# UNDERSTANDING LAWYERS:

## WHY WE DO THE THINGS WE DO

Results from the Hogan Assessment Project of Lawyer Personality
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THE SCIENCE OF PERSONALITY

A couple of years ago, we met with the leadership team of a mid-size law firm to review their recent personality assessment results. On one particular assessment where high scores are undesirable, the managing partner scored in the 99th percentile. Everyone else was considerably lower. The managing partner looked at this score and remarked, "I knew I was high, but I didn't know I was that high." Other members of the team exchanged uncomfortable glances. "Does this mean that I ram stuff home at meetings?" the managing partner asked. "Do I highjack meetings? Why didn't someone tell me?" The others looked at their shoes.

This man has a blind spot. Many people suspect they are high or low on specific attributes, but no one knows until they assess it. Personality feedback helps individuals understand themselves. Once this managing partner understood his own tendencies and their impact on others, he was able to act like less of a tyrannical maniac and more like a benevolent despot…still not an ideal leadership style perhaps but an improvement for him and his team.

Research shows[1] that lawyers share common preferences concerning decision making. Specifically, they prefer order, structure, and rational approaches to making decisions. The current study builds on this research by exploring a range of personality characteristics and values. We collaborated with Hogan Assessment Systems (Hogan) to examine the characteristics of nearly 2,000 lawyers. We discuss our results which show how personality characteristics impact lawyer performance, and then outline ideas for leveraging personality and values inventories to select, train, and retain new lawyers.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONALITY AND VALUES

Personality is stable over time and influences work behaviors.[2] As such, it is useful to understand our own personalities and those of the people around us. Examining the personalities of lawyers can tell us a lot about certain trends we see in the profession. For example, take a simple but true stereotype: lawyers tend to be extremely risk averse. Such risk aversion explains, at least in part, their insistence on the billable hour despite numerous attempts to change it.

Personality can be assessed in several ways.  For this research, we follow the Hogan method and use three assessments that evaluate three discrete, but related, aspects of personality: style, values, and derailers.  Each has its own tradition of research within personality psychology but, taken together, they are powerful predictors of behavior.

Evaluating personality style can also help us address practical concerns such as how to hire high performers, motivate current associates and partners, and identify future leaders. With the additional insight obtained from values and motives measures, we learn what is most important to people and what motivates them. This information enables us to determine how well individual and organizational values

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[1] For example, the ABA Young Lawyers Division (Ron Hirsch, principal investigator) has conducted four studies since 1980, which show that the primary criterion for lawyers choosing law and staying in law was "intellectual challenge." Martin Seligman also discusses lawyer preferences in his 2002 book *Authentic Happiness*.

[2] See for instance Hogan, Hogan and Kaiser's chapter on Management Derailment in the *American Psychological Association Handbook of Industrial and Organization Psychology* (Sheldon Zedeck, Editor, 2010, Vol. 3, 555-573).

align, and therefore fit into the organization. When the two align well, individuals are more likely to enjoy their job and, consequently, stay at a firm for longer periods of time.

Lawyers work in a variety of areas and perform an assortment of tasks; different practices may draw on different skill sets. The personality characteristics associated with successful performance in some tasks may detract from performance in others. For example, most personality measures contain an Extraversion scale, which measures the tendency to be outgoing and approachable. When developing business, Extraversion serves a critical role in finding and building a rapport with clients. Highly extraverted individuals may be less adept, however, at working long hours by themselves preparing documents or conducting research.

Likewise, organizational values differ by firm. Even when performing the same general tasks, individuals may fit better in some firms than others. By identifying a firm's organizational values, hiring partners can identify applicants who are a better fit. Coupled with personality, firms can select individuals with characteristics associated with success in their specific roles and whose values align with the overall firm's values, thereby leading to increased job satisfaction and a longer and more productive tenure.

## THE CURRENT STUDY

Study participants took the Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI), the Hogan Development Survey (HDS), and the Motives, Values, Preferences Inventory (MVPI).[3] Hogan's assessments are among the most widely researched and commonly used personality and values assessments in the world. Hogan maintains a research archive demonstrating links between their assessment results and performance in over 300 job-types across the U.S. Furthermore, the HPI, HDS, and MVPI have all been translated into over 30 languages and are available in over 50 countries. Hogan long ago set the gold standard for assessment quality and reliability for use in both selection and development efforts, and continues to do so today.

