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Characteristics of People

Key concepts and terms

- Ability
- Attitudes
- Attribution theory
- Bounded rationality
- Emotional intelligence
- Emotions
- Self-efficacy
- Intelligence
- Orientation to work
- Perception
- Personality
- Psychological climate
- Roles

Learning outcomes

On completing this chapter you should be able to define these key concepts. You should also know about:

- Individual differences
- Personality theories
- Types of behaviour
- Variations in personal characteristics
- Emotional intelligence characteristics

Introduction

To manage people effectively, it is necessary to take into account the factors that affect how they behave at work. This means understanding the significance of individual differences, the characteristics of people that explain how they act and the types of behaviour that feature in organizational life.

Individual differences

The development of HR processes and the design of organizations are often predicated on the belief that everyone is the same and will behave rationally when faced with change or other demands. But the behaviour of people differs because of their characteristics and individual differences and it is not always rational.

The management of people would be much easier if everyone were the same, but they aren't. As discussed below, they are, of course, different because of variations in personal characteristics and the influence of their background (the culture in which they were brought up); sex, race or disability are also considered factors by some people although holding these views readily leads to discrimination. In addition, there will be differences in ability, intelligence, personality, background and the environment in which they were brought up.

Variations in personal characteristics

The headings under which personal characteristics can vary have been classified by Mischel (1968) as follows.

SOURCE REVIEW

Variations in personal characteristics, Mischel (1968)

- Competencies – abilities and skills.
- Constructs – the conceptual framework that governs how people perceive their environment.
- Expectations – what people have learnt to expect about their own and others' behaviour.
- Values – what people believe to be important.
- Self-regulatory plans – the goals people set themselves and the plans they make to achieve them.

These are affected by environmental or situational variables, including the type of work individuals carry out; the culture, climate and management style in the organization; the social group within which they work; and the 'reference groups' that individuals use for comparative purposes (eg comparing conditions of work or pay between one category of employee and another).

The influence of background and culture

Individual differences may be a function of people's background, which will include the environment and culture in which they have been brought up and now exist. Levinson (1978) suggested that 'individual life structure' is shaped by three types of external event: the socio-cultural environment, the roles people play and the relationships they have, and the opportunities and constraints that enable or inhibit them to express and develop their personality.

Differences arising from sex, race or disability

It is futile, dangerous and invidious to make assumptions about inherent differences between people because of their sex, race or disability. If there are differences in behaviour at work these are more likely to arise from environmental and cultural factors than from differences in fundamental personal characteristics. The work environment undoubtedly influences feelings and behaviour for all these categories. Arnold *et al* (1991) referred to research that established that working women as a whole 'experienced more daily stress, marital dissatisfaction, and ageing worries, and were less likely to show overt anger than either housewives or men'. Ethnic minorities may find that the selection process is biased against them, promotion prospects are low and that they are subject to other overt or subtle forms of discrimination. The behaviour of disabled people can also be affected by the fact that they are not given equal opportunities. There is, of course, legislation against discrimination in each of those areas but this cannot prevent the more covert forms of prejudice.

Influences on behaviour at work

Behaviour at work is dependent on both the personal characteristics of individuals, as considered below, and the situation in which they are working. These factors interact, and this theory of behaviour is sometimes called 'interactionism'. It is because of the process of interaction and because there are so many variables in personal characteristics and situations that behaviour is difficult to analyse and predict. It is generally assumed that attitudes determine behaviour but there is not such a direct link as most people suppose. As Arnold *et al* (1991) comment, research evidence has shown that: 'People's avowed feelings and beliefs about someone or something seemed only loosely related to how they behaved towards it.'

Environmental influences on behaviour, James and Sells (1981)

- Role characteristics such as role ambiguity and conflict (see the last section of this chapter).
- Job characteristics such as autonomy and challenge.
- Leader behaviours including goal emphasis and work facilitation.
- Work group characteristics including cooperation and friendliness.
- Organizational policies that directly affect individuals such as the reward system.

