

# High flyers: What sets them apart? A study of personality and reasoning in 800 senior managers

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## Abstract

This study explores the relationship between personality factors, reasoning abilities and the speed at which individuals moved into senior management positions in organizations. The sample consists of 800 senior managers. The sample was separated into two groups based upon the amount of time it took the individuals to attain a senior manager role. Psychometric data from the two groups was then compared using independent samples t-tests and chi-square analyses. The results show that 'high flyers' are elevated on many indicators of effective social functioning, as well as on breadth and creativity of thinking. Further inquiry will be beneficial for more accurately identifying 'high potential' employees, as well as for building a business case for the importance of 'soft skills' development in organizations.

## Introduction

In general the terms 'high flyer' or 'rising star' are used in the literature to indicate that an individual has been selected by their organization to participate in a formalised programme of training and accelerated placement. Such programmes are intended to ensure that the organization has a cadre of replacements for derailed or retiring senior leaders, (McCall, 1998; Walker, 1998). Our working definition of a high flyer is someone who has risen through the ranks to take on a senior position more rapidly than their peers.

There has not been a great amount of organizational research on large-scale programmes to develop 'rising stars' in recent years. A few of the reasons for this may be that 'high flyers' programmes have recently become seen as populated by people who have difficulty interpersonally (Newell, 2002), have trouble learning what they do not already know (Argyris, 1991), or are somewhat dependent upon organizational context for their 'stardom' (Groysberg, Nanda, & Nohria, 2004). Furthermore, due to the declining long-term stability of organizations (McCann, 2004), formalised 'high flyer' programmes have become seen as somewhat archaic, more suited to the large-scale bureaucratic organizations of the 1960's and 1970's (Larsen, et al., 1998; Liebman, Maki, & Bruer, 1996) and not flexible or quick enough to deliver leaders in a fast-paced, turbulent environment (Walker, 1998). In addition, the 'personalised', self-directed nature of many leadership and high potential employee development programmes may not lend itself to large-scale, high-visibility programmes that can be more easily studied (Walker, 1998; Hughes, 2004). Overcoming business challenges has been identified as a major contributor to building leadership capability (McCall, 1998). Couple this with the increasing mobility of professional managers, and the result is that many 'high flyer' employee programmes have been transformed into efforts to create talent pools comprised of people who are believed to be potential leaders. Another alternative approach has been to create 'pipelines', or groups of

talent pools at various levels in order to identify potential leaders at all levels of organizations (Charan, Dodder, & Noel, 2000).

In this environment of self-directed development programmes, talent pools, and increasing job mobility there are a growing number of popular leadership and personal development books, covering everything from 'making a powerful impression' (Maysonave, 1999) to 'winning at office politics' (McIntyre, 2005). In general, the books purport to explain to an audience of aspiring senior leaders 'how to make it to the top'. Whilst many such books are undoubtedly strong sellers, many rely primarily on anecdotal evidence. These promises to show people how to make it to the top, spurred us to question whether we could discern any differences amongst senior managers who have risen through the ranks more quickly than others.

As business psychology practitioners engaged by clients to help identify future leaders and 'high-potentials', we decided to question whether there were any psychological factors that could separate those who have quickly risen to senior manager status from those who have taken longer to arrive in senior management roles. Therefore, we took the opportunity to analyse our database of psychometric information on managers whom we have assessed during the course of many years of consulting work. We are fortunate to have psychometric data on over 11,000 managers and senior managers (the specific psychometric instruments used in this study are detailed in the methods section).

The purpose of this paper is to describe the results of analysis we conducted to explore if there were any differences in psychological factors between high flyers and those who we felt to be more average in their development as managers. As stated, our objective was to determine whether we could find any significant differences in the psychometric data between those who reach senior positions quickly and those who take longer to reach the top of their organizations. Thus, this study does not compare senior managers with middle managers or supervisors, but 'fast rising stars' against their senior manager peer group.

## Research objective

The study was designed to explore the relationship between the personality traits and reasoning abilities, which were measured by our psychometric tests (see below), and the speed at which individuals were able to move into senior management positions in organizations. The objective was to identify whether there are any psychological differences between those who reach senior positions quickly and those who rise to senior positions at a more moderate pace.

## Methods

This section describes sample selection, the psychometric instruments used in the study and analyses conducted.

### Sample

For this study we selected 'managers of managers' i.e., senior managers, whose career trajectory we knew from our database. Because our clientele request different psychometrics, the sample for each test is slightly variable; however, the overall sample size for the study was approximately 800 'managers of managers'.

