

Personality Correlates of Preference for Multitasking in the Workplace

Jessica Mesmer-Magnus
University of North Carolina Wilmington

Chockalingam Viswesvaran
Florida International University

Valentina Bruk-Lee
Florida International University

Kristin Sanderson
PDRI

Nila Sinha
Assess Systems

In today's fast-paced work environment, preference for multitasking is an important personality predictor of job-related affect, and relevant to the recruitment process in jobs requiring multitasking. Using a sample of 527 managers within a large, financial organization, we investigate the nomological net of this construct in relation to commonly assessed work-related personality correlates. Our results suggest individuals with high levels of sociability, energy, and self-reliance have the positive energy and outlook needed to take on multiple tasks at the same time. Individuals who prefer more organization and detail-orientation are likely to feel less comfortable in roles requiring multitasking.

INTRODUCTION

The dynamic and changing nature of today's jobs has created a work environment wherein individuals are called on to effectively and efficiently attend to a variety of tasks – often simultaneously – over a short period of time. Indeed, many job descriptions, interview questions, and realistic job previews emphasize the importance of multitasking (Ishizaka et al., 2001; König, Buhner, & Murling, 2005). Interestingly, one's preference for multitasking is not necessarily indicative of one's ability to do so effectively (Konig et al., 2005). Instead, research suggests that whereas multitasking ability is predictive of work performance, one's preference for multitasking is predictive of work affect (Fahr, 2011; Kaff, 2004). Although much research has explored predictors of multitasking ability (Colom, Martinez-Molina, Shih, & Santacreu, 2010; Hambrick, Oswald, Darowski, Rench, & Brou, 2009; Konig et al., 2005; Sanderson, 2012), relatively little empirical attention has been paid to preference for multitasking (Palmer & Schoorman, 1999; Poposki & Oswald, 2010). Since preference for multitasking

is an enduring personality trait (Conte & Jacobs, 2003; Landy et al., 1991; Slocombe & Bluedorn, 1999) with implications for work satisfaction, commitment, withdrawal, and turnover intentions (Fahr, 2011; Kaff, 2004), a deeper understanding of its predictors and correlates is an important and practical question for research.

Existing empirical research on the personality profile of individuals who prefer multitasking (e.g., Conte & Jacobs, 2003; Conte et al., 1999; Kantrowitz et al., 2012; Schell & Conte, 2008) has been limited by conceptualizing personality in the broad terms of the Big Five factors of personality (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Although the Big Five framework provides a parsimonious and comprehensive modeling of individual personality (Goldberg, 1990), when attempting to predict a narrow work-related personality trait like preference for multitasking, research suggests that it is more profitable to study specific work-oriented personality variables that have been identified as important in particular job contexts (cf. Ashton, 1998; Eysenck, 1990; Ployhart et al., 2006). A key reason for this is that multitasking preference is thought to have differential relationships with the various facets of the Big Five personality dimensions, meaning these relationships would “wash out” at the global level (Sanderson, 2012). In this study, we investigate the work-related personality correlates of multitasking preference rather than the broader dimensions of the Big Five. This more focused investigation permits a clearer understanding of the personality profile of employees who are likely to be satisfied in roles that require multitasking.

Preference for Multitasking

Preference for multitasking was first recognized as a component of a cultural tendency towards polychronicity (Hall, 1959). Although polychronicity was initially introduced as an important dimension on which cultures differed (Hall, 1959; Palmer & Schoorman, 1999), subsequent research has presented the polychronicity construct as residing at the individual level of analysis as well (Goonetilleke & Luximon, 2010; Krumm, Schmidt-Azert, Bracht, & Ochs, 2011). Hall’s original articulation of cultural *polychronicity* suggested the construct was comprised of two dimensions: (1) one’s preference for multitasking, and (2) one’s belief that multitasking is the best way to get things done. Recent work on polychronicity at the individual level has stressed the need to disentangle these two components, because whereas the first component (*preference for multitasking* which refers to a focal individual’s behavioral preferences/tendencies) reflects a personality tendency, the second component (*the belief that multitasking is the best way to get work done* which has implications for both individual behavior as well expectations of others’ behaviors) reflects an attitude (cf. Palmer & Schoorman, 1999; Poposki & Oswald, 2010). In this study, we focus specifically on the personality aspect of polychronicity – multitasking preference.