Personal characteristics

The personal characteristics that affect people's behaviour at work are their ability, intelligence, personality, attitudes, emotions and emotional intelligence.

Abilities

Ability is the quality possessed by people that makes an action possible. Abilities have been analysed by Burt (1954) and Vernon (1961). They classified them into two major groups:

V:ed – standing for verbal, numerical, memory and reasoning abilities.

K:m – standing for spatial and mechanical abilities, as well as perceptual (memory) and motor skills relating to physical operations such as eye/hand coordination and mental dexterity.

They also suggested that overriding these abilities there is GMA, or general mental ability, which accounts for most variations in performance. It is interesting to note that, as established by Schmidt and Hunter (1998) following a meta-analysis of 85 years of research findings, for selecting people without previous experience the most valid predictor of future performance and learning was GMA.

Alternative classifications have been produced by:

- Thurstone (1940) – spatial ability, perceptual speed, numerical ability, verbal meaning, memory, verbal fluency and inductive reasoning.
- Gagne (1977) – intellectual skills, cognitive (understanding and learning) skills, verbal and motor skills.

- Argyle (1989) – judgement, creativity and social skills.

Intelligence

Intelligence has been defined as:

- ‘The capacity to solve problems, apply principles, make inferences and perceive relationships.’ (Argyle, 1989)
- ‘The capacity for abstract thinking and reasoning with a range of different contents and media.’ (Toplis *et al*, 1991)
- ‘The capacity to process information.’ (Makin *et al*, 1996)
- ‘What is measured by intelligence tests.’ (Wright and Taylor, 1970)

The last, tautological definition is not facetious. As an operational definition, it can be related to the specific aspects of reasoning, inference, cognition (ie knowing, conceiving) and perception (ie understanding, recognition) that intelligence tests attempt to measure.

General intelligence, as noted above, consists of a number of mental abilities that enable a person to succeed at a wide variety of intellectual tasks that use the faculties of knowing and reasoning. The mathematical technique of factor analysis has been used to identify the constituents of intelligence, such as Thurstone’s (1940) multiple factors listed above.

An alternative approach to the analysis of intelligence was put forward by Guilford (1967), who distinguished five types of mental operation: thinking, remembering, divergent production (problem solving that leads to unexpected and original solutions), convergent production (problem solving that leads to the one, correct solution) and evaluating.

Personality

Personality has been defined by Huczynski and Buchanan (2007) as: ‘The psychological qualities that influence an individual’s characteristic behaviour patterns in a stable and distinctive manner.’ As noted by Ivancevich *et al* (2008), personality appears to be organized into patterns that are, to some degree, observable and measurable and involves both common and unique characteristics – every person is different from every other person in some respects but similar to other persons in other respects. Personality is a product of both nature (hereditary) and nurture (the pattern of life experience). Personality can be described in terms of traits or types.

The trait concept of personality

Traits are predispositions to behave in certain ways in a variety of different situations. They have been classified as the ‘big five’ as follows.

Personality traits – the big five, Costa and McCrae (1992)

1. Openness.
2. Conscientiousness.
3. Extraversion.
4. Agreeableness.
5. Neuroticism.

The assumption that people are consistent in the ways they express these traits is the basis for making predictions about their future behaviour. We all attribute traits to people in an attempt to understand why they behave in the way they do. As Chell (1987) explained: ‘This cognitive process gives a sense of order to what might otherwise appear to be senseless uncoordinated behaviours. Traits may therefore be thought of as classification systems, used by individuals to understand other people’s and their own behaviour.’ But the trait theory of personality has been attacked by people such as Mischel (1981). The main criticisms have been as follows:

- People do not necessarily express the same trait across different situations or even the same trait in the same situation. Different people may exhibit consistency in some traits and considerable variability in others.
- Classical trait theory, as formulated by Cattell (1963), assumes that the manifestation of trait behaviour is independent of the situations and the persons with whom the individual is interacting. This assumption is questionable, given that trait behaviour usually manifests itself in response to specific situations.
- Trait attributions are a product of language – they are devices for speaking about people and are not generally described in terms of behaviour.

