

## **Social Representation and Assessment of Salespeople Personality for Job Performance: An Overview and an Italian Piece of Research**

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### **How to cite**

Sartori, R., Costantini, A., Ceschi, A., Tommasi, F. (2021). Social Representation and Assessment of Salespeople Personality for Job Performance: An Overview and an Italian Piece of Research. [Italian Sociological Review, 11 (1), 19-38]

Retrieved from [<http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v11i1.413>]

[DOI: 10.13136/isr.v11i1.413]

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### **3. Article accepted for publication**

Date: November 2020

**Additional information about**

**Italian Sociological Review**

**can be found at:**

**About ISR-Editorial Board-Manuscript submission**



# *Social Representation and Assessment of Salespeople Personality for Job Performance: An Overview and an Italian Piece of Research*

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## **Abstract**

The paper deals with the relationship between the Big Five personality traits (*Agreeableness*, *Conscientiousness*, *Extraversion*, *Openness* and *Neuroticism/Emotional Stability*) and sales performance in the perspective of the social representation of salespeople personality. The first part of the article provides an overview of the topic, while the second half reports the results of a study carried out with 220 Italian salespeople (16 females) and correlating their answers to a personality test named FLORA – an Italian measure of 24 work-related personality characteristics developed and validated for the assessment of specific professional profiles in organizations and based on the Big Five Model – with their sales figures. According to hypotheses, *Conscientiousness*, *Extraversion* and *Openness* are positively related and *Agreeableness* is negatively related to sales performance, which is also consistent with the social representation of salespeople personality. *Emotional Stability* does not prove to be a Big Five directly related to sales performance, but the three facets of *Emotional Stability* measured by FLORA (*Stress tolerance*, *Frustration tolerance* and *Self-control*) are positively and significantly related to the length of service, while the length of service, in turn, is related to job performance. This supports an indirect relation between *Emotional Stability* and sales performance passing through the length of service.

Keywords: social representation of salespeople, Big Five personality traits, job performance.

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of *social representation*, introduced by Moscovici, is defined as the collective elaboration of a social object by groups, organizations and communities for the purpose of behaving and interacting (Moscovici, 1963). Its function is to make unfamiliar familiar through a process of anchoring and objectification, that is to say, a process of labelling, categorization and simplification which attributes few and specific characteristics to social objects and thus makes them manageable or more manageable. As shown by the *Social Identity Theory*, the concept of *social object* applies not only to technological artifacts but also to categories of people, such as salespeople, to which specific personality traits are attached (Tajfel et al., 1971).

Speaking of personality, the studies conducted in the field of psychology as a nomothetic science consider it an aspect that can be described by means of the specific traits that have been identified by the research on the subject. These traits, in turn, become measurable only by means of valid and reliable tools, basically psychometric tests (Sartori, Pasini, 2007). In this respect, the social representation of salespeople personality on the one hand, and the assessment of salespeople personality on the other would be two different processes, even if overlapping cannot be excluded and indeed signs of this have been highlighted in the research by Sartori et al. (2017).

Just because overlapping between these two processes cannot be excluded, part of the reasons why the study we are presenting in this paper has been carried out is to compare some aspects of the social representation of salespeople personality with the results of the administration to salespeople of a valid and reliable personality test whose scores have been correlated with their job performance.

Social representation of salespeople personality describes them as extroverted but not very empathic, more oriented to their own needs than to those of others, more manipulative than friendly, sometimes helpful and sometimes threatening (Arndt et al., 2019). Indeed, salespeople have a bad reputation, as a study published by Hartman in 2006 points out. It investigates depictions of salespeople in movies and television between 1903 and 2005 by using a text analysis of 281 plot summaries (Hartman, 2006). Unfortunately, to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies that specifically deal with the social representation of salespeople personality in Italy, but there is no reason to doubt that things are as similar in Italy as reported by Arndt et al. (2019) and Hartman (2006).

