that personality will matter more. For a profession such as real-estate sales, where individuals have considerable autonomy in how they go about performing their work, those salespeople who lack the disposition, who lack the biologically-based traits essential to sales, will be the least satisfied with the sales profession. This does not necessarily mean that they cannot do well for some time, but it does mean that eventually they are going to be the least satisfied people within their organizations, and much of their coping ability is going to be devoted to dealing with aspects of the job that are simply not problematic for everyone else. Sadly, they will not seem different in terms of how long they work, in how important they believe the customer to be, or how well they work in a team-oriented environment. Instead, they will be different in that even the rewards of success, such as recognition and extrinsic rewards of selling will tend to make them even less-satisfied with their jobs and their careers.

**Recommended Reading**


**References**


**About the Authors**

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Dr. Loveland’s research centers on the firm-level, strategic implications of individual differences. He has also worked as Research Director for a legal consulting firm, as a selection consultant, and as a project leader for a national testing company. His work has appeared in journals such as *Journal of Community Psychology, Industrial Marketing Management, Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, and *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, among others. While at Xavier University, he has taught courses in Marketing Management, Luxury Marketing, and Marketing Research at the undergraduate and MBA levels. He has also taught courses in Personnel Selection, Training & Development, Organizational Development, and Job Analysis while working as an Industrial/Organizational Psychology professor at Louisiana Tech.

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Dr. Lounsbury is Vice President, eCareerfit.com, and President of Resource Associates, Inc. He has written numerous articles on personality traits, career development, scale validation, life and career satisfaction, and work-nonwork relationships, and has served on over 100 doctoral dissertation committees. His work has appeared in journals such as *Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Career Development, Journal of Career Assessment, and Personality and Individual Differences*, among others.

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Dr. Park’s work centered on assessing the preparedness of students for the workforce.

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Dr. Jackson is travelling the world and enjoying a well-deserved retirement. Prior to this, he specialized in sales, with numerous publications in many journals, including *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, Business Horizons*, and *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, among others.