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## A Conceptual Paper on The Relationship between Personality Traits and Employee Performance Within the Smes Context in Malaysia

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### Abstract

Small and medium enterprises (SME) are the driving force behind market economies as well as the development. In Malaysia, SME is known as the backbone of the Malaysian economy and becoming a major employer throughout the region. However, pandemic of Covid-19 outbreak has become a global disruption and affecting the global economy as well as the SME around the globe. As the phenomena are unprecedented, there is a lack of studies on the impact of pandemic on businesses especially among SMEs in Malaysia. Since most of the workforce in Malaysia is contribute by SMEs, increasing the performance of employees is crucial because it will lead to the Malaysian economy sustainability, especially during such crisis. One of the factors that can influence employee performance is personality traits. Personality is one of the major psychological factors affecting the human behaviour and important in the work place. In psychology, the five personality traits are five broad domains or dimensions of personality which consists of extroversion, openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism. This Big Five Factor have an important role in enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of employee performance. Therefore, this conceptual paper aims to explore the role of personality traits in determining employee performance within SMEs context in Malaysia due to the pandemic situation.

**Keywords:** SMEs, Personality Traits, Employee Performance

### Introduction

Employees are major contributors to profits and worth of the organization. Therefore, employees are the most valuable assets an organization has. It's their abilities, knowledge, and experience that can't be replaced. Therefore, it is clear that sustaining and increasing employee performance is very crucial as it is the backbone of the organization. Thus, an organization with high performing employees will be able to compete locally & globally (Hajari, 2020). Besides, according to Johari et al (2019), by improving the individual performance will lead to the increasing of the organizational performance. However, the economic crisis brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic is different from the Asian financial crisis in 1997/98 and expected to bring long-lasting effects. The financial crisis had turned a strong expansion of 7.3 per cent in 1997 into a deep contraction of -7.4 per cent in 1998. The outbreak of the pandemic adversely affected the economic growth in Malaysia with - 5.6 per cent contraction last year. Hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysia's gross domestic

product fell by 17.1 per cent in the second quarter of 2020. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2021), this was the Malaysian economy's worst performance since the height of the Asian financial crisis in 1998. The Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have been particularly affected by this crisis. SMEs contribute to local economies by bringing growth and innovation to the community and help stimulate economic growth by providing employment opportunities to people who may not be employable by larger corporations. There are 95% of enterprises globally (World Bank, 2020), average of 97% in southeast Asia (Asian Development Bank, 2020) and 98.5% in Malaysia (SME Corporation Malaysia, 2019). This proved that SME is the backbone of world's economy.

### **Problem Statement**

The movement control, lockdown, confinement and social distancing are amongst the governments' effort to safeguard unprecedented public health and economic responses. The coronavirus may not swing back fully once the outbreak has relented (Craven et al., 2020). However, In Malaysia, Covid-19 expected to become endemic in Malaysia by end of October, says Khairy Jamaluddin as Minister of Health, Malaysia. Khairy said being in an endemic phase would see more sectors reopened with new Covid-19 norms being practised. He added that the ministry would continue to make mask-wearing mandatory for the foreseeable future. So, it is clear, this study is relevant as the country will continue using with current practices in order to decrease effect of pandemic. Although Sarawak for example has already enter into the endemic phase, however, as the end of September, the cases of covid -19 has increasing compare to other states in Malaysia with 2,943 cases (Ministry of Health, Malaysia, 2021). Although stringent government policy and response to curb the disease is necessary, but most businesses are expose to negative effects in either short or long-term period (Ahmad et al., 2020). Major hurdles are cash flow problems, closure of operation, laying off workers, retrenchment and diluted firms' capacity for future expansion (Craven et al., 2020; Smith-Bingham & Hariharan, 2020).

Employees are the important resources to the organization. The issues of employee performance during this pandemic situation such as low labour productivity which declining about -5.4% in 2020 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020), pay reduction, working from home, fear of contracting to viruses at the workplace and many more has impacted the performance among the employees especially within SMEs. This is supported by the study of Massoudi (2018) where it stated that the success or failure of the businesses are depends on the performance of the employee. As we all know, SME is the main contributor to the country's economic as been stated by (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020; (SME Corporation Malaysia, 2019). There are few factors that contribute to the employee performance. According to study made by Mangkunegara (2013) the employee performance factors consist internal factors, those originating from within an individual, and external factors, those associated with the environment/ situational such as the job and organizational climate and many more. Thus, this is also supported by Paresashvili et al (2021) where they stated that it is essential that the performance of employees must consists and influenced by both the personality and the situational factors. However, only the personality traits as one of the internal factors that will be discuss further in this conceptual paper.