Coming now to data and statistics, in 2018 the US Bureau of Labor Statistics stated that sales related employment would grow 7% all over the world between 2016 and 2026. Even if in 2019 this percentage dropped to 4% for the

period 2019-2029, it is possible to state that sales occupations significantly contribute and are bound to significantly contribute to the overall workforce around the globe (Waheed, Yang, Webber, 2017). As for Italy in particular, research by ForumAgenti shows that at least 35% of job requests from companies concern salespeople and that Italian salespeople are also in demand (and are bound to be in demand) in such European countries as Germany, Austria and France.

Apart from being in demand, sales occupations are also challenging. Indeed, changes due to economic crises particularly affect working habits, attitudes and behaviors of salespeople, since lower demands of the market are an element that clearly displays itself when facing lower orders or fewer customers (Sartori et al. 2018). Moreover, sales job presents some characteristics that make it unique in terms of demands to employees. In particular, the degree of autonomy (Churchill et al., 2000) and the degree of rejection experienced by sales agents (Vinchur et al., 1998) are two job related characteristics that foster considerations about the fact that there must be personality dimensions, such as interactivity, personal influence, constancy and competence striving, which may be not particularly salient in other jobs but fundamental in predicting sales success (Sartori, Costantini, Ceschi, 2016). These personality dimensions are not typically included in the social representation of salespeople personality, as pointed out in research by Arndt et al. (2019) and Hartman (2006).

As it is possible to read in Waheed, Yang and Webber (2017: 149-50), “The sales force of any organization is a crucial asset that endeavors to generate maximum revenue to its owners. Without motivated salespeople, the overall objectives of the organization might be affected in a negative way. Therefore, understanding the personality of potential employees can be a useful tool during the selection process”. Understanding the personality of potential employees during the selection process primarily means to assess it with valid and reliable measurement tools.

A paper published by Hunter, Schmidt and Judiesch in 1990 points out that the potential payoff for selecting successful salespeople may be greater than for other occupations due to the large standard deviation of employee output for sales jobs. This means that there must be large individual differences in performance that can result in large variability in sales (Vinchur et al., 1998).

Many studies have focused on the linkages between personal factors and job performance, in order to set criteria to rely on when designing and developing effective Human Resource Management (HRM) policies and tools (Ones et al., 2007; Sartori, Costantini, Ceschi, 2020). In particular, in the framework of the trait approach to the study of personality (Costa, McCrae, 2006; DeYoung et al., 2013; Goldberg, 1992; Hogan, Johnson, Briggs, 1997;

Perugini, Gallucci, 1997), which relies on strong evidence that the universe of traits can be organized into a hierarchical structure, providing a good description of a person's personality by indicating the person's level on these traits, traits are indicated as great descriptors of individual differences (Fleeson, Jayawickreme, 2014). Along with this, considering also the fact that because of the hierarchical nature of traits such descriptions are relatively rich, such a categorization permits also to provide an account of how individual differences in traits are manifest in behavior (Fleeson, Jayawickreme, 2014), such as, for example, sales performance (Sartori, Costantini, Ceschi, 2016).

The purpose of the study presented in this paper is to build on these findings and increase our understanding of specific personal factors and antecedents of high sales performance in sales agents, bringing together aspects of social representation and the psychometric perspective on personality, in order to identify which traits should be better investigated when designing both selection processes and assessment procedures (Sartori, Ceschi, 2013).

## **2. The relationship between personality and job and sales performance**

Certainly, job performance does not depend only on personality but, as stated by Rothmann and Coetzer (2003: 69) “to the lay person it is a self-evident fact that personality factors play an important part in job performance.” Similarly, the 100 Italian workers and employees (50 males, 50 females) who were interviewed on which personal characteristics are most likely to correlate with job performance in a study carried out by Sartori et al. (2017) mentioned personality traits (78% out of all the characteristics named) more than any other characteristic. These can be considered aspects of social representation, but what does nomothetic research state on the matter?

Work and organizational psychology has dealt with the relationship between personality and job performance for at least the last fifty years (Tommasi, Ceschi, Sartori, 2020), but before the Eighties “no well-accepted taxonomy existed for classifying personality traits” (Barrick and Mount 1991: 2), different tools and approaches, both idiographic and nomothetic (Sartori, 2010; Sartori, Pasini, 2007), were used for assessing personality and, therefore, it was difficult to establish whether there were consistent, meaningful relationships between personality constructs and performance criteria in different occupations (Barrick, Mount, Judge, 2001).

