Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Birds of a Feather Flock Together: The Congruence of Personality Types within Librarians' Subject Specialties

A Review of:
Williamson, J.M., A.E. Pemberton, and J.W. Lounsbury. "Personality Traits of Individuals in Different Specialties of Librarianship." Journal of Documentation 64.2 (2008): 273-86.

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Abstract

Objectives – To investigate the personality traits of a range of librarians and information professionals using the Personal Style Inventory (PSI), and to investigate whether the personality traits of those in person-orientated library specialties differ from those in technique-orientated specialties.

Design – Self-selecting survey.

Setting – Solicitations to complete the survey were sent out via 10 e-mail discussion lists, and paper copies were made available at the annual American Library Association conference in 2002.

Subjects – 2,075 librarians and information science professionals.

Methods – Participants completed the survey either in print format, as an e-mail attachment or a Web form. The survey format was an adaptation of the PSI scale using 13 of the accepted 16 scales, namely:

- adaptability
- assertiveness
- autonomy
- conscientiousness
- customer service orientation

- emotional resilience
- extraversion
- openness
- optimism
- teamwork
- tough-mindedness
- visionary-operational work style
- work drive

Responses were analysed using a two-step cluster analysis technique, and participants were grouped into seven clusters.

Main Results – The largest group of respondents was cataloguers at 23.7%, followed by other (health or law) 19.1%, academic reference librarians 13.2%, special librarians 12.3% with all other groups in single figures. Respondents were divided up into the following seven clusters.

- Cluster 1, the "unadaptive" group -- so labelled because several unadaptive traits such as low emotional resilience, low optimism, low teamwork, and low work drive are included.
- Cluster 2, "adaptive academic reference librarians" -- high on customer service orientation, extraversion and teamwork, and low on tough-mindedness.
- Cluster 3, "adaptive cataloguers" -- low on customer service orientation and possessing a more operational work style.
- Cluster 4, "adaptive special librarians" -- high on autonomy, customer service orientation and extraversion.
- Cluster 5, "adaptive distance education librarians, public librarians, records managers, and school librarians" -- possessing a visionary work style and scoring high on adaptability, assertiveness, customer service orientation, emotional resilience, high

extraversion, openness, optimism, and teamwork; scoring low on tough-mindedness.
- Cluster 6, "adaptive other information professionals" -- also possessing a visionary work style and with high scores on adaptability, assertiveness, autonomy, customer service orientation, emotional resilience, extraversion, openness, optimism, teamwork, and work drive.
- Cluster 7, "adaptive archivists and systems librarians" scoring high on assertiveness, openness, and tough-mindedness.

Most clusters were comprised of a single occupational group, with only Clusters 1 and 5 made up of individuals from more than one group.

Conclusion – The results indicate that different librarianship subspecialties can be differentiated by personality traits, and that individuals are likely to be drawn to either person-orientated or technique-orientated library specialties depending on their personality traits.

Commentary

There is an episode of the classic BBC sitcom Fawlty Towers in which Basil Fawlty suggests his wife Sybil should enter Mastermind -- a long-running TV quiz show -- and for her specialist subject have "the bleedin' obvious." This comment did, perhaps uncharitably, pop into my head while reading Williamson's article. It is a thorough and workman-like piece of research, and an area around which not a lot of research has yet been done in the field of librarianship. But were the results not a foregone conclusion? Perhaps they were, but it is important to remember that assumptions can be wrong. If we are to

move towards an evidence-based profession, we must embrace research to help decision-making. What Williamson gives us here are the beginnings of an evidence base to back up our professional instincts.

The article includes much interesting background for those of us new to research into the effects of personality traits. Williamson herself has written before on the subject and is clearly very comfortable in the realm. The literature search provides a fascinating round-up of studies and provides an excellent introduction. The work is very well referenced, though curiously an earlier article by Williamson using a subset of the data presented here, and exploring related themes, is not referenced (Williamson 2005). Those working in the health arena particularly will find much to intrigue and amuse among the studies reported. Previous research has shown that psychiatrists are more person-orientated while Machiavellianism, or cunning, is greatest in anaesthesiologists.

The PSI used here normally consists of 16 traits, and the authors provide a reassuring amount of detail to expand on how they arrived at the 13 personality traits measured. All items had been used in a wide range of circumstances and validated for a variety of jobs and organisations. These 13 traits are then expanded at some length, so that we have a reasonable idea of how to interpret, for example, "tough-mindedness."

Conversely they do perhaps skate rather quickly over some of the limitations of their study, with background description of the statistical analysis being fairly thin. We are obliged to accept that most of the clusters contained only one occupational category -- which seems very neat and conveniently tidy -- with little explanation as to how this was actually achieved.

Another frustration is that details of gender, identified as a significant factor in previous studies of personality traits in librarianship, including work by Williamson herself (Goulding, Williamson 2005), are not collected. Geography is not taken into account and while we are told that responses were international, we get no indication of percentage of distribution. As paper surveys were distributed at the annual American Library Association conference in 2002, we can guess that this may indicate that responses are greatest from the USA. But as the authors do not provide a response percentage for each of the three survey formats, we can only speculate.

Nor do we learn anything about race or ethnicity, and we must not forget that respondents are exclusively English-language speakers. I found it a particular disappointment of the study that we know next to nothing about the people who responded other than their particular specialty, how long they have been in it and time in their current post. For a study on personality type we do seem to learn rather more about the job than the people. Perhaps this is unfair, as the authors do state that they are particularly interested in exploring the theory of congruence -- how the same personality types are drawn towards similar job -- rather than the personality traits themselves, and that is demonstrated by this research.

So how can this be applied to practice? Well, it's certainly useful for those considering a career change or just starting out to take personality traits into account. Similarly managers considering a restructuring of their services could benefit by actively considering staff personalities. Might an unhappy cataloguer tucked away in the darkest recesses of the library be better suited to running information skills training

sessions? Or, might that be considered too obvious…?

Works Cited

Goulding, A. et al. "Professional Characters: The Personality of the Future Information Workforce." Education for Information 18 (2000): 7–31.

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