Personality traits have an important role in enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of employee's job performance (Delima, 2019). People are different in terms of personality. This difference cause conflicts such as interpersonal conflict when they interact for example when they are having difference opinion (Ahmed et al., 2010). Personality traits always have

negative impact to employee performance (Gridwichai et al., 2020; Altangerel, 2015). This is because personality traits affect employee differently in terms of work contexts. In other words, traits appeared in the condition where individuals know that they cannot handle any pressure facing them which later can affect their performance because of the competitive nature of jobs.

Besides that, according to Medeiros & Young (2021), different individual respond differently to crisis. Everyone is facing similar threats to their health and livelihoods, and how people respond differently to this depending on culture, social groups and individual differences. Each of us have different and unique personality. And understanding someone personality gives us clues on how that person is likely to act and feel in a variety of situation. At the same time, the understanding on the personality will lead to the better performance among the employees.

Personality is thought to be fairly stable across time and context, and difficult to change. As stated by Costa & McCrae (1985); Soto, (2018) where they claimed that personality traits stable over time. However, according to Sutin et al (2020), personality traits might change during crisis. This is because traits can and do change in response to distress and treatment for distress respectively. Thus, most study on western context (individualistic society), but limited study on collectivists society. According to Haq (2020) and Hostfedede Insight 2019, Malaysia is known as the collectivist society and non individualistics. Therefore, this study is imperative, As such, there is a critical need to investigate the impact of such phenomena when little evidence is currently available for practioners, policy makers and academia references. Ahmad (et.al, 2020). Therefore, this study will include the personality traits and employee performance that will give impact to the employee performance

### **Purpose Of Research And Research Questions**

The conceptual paper is intended to identify the links among personality traits and employee performance within SMEs in Malaysia. As such, research questions that will be addressed is:

- i. Is there a relationship between personality traits and employee performance within SMEs in Malaysia?

### **Significance of The Research**

The conceptual paper is significant as it will provide important implications to groups of potential stakeholders of SMEs such as owners or even the employees to monitor the performance. Besides, this study attempts to look into the impact of the personality traits on the employee performance within the SMEs in Malaysia. The result of these relationships may provide information benefits to SMEs on how the differences of personality traits enhance the employee performance. This study is also relevant to policy-makers who promote the creation and growth of the small firms as well as maintaining the performance among employees. Last but not least, this conceptual paper can add to contribute as a literature for scholars to make reference.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

The conceptual paper is delimited by insufficient readings of literatures from multi-discipline in order to get a broader scope of theoretical understanding. This conceptual paper too has its investigate limitations. As such, this paper is merely a review from other journals and the data is yet to be collected. Another limitation is that the literature related to the topic is not fully explored due to time constraints.

## **Theoretical Overview**

### **Trait Activation Theory**

The trait activation theory is based on a specific model of employee performance and can be thought as an elaborated or extended perspective of the relationship between personality - situational (job) fit. According to Tett & Burnett (2003), this theory also demonstrates two elements, which are situational trait relevance and the value of personality traits expression. In other words, the trait activation theory is a new theory that focuses on the person-situation interaction to better explain how individual traits emerge as work-related behaviour and how this behaviour is related to employee performance. Trait activation theory makes extensive use of both situational and trait-based perspectives on personality in order to explain personality. According to trait activation theory, employees would seek and get intrinsic pleasure from a work environment that allows them to easily express their distinctive personality traits. However, the idea stipulates that "activation" the trait leads to higher employee performance only in cases where certain personality traits are valued on the job. Besides, this theory also demonstrates that personality expression has inherent value, and incapacity to exhibit a trait causes anxiety, discontent, and discomfort (Tett & Burnett, 2003). It is a basic premise in some interpersonal and circumplex models of personality. People will feel less contented and engaged if they cannot express their personality traits, or if their personality traits are not able to be expressed. For example, study by Barrick & Mount (1993), which examined the role of autonomy on the relationship between Big Five Personality dimensions and employee performance, has found that the validity of Conscientiousness and Extraversion was greater when autonomy was high compared to when autonomy was low. In other words, employees with high conscientiousness and extraversion may clearly see chances for change and progress, act on them, and persevere until change occurs. They will likely create strategies to improve performance that they would not have been able to investigate if the situation did not allow them the autonomy to do so.

