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Scrutinizing the value and implementation of volitional personality development at work

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Abstract

In this commentary, we discuss Dupré and Wille's proposal (2024) to consider employees' personality change goals in the work context. We compare volitional personality development to skill development and call for more evidence to determine the benefits for both employees and organizations in this context. We also put forward that a clearer understanding is required of how job demands influence personality traits and of how these demands interact with and shape the integration of potential complementary personality development training modules. In closing, we provide avenues for future research.

KEYWORDS

development, development goals, job demands, personality, personality assessment, personality development, personnel, volition, volitional personality development

Practitioner Points

- The benefits of implementing volitional personality development at the workplace still need to be clarified and examined, especially in comparison to more established approaches like skill enhancement.
- Such benefits may result if trait-like and therefore typical behavior is instrumental for higher levels of performance or if counterproductive work behaviors become less frequent with the development of certain traits.
- Regarding implementation, work demands are likely a strong force for volitional personality development, but if meeting them requires acting-out-of character, volitional personality development may be quite effortful for employees.
- Any of these more bottom-up measures for personality development may have to be complemented with modules promoting top-down, reflective processes, for example, coaching, and all measures require systematic future research.

We thoroughly enjoyed reading the article by Dupré and Wille (2024) and appreciate the opportunity to reflect upon it in this commentary. The concept of assessing employees' personality development goals in the

workplace appears as intriguing and thought-provoking. As the authors describe, the assessment of people's actual personality trait levels is already a common approach for organizational purposes like personnel

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selection and development and in parallel, research has provided considerable knowledge of assessing personality with inventories, situational judgment tests, interviews and assessment centers (e.g., Heimann et al., 2021, 2022; Judge et al., 2013; Oostrom et al., 2019). We agree that complementing this procedure with an assessment of people's desired personality trait levels, their personality development goals, could be a step forward. To achieve this, we would like to raise (unanswered) questions regarding the consideration of employees' personality development goals, in particular in the context of personnel development.

In the first part of this commentary, we would like to discuss the potential value of considering personality development goals in personnel development by comparing it to what we perceive as the current status quo: a primary focus on skill levels and their enhancement.¹ In the second part, we will explore open questions regarding the implementation of volitional personality development at work for organizations that may find it valuable to incorporate it into their personnel development strategies.

1 | TRAIT VERSUS SKILLS: WHAT IS THE MORE VALUABLE TARGET FOR DEVELOPMENT AT WORK?

In a way, comparing the primary focus on skill levels and their enhancement to a focus on personality trait levels and their development follows a standard practice for evaluating new interventions, namely, to compare them to the "treatment-as-usual." We believe such a comparison is warranted given that organizations already invest an enormous amount of money into the development of employees per year. In the United States, for instance, 90 billion dollar have been estimated as expenditures for 2017 (Carucci, 2018) and in the UK 42 billion pounds for 2018 (Department for Education, 2020). While this investment is critical for organizations not only in terms of ensuring effectiveness, but also from the point of view of retaining talent, organizations need to decide wisely on how to spend resources for personnel development; and investing in one particular development approach will oftentimes come at the cost of investing less in another development approach. This led us to first consider a critical question that, in our view, warrants careful consideration before moving forward: Are personality traits a more valuable target for development in the workplace compared to skills?

Given that organizations need to operate in a profitable manner, a key aspect when evaluating the promotion of employees' trait development goals at work in comparison to enhancing skills is the extent to which personality traits versus skills can potentially contribute to fostering job performance. Whereas traits refer to what a person tends to do (typical behavior), skills represent someone's functional capacities that define what a person can do (maximal possible behavior), when the situation calls for it (e.g., Soto et al., 2021). The distinction between traits as describing typical behavior and skills as describing maximal possible behavior is also reflected in the distinction between typical performance and maximum performance as brought up by Sackett et al. (1988): Typical performance, is best predicted by a person's trait levels and is expected during non-evaluated, everyday situations. It refers to what someone usually *tends to do*. Maximum performance, in contrast, is best predicted

by a person's skill level and is expected when someone chooses to invest maximum effort on demand. It refers to what someone can do (Sackett, 2007; Soto et al., 2022; Turner, 1978). Research supports this conceptual distinction, as illustrated by a moderate corrected Meta-analytic correlation of maximum and typical performance ($\rho = 0.42$, Beus & Whitman, 2012).