Research suggests multitasking preference predicts employee satisfaction and involvement in jobs that require multitasking (Fahr, 2011; Kaff, 2004). When there is a mismatch between multitasking role requirements and multitasking preference, worker anxiety, stress, and discontentment arise (Sanderson, 2012). Such feelings increase employee tendency toward work withdrawal and turnover. Given the prevalence of jobs that now require employees to multitask, it has become increasingly important to consider multitasking preference in personnel selection. Although personality tests have become commonplace in many selection systems, it is typically not feasible for organizations to measure every possibly relevant personality construct (like multitasking preference) prior to making personnel decisions. As such, it is important to understand the personality profile of individuals who are likely to be a good fit in these roles.

Personality Correlates of Preference for Multitasking

Most research exploring the personality correlates of multitasking preference has examined it in relation to the Big Five, though results tend to suggest multitasking preference correlates weakly with each of the five factors (e.g., Conte & Jacobs, 2003; Conte et al., 1999; Ishizaka et al., 2001; Kantrowitz et al., 2012; Schell & Conte, 2008). In a recent meta-analysis of 20 studies linking polychronicity with the Big Five, Sanderson (2012) found positive relationships between polychronicity and the Big Five,

however she reported the credibility intervals of the true-score correlations for these relationships were very wide (and even included zero for neuroticism, conscientiousness, and agreeableness), suggesting that sometimes the relationships were positive, sometimes they were negative, and sometimes they were near zero. Sanderson argued that such variability is likely a function of the way the Big Five factors were operationalized in the primary studies (i.e., whether they were assessed at a facet versus global level). In particular, facets of the Big Five are likely to differentially relate to multitasking preference. For example, although neuroticism tends to be negatively correlated with multitasking preference because of the anxiety induced by multitasking situations, the impulsiveness facet of neuroticism may predispose employees towards liking multitasking (e.g., Conte & Jacobs, 2003; Kantrowitz et al., 2012; König et al., 2005; Poposki et al., 2009). As another example, a similar disparity may exist with conscientiousness: on one hand, conscientious individuals tend to be organized, planful, and structured, tendencies that are likely inconsistent with a preference toward multitasking, but on the other hand, the achievement striving facet of conscientiousness would suggest a positive correlation with multitasking preference (Conte & Jacobs, 2003; Girgis, 2010; Kantrowitz et al., 2012; Stachowski, 2011).

These examples underscore the likelihood that the broader personality constructs described by the Big Five are insufficient for predicting multitasking preference. Indeed, organizations typically use personality inventories that measure narrower, work-related facets of personality appropriate for the focal work context; these dimensions may or may not map to the higher-order structure of the Big Five (Burch & Anderson, 2008). One such commonly used inventory is the Guilford-Zimmerman Temperament Scale (GZTS). As part of a dissertation research study, Glasgow (1999) examined a variation of the GZTS in relation to the facets of the Big Five and found that while there was overlap between this measure and facets of the Big Five, the narrower work-related personality dimensions assessed by the GZTS were more useful in predicting work-related tendencies and behaviors because they could cut across several global personality dimensions when appropriate/relevant to the work context. By examining multitasking preference in relation to these work-related personality dimensions, we may be better able to understand why prior studies have found weak or variable relationships with the Big Five (Sanderson, 2012).

Table 1 summarizes the work-related personality dimensions of the GZTS studied by Glasgow (1999), and Table 2 summarizes the GZTS dimensions he identified as most strongly associated with each of the Big Five factors. An examination of the association between the GZTS work-related personality dimensions and the Big Five (Table 2) reveals why past research has tended to find contradictory results related to the association between multitasking preference and the Big Five. For example, whereas the assertiveness and sociability aspects of extraversion may be expected to positively correlate with multitasking preference, the detail orientation and organization aspects of extraversion would likely negatively correlate with preference for multitasking. Similarly, although the assertiveness and need for freedom scales (facets of conscientiousness) likely positively correlate with multitasking preference, we would expect the conscientiousness-related facets of need for organization and detail orientation would negatively relate to multitasking preference. Given this rationale, we would expect the following with regards to the work-related personality profile of workers who prefer multitasking:

*Hypothesis 1. Multitasking preference will be **positively** correlated with the work-related personality dimensions of energy/preference for fast-paced work and sociability (facets of extraversion), assertiveness/taking initiative (reflecting the achievement striving facet of conscientiousness, as well as the assertiveness dimension of extraversion), criticism tolerance (facet of emotional stability and openness), and need for freedom (facet of conscientiousness)*

*Hypothesis 2. Individual differences in multitasking preference will be **negatively** correlated with the need for organization and detail orientation (facets of extraversion and conscientiousness), and logical thinking (facet of openness and conscientiousness).*

