

# The Role of Trait Activation Theory in Occupational Behavior: A Systematic Review

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The Trait Activation Theory (TAT) is widely regarded as the most influential personality theory approach in psychology. The purpose of this study is to analyze the TAT's role in the contemporary workplace. Which personality traits are more likely to predict work success? Which characteristics should businesses prioritize throughout the recruiting and selection processes? According to the Trait Activation Theory, what is the significance of motivation in the workplace and how can employers find employees who can be more productive, efficient, and involved in the organization's goals? A systematic review of past recent research was used to answer the questions raised above. Following the gathering and examination of multiple recent publications on the issue, it was determined that the use of this model had a favorable impact on individual and group performance, working relationships, manager job performance, and workplace creativity.

*Keywords:* Trait Activation Theory, Big Five Theory, workplace, personality traits, work behavior, job performance, leadership, group, innovation, core self-evaluation, autonomy

## Introduction

In this research study, we investigate how the combination of the Trait Activation Theory (TAT) and Big Five Theory may be applied to a specific organizational structure. Specifically, we examine how both can be used and correlated to predict employee performance. To be more explicit, the focus is mostly on the contribution that was made by both theories (TAT & Big Five Theory) as well as their application in the context of the working environment.

The examination of this concept in the context of a working environment has been the topic of a substantial amount of study that has been released publicly. In addition, this paper will analyze and investigate the effects of those models on working relationships, innovation, employees' and managers' performance, managerial decision-making, group performance, work-related stress, and managerial perspective. In addition, a critical analysis will be carried out, and the scope for more research that may be carried out in the future will be offered in connection to these theories to facilitate their continued development.

## Standard Definition of the Personality Trait

As per Allport (1931, pp. 368-372), "there are eight criteria to define the personality trait: A trait has more

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than nominal existence, is more generalized than a habit, is dynamic or at least determinative; the existence of a trait may be established; traits are only relatively independent of each other; a trait of personality psychologically considered is not the same as a moral quality, acts, and even habits, that are inconsistent with a trait, are not proof of the non-existence of the trait; a trait may be viewed either in the light of the personality which contains it or in the light of its distribution in the population at large.”

### **Basic Concepts of the Trait Activation Theory**

Many psychologists have tried to capture when trait activation happens and in which situations. As cited by Christiansen and Tett (2013), psychologists after a long investigation ended up with the following notion that first personality traits are latent propensities to behave in certain ways. Second traits are exhibited as reactions to trait-relevant situational cues, and third when one’s traits are expressed, he/she derives intrinsic satisfaction from it.

According to the trait-based model of job performance introduced in Tett and Burnett (2003), the theory of trait activation proposes the following three key elements:

1. Employees expressing traits at work that are responses to situational cues;
2. Three categories in the work-life (task, social, organizational) are possible to activate trait-relevant cues;
3. It is important to note that trait expressive work behavior is not the same as job performance, which may be understood in the most basic terms as valued work behavior.

Tett and Burnett (2003) did the extra mile and helped us by offering a taxonomy of workplace stressors to understand if the trait activation according to the situational cue will be an advantage for the performance of the employee or not.

The following taxonomy which includes: demands, distracters, constraints, releasers, and facilitators could be called “functional” by the way they contribute to the trait activation process (Tett & Burnett, 2003).

To understand the above an example would be useful. Companies have to take into consideration that every job position has a different approach to understanding if a stressor would be functional for the performance. In other words, it is essential to have a clear view of the day-to-day tasks of an employee. In our case, we will use the example of a salesman who takes a call from a client while the call is a distracter if the salesman accepts to socialize with the client and then the company might gain extra profit. Conversely, when a salesman who by nature is a social individual gathers in the lunchroom with the other colleagues and starts socializing, this situation is a distracter for the company if the salesman stays in the room for more time than appropriate for his/her break (Tett & Burnett, 2003).

In research from Tett, Toich, and Ozkum (2021) and focusing on previous researchers (e.g., Allport, 1951; Lewin, 1936; Murray, 1938), TAT personality traits are seen as latent potentials for behavior. Sometimes the traits appear in observable ways in response to environmental signals that are relevant to the characteristic in question. Similar to the tools carried on a tool belt, a person’s attributes are only used when the appropriate circumstances arise. Someone with a high level of sociability only exhibits sociable behavior when there are other individuals around with whom they may interact.

Therefore, a circumstance is relevant to a characteristic to the extent that it allows that feature to be manifested. Situations that are trait-relevant often have a significant impact on behavior (e.g., socially engaging situations tend to increase sociable behavior in everyone present). However, they also reveal individual variances in crucial traits: Social gatherings expose who is and is not social better than any other form of setting (Tett et al., 2021).