Hogan takes a unique approach to personality assessments by presenting results as they concern a person's "reputation," not how a person views him or herself. For example, highly ambitious individuals see themselves as goal oriented, driven, and highly motivated. Although others might also describe them using the same terms, some might also see them as abrasive, pushy, and difficult at work. In our opening example, for instance, our managing partner knew that he was high on a particular attribute, but did not realize how this led others to perceive him. By recognizing his reputation for being too aggressive, he was able to modify his behaviors to interact with others more effectively.

The Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI). The HPI is the first occupationally-oriented measure of normal personality based on the Five-Factor Model (FFM)[4] and is designed to predict job-related criteria. The HPI

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[3] The HPI, HDS, and MVPI are owned and distributed by Hogan Assessment Systems. For use in the legal profession, Hogan has partnered with Hildebrandt Baker Robbins.

[4] The Five Factor Model is considered the gold standard by contemporary personality testing authorities. It reflects the finding that, over thousands of studies of personality, the same five discrete factors – determined by the statistical method known as "factor analysis" – emerge over and over again. These factors are: Openness to new experiences, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability.

describes the "brightside" of personality, or characteristics that lead to successful performance. The HPI includes seven primary scales:

| HPI Scale Name | Definition | FFM Alignment* |
|---|---|---|
| **Adjustment** | The degree to which a person is steady in the face of pressure, or conversely, moody and self-critical. | Emotional Stability |
| **Ambition** | The degree to which a person seems leader-like, status-seeking, and achievement-oriented. | Extraversion |
| **Sociability** | The degree to which a person needs and/or enjoys social interactions. | Extraversion |
| **Interpersonal Sensitivity** | The degree to which a person is socially sensitive, tactful, and perceptive. | Agreeableness |
| **Prudence** | The degree to which a person demonstrates self-control and conscientiousness. | Conscientiousness |
| **Inquisitive** | The degree to which a person seems imaginative, adventurous, and analytical. | Openness |
| **Learning Approach** | The degree to which a person enjoys academic activities and values education as an end in itself. | Openness |
| *Note.* In their research, Hogan found justification for separating two of the Five Factor scales into two additional scales yielding a total of seven personality scales. | | |

**The Hogan Development Survey (HDS).** The HDS indexes behavioral tendencies that can negatively impact performance, particularly when an individual is fatigued, ill, stressed, bored, or lacking social vigilance. HDS results describe the "dark side" of personality where higher scores indicate a greater potential for performance problems that impede success. The HDS contains 11 scales:

| HDS Scale Name | Definition |
|---|---|
| **Excitable** | Tends to be initially enthusiastic about people or projects but then becomes disappointed with them. Results: seems to lack persistence. |
| **Skeptical** | Tends to be socially insightful but cynical, mistrustful, and overly sensitive to criticisms. Result: seems to lack trust. |
| **Cautious** | Tends to be overly worried about making mistakes and criticism. Results: seems resistant to change and risk adverse. |
| **Reserved** | Tends to be tough, remote, detached, and hard to reach. Result: seems to be a poor communicator. |
| **Leisurely** | Tends to be independent, ignore others' requests, and becomes irritable if they persist. Result: seems stubborn, procrastinating, and uncooperative. |
| **Bold** | Tends to act entitled and have inflated views of one's worth. Result: seems unable to admit mistakes or share credit. |
| **Mischievous** | Tends to be charming but manipulative and ingratiating. Result: seems to have trouble maintaining relationships and learning from experience. |
| **Colorful** | Tends to be dramatic, engaging, and attention-seeking. Result: seems preoccupied with being noticed and may lack consistent focus. |
| **Imaginative** | Tends to think and act in interesting, unusual, or even eccentric ways. Result: seems creative but often lacking good judgment. |
| **Diligent** | Tends to be conscientious, perfectionistic, and hard to please. Result: disempowers staff and subordinates. |
| **Dutiful** | Tends to be eager to please and reluctant to act independently. Result: seems pleasant and agreeable but reluctant to support subordinates and co-workers. |

