

What's your Library Personality?

In a recent study, 305 graduate students were surveyed to find out whether personality can be linked to abilities in information searching.

The students answered questions about the following personality traits: neuroticism (susceptibility to negative emotional states), extraversion, openness to experience, competitiveness and conscientiousness. The results found that students with a dominant personality trait in any of these areas fell into information seeking patterns. In summary:

1) If a person has a tendency toward neurotic personality:

The study found that vulnerability to negative emotions (neuroticism) was related to a feeling of insecurity when searching for information, and also the perception that time was a serious barrier to research. Those who described themselves as neurotic also had difficulties judging information relevance and were prone to temporary states of anxiety. These students tended to give up searching before finding what they needed or wanted.

2) If a person has a tendency toward an extraverted personality:

Those respondents who identified most closely with extraversion had a preference for thought-provoking documents over documents that confirmed previous ideas. They tended to search for and find information without having a systematic approach. These students also consulted with professors and TAs more frequently than other groups. Extraversion, however, was found to have a negative effect on final marks, as extraverts preferred spending time with friends to spending time doing research.

3) If a person claimed to be open to new experiences:

Students who fit into this category spent the most effort to find the materials they wanted and needed. They were energetic and curious in their research. These students also found information by chance more often than students in the other groups. Conservative thinkers (those who scored low in "openness to experience"), on the other hand, preferred familiarity in information. They were generally skeptical of the Internet, tended to prefer very precise searching, and wished to gather only a few very specific documents. They had developed a consistent approach to selecting information: generally they preferred recently published information over historical information, and documents that conformed to standard quality criteria. They usually consulted sources that were recommended by Professors and TAs.

4) People who thought that they were competitive:

Were the most likely to cite lack of time as a barrier to successful research. They were impatient with the process of finding materials, and were unlikely to devote much time to research. However, this group also displayed the highest awareness and skill in terms of critical evaluation of materials.

5) People who identified themselves as being conscientious:

These students were willing to spend time, money and to work diligently at finding good information. They were self controlled, strong-willed and determined to achieve academically. Because they took their research seriously, they were focused and in general, were successful in finding information. These

students also excelled at information analysis, and preferred documentation by authors with strong reputations published in acknowledged sources. As a group, they achieved higher marks than those students who scored low in conscientiousness.

Students who participated in the survey varied in age from 21 to 52 years, but the average age was 28. The majority (68%) of respondents were women. The overall aim of the study was to explore the influence of the five personality traits on information seeking behaviour. In addition, though, the study questions whether there is a direct relationship between intelligence and the ability to perform good research. It suggests that everyone has a different learning style and that librarians need to recognize that a "one size fits all" attitude on the reference desk isn't going to work.

The study also noted that there are exceptions to general behaviours and that for example, an easygoing but extraverted person might well overcome her relaxed attitude to take on some more challenging research. Information seeking habits can be modified if students are willing to put in some extra effort.

Reference

Heinström, J. (2003) "Five personality dimensions and their influence on information behaviour"
Information Research, 9(1) paper 165 [Available at <http://InformationR.net/ir/9-1/paper165.html>]