

The 'Big Five' Factors Personality Model

'The Big Five' is the commonly used term for the model of personality which describes the five fundamental factors of our personality.

This summary and explanation has been provided by psychologist and psychometrics expert Paul Sinclair (see Paul's biography below), which is greatly appreciated.

The Big Five 'super traits' have been researched and validated by many different psychologists (WT Norman 1963, McCrae & Costa 1987, Brand & Egan 1989, LR Goldman 1990 and P Sinclair 1992) and are at the core of many other personality questionnaires.

While Raymond Cattell 'uncovered' 16 traits from his factor analysis (a statistical way of reducing a variety of things down to a smaller number of related clusters) in the development of the 16PF; no one else was able to replicate his work.

On the other hand, the Big Five Factors have been replicated in studies across the world and give us a confident summary of our mental building blocks, according to trait theory.

This had led to a number of slightly different 'translations' of the Big Five model, although each version essentially deals with the same theory and content. The words describing the characteristics change, but the basic characteristics do not. The 'translations' between the different interpretations are explained later.

Trait theory, on which many of our occupational questionnaires are based (for example, Cattell's 16PF and Saville & Holdsworth's 'OPO' Occupational Personality Questionnaire), states that by the time we are in our early 20's and start work, our personality traits become more stable and reliable. This does not necessarily mean we become more stable or reliable, but that our individual personality traits become more fixed and are thus capable of being reliably measured.

For example, loud, confident, creative people tend to remain loud, confident and creative people throughout their careers. Quiet, unassuming, dependable people tend to remain so also.

When the first Big Five questionnaire was launched the UK in 1990, people were surprised and a little sceptical about the speed of the personality profiler; it took under 10 minutes to complete.

This was because it was only measuring five factors and not sixteen or thirty-two personality factors.

Suffice it to say, validation studies were published and presented to the British Psychology Society by the end of the 1990's the Big Five was established as a significant and fundamental personality testing model.

N.B. The **pink** colour in the tables is used for the **Big Five terminology recommended by Paul Sinclair**. Aside from this, colour is used (hopefully) to improve presentation only, and does not relate to other personality models on this webpage.

the big five model - five 'bipolar' scales

The bold names in the left column are the recommended names (by Paul Sinclair) for these factors. Other names are used for each of the factors, which might equate to names in the left or right columns. See the OCEAN names below.

Extraversion	vs	Introversion
Confidence	vs	Sensitive
Detail-conscious	vs	Unstructured
Tough-minded	vs	Agreeable
Conforming	vs	Creative

These scales are commonly alternatively represented by the **OCEAN** acronym and descriptions:

- **Openness to experience** (equates to Creative, opposite Conforming above)
- **Conscientiousness** (equates to Detail-conscious above)
- **Extraversion/Introversion** (same as above)
- **Agreeableness** (equates to Agreeable, opposite Tough-minded above)
- **Neuroticism** (equates to Sensitive, opposite Confidence above)

While some psychologists refer to the OCEAN terminology it's not particularly recommended for use where people are likely to be sensitive to the words, notably 'neuroticism'. Other words in the OCEAN scale can also be perceived as judgmental or stigmatised. And while 'Conscientiousness' is technically accurate, using this word tends to influence decision-makers (notably users of psychometric testing systems) towards the characteristic and those displaying it, not least because the other end of the scale would logically be called 'Unconscientious'; better instead to refer to the scale of 'Detail-conscious - Unstructured', which carries no sense of good or bad.

It is generally more helpful to use the Big Five terms as detailed in the grid, which tend to present the scales as 'one or the other' rather than 'good or bad'.

For the sake of reference however, here is the correlation between the OCEAN Big Five factor names and the more user-friendly names. See above for the precise description correlations.

Recommended Big Five Factor terms	Common 'OCEAN' equivalents
Extraversion - Introversion	Extraversion/Introversion
Confidence - Sensitive	Neuroticism/Stability
Detail-conscious - Unstructured	Conscientiousness
Tough-minded - Agreeable	Agreeableness

Conforming - Creative

Openness to experience

You will find other variations of how people refer to the Big Five Factors.

For example The Big Five according to McCrae & Costa (1987) is typically shown as:

- Neuroticism (vs Emotional Stability)
- Extraversion (vs Introversion)
- Openness to experience (vs Closedness to experiences)
- Agreeableness (vs Disagreeableness)
- Conscientiousness (vs Lack of conscientiousness)

The following tables show the typical behaviours within this model.

Psychologists and psychometrics practitioners use the term 'Factor' to describe each of these five 'large traits' or scales.

In turn, each of the Big Five Factors contains several behaviours, which are clustered under the five main Factor headings.