**The Motives, Values, Preferences Inventory (MVPI).** The MVPI measures core values related to occupational preferences, interests, and job-related satisfaction. Although the HPI and HDS provide insight into why a person behaves in characteristic and predictable ways, the MVPI indexes what he or she wants—needs, values, and interests. The MVPI contains 10 scales:

| MVPI Scale Name | Definition |
| --- | --- |
| Aesthetic | Values creative self-expression; interested in quality, product look and feel, and attractive surroundings. |
| Affiliation | Values frequent and varied social interaction; interested in social networking and a feeling or sense of belonging to a group or organization. |
| Altruistic | Values actively helping others and improving society; interested in providing good customer service and building a better workplace. |
| Commerce | Values business activities, money, and financial gain; interested in earning money, realizing profits, finding business opportunities, and making investments. |
| Hedonism | Values fun, good company, and good times; interested in pleasure, excitement, and variety. |
| Power | Values competition, achievement, and being perceived and influential; interested in challenge, competition, and a lifestyle organized around worldly success. |
| Recognition | Values fame, visibility, and publicity; interested in being known, recognized, visible, and famous. |
| Science | Values ideas, technology, and rational problem solving; interested in new ideas, analytical approaches to solving problems, and understanding how things work. |
| Security | Values certainty, predictability, and risk free environments; interested in structure, order, and planning for the future. |
| Tradition | Values similarity between the organization's and employees perspectives on tradition; interested in history and old-fashioned virtues. |

**Sample Characteristics.** We collected data from over 1,800 lawyers in four large firms. We compared their results to results from over 4,800 managers and professionals in high level, individual contributor positions in industry.

Our lawyer sample represented a diverse cross-section of roles. Associates made up the largest portion of the sample (45%), followed by equity partners (32%), non-equity partners (16%), and others including counsel, trainees, etc. We collected data in late 2009 and early 2010. As a result of layoffs in many firms during economic downturns in 2008 and 2009, our sample consisted primarily of lawyers who were able to survive the winnowing out process that occurred in each firm. Therefore, the sample may be unique in that it likely contains a disproportionately high percentage of above-average performers, thereby providing a more accurate picture of the characteristics of successful lawyers as defined as those who were able to keep their jobs during times of economic uncertainty.

For participating in this study, participants received interpretations of their assessment results.