## Methodology

We conducted secondary research and qualitative analysis to compile this paper. Specifically, numerous publications on the influence of the Trait Activation Theory and Big Five Theory in the workplace were examined (systematic review). In addition, a vast amount of current, different publications were collected to get a comprehensive grasp of how this theory applies to the contemporary workplace.

## Results

There is no doubt that TAT has many applications, especially in the workplace environment. Companies by creating psychometric tests would be able to evaluate according to personality traits if a candidate would be a good fit for the organizational culture. Drawing on TAT research we found many studies which aim to prove the significance of TAT and its many applications in the workplace with the main goal to improve organizational citizenship behavior, employee performance, autonomy, mindset, and support of innovative ideas.

Based on research we know that to increase job performance at the group level and core self-evaluation, we have to bear in mind that shared challenge stressors can bring great results in terms of performance. On the other hand, hindrance stressors have a negative relationship with job performance (Bisht & Mahajan, 2021).

According to the literature, we find out that TAT brings to the surface a very playful finding.

As per Bakker, Scharp, Breevaart, and de Vries (2020), people by nature need to play to stay vigorous, happy, and productive. The concept of “playful work design” is the last trend and multinational companies which recognize play importance have let employees design their work tasks more playfully and let them proceed with job crafting when possible. By accepting people’s nature and the great need to overcome monotonous and repetitive activities, companies give space to the employees to express their best selves at work. To sum up, adopting PWD companies increases employee job performance, diminishes job stress, and gives space for innovative ideas to arise.

By diving deep into previous research, we find out how great power has the trait activation theory. Especially we try to evaluate when employees are more likely to announce an innovative idea and from whom they will take approval first. According to research, the results are disappointing as many times people tend to announce their ideas to their peers, and by nature, they are waiting for feedback to take the next step and communicate their idea to a people manager. As we already know from TAT, “if a situation is relevant to a specific personality trait this trait will be likely to manifest itself in behavior”. People many times have to deal with the fear of failure. This is a pivotal juncture at which individuals must remain true to their own beliefs; otherwise, they risk being swayed by the views of their peers (Urbach, Fay, & Lauche, 2016).

In research from Heslin, Keating, and Minbashian (2018), we get inspired when we realize about a great tool that companies have but still in 2022 they ignore its existence. We are talking about personality traits and how situational cues can shape mindsets and the career path of every employee.

To get results, researchers combined many theories and especially the Big Five Theory which, is the most widely accepted personality theory held by psychologists today. The theory states that personality can be boiled down to five core factors, known by the acronym CANOE or OCEAN. The five personality traits in research from McCrae and Costa (1997) are the following and combined with TAT we can have thematic results about employees’ career outcomes. The traits are openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

Pan and Zhang (2018) have acknowledged by combing TAT and Big Five Theory when is more likely for teams to withhold knowledge. They tried to explain this notion by examining the personality traits given by Big Five Theory and when they were activated in the workplace environment. Nowadays we observe big companies trying to convince their employees that they work in safe environments with an organizational culture built with trust. The findings of the research are the following: “employees with high conscientiousness and low neuroticism are less likely to withhold knowledge in teams because of their high achievement-striving”.

Last but not least by research conducting, we find out information about when informal learning would take place in the companies. The results were astonishing and companies should put an effort to expand informal learning among employees. According to researchers, informal learning is a big asset for companies and should work on it in order for employees to gain knowledge when is possible and avoid unaffordable external pieces of training. Informal learning is common in businesses, particularly for managers who cannot attend conventional training programs but need to cope with dynamic events and ill-defined difficulties. This research contributes to our knowledge of informal learning by utilizing trait activation theory to analyze how goal orientation, individual difference, job autonomy, and training atmosphere impact managers’ informal learning (Noe, Tews, & Michel, 2016).

### Discussion

The Trait Activation Theory is without a doubt well-known. Several research has been undertaken to explore its influence in the workplace. Some research showed favorable benefits of the approach on organizations, while others found negative impacts. However, there are various constraints that must be addressed. More specifically, the first constraint concerns the sample size of the majority of the research. Many of them employed a small population number, which might raise concerns.

Moreover, the second constraint is based on the generalization of results, which must be handled with caution. The majority of the case studies studied were all functioning in a single location, which cannot be applied to other companies.

### Future Research

The results from this study provide numerous practical implications. Researchers have conducted many studies about TAT and its implication in the workplace. We already know that personality traits could activate in situational cues and may affect an individual’s behavior. So, how about a standardized workplace environment where everyone should select accordingly to their personality traits? Using TAT as an encompass for future decisions, company will achieve lower turnover and happy employees. People should work in places that get recognized and have the ability to be the best version of themselves.

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