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How the pandemic changed our adaptability and resilience
Five valuable insights to help heal from collective trauma and begin the great retention

Whitepaper

Introduction

Personality traits are known to remain reasonably stable in individuals throughout their lifetime. For example, if you have a preference to take the lead in groups or to make decisions based on data and facts, then these are likely to remain broadly consistent. However, research has also shown that significant changes in our lives can alter our preferences.

We are acutely aware of the pandemic's impact on us in so many ways. Physically—our health, well-being and family-life, and emotionally—feeling anxiety, uncertainty, stress, resulting in increased instances of burnout and mental health issues. However, little has been explored in relation to core attributes like personality, and furthermore, how that has impacted our preferences in the way we work.

Throughout mid-2020, SHL's people scientists examined the impact of COVID-19 on personality preferences in the workplace with a sample of 4,574 people. The findings reveal consistent shifts in self-reported measures of personality related to adaptability and resilience due to the pandemic (using the Occupational Personality Questionnaire, OPQ, an established and proven measure of personality).

As we move into living with COVID-19 and begin recovering from our collective trauma, this paper provides five valuable insights for individuals and organizations who are in the process of finding ways to heal and re-build, especially in the midst of the Great Resignation.

Sarah McLellan
Senior Director,
European Professional Services

Contributors:
Kristin Allen, Leah Coulon,
Sara Gutierrez, Erin Crask

Personality altering experiences

Generally, when individuals reach adulthood, their personality becomes fairly stable. However, research has shown that personality traits can change because of disruptive life events such as near-death experiences, losing a family member, becoming a parent, getting a divorce, and so on.

Trauma from these pivotal events can greatly impact personality and create a lasting influence on an individuals' behavior and feelings. For example, research conducted by Rutkowski et al. (2016) on war victims and politically persecuted individuals showed that those who have experienced a traumatic event such as war tend to develop social introversion post-event compared to pre-event. This validates the notion that traumatic experiences can indeed impact personality.

For the past two years, the world has collectively experienced trauma as the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on every aspect of our lives. Our research team examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on adaptability and resilience, as measured by selected personality preferences assessed by the Occupational Personality Questionnaire, OPQ, an established and proven measure of personality. The study was conducted in the US using a sample of 4,574 respondents for the pre-COVID-19 period (October 2019-February 2020) and 6,820 respondents for the post-lockdown period (March to August 2020). The findings also support the idea that critical periods in our lifetime can cause personality changes.

Collective trauma; unique experiences

The pandemic has impacted us all in so many ways, both emotionally and physically. It is certainly true that collective trauma can bring people closer together, but it would be a mistake to assume we have all experienced the past few years in the same way. The pandemic has cruelly and quickly taken from many and left thousands processing grief in isolation, and these unique experiences could include:

- **Loss of health:** Consider those directly impacted through the illness itself. Managing the impact of being unwell, perhaps dealing with longer-term symptoms or life-changing complications; and those who have experienced the devastation of losing someone close.
- **Stressful job circumstances:** So many have worked on the front line, in jobs critical to caring for those suffering from COVID-19 or ensuring essential supplies can reach those in need. They have felt

the adrenaline surge on a daily basis, have worked over-time, all the time, and carry the scars, emotionally and physically, from using their skills to fight the impact of the pandemic.

- **Careers on hold:** In addition, huge numbers of people have lost jobs or been forced to leave careers as industries fold and families find ways to home-school children and care for the unwell. Careers put on pause or abandoned, rarely through choice but due to the need to survive. So many have faced economic challenges and have had to find new ways to fund their lives.
- **Missed milestones:** Then, there are the generations uniquely impacted based on their stage in life. Missed exams and qualifications, students attending university virtually (and missing all the social fabric of university life), graduates starting first professional jobs from their living rooms— missing the interaction, guidance, sharing of knowledge and expertise that is so important in shaping a career.

"The pandemic has cruelly and quickly taken from many and left thousands processing grief in isolation."

Diminished resources

Each scenario has measurable impact on our resilience, stress, and well-being:

- Research has shown that mental health can be affected by a pandemic;

- Infectious disease outbreaks have been related to lower levels of resilience;

- Early research suggests that 38% of people noted some degree of distress due to COVID-19 while 16% were so stressed that a mental health intervention was recommended; and

- Role conflict (e.g., parent vs. employee) is high with 35% of working families with children under 12 reporting difficulties in managing childcare responsibilities.

All of which suggests that we cannot just go back to normal. All of us have experienced something significant, and our ability to cope has been impacted.

Using the OPQ we investigated how competency scores differed across the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic time period. Scores on the Universal Competency Framework (UCF) competencies, specifically Adaptability and Resilience, were calculated from selected OPQ personality scales using standard equations which have been proven to predict performance in the workplace. The personality traits related to each competency are described below.