Type theories of personality

Type theory identifies a number of types of personality that can be used to categorize people and may form the basis of a personality test. The types may be linked to descriptions of various traits.

One of the most widely used type theories is that of Jung (1923). He identified four major preferences of people:

1. relating to other people – extraversion or introversion;
2. gathering information – sensing (dealing with facts that can be objectively verified), or intuitive (generating information through insight);
3. using information – thinking (emphasizing logical analysis as the basis for decision making), or feeling (making decisions based on internal values and beliefs);
4. making decisions – perceiving (collecting all the relevant information before making a decision), or judging (resolving the issue without waiting for a large quantity of data).

This theory of personality forms the basis of personality tests such as the Myers-Briggs Types Indicator.

Eysenck (1953) produced a well known typology. He identified three personality traits: extroversion/introversion, neuroticism and psychoticism, and classified people as stable or unstable extroverts or introverts. For example, a stable introvert is passive, careful, controlled and thoughtful, while a stable extrovert is lively, outgoing, responsive and sociable.

As Makin *et al* (1996) comment, studies using types to predict work-related behaviours are less common and may be difficult to interpret: 'In general it would be fair to say that their level of predictability is similar to that for trait measures.'

Attitudes

An attitude can broadly be defined as a settled mode of thinking. Attitudes are evaluative. As Makin *et al* 1996 say, 'Any attitude contains an assessment of whether the object to which it refers is liked or disliked.' Attitudes are developed through experience but they are less stable than traits and can change as new experiences are gained or influences absorbed. Within organizations they are affected by cultural factors (values and norms), the behaviour of management (management style), policies such as those concerned with pay, recognition, promotion and the quality of working life, and the influence of the 'reference group' (the group with whom people identify). Sometimes there may be a discrepancy between attitudes and behaviour, ie someone may believe in one thing such as being fair to people but act differently. This is called 'cognitive dissonance'.

Emotions

Emotions are feelings such as anger, fear, sadness, joy, anticipation and acceptance; they arouse people and therefore influence their behaviour. The mildest forms of emotions are called 'moods', which are low intensity, long-lasting emotional states.

Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence is a combination of skills and abilities such as self-awareness, self-control, empathy and sensitivity to the feelings of others. The notion of emotional intelligence was first defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990), who proposed that it involves the capacity to perceive emotion, integrate emotion in thought, understand emotion and manage emotions effectively.

Goleman (1995) popularized the concept. He defined emotional intelligence as ‘The capacity for recognizing our own feelings and that of others, for motivating ourselves, for managing emotions well in ourselves as well as others.’ He defined its four components as follows.

SOURCE REVIEW

Components of emotional intelligence, Goleman (1995)

1. Self-management – the ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods and regulate your own behaviour coupled with a propensity to pursue goals with energy and persistence. The six competencies associated with this component are self-control, trustworthiness and integrity, initiative, adaptability – comfort with ambiguity, openness to change and strong desire to achieve.
2. Self-awareness – the ability to recognize and understand your moods, emotions and drives as well as their effect on others. This is linked to three competencies: self-confidence, realistic self-assessment and emotional self-awareness.
3. Social awareness – the ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people and skill in treating people according to their emotional reactions. This is linked to six competencies: empathy, expertise in building and retaining talent, organizational awareness, cross-cultural sensitivity, valuing diversity and service to clients and customers.
4. Social skills – proficiency in managing relationships and building networks to get the desired result from others and reach personal goals and the ability to find common ground and build rapport. The five competencies associated with this component are: leadership, effectiveness in leading change, conflict management, influence/communication, and expertise in building and leading teams.