The relationship between personality and job performance has been studied both at a general level, mainly through meta-analyses, and at a specific level, through surveys investigating the relationship between personality and specific professional roles, such as salespeople. As for sales performance, even

though early research suggested that a general action component of the sales interaction could predict sales success (Chapple, Donald, 1947; Evans, 1963; Sujan, Weitz, Sujan, 1988), leading sales managers to concentrate on competence development rather than on personality assessment, it would be unrealistic and against a certain social representation to think that there are no specific person-related characteristics influencing successful job performance (Ones et al., 2007). In addition, it must be noted that competences are rooted in personality traits (Bartram, 2005; Kanfer, Ackerman, 2005; Spencer, Spencer, 1993), an aspect that directly leads to the opportunity of better investigating which specific personality traits characterize the professional role of salespeople. Approaching the study of personality traits in salespeople allows to set the limits of how individual potentialities turn into effective organizational behaviors (Consiglio et al., 2013), while, at the same time, investigating traits at a more specific lower-level facet permits to better understand the basis on which competences develop (Sartori, Costantini, Ceschi, 2016; Sartori et al., 2017).

Nowadays, there is general agreement about the existence of five robust personality traits (the so called Big Five: *Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Openness* and *Neuroticism/Emotional Stability*) which function as a meaningful taxonomy for classifying personality attributes (Digman, 1990). Indeed, the Big Five are personality traits that have proved to be relevant to different cultures (De Fruyt et al., 2004; McCrae, Costa, 1997; McCrae, Terracciano, and 79 Members of the Personality Profiles of Cultures Project, 2005) and have been recovered consistently in factor analyses of peer- and self-ratings of trait descriptors involving diverse conditions and samples (Soto et al., 2011; Sartori et al., 2017) and diverse factor extraction and rotation methods (Grucza, Goldberg, 2007).

Research investigating the relationship between the Big Five and job performance at a general level, across different kinds of jobs, has led to the conclusion that there is no agreement about how many Big Five should be considered as valid predictors of job performance regardless of gender and occupational group, whether one (Barrick, Mount, 1991; Tett, Jackson, Rothstein, 1991), two (Barrick, Mount, Judge, 2001), four (Hunthausen et al., 2003) or all (Rothmann, Coetzer, 2003; Waheed, Yang, Webber, 2017). Le et al. (2011) argue that, in order to explore the relationship between the Big Five and job performance, studies carried out at a more specific level that use lower order traits are to be preferred. This is what we did in the piece of research we are going to report later in this article. Indeed, this way of proceeding helps to find out which facets of one Big Five are more related to job performance than others of the same Big Five (Barrick, Mount, Judge, 2001; Rothmann, Coetzer, 2003; Van der Linden, te Nijenhuis, Bakker, 2010; Shaffer, Postlethwaite, 2013).

Being personality traits, the Big Five are generally considered to be quite stable (Cobb-Clark, Schurer, 2012). In fact, although some research reports differences in the Big Five personality traits across the life span (Donnellan, Lucas, 2008), they generally do not show variations according to either gender or education level (Donnellan, Lucas, 2008). In addition, they appear to be quite stable among working-age adults (Cobb-Clark, Schurer, 2012). The only exception to this trend is *Neuroticism* that is generally found to be negatively related to age (Steunenberg et al., 2004), while *Emotional Stability*, the construct opposite to *Neuroticism*, is found to improve over age (Williams et al., 2006). Moreover, age generally varies with the length of service (Sarker, Crossman, Chinmeteepituck, 2003). In this way, what is possible to conclude is that *Emotional Stability* tends to improve with the length of service (Williams et al., 2006) and positively affects job performance (Tett, Jackson, Rothstein, 1991).

Studies carried out in personality traits at a general level usually find that its first consistently valid predictor regardless of gender and occupational group is *Conscientiousness* (Barrick, Mount, 1991; Barrick, Mount, Judge, 2001; Shaffer, Postlethwaite, 2013). Second comes *Emotional Stability* (Le et al., 2011; Tett, Jackson, Rothstein, 1991). *Conscientiousness* and *Emotional Stability* are indeed called the Big Two (Le et al., 2011) and are considered to be the best predictors of job performance regardless of gender and occupational group.

