

Personality Isn't Set in Stone

What the research really says about whether personality changes — and what that means for hiring.

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"Personality traits are not fixed biological qualities but change in response to life experiences and circumstances."

My position

The evidence largely supports the statement — but the full picture is interactionist.

Biology, environment, and situation all shape who someone is — and how they behave at work.

Biology plays a role — but only part of one.

40%

heritability of personality

Vukasović & Bratko, 2015 — meta-analysis

The other 60% comes from environment, upbringing, and life experience.

Despite decades of research, no specific gene has been reliably linked to a specific trait. Biology sets the stage; it doesn't write the script.

Personality keeps changing across a lifetime.

• 92

long-term studies

Roberts, Walton & Viechtbauer (2006) meta-analysis: personality keeps changing into middle and old age.

• 20 → 40

key adult window

People generally become more conscientious and less neurotic. Openness tends to drop in later life.

• COVID

short-term shifts

Sutin et al. (2022): measurable decreases in four of the Big Five during the pandemic — over just a few years.

Culture and generation shape personality too.

Generations shift

Brandt et al. (2022) tracked US adults across 50 years. Later generations score higher on extroversion and openness, lower on agreeableness and neuroticism.

Cultures differ

Cheung et al. (2001): a Chinese-built personality inventory found a unique factor — "Personal relatedness" — that a translated Western test missed entirely.

Takeaway: an assessment built in one cultural context may not capture what matters in another.

Often, the situation matters more than the trait.

1

Asch & Milgram

Ordinary people conform and even obey orders that contradict their values — driven by the situation, not personality.

2

Mischel (1968)

Found little correlation between personality test scores and actual behaviour. Context shapes what people do.

3

Fleeson & Gallagher (2009)

The range of behaviours within one person across situations is wider than the range between different people.

Traits aren't meaningless — they're just not the whole story.

Traits do tell us something

Epstein showed that behaviour averaged across many situations does correlate with trait scores. So traits capture something real about general tendencies.

"If ... then ..." signatures

Mischel, Shoda & Smith (2004): people show consistent patterns within situations. If Mark is ignored, he gets irritated. If April is approached, she gets irritated. Same label — very different people.

Modern view: interactionist — biology, environment, and situation all interact.

Personality is real. It's just not as fixed as the tests can make it look.

01

Treat personality test results as a snapshot — not a verdict.

02

Expect candidates to develop and shift in role over time.

03

Design the environment, not just the hire — situation drives behaviour.

04

Be cautious with assessments built in one culture, used in another.

Thank you.