According to Goleman it is not enough to have a high IQ (intelligence quotient); emotional intelligence is also required. Since Goleman’s contribution, the following three major models

of emotional intelligence, as summarized by Clarke (2007), that have dominated the writing in this area are as follows:

1. Personality models have become the most popular theory of emotional intelligence following Goleman. Here, emotional intelligence is viewed as comprising a range of emotional dispositions as well as competences, from individual traits to a number of learnt capabilities. These are all contained within five separate elements of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, motivation, self-regulation, empathy, and adeptness in relationships.
2. Mixed models – comprising aspects of personality as well as abilities to perceive emotional intelligence and manage emotions – have abounded, with arguably the most developed being that by Bar-On (1997). This model includes 15 subscales underpinning five dimensions of an individual's emotional quotient (EQ). These are identified as: intrapersonal EQ (including emotional self-awareness), interpersonal EQ, adaptability, stress management, and general mood. The most notable distinction of this model is the far wider array of elements that make up emotional intelligence, in addition to those that might be more strictly considered as emotional abilities.
3. The ability model, however, views emotional intelligence far more narrowly, comprising a set of four cognitive abilities that involve the capacity to identify, reason with, and utilize emotions effectively. The construct is made up of four branches: the ability to perceive emotion, the ability to integrate emotion to facilitate thought, the ability to understand emotions, and the ability to manage and regulate emotions.

As Clarke comments, of all these models, the first two have come under criticism in terms of the ambiguity associated with the areas included and the measurement approaches employed. The ability model has received more positive commentary as possessing greater validity. Research is now showing some exciting implications, particularly as regards a clear link between this set of emotional abilities, transformational leadership and the quality of individuals' social relationships.

Types of behaviour

The types of behaviour associated with individual differences are perception, attribution, orientation, roles and bounded rationality.

Perception

Perception is the intuitive understanding, recognition and interpretation of things and events. Behaviour will be influenced by the perceptions of individuals about the situation they are in.

The term ‘psychological climate’ has been coined by James and Sells (1981) to describe how perceptions give the situation psychological significance and meaning.

Perception has been defined by Ivancevitch *et al* (2008) as: ‘The process by which an individual gives meaning to the environment. It involves organizing and interpreting various stimuli into a psychological experience.’ Perception is empirical in that it is based on the individual’s past experience. Different people will therefore perceive the same thing in different ways. As Ivancevitch *et al* comment: ‘While we think we are describing some objective reality, we are in fact describing our subjective reactions to that reality.’ And it is this perception of reality that shapes behaviour. To a large extent people interpret the events and the actions of others from their own viewpoint. They see what they want to see.

Attribution theory

Attribution theory is concerned with how people assign causes to events. It involves perceptions about why things happen or why people behave in the way they do. Behaviour is often influenced by the perceived causes of events rather than the events themselves. Attribution theory explains how we make judgements about people at work. We make an attribution when we perceive and describe other people’s actions and try to discover why they behaved in the way they did. We can also make attributions about our own behaviour. Heider (1958) has pointed out that: ‘In everyday life we form ideas about other people and about social situations. We interpret other people’s actions and we predict what they will do under certain circumstances.’

In attributing causes to people’s actions we distinguish between what is in the person’s power to achieve and the effect of environmental influence. A personal cause, whether someone does well or badly, may, for example, be the amount of effort displayed, while a situational cause may be the extreme difficulty of the task.

Criteria for deciding whether behaviour is attributable to personal rather than external (situational) causes, Kelley (1967)

1. Distinctiveness – the behaviour can be distinguished from the behaviour of other people in similar situations.
2. Consensus – if other people agree that the behaviour is governed by some personal characteristic.
3. Consistency over time – whether the behaviour is repeated.
4. Consistency over modality (ie the manner in which things are done) – whether or not the behaviour is repeated in different situations.

Attribution theory is also concerned with the way in which people attribute success or failure to themselves. Research by Weiner (1974) and others has indicated that when people with high achievement needs have been successful they ascribe this to internal factors such as ability and effort. High achievers tend to attribute failure to lack of effort and not lack of ability. Low achievers tend not to link success with effort but to ascribe their failures to lack of ability.