We conducted the study by identifying a group of approximately 800 senior managers whose career path was known to us. Using this group of managers, we identified the top quartile who attained a senior position rapidly from the rest of the sample of senior managers in order to examine any differences between this group and others that rose to seniority less quickly. It is also important to note that we did not use inclusion in any formal 'high flyer' programme as a criterion for separating the groups; in fact, we were blind to the managers 'high flyer' programme status in this study. In terms of methodology it was not our intention to conduct an in-depth piece of research at this stage; we were simply keen to establish whether there was 'anything of interest' which in due course might warrant further investigation. It was our intention to cover a wide range of work roles and organizations from a number of sectors.

## Psychometric measures

For the purposes of this study we have used five psychometric tests of reasoning and personality profiles. These are listed below:

GMA (A)	A measure of convergent thinking and the ability to identify patterns or systems.
Consequences	A test of divergent thinking which measures the ability to generate creative alternatives in problem solving situations.
NEO PI-R	A 240-item paper and pencil personality inventory based on the five-factor model of trait personality. The five domains measured are Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness.
Hogan Development Survey	A personality inventory based on identifying 11 patterns of dysfunctional interpersonal leadership behaviour.
Myers Briggs Type Indicator™	A measure of 'psychological type' which profiles people on four dimensions of personal preference, Extraversion-Introversion, Sensing-Intuition, Thinking-Feeling, and Judging-Perception.

## Analyses

We first determined that the top quartile of senior managers had reached their senior position within eight years of beginning their career. Then, we separated the senior managers into two groups: those who had reached a senior management position in less than nine years and those who had taken nine or more years to reach a senior position. Next, we conducted independent samples t-tests to determine if there were any significant differences between the two groups on our battery of instruments. Finally, because the theory upon which the Hogan Development Survey is based states that only high levels of a specific trait are likely to manifest themselves in dysfunctional behaviour, we conducted Chi-square tests on the results of the Hogan Development Survey in order to determine if any of the high levels of dysfunctional behaviours were significantly over or under represented in either of the two groups of senior managers.

## Results

This section gives the details of our sample, as well as the results of the analyses for each psychometric instrument. Table 1 overleaf shows the trends and significant results that were found.

The gender split in the total sample was approximately 20% women and 80% men. The total sample was 82% British with the remaining 18% comprising a wide range of different nationalities. The managers in the sample were drawn from twenty-one organizations across a wide range of industry sectors including utilities, telecommunications, financial services, engineering, manufacturing, health care, and professional legal and accounting practices. The majority of the managers were from international companies. The managers were from a wide range of functions including Finance, Operations, Sales / Business Development, Engineering / Technical and General Management (i.e., CEOs, Managing Directors, Regional or Divisional Heads).

The results show that high flyers do significantly differ from their senior manager peers on a number of personality, and thinking dimensions. This is shown in Table 1.

Broadly 'high flyers' are superior on many indicators of effective social functioning, as well as on breadth and creativity in thinking. However, there was no significant difference on the convergent thinking scores of the two groups of senior managers.

**Table 1: Comparison of high flyers and senior managers on measures**

	<i>High Flyer Senior Managers Mean</i>	<i>Other Senior Managers Mean</i>	<i>Difference</i>	<i>Significance</i>
<b>NEO</b>				
N6 Vulnerability	5.32	5.99	-0.67	**
Extroversion	135.18	129.17	6.01	***
E1 Warmth	24.35	23.75	0.6	0.07
E2 Gregariousness	20.95	20.11	0.84	*
E3 Assertiveness	23.17	21.77	1.4	***
E4 Activity	23.37	22.13	1.24	***
E5 Excitement-seeking	19.7	18.82	0.88	*
E6 Positive emotions	23.59	22.86	0.73	*
O3 Feelings	22.52	21.72	0.8	*
O4 Actions	20.73	20.05	0.68	*
A2 Straightforwardness	18.47	19.18	-0.71	*
Conscientiousness	138.56	135.78	2.78	*
C2 Order	19.64	18.84	0.8	*
C4 Achievement Striving	24.82	23.88	0.94	**
<b>MBTI</b>				
SN	21.08	24.26	-3.18	*
Consequences				
Raw Score	42.93	40.48	2.45	*
GMA-A				
Raw (Harsh Scoring)	8.19	7.84	0.35	N/S
<b>EQI</b>				
Emotional Self Awareness	103.02	100.45	2.57	0.09
Interpersonal Relationship	99.09	96.22	2.87	0.07
Optimism	105.32	103.7	1.62	0.07
<u>Note:</u> * $p < .05$ , ** $p < .01$ , *** $p < .001$ .				
<b>HDS</b>				
<i>Chi-Squares</i>				
Careful-Cautions - Fewer @ 90%				

Results from the NEO indicated that 'high flyers' were less vulnerable to stress and generally more extroverted than their peers. Furthermore, the high flyers were more open to new actions as well as their own feelings. Openness to one's own feelings was also reflected on the EQI where there was a trend towards higher emotional self-awareness in high flyers. On the NEO, high flyers also scored lower on straightforwardness, indicating a greater willingness to manipulate others through selective presentation of information. The high flyer group also scored significantly higher on overall conscientiousness, as well as the order and achievement striving facets included under conscientiousness.