For personnel development, the distinction between traits and skills therefore raises the known (Sackett et al., 2007) but, as far as we are aware, still unanswered question if it is feasible to lower the discrepancy between typical and maximum performance such that regular "tends to do" would approach "can do" under maximum performance conditions. Soto et al. (2022) also argue that, compared to skills, which predict behavior in high-stakes situations, traits "may better predict outcomes that rely on sustained behavior over longer periods of time" (p. 218). Clearly, performance on a job and a professional career demand sustained behavior over extended periods of time. If individuals have developed the trait levels necessary to typically show higher performance, even high performance levels are supposed to feel authentic, effortless, and intrinsically motivated (Tett et al., 2021). Accordingly, when aiming to raise the overall level of typical performance and thereby lower the gap to maximum performance, developing personality appears a relevant approach.

A possible argument in favor of personality development stems from research on the job performance facets Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB) and Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB). CWB refers to "any intentional behavior on the part of an organization member viewed by the organization as contrary to its legitimate interests" (Gruys & Sackett, 2003, p. 30), for instance theft, destruction, or inappropriate verbal actions, and can reduce an organization's effectiveness (Carpenter et al., 2021). OCB refers to "work behaviors that support the broader organizational, social, and psychological environment of an organization" (Berry et al., 2007, p. 414), for instance helping co-workers or volunteering to participate in business events, and contributes to an organizations' effectiveness (Podsakoff et al., 2009). Meta-analytic research suggests that the Big Five personality traits are negatively correlated with CWB (Berry et al., 2007) and positively correlated with OCB (Chiaburu et al., 2011), although the specific effect sizes vary depending on which traits are looked at. Hence, the benefits that organizations may reap from supporting their employees' personality development on these traits may extend beyond the benefits of supporting their employees' skill development which oftentimes prioritizes the enhancement of task performance. Moreover, these benefits may be more long-lasting given that the overall demand to be a good employee may be less prone to change than more job-specific demands in constantly evolving work environments.

There are also arguments against a greater emphasis on supporting employees' personality development (vs. skill enhancement) within the workplace. It seems relatively straightforward to assume that higher levels of skills are always better, whereas we do not yet know what trait levels would be optimal for reaching the highest possible levels of performance. Against the backdrop of less explored nonlinear effects between personality and performance, performance losses could be the result of developing levels of certain traits beyond a certain threshold. Based on empirical findings on curvilinear effects

of emotional stability on OCB and CWB, it is, for example, possible that training employees with relatively high emotional stability to become even more emotionally stable may, at a certain inflection point, no longer provide benefits in terms of potentially increasing OCB or decreasing CWB and could even backfire (Le et al., 2011).

Finally, we would also like to refute an argument that could be brought up in favor of developing traits instead of skills: Trait changes could benefit employees outside of work as well (Hill & Jackson, 2016) because traits are known to predict outcomes across various life domains (e.g., conscientiousness is associated not only with work performance, but also with health behaviors; Bogg & Roberts, 2004). While this argument supports the promotion of trait development (e.g., increasing conscientiousness) over narrow behavioral changes (e.g., using an agenda for time management) (Bleidorn et al., 2019), we believe it loses some of its strength when comparing trait development to the development of broader skills like social engagement skills, cooperation skills, self-management skills, emotional resilience skills, and innovation skills. Like traits, these skills are likely broad enough to benefit individuals in non-work contexts. Research within the social, emotional, and behavioral skills framework (Soto et al., 2021, 2022) has, for example, shown that broad skills predict academic achievement and engagement, social relationships, civic engagement, and well-being (in adolescents), even above and beyond the Big Five traits (Soto et al., 2024). And just as conscientiousness is linked to goal pursuit and task completion outside of work, self-leadership, a trainable skill that is often used synonymously with self-management, relates not only to task performance, commitment, and job satisfaction, but also to self-efficacy, creativity, and innovation (Harari et al., 2021; Knotts et al., 2022), all of which should provide benefits inside and outside the work domain. Thus, if the work environment fosters the development of broadly applicable skills, individuals could experience comparable benefits as they would from an increase in personality traits. Potentially, these broad skills, could for instance benefit OCB.

2 | IF ORGANIZATIONS AIM TO DEVELOP EMPLOYEES' PERSONALITY, WHAT ARE POTENTIAL PATHWAYS IN THE WORK CONTEXT?