Self-efficacy

The concept of self-efficacy was developed by Bandura (1982) who defined it as 'how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations'. It is concerned with an individual's self-belief that he or she will be able to accomplish certain tasks, achieve certain goals or learn certain things. Research by Grandey (2000) established that individuals high on self-efficacy tended to perform at a higher level.

Orientation to work

Orientation theory examines the factors that are instrumental, ie serve as a means of accomplishing something, in directing people's choices about work. An orientation is a central organizing principle that underlies people's attempts to make sense of their lives. In relation to work, as defined by Guest (1984): 'An orientation is a persisting tendency to seek certain goals and rewards from work which exists independently of the nature of the work and the work content.' The concept of orientation stresses the role of the social environment factor as a key factor affecting motivation.

Orientation theory is primarily developed from fieldwork carried out by sociologists rather than from laboratory work conducted by psychologists. Goldthorpe *et al* (1968) studied skilled and semi-skilled workers in Luton and, in their findings, they stressed the importance of instrumental orientation, that is, a view of work as a means to an end, a context in which to earn money to purchase goods and leisure. The research team found that the 'affluent' workers they interviewed valued work largely for extrinsic reasons.

In their research carried out with blue-collar workers in Peterborough, Blackburn and Mann (1979) found a wider range of orientations. They suggested that different ones could come into play with varying degrees of force in different situations. The fact that workers, in practice, had little choice about what they did contributed to this diversity – their orientations were affected by the choice or lack of choice presented to them and this meant that they might be forced to accept alternative orientations. They commented that: 'An obsession with wages clearly emerged... A concern to minimize unpleasant work was also widespread.' Surprisingly, perhaps, they also revealed that the most persistent preference of all was for outside work, 'a fairly clear desire for a combination of fresh air and freedom'.

Roles

When faced with any situation, eg carrying out a job, people have to enact a role in order to manage that situation. This is sometimes called the ‘situation-act model’. As described by Chell (1985), the model indicates that: ‘The person must act within situations: situations are rule-governed and how a person behaves is often prescribed by these socially acquired rules. The person thus adopts a suitable role in order to perform effectively within the situation.’

At work, the term ‘role’ describes the part played by individuals in fulfilling their work requirements. Roles therefore indicate the specific forms of behaviour required to carry out a particular task or the group of tasks contained in a position or job. The concept of a role emphasizes the fact that people at work are, in a sense, always acting a part: they are not simply reciting the lines but are interpreting them in terms of their own perceptions of how they should behave in relation to the context in which they work, especially with regard to their interactions with other people.

Role theory, as formulated by Katz and Kahn (1966) states that the role individuals occupy at work, and elsewhere, exists in relation to other people – their role set, which consists of the individuals with whom a role-holder interacts and therefore influences and is also influenced by them. Members of a role set have expectations about the individuals’ roles, and if they live up to these expectations they will have successfully performed the role.

Performance in a role is a product of the situation individuals are in (the organizational context and the direction or influence exercised from above or elsewhere in the organization) and their own skills, competencies, attitudes and personality. Situational factors are important, but the role individuals perform can both shape and reflect their personalities. Stress and inadequate performance result when roles are ambiguous, incompatible, or in conflict with one another.

Role problems

- Role ambiguity – when individuals are unclear about what their role is, what is expected of them, or how they are getting on, they may become insecure or lose confidence in themselves.
- Role incompatibility – stress and poor performance may be caused by roles having incompatible elements, as when there is a clash between what other people expect from the role and what individuals believe is expected of them.
- Role conflict – this happens when, even if roles are clearly defined and there are no incompatible elements, individuals have to carry out two antagonistic roles. For example, conflict can exist between the roles of individuals at work and their roles at home.