Nevertheless, the strength and type of correlations between the Big Five and job performance also depend on the specific job considered (Judge et al., 2013). This is the reason why not every study finds that *Conscientiousness* and *Emotional Stability* are the main personality traits related to job performance. Typical examples of such studies carried out at a specific level are the ones conducted in the field of sales, where *Extraversion*, not *Conscientiousness* or *Emotional Stability*, is usually found to be particularly related to job performance (Barrick, Mount, 1991; Mount, Barrick, Stewart, 1998). This is consistent with both the social representation of salespeople personality and the study carried out by Waheed, Yang and Webber (2017) with 510 salespeople from various organizations, where the strongest positive correlation was found between *Extraversion* and sales performance, indicating that salespeople with high levels of *Extraversion* significantly perform at higher levels than those who scored at lower levels.

In the same study, the weakest correlation was found between *Emotional Stability* and sales performance. This is not consistent with the concept of Big Two but is in line with the results found in the study carried out by Furnham and Fudge (2008) on the relationship between the Big Five and sales performance in 66 sales consultants from a sports organization, where *Neuroticism* (*Emotional Stability*) showed no statistically significant relationship with sales performance.



As for *Agreeableness* and *Openness*, they generally tend to show weak relationships with job performance and, therefore, they are not taken very much into consideration as predictors of job performance (Barrick et al., 1993; Mount, Barrick, Stewart, 1998), except in the case of nurses (Cunico et al., 2012; Tomietto et al., 2019) and volunteers (Sartori et al., 2014). Nevertheless, in the study carried out by Furnham and Fudge (2008), *Agreeableness* shows a significant negative relationship with sales performance, which is consistent with the social representation of salespeople as non-empathic personalities. The same phenomenon emerges in the study carried out by Warr, Bartram, and Martin (2005), where high sales performance is related to low *Agreeableness*. In addition, in this study, the relationship between job performance and *Conscientiousness* is found to be not dependent on the level of the other Big Five, while Witt et al. (2002) find that the relationship between *Conscientiousness* and job performance is stronger for individuals high in *Agreeableness* than for those low in *Agreeableness*, but this is mainly true in jobs characterized by cooperative interactions with others (which is not typically the case of sales, where indeed high *Extraversion* and low *Agreeableness* are more typical).

As for *Openness*, a study by Bing and Lounsbury (2000) finds that *Openness* predicts job performance for workers and employees who are above and beyond both cognitive aptitude and the other four Big Five, while the study by Furnham and Fudge (2008) finds that *Openness* shows a significant positive relationship with sales performance. Finally, the study carried out by Rothmann and Coetzer (2003) with employees of a pharmaceutical company finds that all the Big Five are somehow related to job performance and this finding is said to be consistent with the results of several other studies, among which one by Dunn et al. (1995). This finding is also consistent with the results of the study by Waheed, Yang and Webber (2017).

Against this background, the paper reports the results of a study carried out by administering to 220 Italian trade agents (16 females) the Italian validated test named FLORA measuring the Big Five personality traits, in order to put in relation their performance (in terms of sales figures) with the 24 lower order traits (facets) measured by this specific personality test. The hypotheses of the study are the following:

- H1: positive correlations are expected between *Conscientiousness*, *Emotional Stability*, *Extraversion*, *Openness* and sales performance, since the first two are considered to be the best predictors of job performance regardless of gender and occupational group, while the second two are considered to be typical of the specific professional group here considered;
- H2: as for *Emotional Stability* in particular, a positive relation between this Big Five and the length of service is expected, since *Emotional Stability*

is the only Big Five to show changes over age and age is in general positively related to the length of service;

H3: a negative correlation is expected between *Agreeableness* and job performance, since in sales, where interactions are not typically cooperative, high job performance is generally found to be related to low *Agreeableness*.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Design

A cross-sectional survey design was used. Personality traits were measured by the Italian test named FLORA, which is based on the Big Five Model and covers 24 facets (Sartori et al., 2016). Job performance was expressed in terms of sales figures. Sample was composed of 220 trade agents (16 females).