TABLE 1
PERSONALITY DIMENSIONS DEFINED

| Personality Dimension | Definition |
|---------------------------|--|
| 1. Multitasking | The preference for handling multiple tasks, vs. focusing on one thing at a time |
| 2. Assertiveness | The tendency to take the initiative w/ people and make one's presence felt, as opposed to a preference for remaining in the background |
| 3. Energy | The pace at which one prefers to do things |
| 4. Sociability | The extent to which one seeks and feels comfortable in social situations |
| 5. Cultural conformity | The extent to which one believes in and is concerned about adhering to the values and practices of one's peers, organization or relevant groups |
| 6. Need for freedom | The extent to which one prefers personal freedom and independence in their job |
| 7. Detail orientation | Preference for tasks which require detail-orientation or thoroughness in work |
| 8. Organized | The tendency to be organized, planful, and structured in the way one works and handles tasks |
| 9. Need to be liked | Desire to be accepted and liked by others, as opposed to having little concern about acceptance |
| 10. Positive about people | The tendency to be trusting and optimistic in one's outlook toward people, as opposed to being critical or cynical |
| 11. Optimism | The tendency to have an optimistic and positive outlook under most circumstances, as opposed to having a more negative or pessimistic outlook |
| 12. Criticism tolerance | The response to actual or perceived criticism. "Thick-Skinned" vs. "Thin-skinned" |
| 13. Need for attention | The extent to which one wants or needs personal attention, recognition, and positive feedback |
| 14. Realistic thinking | The tendency to be an imaginative, perhaps wishful thinker, as opposed to a more serious-minded and here-and-now thinker |
| 15. Self reliance | Preference for relying on oneself and accepting responsibility as opposed to relying on or seeking/accepting support from others |
| 16. Follow through | The tendency to do more than expected and keep commitments |
| 17. Serious minded | The tendency to be serious-minded and deliberate in dealing w/ situations/information |
| 18. Logical thinking | Preference for thinking through problems or situations using logical, systematic procedures and a structured approach, as opposed to a problem solving or reaching conclusions in a more direct, single-step fashion |
| 19. Fact-based thinking | The tendency to view information/situations factually and dispassionately, as opposed to viewing situations from a more personal frame of reference |
| 20. Reflective | The tendency to be perceptive, introspective, and philosophical, as opposed to a tendency to be less contemplative |

TABLE 2
OVERLAP BETWEEN GZTS FACETS AND BIG FIVE DIMENSIONS
AS REPORTED BY GLASGOW (1999)

| Big Five Dimension | GZTS Facet |
|---------------------------|--|
| Emotional Stability | Criticism tolerance Optimism |
| Extraversion | Detail orientation Organized Need for attention Assertiveness Sociability Energy |
| Openness | Realistic thinking Logical thinking Criticism tolerance |
| Agreeableness | Positive about people Cultural conformity |
| Conscientiousness | Logical thinking Serious minded Detail orientation Organized Need for freedom Assertiveness |

METHOD

Database

Data were obtained from 527 employees of a large international financial organization specializing in credit cards, auto/home/medical loans, insurance, and investments. The data were obtained when the participants took part in a firm-wide organizational leadership development program. Questionnaires were administered in paper and pencil format, with the personality assessment presented first to prevent participant fatigue. Participants were representatives from management within the sales, finance, human resources, information technology, legal, marketing, and operations departments. All participants held professional/managerial-level positions requiring a minimum of 2 years of college education. Seventy percent of the sample was Caucasian, 54% was male, and 67% were between the ages of 21 and 39, with the majority falling in the upper half of that range.

Measures

The 350-item personality taxonomy used in this research was developed by adapting the Guilford-Zimmerman Temperament Scale for a more face-valid work-related personality inventory relevant for this organization. Ones and Viswesvaran (2001) also argue the need for developing work-related personality inventories as opposed to using general-purpose personality inventories. The inventory was developed to assess the twenty personality dimensions defined in Table 1. Scale reliabilities (coefficient alpha) in this sample ranged from .58 to .85, with an average of .77.

RESULTS

The correlations between multitasking preference and the other work-related personality dimensions are provided in Table 3. As expected, individual differences in multitasking preference were positively

correlated with assertiveness ($r = .20, p < .01$), energy or preference for fast paced work ($r = .37, p < .01$), criticism tolerance ($r = .21, p < .01$), need for freedom ($r = .22, p < .01$), and sociability ($r = .19, p < .01$), and negatively associated with detail orientation ($r = -.25, p < .01$), preference to be organized ($r = -.41, p < .01$), and logical thinking ($r = -.12, p < .01$), providing support for Hypotheses 1 and 2.