## **Discussion of The Literature Review**

### **Employee Performance**

Employee performance is one of the most widely researched items in industrial and organisational psychology. Employee performance can be defined as the successful completion of tasks by a selected individual or individuals, as set and measured by a supervisor or organization, to pre-defined acceptable standards while efficiently and effectively utilizing available resource within a changing environment (Thao & Hwang, 2010). In other words, employee performance is the ability of the employees to fulfil their roles as well as completed their tasks and be able to behave at their workplace. Besides, employee performance is critical in all businesses because it influences the success or failure of the job and has impacted achieving the goals of the enterprise organisations and meeting the needs of customers. The performance among employees is important in pursuing the company's goals and ensuring the success or failure of organisations. Most organisations seek to measure employee performance and the factors affecting performance to improve employee performance as much as possible and make it effective and efficient. Employee performance is viewed as a multidimensional construct encompassing more than one type of behaviour. Although researchers present their definitions of work performance, according to Rotundo (2002) a conventional definition focuses on individual behaviours or activities rather than the effects or outcomes of these actions and behaviours. For example, according to Murphy (1989), employee performance should be measured in terms of actions rather than



outcomes. Employees may aim to optimise results at the expense of other things; thus, results-based measurements are not necessarily functional to the organisation. Besides, Nickson (2020) stressed that the accuracy of employee performance includes the direct observation of the behaviour.

However, this study builds upon ideas developed by Borman & Motowidlo (1997); employee performance is behavioural, episodic, evaluative, and multidimensional. Furthermore, they identified two types of employee behaviour required for organisational effectiveness: task performance and contextual performance. Employee performance has the same meaning as job performance (Massoudi, 2018). It is multifaceted and encompasses a wide range of factors. There are two dimensions of employee behaviour in employee performance: task performance and contextual performance (Kahya, 2009). Borman & Motowidlo (1997) distinguished between task performance and contextual performance at the most fundamental level. Task performance is significant because it pertains to creating job-specific goods and services and involves the learning and application of critical technical skills by employees. Task performance refers to an individual's ability to contribute to the organisation's "technical core".

While task performance is important, contextual performance improves the work environment through developing social networks. Contextual performance refers to actions supporting the organisational, social, and psychological contexts in which organisational goals are pursued. Employees engaging in contextual performance contribute to the organisation's culture and climate. Because people volunteer for extra work, persevere with passion, and support and cooperate with others, contextual performance has the potential to transform the organisation (Motowidlo & Schmit, 1999). Contextual performance includes assisting co-workers, being loyal to the organisation, and providing ideas to improve work procedures.

The distinction between task performance and contextual performance is related to three essential assumptions (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Motowidlo & Schmit, 1999); (1) task performance activities vary across jobs, whereas contextual performance activities are relatively consistent across jobs; (2) task performance is related to ability, whereas contextual performance is related to personality and motivation; and (3) task performance is more prescribed and constitutes in-role behaviour, whereas contextual performance is more discretionary and extra-role behaviour. Employee performance among SMEs in Malaysia was studied concerning personality traits as an independent variable and employee performance as a dependent variable during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Personality Traits Dimensions**

Personality can be defined as the characteristic which includes thoughts, feelings as well as behaviour and are difference between one person from another that exists over time and situation (Phares, 1992). The personality trait model had evolved over the years (Bhalla & Kang, 2020). Costa & McCrae (1988) were not the first to develop a personality trait model but had validated the model put forward by previous scholars (Boyle et al., 2008). Literature review revealed that the personality trait model had attracted attention from scholars across a wide range of cultures and organisations. It is a widely accepted theory of personality research (Bhalla and Kang, 2020). Nonetheless, each personality trait represents a wide array of personality lexical terms. Hence, measuring personality is conceptualising personality traits as a continuum spectrum not on the polar ends of the spectrum but somewhere in between. Therefore, a common criticism of personality traits is that each trait comprises many other personality descriptions to provide the entirety of personality overview using lexical

psychology, which can be subjective. The five-factor personality trait is depicted in the table below:

Table 1.1

*Five Factor Personality Trade and Meaning*

Personality Trait	Meaning
Openness to experience	Receptive to ideas and values from employees
Conscientiousness	Receptive to competency and integrity of employees
Extroversion	Warmth reception towards employees
Agreeableness	Mindedness and modesty towards employees
Neuroticism	Impulsiveness toward employees