#### 3.2 Measures

*Personality.* The personality traits were measured by FLORA, an Italian personality test developed and validated for the assessment of specific professional profiles in organizations and based on the Big Five Model. FLORA is a 149-item measure of work-related personality characteristics and consists of 24 facets referring to the following 5 macro-areas (plus Lie Scale): *Extraversion*, *Sociability (Agreeableness)*, *Conscientiousness*, *Emotionality (Emotional Stability/Neuroticism)* and *Openness* (see Table 1). In order to reduce acquiescence bias, each facet includes both positive and negative worded items to which respondents answer on a 7-point rating scale, from 1 = *totally disagree* to 7 = *totally agree* (Burro, Sartori, Vidotto, 2011). It is worth noting that, for the validation of FLORA, 347 salespeople were involved. Salespeople took part in both the qualitative (interviews to workers and employees) and the quantitative steps (administration and calculation of validity and reliability indexes and norms) of the development process of the test (Sartori et al. 2016).

*Sales Performance.* Sales performance was expressed in terms of the sales figures achieved by the trade agents. Even if previous studies evaluated sales performance by considering self-assessment questionnaires or supervisory ratings (Asare, Yang, Brashear, 2012), in the case of our study it was decided to adopt sales figures as a more objective measure. Each participant was assessed on a scale of 1 = *low performer* to 5 = *high performer*, based on the amount of the monthly sales revenue. The 5 different levels of sales performance provided by organizational data were described as follows: 1 = 0-5000 € per month, low performance; 2 = 6000-10000 € per month, passing grade; 3 = 11000-15000 €

per month, fair performance; 4 = 16000-20000 € per month, good performance;  
5 > 20000 € per month, high performance.

TABLE 1. Characteristics of the personality test named FLORA.

Big Five	FLORA's facets	Number of items	Cronbach Alpha	Average total-item coefficient
EXTRAVERSION	Activism	10	.76	.56
	Interactivity	6	.81	.59
	Multitasking	6	.79	.58
	Initiative	6	.77	.58
	Influence	6	.72	.55
	Leadership	4	.70	.53
	Autonomy	4	.70	.52
<b>Extraversion total items</b>		<b>42</b>	<b>.79</b>	<b>.57</b>
SOCIABILITY (AGREEABLENESS)	Interpersonal sensitivity	6	.80	.60
	Collaboration	6	.70	.54
	Care	5	.71	.56
	Supportiveness	5	.63	.49
	Positive affectivity	5	.62	.50
<b>Sociability total items</b>		<b>27</b>	<b>.85</b>	<b>.64</b>
CONSCIENTIOUSNESS	Reliability	6	.79	.58
	Constancy	6	.77	.57
	Deliberateness	6	.71	.49
	Accomplishment	6	.60	.45
	Precision	5	.71	.50
<b>Conscientiousness total items</b>		<b>29</b>	<b>.81</b>	<b>.60</b>
EMOTIONALITY (EMOTIONAL STABILITY/NEUROTICISM)	Stress tolerance	10	.86	.66
	Frustration tolerance	6	.69	.48
	Self-control	5	.69	.47
<b>Emotionality total items</b>		<b>21</b>	<b>.76</b>	<b>.56</b>
OPENNESS	Learning	8	.81	.60
	Deepening	6	.65	.55
	Flexibility	5	.60	.46
	Inventiveness	4	.77	.57
<b>Openness total items</b>		<b>23</b>	<b>.79</b>	<b>.58</b>
LIE SCALE		7	.77	-
<b>FLORA Total items (with Lie Scale)</b>		<b>142 (149)</b>		

