

Using Five Factors to Measure Personality

The Five Factor Model (also known as the Big Five) is a highly regarded psychological theory. The model sums up all of human personality into five broad, yet distinct traits: Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Neuroticism, Openness, and Agreeableness. The groundwork for the Big Five was laid in the 1950s by psychologist Raymond Cattell, who statistically identified 16 Primary Factors of personality. Cattell found that those factors could be further grouped into five broader dimensions, known as the Global Factors. Each of the Global Factors corresponds closely with the Big Five personality factors later described by other researchers.

Cattell's research led to the creation of the 16pf® Questionnaire, a comprehensive measure of personality known for its value in employee selection and development. Historically, HR practitioners have used the five Global Factors as a conceptual framework for studying the meaning and function of the more detailed 16 Primary Factor scores. However, for some 16pf Questionnaire applications, using the five Global Factors alone may be informative enough.



Figure 1

- **The Global Factors Work for Everyone**

For practitioners with limited exposure to the 16pf assessment, or psychological assessments in general, it may seem challenging to fully understand and interpret the meaning behind the more detailed 16 Primary Factors. The Global Factors, on the other hand, are simple, concise, and highly geared toward a business-savvy (as opposed to psychometric-savvy) audience. In fact, the 16pf Global Factors report replaces Cattell's original names for the five factors with practical names that are useful in an everyday work setting. For instance, "Independence" has the more obvious title than "Influence and Collaboration" (see figure 1). These Global

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Factors are easy for HR practitioners to understand, and may be a suitable alternative for less thoroughly-trained users.

- **When Are Five Factors Right for Selection?**

When you need fast results – Interpreting all 16 Primary Factors for every job applicant can become time consuming, especially when you are administering the 16pf assessment to a large applicant pool. If decision time is absolutely critical, interpreting only the Global Factors may allow a more efficient screening process.

When job-relatedness can be demonstrated – The Global Factors offer less in-depth insights into the complexity of human personality than the 16 Primary Factors. However, in some situations the key job performance requirements can be validated using only high or low scores on these five factors. For example, when customer service roles require a great degree of social interaction, it may be wise to filter out applicants with low scores on the Relating to Others dimension. If one or more Global Factor scores can predict performance for a particular job or job family, then this report may be a suitable alternative.

When the risks are relatively low – While the 16pf Global Factors are scientifically sound and empirically validated measures, they offer less detailed and predictive insight into personality than the Primary Factors. In situations where the risks of a bad hire are less dire than others, for instance, in an entry-level position, the tradeoff between efficiency and detail may be fine. If hiring the wrong person for a job would be disastrous for an organization, then a deeper look at personality may be necessary. Hiring the wrong executive, for example, could have much greater consequences. For relatively low-risk hiring situations, the cost-benefit ratio of only measuring the Global Factors, which are still strong predictors of performance, may outweigh using all 16 Primary Factors.

As a supplement to other assessments – The Global Factors are a higher-order personality measure and are quite broad. While users can glean valuable information from them, we suggest pairing the 16pf tool with other skill or aptitude tests to obtain a more robust insight into an applicant's job potential.

- **When Are Five Factors Useful for Development?**

Individual and Leader Development – The Global Factors provide a conceptual blueprint to guide developmental feedback conversations. In particular, the development portion of the 16pf Comprehensive Insights Report provides feedback tips for each Global Factor. Giving feedback to individuals about how they score on these five broad personality dimensions will allow them to better understand themselves, their personal strengths, and where they have room to grow without being overwhelming.

Team Development – For team members, understanding their major similarities and differences with the rest of the team can foster a deeper understanding of one another and how to work well together. A 16pf Global Factors report can compile scores from all members into a single, straightforward report to help the entire team see how they score on important personality dimensions. This helps each member to understand how they mesh with the rest of the group, and also highlights shared strengths or developmental needs which may affect performance.

Under the right conditions, a 16pf Global Factors report can offer valuable insights and time savings. If you meet the criteria above, the Global Factors may be a suitable alternative for your selection or developmental assessment needs.