**The Relationship Between Personality Traits And Employee Performance**

One of the most important psychological aspects influencing human behaviour is personality, which is crucial in the workplace. Every organisation values the personality of its employees. The five dimensions of personality provide a clear conceptual and measurement framework for personality research in psychology, and they are used to describe human personality. Even though the Five-Factor Model has amassed a large body of evidence worldwide, it is sometimes criticised for being theoretical, excessively descriptive, and missing concerning personality development across the lifespan. McCrae & Costa (1999) established the Five-Factor Personality Traits Theory in response to these criticisms. Five-Factor Personality Traits Theory is a contemporary version of trait theory based on the assumptions that people are knowable, rational, variable, and proactive (McCrae & Costa, 1999). Every person has different personalities, which all contribute to employee performance in a business. Personality traits have an important effect in improving employee performance to become more efficient and effective. The personality of a person has a significant impact on his/her employment. According to Barrick & Mount (2005), the dimensions of personality traits, such as conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience, have a significant relationship with employee performance and become the core components of a person's personality. The greatest success of an organisation is determined by not only the skills and abilities of its employees but also by the various personality traits, they possess. The personality traits theory (McCrae & Costa, 1999) also posits that openness to experience is concerned with a person's diverse interests and curiosity with novelty. In other words, openness to experience displays the ability to be flexible enough to learn and understand tasks quickly. Openness to experience is a dispositional variable that is likely to be relevant for predicting individual differences in the pattern of performance growth over time (Minbashian et al., 2013). The dimension of openness to experience is likely to influence employee performance by affecting the individual's intrinsic motivation to learn. It is hypothesised that an individual with high openness to experience is associated with greater continuous learning efforts throughout one's career. Thus, this may also provide the impetus for continued development and skill acquisition, which may increase employee performance over time.

Another factor of personality traits is conscientiousness. Conscientiousness motivates people to be more engaged in their organisations (Chiaburu et al., 2011). As a result, conscientiousness will be a much more accurate predictor of work performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991). According to the research, conscientiousness is highly associated with job satisfaction (Judge et al., 2002), ongoing commitment (Erdheim et al., 2006), and job

performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Erdenk & Altuntaş (2017) posited that conscientiousness is an important aspect of employee performance because it involves employees' ability and not only social aspects at the workplace. Besides, most of the researchers suggested that conscientiousness is the most often correlated with employee performance. According to Barrick and Mount (1991), employees with conscientiousness is able to keep their high performance, even in an environment of a varying organisation. Thus, when taken to an acute, these kinds of employees may also be "workaholics" and perfectionists in their performance at the workplace.

Additionally, extroverts have a bigger social circle both inside and outside of the company (Judge et al., 2002), often have good feelings (McCrae & John, 1992), and feel energised when they are around other people (Cherry, 2019). The extroverted persons in the workplace are more likely to achieve career growth, particularly in occupations requiring attributes such as sociability, assertiveness, and talkativeness (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Fichter et al.,(2020) posited that extroversion is the warmth reception towards others. Meanwhile, Buil et al., (2019) posited that extroversion involves effective communication between employers and employees. Extrovert communication skill involves talking and social activities with people in creating cheerful and optimistic working environment between employers and employees (Anbaz, 2013; Canaan et al., 2016; Khedhaouria & Cucchi, 2019; Kim & Lee, 2016; Kwong & Cheung, 2003; Monteiro et al., 2016; Rashid et al., 2016; Rubenstein et al., (2019). Employees with high extraversion are continually on the search for better career opportunities. Gridwichai et al (2020) claimed that high extraversion persons are more aggressive in pursuing higher networking activities. Furthermore, if they can advance in their current organisation, they will be more committed to it and will be able to improve their performance. Meanwhile, according to Chiaburu et al (2011), individuals with high agreeableness are stronger team members since people emphasise trust and cooperation. High agreeableness in the workplace translates to modesty and obedience (McCrae & John, 1992) and work well with each other (Cherry, 2019). Yao & Li (2021) posited that agreeableness is conducive to developing a cooperative and caring working atmosphere between employers and employees; thus, enhancing employee performance. Woods et al (2019) agreed with Wu & Minor (1997) that agreeableness is an important variable in determining employee performance. Employees with agreeableness hope that they have been treated equally based on what they have given to the businesses. Suppose the employees have been treated well by having the support and benefits from the organisation. In that case, they will be able to perform well and at the same time be able to achieve the organisational objectives. According to Judge et al (1999), the nature of agreeable individuals through cooperation may also lead to success in their job and performance. The agreeable employees will increase their performance when the political skill is combined, leveraging relationships to achieve the organisational objectives.