### 3.3 Participants and procedure

Participants were 220 sales agents (16 females) from the Italian branch of a large European group of direct sales companies operating in the market of small items for professional use in the field of automotive, crafts and industry. 554 sales representatives were contacted, 224 participants took part in the research and 220 questionnaires were considered valid for the study. About 76%

had a high school diploma, 14.2% a junior high school diploma and 7.4% a master's degree or higher. Ages of participants varied between 21 and 63 years, with 40% in the age group between 31 and 40, 37.6% between 41 and 50, 12.4% between 21 and 30, 9% between 51 and 60 and the remaining 1% between 61 and 63. Length of service varies from about 1 year to about 30 years, with most of salespeople working between 2 and 6 years within the same organization. Trade agents involved in the study operate in a well-defined geographical region and typical interactions involve dealing with customer service issues as well as generating sales and future orders. Each sales agent is a mono-mandate agent, meaning that they can represent and sell only the brand products of the company they are working for. Prior to testing, all participants were given a letter containing a brief explanation of the purpose of the study and a statement ensuring confidentiality. Data were analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics 21.

#### 4. Results

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics in terms of mean raw scores and standardized T-scores of each facet of FLORA.

Table 3 shows the Pearson correlation coefficients between the 8 facets of FLORA for which these coefficients are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) and job performance in terms of sales figures. The first column reports the Big Five to which the facets of FLORA belong.

According to hypotheses, *Conscientiousness*, *Extraversion* and *Openness* are positively related (H1) and *Agreeableness* is negatively related (H3) to sales performance. Contrary to H1, *Emotional Stability* does not prove to be a Big Five directly related to sales performance, but the three facets of *Emotional Stability* measured by FLORA (*Stress tolerance*, *Frustration tolerance* and *Self-control*) are positively and significantly related to the length of service (with  $r$  coefficients ranging from .21 to .24), while the length of service, in turn, is related to job performance with  $r = .59$ . Hence, even if a direct relation between *Emotional Stability* and sales performance does not emerge, the amount of *Emotional Stability* in the salespeople involved in this study varies with their length of service, while their length of service, in turn, varies with their sales performance, which would support an indirect relation between *Emotional Stability* and sales performance passing through the length of service (H2). On the other hand, *Emotional Stability* improves over age (Williams et al., 2006) and indeed, in the study reported in this paper, age and length of service are related with  $r = .35$  ( $p < .05$ ).

TABLE 2. T-scores reported by participants in the 24 facets.

Macro-area		Facet	Mean row scores	T-Scores
Extraversion	1.	Interactivity	31,66	53,37
	2.	Multitasking	30,62	50,84
	3.	Initiative	31,08	54,32
	4.	Influence	30,03	57,97
	5.	Activism	54,74	51,83
	6.	Leadership	17,21	51,43
	7.	Autonomy	21,26	52,64
Sociability	8.	Interpersonal sensitivity	31,98	53,45
	9.	Care	25,82	49,89
	10.	Cooperativeness	32,10	51,76
	11.	Supportiveness	25,96	49,29
	12.	Positive affectivity	27,81	52,77
Conscientiousness	13.	Dependability	33,85	49,61
	14.	Constancy	29,33	50,56
	15.	Precision	28,07	50,87
	16.	Deliberateness	30,27	52,97
	17.	Achievement	30,08	53,93
Openness	18.	Inventiveness	21,02	52,93
	19.	Learn to learn	42,67	51,66
	20.	Deepening	33,08	56,09
	21.	Flexibility	25,62	52,86
Emotionality	22.	Stress tolerance	52,94	57,86
	23.	Frustration tolerance	27,60	56,50
	24.	Self-control	21,78	52,66
Lie Scale			33,41	55,82

TABLE 3. Pearson correlation coefficients between 8 facets of FLORA and the job performance of 220 trade agents expressed in terms of sales figures.

Big Five	Facets of FLORA	Sales performance
Extraversion	Interactivity	.37 **
	Multitasking	.21 *
Agreeableness	Care	-.40 **
	Interpersonal sensitivity	-.19 *
Conscientiousness	Constancy	.31 **
	Deepening	.28 **
Openness	Flexibility	.23 **
	Learning	.20 *

\* = correlation is significant for  $p < .05$ ; \*\* = correlation is significant for  $p < .001$ .

Table 4 reports the results of a linear regression model between the 8 facets of FLORA in Table 3 and sales performance (only the 5 facets for which the statistical analyses are significant are reported; *Interpersonal sensitivity* and *Learning* are left out).