The results from the MBTI analysis indicated that there were no significant differences between the two groups regarding any of the individual behavioural preferences measured by the MBTI; however, we can report that the 'high flyer' group exhibited less of a polarisation on the Sensing and Intuition dimensions.

The chi-square analyses conducted on the HDS data indicated that 'high flyers' were under represented in the number of managers scoring high on careful-cautious, indicating that they are less fearful of criticism being seen to make mistakes.

Finally, the results of the EQI indicated three trends that are broadly in agreement with the other analyses in the study. Specifically, 'high flyers' tended towards being more emotionally self-aware, more focused on maintaining effective relationships and more optimistic.

## Discussion

Overall, we believe that the results of this study point to a senior manager who – in comparison with their peers - is more broad thinking, challenging of norms, more open to doing things in new ways, more capable of understanding themselves and their colleagues' emotions, and who pay more attention to communicating in ways that preserve and strengthen relationships and that allow others to understand them more fully. Furthermore, because our sample is comparing groups of senior managers with each other, we can hypothesise that effective social and emotional functioning may be an important component that separates 'high flyers' from other senior managers, especially when we observe that analytical ability is similar in both groups.

Because there is general agreement that work motivation is composed of elements of direction, amplitude and persistence (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1999), we can make the case that increased assertiveness, achievement striving, energy, and decreased vulnerability to stress could indicate that 'high flyers' have stronger overall work motivation than their peers. This is not an especially surprising finding and generally supports others' conclusions regarding work motivation.

Nevertheless, whilst O'Reilly and Chatman (1999) found that the interaction of general cognitive ability and motivation was a strong predictor of success in front-line managerial roles, our analysis indicated that 'high flyers' and their peers scored very similarly on the convergent thinking. This result was somewhat surprising in the light of many studies that have shown general cognitive ability is a strong predictor of work success (O'Reilly & Chapman, 1999). However, these findings suggest that there may be a threshold of cognitive ability that, once crossed, yields relatively little increased performance in leadership roles.

Whilst research into the efficacy of 'high-flyer' programmes has tailed off over the past few years, it seems that, based upon an examination of our results, there may be a case for re-opening the investigation with a view towards differentiating between high-potential employees who ascend rapidly from those who are derailed or take longer to rise to senior roles. Such examination is likely to yield further information regarding the psychological skills vital for taking leadership positions in organizations. In addition, the community of practitioners is likely to benefit from a better understanding of the 'trainability' of such skills. This is especially important when considering that many organizations continue to limit their senior leadership selection decisions to examinations of technical expertise and past performance (Bernthal & Wellins, 2006).

Further study of individuals with high potential is likely to be beneficial for building a more robust theoretical underpinning of what factors are involved in their achievements. In addition, the findings of this study will enable a business case to be built for the importance of 'soft skills' in organizations. For example, our results do seem to support the observation forwarded by Mintzberg (1994) that the accelerating pace, increasing turbulence in the business environment, and changing nature of managerial and leadership roles means that whilst technical and intellectual competency are necessary for success, they are no longer sufficient and must be augmented by more skilful intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning.

Our findings may also prove useful, or interesting, in other lines of inquiry. For instance, it is possible that a stronger ability to think laterally, combined with the levels of analytical capability that we found give some individuals a stronger ability to do what Argyris (1991) termed "double loop learning". Double loop learning is the ability to go beyond the examination of the actions and outcomes to analyse the set of assumptions that contributed to formulating the original course of action. Thus, managers would theoretically be predicted to be better at understanding their assumptions about a given problem or circumstance, as well as more able to formulate alternative plans of action. This capability may also be augmented by psychological factors such as openness to ideas, openness to actions, higher levels of personal confidence, stronger emotional insight and resilience in the face of pressure.

It also seems probable that inquiry into capability, applied across a large group of candidates, could prove useful in helping to increase the diversity of the senior leadership population in organizations, a noted key shortcoming in current succession planning efforts (Liebman, Bruer, & Maki, 1996). Increasing diversity in senior management roles would likely spur innovation, as well as help to ensure that organizations are able to more effectively tailor their products and services to fit with the expectations of an array of customers.

In summary, the findings of this study show interesting differences between 'high-flyers' and those who rise to the top of their organizations less rapidly. This information suggests that psychological skills are vital for achieving leadership positions in organizations. We believe that a number of these psychological skills can be acquired through training in small group settings where the participants receive personalised feedback from professionals who are psychologically trained. We invite further study into this important area of management development.

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