The feasibility and implementation of volitional trait change efforts within the workplace context require nuanced discussions on their own. Would efforts that support employees in attaining their personality change goals, for example, through training, be effective at all? Clearly, as summarized by Dupré and Wille (2024), personality is—presumably even without the explicit employees' intentions—influenced by work experiences and demands (e.g., Heyde et al., 2023; Li et al., 2021; Wille & De Fruyt, 2014). It is, however, unclear to what extent more intentional trait change efforts would be successful in the context of work, what effects organizational measures could have in this regard, and what such measures could look like.

Using the previous standard of comparison with skills, it is, however, known that enhancing employees' skill levels is a common

goal that can be achieved successfully. For example, organizational trainings have effect sizes of $d = 0.54$ for interpersonal skills (Arthur et al., 2003) and $d = 0.78$ for leadership skills, when behavioral evaluation criteria are considered (Lacerenza et al., 2017). In comparison, a 12-week long app-based personality change intervention had an average effect of $d = 0.52$ – 0.58 on increases or decreases in self-reported traits, respectively (Stieger et al., 2021) and clinical interventions with an average duration of 24 weeks have an average effect on the development of personality traits of $d = 0.27$ (Roberts et al., 2017). Given that this personality change research was conducted outside of the work context, it is not yet possible to quantify the effectiveness of efforts that support employees' personality development based on empirical findings.

In addition, it remains an open question *how* employers could support their employees in developing traits beyond training in related skills (e.g., training self-management techniques to enhance conscientiousness). Considering the relevance of needs analysis for training, we can certainly see potential value in assessing trainees' personality goal development to identify the need for personality development. Yet, after a needs analysis with potential agreement on the direction of the development, the question is still how to exactly move forward in terms of how to best achieve the development of employees' personality. One of the most effective ways to alter a personality trait could be by consistently engaging in behaviors that align more closely with the desired trait level than with the current one—in other words, by practicing to “act out of character” (Kuijpers et al., 2022). For example, to become more extraverted, one might regularly seek out social interactions or behave more assertively. When done over prolonged periods of time, the repeated enactment of these behaviors may become habitual and result in relatively stable changes to personality traits (Hennecke et al., 2014; Olaru et al., 2024; Quintus et al., 2021; Roberts & Jackson, 2008; Van Zalk et al., 2020; Wrzus & Roberts, 2017). In the context of work, this suggests that job demands are probably the most powerful influence on personality development, at least if employees are motivated to meet them (Olaru et al., 2024). To meet these job demands, employees can be required to exhibit personality states that may not align with their current trait levels (e.g., for work planning conscientiousness, for customer acquisition extraversion). For instance, an introverted individual in a role that requires frequent customer acquisition will be compelled to “act out of character,” potentially leading to an increase in their level of extraversion over time. This aligns with personnel development approaches of “on the job training” and development via additional tasks or (temporary) assignments of novel tasks (e.g., job enrichment) during which employees are exposed to novel job demands (e.g., work planning for the first time, customer acquisition tasks), and also corresponds to the perspective on work design as an opportunity to develop and learn (Parker, 2014).

If work demands indeed serve as a strong force for personality trait development, it becomes essential to understand these demands in terms of the traits they promote before moving forward to add personality development modules. To determine job demands, various approaches are possible. Denissen et al. (2018) have, for

example, asked experts to rate jobs in terms of the personality traits required for them. Using this approach, it was possible to predict employees' individual income from the extent to which their personality traits matched or mismatched with their (personality-based) job demands. To assess job demands, Wille and De Fruyt (2014) asked job holders' to describe their job characteristics using the Position Classification Inventory that assesses the resemblance of job characteristics to Holland's RIASEC types. They found evidence for job characteristics predicting changes in four of the Big Five personality traits 14 years later, thereby underlining the role of job demands for personality development. Finally, it may be possible to infer demands to some degree from the observed personality traits of employees that already work in various occupations. However, occupations used as predictors account for relatively little variance in personality traits (e.g., 2%–7% in a recent study by Anni et al., 2023; 1%–4% in a study by Törnroos et al., 2019; 7–10% in a study by Wolfram, 2023) and it remains unclear whether the observed personality traits of employees really reflect the occupations' demands, and, in turn, the direction toward which employees' personality would change over time.