**HPI Results.** Figure 1 presents average HPI results for our lawyer and comparison samples.

*Figure 1: HPI Results[5]*
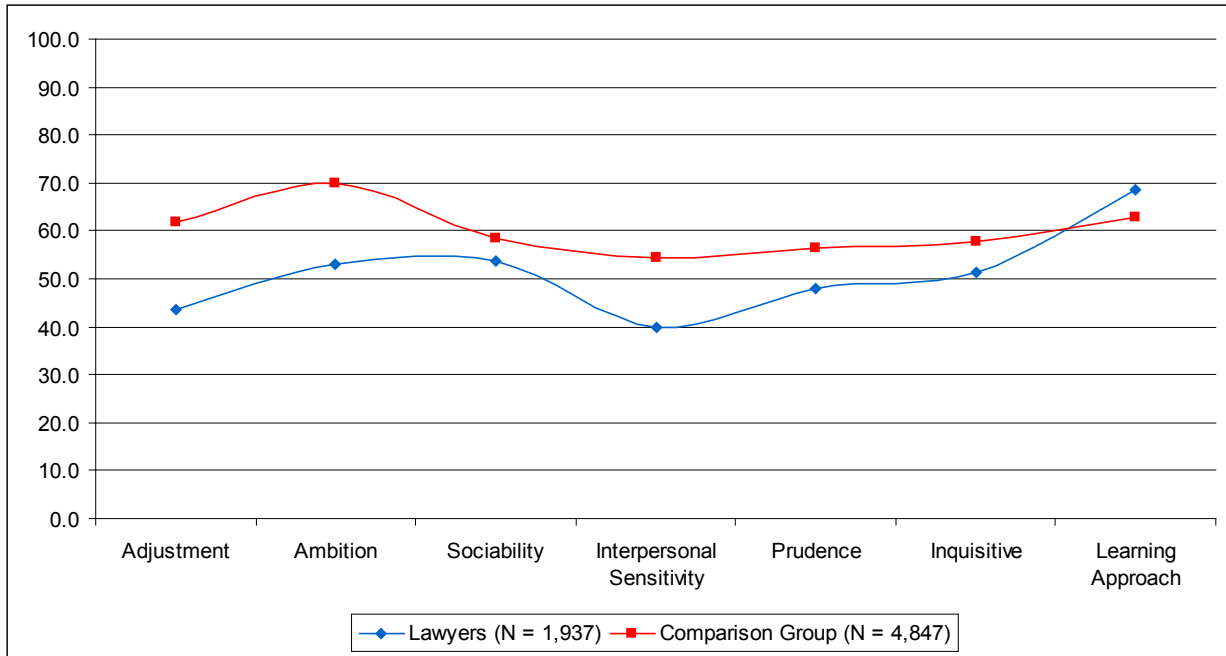


HPI results show that lawyers' highest average scores are on Learning Approach (69th percentile), suggesting that they value education and enjoy academic activities. This is not surprising given the education required to become a lawyer and scholarly nature of the profession, and is in keeping with the results of many other studies.[6] Average results are significantly below the midpoint on Adjustment (44th percentile), indicating that lawyers tend to be self-critical and temperamental but are also self-aware, open to feedback, and emotionally expressive.[7] The lowest average score is on Interpersonal Sensitivity (40th percentile), indicating that lawyers are task-oriented and tend to speak their minds but may also come across as cold, critical, and argumentative. Average scores were near the midpoint on Ambition (i.e., achievement-oriented and driven), Sociability (i.e., outgoing and socially active), and Prudence (i.e., organized and dependable). Compared to our sample of executives, the typical lawyer looks like an individual contributor, not a manager.

In comparison to other managers and professionals, lawyers only had higher average scores on Learning Approach. In contrast, lawyers had significantly lower average scores on three scales: Adjustment,

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[5] Note: All differences that are more than two percentage points can be considered strongly significant from a statistical standpoint.

[6] See again the ABA research cited above as well as Herding Cats: The Lawyer Personality Revealed – Hildebrandt Baker Robbins white paper by Larry Richard as well as Larry Richard's July 1993 article, "The Lawyer Types" in the *ABA Journal*.

[7] This finding is consistent with results from other tests as well. See for example, Larry Richard's HBR white paper on Herding Cats, cited above.

Ambition, and Interpersonal Sensitivity. These results suggest that, as compared to other highly educated members of the U.S. workforce, lawyers tend to be more direct in their dealings with others, approach work with more of a sense of urgency, and be less concerned with obtaining leadership positions above all other goals.