It is crucial to highlight that people with low neuroticism do not necessarily have a high level of mental pressure; they are more even-tempered, easy-going, and composed. Besides, individuals with high neuroticism do not cope well with stress, are easily disturbed, and are emotionally vulnerable (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Cherry, 2019). Concerning workplace neuroticism, Judge et al (2002) stated that studies upon that particular personality trait have continuously been highly associated with job satisfaction. Similarly, Barrick & Mount (1991) discovered that severely neurotic individuals self-select from organisations due to their incapacity to operate efficiently. Maisarah et al (2016) posited that neuroticism is confrontational, not conducive to a cooperative working environment. Meanwhile, Weng &



Chang (2015) posited that neuroticism affects employee performance efficiency and effectiveness. Swelam et al (2020) agreed with Maisarah et al (2016); Weng & Chang (2015) on the negative effect of neuroticism trait on employee performance in organisations. Moreover, Soomro et al (2016); Selden & Goodie (2018) posited that neuroticism affects team climate, network structures, perceptions, and overall performance of organisations. Samsudin et al (2020) posited that neuroticism could lead to victimisation and bullying at the workplace.

Overall, personality traits are vital and have the most significant effect in developing employee performance. The personality characterised by traits, which are relatively enduring characteristics, will influence employee behaviour across many situations and work contexts.

### Conceptual Model Development

The linkage between personality traits and employee performance can be explained by the Trait Activation Theory. This theory is based on a specific model of employee performance. Trait activation theory is a recent theory that focuses on this person–situation interaction to understand how individual traits express as work-related behaviour and how this behaviour is related to job performance (Tett & Burnett, 2003). In other words, when behavioural traits that improve employee performance are exhibited, the individual will receive the positive reinforcement at the workplace which later will encourage further display of such behaviour that will lead to better performance. Based on that, the following conceptual framework was proposed. Applying the Trait Activation Theory, employee performance was proposed as the dependent variable while the personality traits as an independent variable.

The conceptual model for this study is shown in Figure 1.

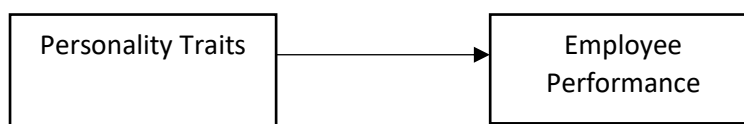


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

### Discussion: The Potential Outcome of The Study

Based on discussion above, it is expected that personality will have a direct effect on employee performance. The relationship between personality and job performance is widely studied in industrial psychology in the past century (Barrick et al., 2001). Few studies have indicated personality as a significant predictor of performance, but some researchers disagree with this claim. A study by Delima (2019) on the relationship between personality traits and employees showed that personality directly affects task performance and contextual performance with overall job performance.

Review of the research reveals consistent relationship between personality traits dimension and the employee performance. Two of the five personality dimensions – extraversion and openness to experience were found to positively related to employee performance while neuroticism and agreeableness were negatively correlated (Beng & Muthueloo, 2020). Besides that, according to Gridwichai et al (2020), conscientiousness is the most influential trait, followed by openness and agreeableness. Obeid et al (2017) stated that employees with high conscientiousness tend to commit to their organisations because their concern is to develop a long-term relationship with their companies. Conscientious employees are

dependable and more persistent due to putting in extra efforts to work and pushing themselves to give a better performance to their companies (Terrier et al., 2016).

Besides that, this study is hope to produce some research contribution. From a theoretical perspective, this study is hope to propose and tested a theoretical model linking the personality traits and the employee performance among the SMEs. Besides that, from the practitioner perspectives, this study is going to highlight an important key learning where individuals with different personality performs their jobs differently. Therefore, organizations must be able to adjust those behaviours in order to increase their employee performance at the workplace.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the personality traits among the employee becoming more critical and essential as it help to boost the performance among the employee. This chapter has discussed the literature in the context of SMEs and the conceptualisation and review on the dependent variable (employee performance), independent variables (personality traits), and subsequently the empirical review about the relationships of variables and underpinning theories of the study. Literature review analysis shows there is a gap in research between the five-factor personality and employee performance. Personality traits, such as openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism, have been discovered to affect employee performance. However, scanty research has been conducted on the relationship between personality traits and employee performance within SMEs in Malaysia during a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Personality traits, validated by Costa & McCrae (1988) may have affected employee performance differently with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic (Fichter et al., 2020). Thus, there is a need for this area to be researched.

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