Of course each main Factor can be further broken down into 'sub traits' or 'facets', for example, Extraversion could have sub-traits such as Sociable, Competitive, Energetic and Seeking Recognition.

Each factor is named according to the 'high scoring' end of each scale.

Low scores logically indicate behaviours at the opposite side of the scale.

High scores are not good or bad.

Low scores are not good or bad.

The majority of us actually tend to score close to the middle (the 'norm').

The higher a person scores for the behavioural elements shown within each of the five factors, the more (logically) they will exhibit these behaviours, and be less able to sustain the tendencies of the low scorer. And vice versa.

Again, there is no good or bad. It's simply a measure of what we are.

the big five factors including behavioural elements

Other commonly used factor names (notably OCEAN) for the Big Five Factors are shown in **Green**.

<i>extraversion</i>	
low score (introversion)	high score (extraversion)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reserved and shy in company• Able to concentrate on long tasks• Prefers a calm environment• Dislikes the limelight and attention• Inhibited and somewhat reluctant in teams• Not a natural communicator• Deliberate, and reflects on things• Lacks spontaneity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Open and talkative• Competitive, enthusiastic and persuasive• Enjoys a fast pace and variety at work• Gregarious• Socially active and energetic• Can be impulsive or indiscreet• Needs praise - enjoys attention• Can lack concentration in routine or long tasks

confidence

**low score (sensitive, aka
neuroticism)**

- Unsure of self, hesitant, checks with superiors
- Prone to anxiety under pressure
- Dislikes making big/important decisions
- Not ambitious, somewhat pessimistic
- Concerned by change or the unexpected
- May be temperamental, low emotional control
- Nervous presenting self or own ideas

**high score (confidence,
aka stability)**

- Relaxed, calm under pressure
- High self esteem
- Decisive, asserts him/herself
- Optimistic, enjoys taking lead
- Resilient to pressure
- Copes with the unexpected
- Enjoys autonomy, ambitious

detail-conscious

**low score
(unstructured)**

**high score (detail-
conscious aka
conscientiousness)**

- Flexible and informal approach to work
- Multi-tasker
- Not detail conscious - expedient
- Prefers 'big picture' - strategic
- Less committed to formal tasks
- Works well in a chaotic environment
- Dislikes paper work - unstructured

- Structured approach to work
- Quality-conscious and detailed
- Plans and forecasts - organised
- Reliable and efficient
- Persevering and dutiful
- Committed to the job - striving
- Keen to achieve goals

tough-minded

low score (agreeableness)

- Empathetic and consensus oriented
- Enjoys team participation
- Tolerant of others
- Seen as kind and generous
- Patient and democratic with others
- Can find disciplining

high score (tough-minded)

- Self reliant and independent - pushy
- Not a natural team player - dominant
- Goal oriented - tough and determined
- Capable of dealing with 'office politics'
- Drives through

- others difficult
- Can be seen as too soft or submissive
 - Naturally democratic management style

- obstacles
- Somewhat impatient with weaker colleagues
 - Able to make unpopular decisions
 - Autocratic management style

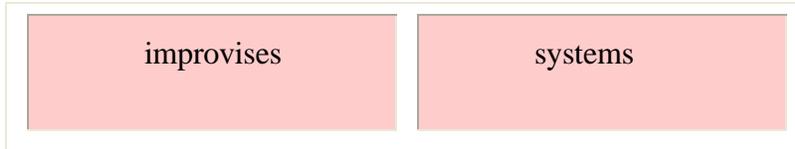
conforming

low score (creative, aka openness/openness to experience)

- Finds routines and systems constricting
- Enjoys challenging the status quo
- Champions change - accepts risks
- Idealistic, with a variety of interests
- Creative thinker and problem solver
- Unconventional and intellectual
- Thinks on feet,

high score (conforming)

- Follow rules and procedures
- Risk-averse and cautious of change
- Adapts rather than creates new approaches
- Conservative and serious
- Obedient to corporate methodology
- Practical and down to earth
- Adheres to guidelines and



the combinations of factors define the personality - not single scales

When using this model, as with many other personality concepts, it is the **combination of scores from all of the scales** that shows us how people operate and identifies their underlying preferences.

Looking at a single scale in isolation tells us hardly anything, and can be very misleading.

For example:

Although a **creative (non-conformist)** has the intellectual ability to be creative, if their non-conformity is combined with **introversion** and **low confidence**, they may not express their creative thoughts and ideas.