There were also other interesting correlates of multitasking preference. We found positive correlations with optimism ($r = .20, p < .01$) and self-reliance ($r = .22, p < .01$), suggesting individuals with high levels of optimism and self-reliance have the positive energy, outlook, and emotional stability needed to take on multiple tasks at the same time. Our results also suggest that individuals who are serious minded ($r = -.18, p < .01$) and who prefer logical and fact-based thinking ($r = -.26, p < .01$) are less likely to prefer multitasking; these individuals are likely to want to be focus on tasks more sequentially as it allows more opportunity for time and focus on each task.

We also ran a stepwise regression analysis to assess the best predictors of multitasking preference. Results are summarized in Table 4. Organization ($\beta = -.29, p < .01$), fact-based thinking ($\beta = -.16, p < .01$), and need for attention ($\beta = -.14, p < .01$) were the strongest negatively related predictors. Individual differences in energy ($\beta = .30, p < .01$), criticism tolerance ($\beta = .13, p < .01$), need for freedom ($\beta = .13, p < .01$), self-reliance ($\beta = .12, p < .01$), and sociability ($\beta = .09, p < .01$) were the strongest positively related predictors. Together these eight factors explain 38% of the variance in multitasking preference, and are associated with several Big Five dimensions (extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness). These results suggest organized employees as well as those who prefer fact-based thinking and have a high need for attention are unlikely to be comfortable in an environment that requires multitasking. Conversely, employees who prefer fast-paced work (energy) and freedom, as well as those who are sociable, self-reliant, and tolerant of criticism are likely to be comfortable in roles that require multitasking. Interestingly, the stepwise regression results suggest that the remaining personality dimensions do not add appreciably to our understanding of multitasking preference beyond the eight identified factors.

TABLE 3
CORRELATES OF MULTITASKING PREFERENCE

| Personality Vari | Multitasking Preference |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Assertiveness | .20*** |
| 2. Energy | .37*** |
| 3. Sociability | .19*** |
| 4. Cultural conformity | -.16*** |
| 5. Need for freedom | .22*** |
| 6. Detail orientation | -.25*** |
| 7. Organized | -.41*** |
| 8. Need to be liked | .11*** |
| 9. Positive about people | .17*** |
| 10. Optimism | .20*** |
| 11. Criticism tolerance | .21*** |
| 12. Need for attention | -.09* |
| 13. Realistic thinking | .12*** |
| 14. Self reliance | .22*** |
| 15. Follow through | .07* |
| 16. Serious minded | -.18*** |
| 17. Logical thinking | -.12*** |
| 18. Fact-based thinking | -.26*** |
| 19. Reflective | -.05 |

Note: N=527; * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

TABLE 4
STEPWISE REGRESSION RESULTS REGRESSING WORK-RELATED PERSONALITY
DIMENSIONS ON MULTITASKING PREFERENCE

| | Standardized Regression Coefficients (β) | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------|--|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| | Step | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
| Organized | | -.41** | -.40** | -.40** | -.34** | -.34** | -.30** | -.28** | -.29** |
| Energy | | | .36** | .34** | .33** | .35** | .35** | .33** | .30** |
| Criticism Tolerance | | | | .15** | .17** | .16** | .17** | .15** | .13** |
| Fact-Based Thinking | | | | | -.17** | -.18** | -.16** | -.18** | -.16** |
| Need for Attention | | | | | | -.11** | -.14** | -.12** | -.14** |
| Need for Freedom | | | | | | | .12** | .13** | .13** |
| Self-Reliance | | | | | | | | .10** | .12** |
| Sociability | | | | | | | | | .09* |
| | R^2 | .17** | .30** | .32** | .34** | .36** | .37** | .38** | .38** |

Note: Partial correlations with multitasking preference for the variables excluded at Step 8 were as follows: $pr = .03, p > .10$ for cultural conformity, $pr = -.07, p > .10$ for detail orientation, $pr = .07, p > .10$ for assertiveness, $pr = .08, p > .05$ for need to be liked, $pr = .05, p > .10$ for positive about people, $pr = .01, p > .10$ for optimism, $pr = -.01, p > .10$ for realistic thinking, $pr = .07, p > .10$ for follow through, $pr = .03, p > .10$ for serious mindedness, $pr = .01, p > .10$ for logical thinking, and $pr = .06, p > .10$ for reflective.
N=527; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

DISCUSSION

Multitasking has become an important job competency in today's fast-paced global workplace (Konig et al. 2005; Poposki & Oswald, 2010). Whereas early research did not distinguish between multitasking ability and multitasking preference, contemporary theory recognizes that the two represent distinct components of performance and parallel the classic prediction equation that performance is a multiplicative function of ability and motivation/affect. Furthermore, multitasking ability is a cognitive variable more likely to be related to working memory and information processing whereas preference for multitasking is a non-cognitive variable with personality correlates (Poposki & Oswald, 2010).