**HDS Results**. Figure 2 presents average HDS results for our lawyer and comparison samples.

*Figure 2: HDS Results*
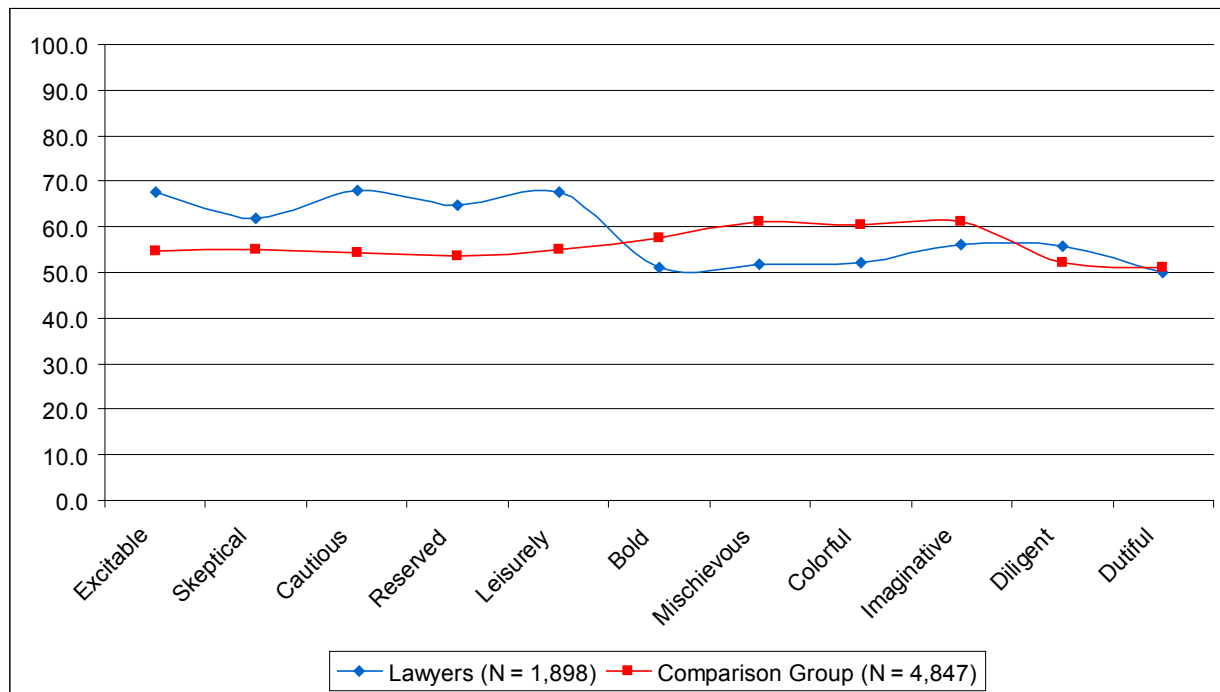


HDS results, where higher scores are associated with problematic tendencies, show that lawyers have the highest average scores on three scales (all of which fall at the 68th percentile): (a) Excitable – becoming tense and overly critical, (b) Cautious – being reluctant to take risks and make decisions, and (c) Leisurely – resisting authority. Also, lawyers have above average scores on Skeptical (62nd percentile), indicating a tendency to be argumentative as well as suspicious of others, and Reserved (65th percentile), indicating a tendency to distance themselves from others and become uncommunicative. Average results were close to the midpoint for the remaining scales, which are Bold (i.e., demanding and self-promoting), Mischievous (i.e., risk taking and rule breaking), Colorful (i.e., attention seeking and distractible), Imaginative (i.e., eccentric and insensitive), Diligent (i.e., perfectionistic and nit-picky), and Dutiful (i.e., conforming and seeking to please others).

The 11 scales of the HDS represent three broad strategies for coping with stress—Moving Away or distancing oneself from the source of the stress; Moving Against or pushing back at the source of stress; and Moving Towards or acceding to and complying with the source of stress (usually another person). The first five HDS scales—Excitable, Skeptical, Cautious, Leisurely and Reserved—all represent a Moving

Away strategy. Interestingly, these are the same five characteristics where lawyers score the highest. In other words, lawyers overwhelmingly favor one or more Moving Away strategies under stress. This finding is in marked contrast to research with other managers and professionals, who are usually elevated on the four Moving Against attributess—Bold, Mischievous, Colorful and Imaginative. The remaining two scales—Diligent and Dutiful—comprise the Moving Towards strategy.

MVPI Results. Figure 3 presents average MVPI results for our lawyer and comparison samples.