If employees seek to change traits that are not directly linked to their tasks and job demands, it is uncertain how additional training or development modules might look like that can assist them in the context of work. It has been argued that reflective processes can also be leveraged to change one's personality by consciously gathering information from observing and reflecting on one's own behavior (Allemand & Flückiger, 2017; Wrzus & Roberts, 2017). This approach may be particularly important to change components of personality traits that are not behavioral, that is affect, cognition, and desires (Wilt & Revelle, 2015), and thus it could be relevant to include personality development coaching sessions to foster self-reflections and observations. Take for example extraversion: Even if employees act in an extraverted manner, that does not necessarily imply that they are happy and relaxed doing so, or that they also think optimistically and desire stimulation and excitement. Which additional personality development measures would be necessary to support employees in these nonbehavioral trait level changes remains an open question. It is furthermore unclear how potential complementary modules would have to be designed and would interact with job demands and relatedly, which ones would provide sufficient incremental value over job demands. In addition, potentially relevant demands outside the work domain (e.g., voluntary engagement outside work, demands associated with nonwork life events) could additionally influence the effectiveness of the respective approaches.

3 | CONCLUSION AND FINAL REMARKS

We applaud Dupré and Wille (2024) for inspiring us to think about the potential benefits of considering applicants' and employees' personality development goals at work. In terms of the relevance of high-quality assessment methods, we are convinced that sparking

thoughts on valid assessment of these potential development goals cannot be brought up early enough as organizational practices tend to outpace research. As such, we think that their proposal can inspire future research on personality development at work, an area where research could provide meaningful evidence for informing potential practices.

Moreover, given that most adults experience discrepancies between their actual and their desired personality trait levels (see Hennecke et al., 2020 for data on discrepancies in a large representative sample of adults), it appears likely that a considerable number of applicants and employees would show interest in receiving support in attaining desired levels of personality traits at the workplace. Accordingly, the approach proposed by Dupré and Wille (2024) could catch some attention in the so-called “war for talents.” Anecdotaly, we have even noticed that some organizational training providers appear to already sell personality development to trainees (even when what they offer is personality assessment), presumably in response to a perceived demand.

As outlined above, there also remain some unanswered questions regarding both the value and practical implementation of incorporating personality development goals into assessment and development processes within organizations. In terms of value, more evidence is needed to demonstrate that the benefits for both employees and the organization outweigh those of traditional skill assessment and enhancement. On the implementation side, a clearer understanding is required of how job demands influence personality traits and of how these demands interact with and shape the integration of potential complementary training modules.

Notwithstanding an increased interest in volitional personality development, we would like to caution employers against pushing forward with offering “opportunities for personality development” to attract and retain talents unless they have an, ideally evaluated, strategy for supporting personality development that goes beyond personality assessment, skill development measures, or “offering” job demands. We also think that applicants and employees should be provided with a realistic outlook that their personality change may be slow, limited in extent, and effortful. Otherwise, they may underestimate the affective costs and exhaustion that results from out-of-character behavior (Kuijpers et al., 2022) and become discouraged. To be able, willing, and happy to invest contra-trait effort over long enough periods for new trait levels to develop, employees will also need to be sufficiently motivated for their (future) roles and their trait development.

Concerning future research, we believe that personality development is a fruitful area that is meaningful for industrial and organizational psychology as well as personality psychology as it may contribute to understand the interplay of job demands and training and development for personality development, and at the same time, will derive practical implications for organizations and employees. As we as researchers enjoyed joining forces to write this commentary across the psychology subdisciplines, we envision that more is to be gained from bridging our subdisciplinary siloes and summarize exemplary avenues in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Research on personality development at work.

Future research topic	Exemplary questions
Reactions, perceptions and motivation toward personality development at work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do employees perceive and react towards offers of volitional personality development at work (e.g., perceived feasibility, intrusiveness)? To what extent do reactions depend on employees (e.g., learning orientation, fit of their personality to (future) job demands, career orientation) and the offered development interventions and related communication (e.g., explanations)? How is the training and development motivation for volitional personality development at work and how does it develop across time and in light of affective costs, and to what extent does it affect development outcomes?
Understanding interventions for personality development at work and their effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are effective approaches for personality development at work? Can the convergence of maximum and typical performance be increased via trait development? Does the development of traits explain additional shares of variance in work performance, including organizational citizenship and counterproductive work behaviors, over and above the development of (more or less) broad skills? Do interventions promoting personality development at work have linearly positive effects? What is the interplay of job demands and development modules and how does it impact its effectiveness? What role do nonwork demands play in this context?

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTE

¹ We acknowledge that different comparisons would have been possible and set out to polarize a bit to spark further discussion, while acknowledging that a complementary approach of developing skills and personality is a viable possibility if affordable.

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