Bounded rationality

The extent to which people behave rationally is limited by their capacity to understand the complexities of the situation they are in and their emotional reactions to it. This is the concept of bounded rationality – while people by their own lights are reasoned in their own behaviour, the reasoning behind their behaviour is influenced by ‘human frailties and demands from both within and outside the organization’ (Miller *et al*, 1999). As Harrison (2005) put it:

Some of the factors that pull players away from a purely rational approach include confused, excessive, incomplete or unreliable data, incompetent processing or communicating of information, pressures of time, human emotions and differences in individuals’ cognitive processes, mental maps and reasoning capacity.

Implications for HR specialists

The main implications for HR specialists of the factors that affect individuals at work are summarized below.

Individual differences

When designing jobs, preparing learning and development programmes, assessing and counselling staff, developing reward systems and dealing with grievances and disciplinary problems, it is necessary to remember that all people are different. What fulfils one person may not fulfil another. Abilities, aptitudes and intelligence differ widely and it is necessary to take particular care in fitting the right people to the right jobs and giving them the right training. Personalities, attitudes and emotions also differ. It is important to focus on how to manage diversity. This should take account of individual differences, which will include any issues arising from the employment of women, people from different ethnic groups, those with disabilities and older people. The predictive effectiveness of general mental ability (GMA) tests as selection aids should be noted.

Judgements on personality

Personality should not be judged or measured simplistically in terms of stereotyped traits. People are complex and they change, and account has to be taken of this. The problem for HR specialists and managers in general is that, while they have to accept and understand these differences and take full account of them, they have ultimately to proceed on the basis of fitting them to the requirements of the situation, which are essentially what the organization needs to achieve. There is always a limit to the extent to which an organization that relies on collective effort to achieve its goals can adjust itself to the specific needs of individuals. But the

organization has to appreciate that the pressures it places on people can result in stress and therefore can become counter-productive.

Perceptions and attributions

We tend to see things from our own frame of reference when we ascribe motives to other people and attempt to establish the causes of their behaviour. We must be careful not to make simplistic judgements about causality (ie what has motivated someone's behaviour) – for ourselves as well as in respect of others – especially when we are assessing performance.

Self-efficacy

In operating performance management and reward systems and providing training we must try to develop self-belief – the confidence people have in their own abilities and capacity to perform well.

Orientation theory

The significance of orientation theory is that it stresses the importance of the effect of environmental factors on the motivation to work.

Role theory

Role theory helps us to understand the need to clarify with individuals what is expected of them in behavioural terms and to ensure when designing jobs that they do not contain any incompatible elements. We must also be aware of the potential for role conflict so that steps can be taken to minimize stress.

Bounded rationality

Don't expect everyone to behave rationally, especially when confronted with change. Use techniques of communication and involvement to overcome irrational reactions.

Characteristics of people – key learning points

Individual differences

The development of HR processes and the design of organizations are often based on the belief that everyone is the same and will behave rationally when faced with change or other demands. But the behaviour of people differs because of their characteristics and individual differences and it is not always rational.

Variations in personal characteristics

These result from differences in:

- competencies – abilities and skills;
- constructs – the conceptual framework that governs how people perceive their environment;
- expectations – what people have learnt to expect about their own and others' behaviour;
- values – what people believe to be important;
- self-regulatory plans – the goals people set themselves and the plans they make to achieve them.

Personality theories

Personality is a product of both nature (hereditary) and nurture (the pattern of life experience). Personality can be described in terms of traits or types.

Emotional intelligence characteristics

- Self-management.
- Self-awareness.
- Social awareness.
- Social skills.

Types of behaviour

The types of behaviour associated with individual differences are perception, attribution, orientation, roles and bounded rationality.

Role theory

The role individuals occupy at work, and elsewhere, exists in relation to other people – their role set, which consists of the individuals with whom a role-holder interacts and therefore influences and is also influenced by them.

Questions

1. What is personality?
2. You have been asked to explain trait theory to your fellow students. You are expected to submit the theory to critical examination.
3. What problems can occur in carrying out roles?

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