*Figure 3: MVPI Results*
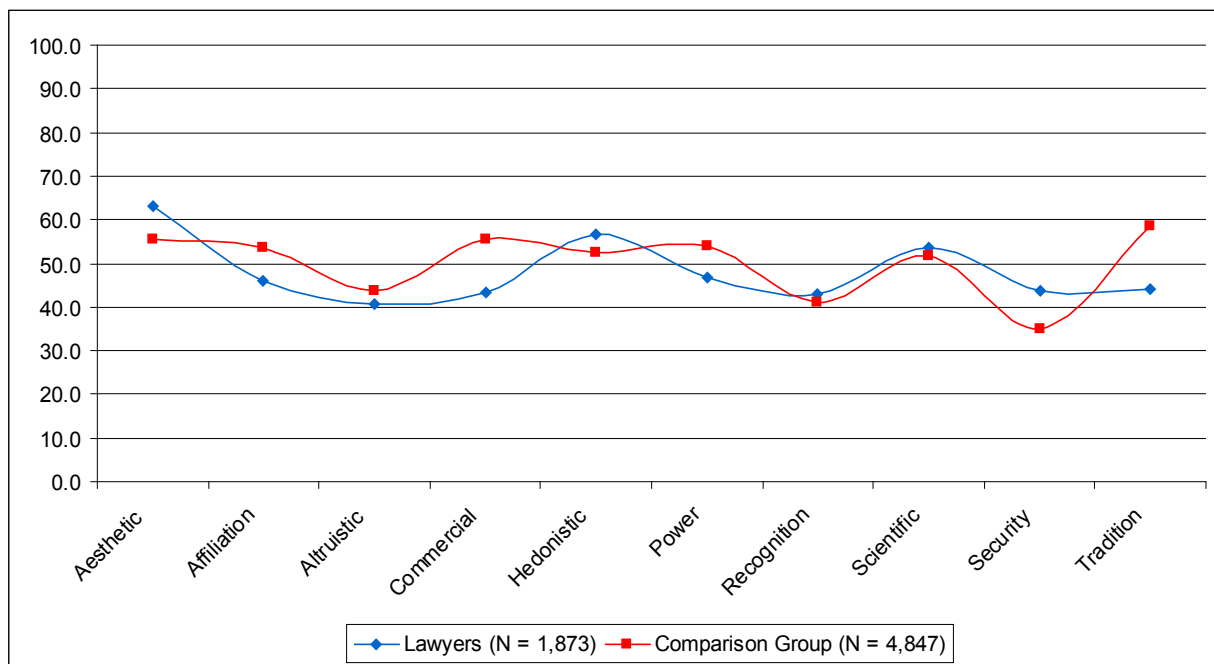


MVPI results show that lawyers' highest scores are on Aesthetic (63rd percentile), suggesting that most lawyers place a high value on quality, particularly around the three C's: high quality cases, high quality clients and high quality colleagues. Also, lawyers have above average scores on Hedonism (57th percentile), indicating that they prefer colorful and entertaining environments, although this result is mostly driven by associates, who score much higher on Hedonism than partners, possibly reflecting the often observed tendency for this generation to place greater emphasis on achieving a balance between work life and social life. The lowest average score is on Altruistic (41st percentile), indicating that lawyers place more value on their own work than in helping others. They have below average scores on four remaining scales: (a) Commercial (43rd percentile), possibly suggesting that the real appeal of the law as a profession is the intellectual challenge more than the lure of the dollar; (b) Recognition (43rd percentile), indicating that most lawyers do not seem to have a strong need to get public recognition for their accomplishments, (although there is a subset of lawyers who seem to crave recognition and publicity); (c) Security (44th percentile), showing that they value environments where they can be creative and take chances; and (d) Tradition (44th percentile), indicating that they value liberal, flexible, and unconventional

environments. Average scores were near the midpoint on Affiliation (i.e., seeks interactions with others), Power (i.e., drives for status and control), and Scientific (i.e., values structured problem solving).

Compared with other managers and professionals, lawyers tend to have higher scores on Aesthetic, Hedonistic, and Security and lower scores on Affiliation, Commercial, Power, and Tradition. In general, these results indicate that lawyers prefer environments that are stylish, entertaining, and flexible. In contrast, they place less value on environments that are highly structured, authoritative, and require close and frequent interactions with others. We should note, however, that cultures vary across firms. Firms can best assess fit by comparing individual MVPI profiles to their own culture, not by comparing individual scores to industry benchmarks. We wonder, too, if cultures vary significantly from office to office and practice to practice within the same firm.  These questions await further empirical investigation.

## IMPLICATIONS

At an aggregate level, the information presented here reveals interesting information about the personality of and values held by lawyers. For example, HPI results show that, on average, lawyers tend to deal with others in a direct and matter-of-fact way. HDS results reveal a general tendency among many lawyers to shy away from others when under pressure. This stands in direct contrast to many managers and highly educated professionals in other fields who are more likely to engage in confrontation. Finally, MVPI results show that, on average, lawyers are most attracted to environments that emphasize quality and are less commercially focused than professionals in other industries.

These results can serve a number of purposes. First, the average lawyer's HPI profile, coupled with information from the Hogan archive showing how each HPI scale predicts critical lawyer competencies, can help identify new associates with the personal characteristics most predictive of successful performance. Similarly, firms can use information from the HDS to identify new associates with potentially derailing characteristics that are most likely to detract from performance down the road and institute a program of development or coaching to prevent these tendencies from developing into serious problems. Finally, within any specific firm, MVPI results can help match individual values to the most predominant characteristics of the firm's culture.  This information helps identify associates most likely to fit in well and, consequently, enjoy and stay in their jobs longer.

Law firms can also use these personality and values measures to enhance their development initiatives. In general, although it's usually not possible to "change" personality, it is possible to learn how to manage it. In even the most extreme cases, both high and low performers can improve. Organizations often use HPI results to customize individual development programs around areas where a person may lack some of the characteristics associated with success in a particular job. For example, our results show that Adjustment is a key driver of performance in several critical areas for lawyers. This means, however, that law firms should train individuals low on Adjustment to deal more effectively with stressful situations. The same is true for HDS results. Simply having high Imaginative scores does not doom someone to failure as a lawyer. Instead, recognizing potential shortcomings associated with high Imaginative scores can help individuals focus their attention accordingly on sound and practical decisions and courses of action

when needed. Likewise, MVPI results do not just indicate fit, but can also be used to customize reward programs and packages to keep the best performers longer.

We are not advocating reliance on personality assessments alone for personnel decision making. Nothing can substitute for thorough vetting processes, already in place in most firms, to select the most appropriate candidates.  Likewise, development programs can use personality assessment as one tool among many to build an appropriate agenda for progress on an individual basis. These data support the idea that personality assessments provide invaluable information to incorporate into the best possible recruitment and development decisions.

For more information on how these tools can be used to drive selection and development efforts in your firm, please contact Dr. Larry Richard at Hildebrandt Baker Robbins at (610) 688-7400 or LRRichard@ hbrconsulting.com.

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