TABLE 4. Linear regression model between 5 facets from FLORA and sales performance.

Model	R	R-square	R-square corrected	Standard deviation
1	.512 <sup>a</sup>	.262	.211	1.095

  

Model	Non standardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Standard deviation	Beta		
1 (Constant)	2.991	.553		5.412	.001
Interactivity	.042	.016	.234	2.657	.009
Multitasking	.039	.017	.177	1.907	.048
Care	-.082	.023	-.307	-3.617	.001
Constancy	.035	.016	.175	2.233	.027
Flexibility	.039	.025	.179	1.522	.048

a. Dependet variable: Sales Performance

## 5. Discussion

Given the importance of this kind of studies for such HRM processes as personnel selection and assessment (Ones et al., 2007; Sartori, Ceschi, 2013), much research in work and organizational psychology has been dedicated to find out which is the relationship between personality and job performance, especially since the five traits of *Agreeableness*, *Conscientiousness*, *Emotional Stability (Neuroticism)*, *Extraversion* and *Openness* (the so-called Big Five) were established and thoroughly investigated (Soto et al., 2011).

In the case of the research here reported, participants were 220 trade agents (16 females). A cross-sectional survey design was adopted. Personality traits were measured by the Italian personality test named FLORA, which is based on the Big Five and covers 24 work-related facets. Sales performance was measured by sales figures. Results reflect the specificity of the professional field considered (sales) and show statistically significant correlations ( $p < .05$ ) between 8 facets of FLORA and sales performance (Table 3).

Two facets, *Interactivity* ( $r = .37$ ) and *Multitasking* ( $r = .21$ ), refer to the Big Five *Extraversion*. Consistently with the social representation of salespeople personality, literature on *Extraversion* has found out that it is related to job performance in occupations where interactions with others are a significant portion of the job, such as sales (Barrick, Mount 1991; Mount, Barrick, Stewart 1998). In the specific case of the study here reported, where participants are salespeople, it is interesting to point out that the facet *Interactivity* refers to the typical relational aspects of *Extraversion*, while the facet *Multitasking* is more related to energy, activity and speed.

Two facets, *Care* ( $r = -.40$ ) and *Interpersonal sensitivity* ( $r = -.19$ ), refer to the Big Five *Agreeableness*, which is hardly ever found to be related to job

performance (Barrick et al., 1993; Mount, Barrick, Stewart, 1998). They both refer to such aspects as kindness, care and empathy. In the specific case of the study here reported, these two facets are negatively related to sales performance, which is consistent with both the social representation of salespeople personality and with results obtained by both Warr, Bartram and Martin (2005) and Witt et al. (2002). Indeed, in the case of sales, high *Extraversion* and low *Agreeableness* are typical. One possible explanation of this result summons the Machiavellianism personality trait (Christie, Geis, 1968). In literature, this trait has been found to be a main feature of salespeople (Robinson, Shaver, 1973) and seems to characterize workers and employees with a cool detachment, which would make them less emotionally involved with other people, with sensitive issues, or with saving face in embarrassing situations. This is consistent with the results obtained by Arndt et al. (2019). They conclude that salespeople are extroverted but not very empathic, more oriented to their own needs than to those of others, more manipulative than friendly.

Another explanation could deal with the social and cultural background of the specific organizational environment in which this study was carried out. In other words, the specific organizational climate in which salespeople operate might be a factor determining sales professionals' ethical decision making (Ceschi et al. 2017a, 2017b; Singhapakdi, Vitell, 1991) influencing the way sales agents would interpret and act their professional role. It should be noted, however, that *Interpersonal sensitivity* does not enter into the linear regression model shown in Table 4, which leads to the conclusion that, although in general salespeople should not be characterized by high *Agreeableness*, one thing is to take care of clients in a clinical sense and then getting involved in their personal problems (which is not desirable and functional to sales goals), another one is to show some understanding towards them and convey *Interpersonal sensitivity* (which, instead, may not be counterproductive) (Costantini, Ceschi, Sartori, 2019a; Ceschi et al. 2016).