A **creative (non-conformist)** who is also **extravert**, **confident** and **unstructured (low detail-conscious)**, will not only express their ideas but may also propose quite impractical suggestions.

usage of the big five factor model

The Big Five is a very useful model for assessing non-managerial staff, but it lacks some of the rigour required for assessing people in or destined for managerial and executive roles. The Big Five model gives us an **accurate and fast way of assessing the main drivers of someone's personality**. But the model by itself is not able to drill down into complex management capabilities or competencies. For this we must refer more to work-related behaviours rather than 'pure' personality.

Management performance depends more on the subtle use of discretionary elements of the job, which the Big Five will not measure. The Big Five is a 'broad brush' personality methodology. A different approach is required for management assessment, to gauge the **'components' of people's behaviour**

and the **detailed combinations of working style**. The 'PRISM' model (PRISM is summarised separately here) and similar systems are more appropriate for measuring management style and potential than the Big Five.

Each of the Big Five factors consists of 'sub-traits', for example, '**Agreeable**' (at the opposite end of the 'Tough-minded' scale) consists of sub-traits (behavioural elements) such as 'Tactful', 'Diplomatic', 'Team-centred', 'Submissive', 'Warm', 'Friendly', 'Tolerant' and 'Democratic'. In typical use of the Big Five model and tests, a person's score on the 'Agreeable' scale will be an **average** of how they match the sub-traits. Showing the detail and variance of the sub-traits scores would entail a vastly more complex and time-consuming analysis.

The strengths of the Big Five Factor model lie in its **speed and ease of use** and this makes it a very useful tool for gaining a rapid overview of a person's key drivers.

The Big Five Factor model has been very well validated, and while it has shown correlations with performance in jobs, studies indicate that the correlation with particular jobs does not exceed 0.30, which accounts for no more than 15% of the variables. There is a big difference between measuring job suitability, style, etc., and measuring personality per se.

The Big Five model is a modern, widely replicated and validated methodology for understanding, explaining and measuring personality.

Various Big Five tests have been developed. The first to be launched in the UK, and one of the most popular, is the RPQ (Rapid Personality Questionnaire), which is available from various suppliers.

Here is a free Big Five mini-test (5 mins max) on the excellent website of Professor George Boeree (pronounced boo-RAY). This test gives a very quick Big Five profile and is more for understanding the model than for serious personality assessment, although as a quick simple guide it works well.

Bear in mind that the Big Five factor headings Professor Boeree's mini-test vary slightly compared to factor names mentioned above, and correlate as follows (precise correlations in bold). Aside from 'Stability' Boeree uses the OCEAN headings:

**Recommend Big Five
Factor terms**

**Boeree mini-test
equivalents**

Extraversion - Introversion	Extraversion
Confidence - Sensitive	Stability
Detail-conscious - Unstructured	Conscientiousness
Tough-minded - Agreeable	Agreeableness
Conforming - Creative	Openness

the big five - some notable combinations

The 'personality-based sub-types' in column one are broad generic profiles and do not relate to any particular model's definitions. Be careful not to read too much into these single-word descriptions - they provide a rough guide, not a detailed scientific correlation.

personality-based 'sub-types'	will contain Big Five high scoring factors	will contain Big Five low scoring factors
dependent	conforming	confidence, tough-minded
social leader	confidence, extraversion	
intellectual	extraversion	conforming
submissive		extraversion, tough-

		minded
need for praise	confidence, extraversion	
defensive		confidence, tough-minded
exhibitionist	extraversion, tough-minded	
autonomous	confidence	extraversion, conforming
harm avoidance	conforming	tough-minded
supportive	extraversion	tough-minded
conscientious	detail-conscious, conforming	
impulsive	tough-minded, extraversion	conforming
authoritarian	tough-minded, conforming	
sensitive to criticism	tough-minded	confidence

persuasive	extraversion, confidence	conforming
completer- finisher	detail- conscious, conforming	confidence

'the big five' correlations with other personality models

Here are correlations between the Big Five factors and respectively the models of 16PF, OPQ and the Belbin 'team role' types.

Below first are the Big Five correlations with Cattell's 16PF model. Understanding these correlations is aided by knowing the 16PF scale definitions. As ever, single word descriptions are open to different interpretations, hence inclusion of the 16PF letter codes. An explanation of the 16PF model will appear on this page in due course.

