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# Gut Feeling:

## Decision Maker Intuition Influences Hiring/Buying/Contracting Decisions

### Donn LeVie Jr. / Donn LeVie Jr. STRATEGIES, LLC

In a 2011 study by Cornell University,[[1]](#footnote-1) researchers wanted to know the relative emphasis decision makers with hiring authority placed on general mental abilities (GMA) and the different dimensions of personality: agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, extroversion, and openness to experience in assessing employment suitability. To answer this question, researchers used a host of high-powered analytical tools.

The data analyses revealed that some groups of decision makers might be making better hiring decisions in practice than others. However, the research also showed that, while overall GMA had been consistently demonstrated to be the strongest predictor of job performance, it was not highly valued by decision makers in the study. Three of the Big 5 personality dimensions were consistently emphasized more: agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability, with conscientiousness being the strongest predictor of performance.

At different times in a candidate’s career, the GMA dimension may take higher precedence as roles and responsibilities increase and duties change, but this limited study reveals that despite the objective criteria used to evaluate potential candidates, likeability/personality—along with a mix of decision maker beliefs, intuitive assessment, and subjective criteria—often plays the major role in candidate selection.

## Who Reads These Academic Journals Anyway?

Another possible reason decision makers are reluctant to place much faith in objective assessment tools is because much of the research into recruiting and candidate selection is performed by academics in industrial and organizational psychology. Their conclusions about the validity, objective assessment, and prediction of work outcomes are sometimes based on arcane terminology, a very small population segment (or in subjects in controlled laboratory conditions), and advanced statistical measures, the

details of which are beyond the understanding of most hiring managers and other mere mortals. While “validity coefficients, F-statistics,” and other such deep-water statistical analysis can shed light on valid conclusions, the reading audience for such published research would likely include only a fraction of decision makers with backgrounds in industrial and organizational psychology or data analytics.

Therefore, it appears that: (1) the audience that could benefit the most from this research (decision makers with hiring authority) does not typically read the periodicals in which the research results are published, and (2) valid applicant attributes highlighted by such research are not the most highly valued by those same decision makers.

## Understanding How “Irreducible Unpredictability” Works

Can we really uncover enough information from a one-hour interview to assess whether a candidate has the potential for success in a given position? The term “irreducible unpredictability” refers to the gap that remains after assessing a candidate’s cover letter, résumé, and interview results. Decision makers understand that these practices only provide a partial picture (some of which may be “enhanced” or “exaggerated”) with which to render a go/no decision to buy or hire.

However, it appears people have what Malcom Gladwell calls in his book, *What the Dog Saw*, a “prerational ability for making searching judgments about others” during first impression scenarios. Research has shown that what we can identify in those first two seconds about a person’s basic character ***sometimes*** aligns very closely with what we arrive at after 20 minutes or even 20 weeks.

There’s a downside to this realization as well. We form initial impressions with our eyes first (physical appearance, appropriate attire, grooming), followed by the type of handshake. This initial impression is powerful because a strong positive one can color subsequent interactions – even after posing structured interview questions – that make the interview a self-fulfilling prophecy. To paraphrase an old saying, “fortune favors the likeable.”

But such rapid, instantaneous assessments often lead to bias, so we should temper such conclusions by also using a more logical, rational, and step-wise approach.

Quantitative measurements and MBTI scores are nice-to-haves but represent snapshots only. More often than not, hiring decisions are based on these criteria:

* “Is this person like me? Does he or she share the same values?”
* “Do I want to work with this person? Does my team want to work with them?”
* “Do I like this person? Will they be able to plug into the current team or department dynamic and corporate culture?”

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1. Tews, Michael, Kathryn Stafford, and J. Bruce Tracey. “What Matters Most? The Perceived Importance of Ability and Personality for Hiring Decisions,” *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2011, pp. 94–101. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)