The facet of *Constancy* ( $r = .31$ ) refers to *Conscientiousness*, which is the first consistently valid predictor of job performance regardless of gender and occupational group according to general level research (Barrick, Mount, 1991; Barrick, Mount, Judge, 2001; Shaffer, Postlethwaite, 2013). One possible explanation of this result, and in particular of the fact that in our study no other facet of *Conscientiousness* is related to sales performance, could have to do with the fact that the trade agents of this study, operating in the market of small items for professional use in the field of automotive, crafts and industry, feel they must be particularly perseverant and constant in their efforts to sell such products.

Three facets refer to *Openness* which is the personality trait related to curiosity and imagination. They are *Deepening* ( $r = .28$ ) and *Learning* ( $r = .20$ ); they

both have to do with schooling, education, training and culture) and *Flexibility* ( $r = .23$ ; it has to do with adaptability, creativity and innovation). *Openness* generally tends to show weak relationships with job performance (Barrick et al., 1993; Mount, Barrick, Stewart, 1998), but in the specific case of the study here presented and consistently with research by Furnham and Fudge (2008) three facets referring to *Openness* show positive and statistically significant correlations with sales performance. This is also consistent with research by Bing and Lounsbury (2000) and probably depends on the particular products that the trade agents deal with (which require having a lot of knowledge about their characteristics and uses) and the particular environment they find themselves acting in when they try to sell their products (which requires being flexible, adaptable and inventive). It should be noted, however, that *Learning* does not enter the linear regression model shown in Table 4.

Finally, no dimension of *Emotional Stability (Neuroticism)* has been found to be directly related to job performance in the specific case of the study here presented, which is surprising in the light of the fact that *Emotional Stability (Neuroticism)* is claimed to be at least one of the two Big Five (Barrick, Mount, Judge, 2001; Le et al. 2011), if not the only one (Tett, Jackson, Rothstein, 1991), to be a valid predictor of job performance regardless of gender and occupational group. Nevertheless, in their meta-analysis, Barrick and Mount (1991) write that most correlations between *Emotional Stability (Neuroticism)* and job performance are relatively low and they explain this result by remembering that people who are highly neurotic are unable to function effectively and, as a consequence, are not likely to be in the labor force (Barrick, Mount, and Judge, 2001). They also add that, if a person possesses enough *Emotional Stability*, the predictive value of any difference is minimized.

The participants to our study are at least mid-term workers and employees. This means, according to Barrick and Mount's reasoning, that they possess enough *Emotional Stability* to keep a job. On the other hand, the three dimensions of *Emotional Stability* measured by FLORA (*Stress tolerance*, *Frustration tolerance* and *Self-control*) are positively and significantly related to the length of service, while the length of service, in turn, is related to job performance. Accordingly, even if a direct relation between *Emotional Stability* and job performance does not emerge, the amount of *Emotional Stability* in the salespeople involved in this study varies with their length of service, while their length of service, in turn, varies with their sales performance, which would support an indirect relation between *Emotional Stability* and sales performance passing through the length of service. Research points out that *Neuroticism* is generally negatively related to age (Steunenberg et al., 2004), while *Emotional Stability*, the opposite construct, improves over age (Williams et al., 2006), probably because of the decrease of impulses. In addition, age generally varies



with the length of service (Sarker et al., 2003). Consequently, it is possible to conclude that *Emotional Stability* tends to improve with the length of service (Williams et al., 2006), probably because of the mastery acquired by experience, and positively affects sales performance (Tett, Jackson, Rothstein, 1991).

## 6. Limitations and further research

The study is based on data collected from a specific organizational context and is cross-sectional, not longitudinal. In addition, the sample is self-selected, as out of the original 554 salespeople only 220 took part in the survey. All this does not support the generalizability of results. Finally, the study uses data from different sources: on one side, there is the assessment of personality that came from self-report data; on the other side, there is business results as external criterion.

Future studies should assess sales performance by the convergence of different sources, both objective and subjective in nature. Considering sales performance only as business results represents a choice that does not cover the possibility of investigating other dimensions that contribute to define the more general job-performance construct.

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