Most researchers who have assessed the personality profile of multitaskers have done so at the global level of the Big Five (e.g., Conte & Jacobs, 2003). This is a useful start given the clear organizing framework of the Big Five. However, multitasking preference likely has differential relationships with facets of the Big Five (Sanderson, 2012). Moreover, it is important to perform a more comprehensive assessment of relevant work-related personality dimensions given the work-relatedness of the

multitasking construct. Our findings provide valuable insight into why results of these prior studies have been inconclusive.

We find that employees who are likely to be comfortable with multitasking are also likely to be self-reliant in the face of challenges (self-reliance), sociable, and “thick-skinned” (criticism tolerance). They also seem to like fast-paced work (energy), thrive in autonomous roles (need for freedom), and are less likely to approach tasks in a planful, structured way (organized). Such a detailed description of an “ideal” candidate empowers hiring managers and recruiters to detect tendencies that are likely to indicate comfort with multitasking roles. Further, these descriptions can easily be integrated into job advertisements and realistic previews to help applicants self-select out of positions for which they would be ill-suited.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

External generalization beyond the financial sector is a potential limitation of our study as our participants were drawn exclusively from managers of a financial organization (although the use of actual employees generalizes findings beyond student samples). Future research is needed to determine the extent to which our conclusions apply to non-managerial employees and those in other industries. Social desirability bias poses another potential threat to the generalizability of our findings. Specifically, it is possible that respondents altered their answers in order to appear more consistent with corporate expectations of managers or for other socially desirable reasons.

A clear direction for future research is to explore the process mechanisms underlying why the personality variables we identified correspond to multitasking preference. Although we offer some theoretical basis for these interrelationships, a more fine-grained understanding of the underlying reasoning for how these personality profiles predict comfort with multitasking would yield insights which would be highly useful for personnel recruitment, selection, and development. Recent research has investigated the motivational mechanisms underlying the validity of personality dimensions (e.g., Barrick, Mount, & Li, 2013), and it would be profitable to study how different personality dimensions studied here affect the preference for multitasking.

Future research is also needed to test for the nonlinear effects of personality facets on the multitasking preference. Theoretically, for example, the relationship between detail orientation and multitasking preference may be positive at low levels of detail orientation but may become negative at higher levels. Similarly, the relationship between criticism tolerance and multitasking preference may be positive at low levels but may become negative at higher levels. Although we tested the curvilinear effects of both criticism tolerance and detail orientation on preference for multitasking in this study by adding the square terms of the personality facets to predict multitasking preference, we found no nonlinear effects ($\Delta R^2 = .001$). However, a theory-based investigation of the nonlinearities across the different personality facets as well as their multiplicative effects is needed in other samples.

CONCLUSION

Given trends towards team-based work and generalist rather than specialist capabilities, jobs requiring comfort with multitasking have become increasingly prevalent. Successful performance in a multitasking context requires both the ability to effectively multitask and comfort with multitasking demands. Multitasking ability predicts the extent to which individuals will perform effectively in a multitasking context, whereas the preference for multitasking has implications for whether employees will enjoy working a job that requires them to constantly and seamlessly shift across tasks. From a human resources perspective, identifying applicants/employees who will be both effective and comfortable in a job requiring multitasking is of practical importance. Prior research makes predictions regarding multitasking ability which is an important precursor to job performance in these types of jobs (Konig et al., 2005). Our study addresses predictors and correlates of the preference for multitasking which is an important precursor to job affect. Given that job affect is an important correlate of citizenship behaviors and turnover, preference for multitasking is as important as is the ability for

multitasking. Our results suggest that job specifications, interview questions, and realistic job previews should be crafted to incorporate work-related personalities associated with multitasking preference, including energy, sociability, self-reliance, and criticism tolerance. Further, hiring managers should be cognizant of the likelihood that individuals who are highly organized and detail-oriented may be uncomfortable or dissatisfied in multi-tasking contexts. Another implication is that assessing facets of the Big Five (e.g., sociability, optimism, self-reliance, detail-orientation, organization) rather than the more global personality constructs during recruitment is likely to have greater predictive value for assessing the extent to which applicants will be comfortable in a context requiring multitasking.

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