The word 'negatively' below means that the correlation is with the opposite end of the Big Five scale concerned, for example, below, the 16PF description 'Shrewd' correlates to the opposite of the Big Five 'Extraversion', ie., 'Introversion'

big five and 16pf

Big Five Factors	Cattell's 16PF descriptive equivalents
Extraversion	Assertive (E) Happy-go-lucky (F) Venturesome (H) Shrewd (N), negatively Experimenting (Q1) Controlled (Q3), negatively
Confidence	Emotional (C) Assertive (E)

	Happy-go-lucky (F) Conscientious (G), negatively Apprehensive (O), negatively Experimenting (Q1), negatively Tense (Q4)
Detail-conscious	Happy-go-lucky (F), negatively Conscientious (G) Controlled (Q3)
Tough-minded	Assertive (E) Happy-go-lucky (F) Conscientious (G), negatively Suspicious (L) Experimenting (Q1) Controlled (Q3), negatively
Conforming	Assertive (E), negatively Happy-go-lucky (F), negatively Conscientious (G) Venturesome (H), negatively Shrewd (N) Controlled (Q3)

the big five and opq (occupational personality questionnaire)

Below are the Big Five correlations with the OPQ model (Occupational Personality Questionnaire). Understanding these correlations is aided by knowing the OPQ scale definitions. As ever, single word descriptions are open to different interpretations, hence inclusion of the OPQ letter codes. Again, an explanation of the OPQ model will appear on this page in due course.

And again, the word 'negatively' signifies that the correlation is to the opposite end of the Big Five factor concerned, eg., OPQ description 'Modest' correlates to the opposite of the Big Five 'Extraversion', ie., 'Introversion'.

Big Five Factors	OPQ (Occupational Personality Questionnaire) descriptive equivalents
Extraversion	Persuasive (R1) Controlling (R2) Independent (R3) Outgoing (R4) Confident (R6) Modest (R7), negatively Traditional (T5), negatively Change Orientated (T6) Innovative (T8) Emotional Control (F4) Optimistic (F5) Critical (F6) Competitive (F8) Achieving (F9) Decisive (F10)
Confidence	Persuasive (R1) Controlling (R2) Independent (R3) Outgoing (R4) Socially Confident (R6) Modest (R7), negatively Traditional (T5), negatively Change Orientated (T6) Innovative (T8) Relaxed (F1) Worrying (F2), negatively Tough Minded (F3) Optimistic (F5)
Detail-conscious	Traditional (T5)

	Detail Conscious (T10) Conscientious (T11)
Tough-minded	Independent (R3) Democratic (R8), negatively Caring (R9), negatively Detail Conscious (T10), negatively Critical (F6)
Conforming	Persuasive (R1), negatively Independent (R3), negatively Outgoing (R4), negatively Modest (R7) Traditional (T5) Innovative (T8), negatively Competitive (F8), negatively Achieving (F9), negatively Decisive (F10), negatively

the big five and belbin 'team role' types

Below are the Big Five correlations with the Belbin team role types. Given the overlap of Big Five factors across the Belbin team role types, the correlations are shown between the Belbin types and the corresponding **dominant** Big Five factors. See the Belbin section above.

Belbin 'team role' type	Big Five correlating scale score/emphasis
Coordinator/Chairman (CO)*	Extraversion, Confidence
Shaper (SH)*	Extraversion, Tough-minded, Creative

Plant (PL)*	Extraversion, Confidence, Tough-minded, Creative
Monitor-Evaluator (ME)	No strong correlations with the Big Five, probably because this Belbin team type is not high or low on any scale, ie., they are sober, detached, able to look at things objectively. They are most likely people with 'middle scores' across most of the Big Five scales, suggesting a balanced profile with little emphasis on any specific scale, quite a rare Big Five profile.
Implementer/Co Worker (IMP)	Detail-conscious, Agreeable, Conforming
Resource Investigator (RI)*	Extraversion, Confidence, Creative
Team Worker (TW)	Introversion, Sensitive, Detail-conscious, Conforming
Completer-Finisher (CF)	Sensitive, Detail-conscious, Agreeable, Conforming
Specialist (SP)	Not correlated with the Big Five. This recently added Belbin type is based less on personality and describes a technical specialism, thus linked to specialist knowledge/ability rather than temperament.

paul sinclair biography

Paul Sinclair is the founder and managing partner of Sinclair Associates and has spent fifteen years at the leading edge of psychological profiling and performance development. He works with companies to assess individual and team potential and develops plans to improve personal competencies.

Paul co-launched the UK's first 'Big Five' personality profiler in 1990 and published a paper on 'Personality and Performance' in the British Psychological Society's journal - Selection and Development Review, and also presented a validation of the Big Five against the OPQ and the 16PF, at the BPS conference in 1992.

Paul has been interviewed on BBC Radio 4 and consulted on the BBC2 TV series, 'Mind of the Millionaire'.

Paul now focuses on business coaching and team building. A member of the European Mentoring & Coaching Council, Paul is based near Bath and works across the UK & Europe.