Adaptability Traits

Adaptable
Being adaptable and responsive to changes

Behavioral
Being able to understand others and the drivers of their behavior

Conventional
Being prepared to alter approaches and use more unconventional methods

Optimistic
Being optimistic, hopeful, and may see a change as a constructive challenge

Relaxed
Being able to relax amid pressure and setbacks

Variety Seeking
Enjoying variety and seeking novelty

Resilience Traits

Emotionally Controlled
Being able to manage and control emotions

Tough Minded
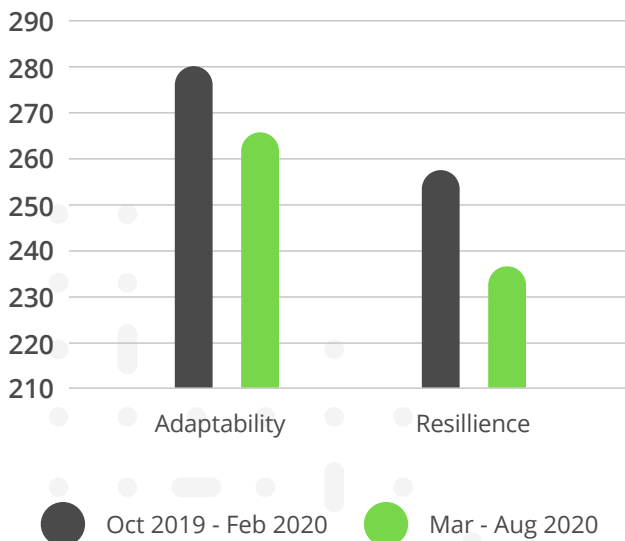Being able to face difficulties with determination and strong will

Optimistic
Being optimistic, hopeful, and may see a change as a constructive challenge

Relaxed
Being able to relax amid pressure and setbacks

Results show that our natural preferences changed during the pandemic, suggesting even for those usually able to draw on strengths in adapting to change and coping under pressure, this period of time was significantly more taxing and demanding. Specifically, our research shows a 5% decrease in average Adaptability competency scores and an 8% decrease in average Resilience competency scores across these time periods, as shown in the chart below.

"We found that even for those usually able to draw on strengths in adapting to change and coping under pressure, this period of time was significantly more taxing and demanding than others."

↓ **5%** decrease in average Adaptability competency scores

↓ **8%** decrease in average Resilience competency scores

As time has gone on, and further lockdowns encountered, the research indicated that we have felt better positioned to cope with what comes next, although the longevity of the experience has certainly taken its toll. In addition, the more usual channels of support were often not there. Lockdowns across societies meant living in isolation, without social connection and support. Many businesses were forced to change core ways of working and to initiate work from home policies, again resulting in a loss of social support and networks, at a time when this is what we needed the most.

Competency Scores Pre vs Post Pandemic

Oct 2019 - Feb 2020   Mar - Aug 2020

How we heal

What does this mean for individuals and organizations? As humans, we are perhaps feeling more fragile than we have ever have. Our relationships have been challenged, 'normal' ways of living and working have been completely reimagined, and we have been forced to become fiercely independent - reliant on ourselves and those immediately around us.

At work, social interactions and relationships have suffered. Work has morphed into tasks and to-do lists, carefully managed to enable other core aspects of life to function (nothing 'fun,' just day-to-day living). At the same time, organizations and societies have faced an enormous wake-up call around the importance of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. The Great Resignation has placed even greater pressure on businesses to re-

consider their employee value propositions as employees demand a more holistic approach to rewards, recognition, and experiences. Furthermore, there is also a change in employees' expectations around work-life balance and flexibility, especially related to the ability to work from home.

And as the pandemic continues to create uncertainties in the working environment, employers, recruiters, and hiring managers should consider that resilience and adaptability scores are likely to shift in their current talent data and in candidate pools within the COVID-19 timespan.

There is no question that our experiences have, and for many, continue to feel traumatic. We must now take steps to start the healing and replenishing process:

1. Lead with empathy

90% of US workers believe empathetic leadership leads to higher job satisfaction and 79% agree it decreases employee turnover. Empathy is a critical driver in building a culture based on trust. This is a topic often given lots of airtime and yet less frequently experienced. Now, as we begin the healing process—trying to live side-by-side with COVID-19 and reverse the Great Resignation into the Great Retention—, individuals need empathy more than ever, and for organizations, this starts at the top. Leaders need to regularly listen—not just talk, ensure that there are mechanisms to gather regular and honest feedback (and that this is acted upon), and that individuals are supported and enabled to be successful based on their own unique needs and circumstances.

They also need to step away from assumptions and filling in the blanks, and go and ask for thoughts, feedback and suggestions. Show that you trust and believe in your own team and their capability to

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develop and grow by growing and promoting the talent within your organization as new and critical roles emerge. Be prepared to flex and change previously well-established methods and approaches—take the opportunity to reinvent based on what is needed now and in the future.

2. Build individual psychological contracts

Almost a third of employees are thinking about leaving their jobs despite not having a new one lined-up. That is pretty amazing, given what we are all experiencing— uncertainty, disruption, anxiety. The upheaval in our lives has actually resulted in a significant change in the dynamic between employees and organizations. Individuals want more than physical or monetary outcomes. Prospective employees are now

> "Individuals want more than physical or monetary outcomes."

evaluating jobs and businesses based on the flexibility offered and broader values and contributions —will the work be truly hybrid? Do leaders really care for their teams and give back to society? Will decisions be made fairly and transparently? Will there be opportunities to try new roles, develop new skills? Will the company truly believe in me, my capabilities, commitment and potential and give me the space to flourish?

Prospective employees and current employees are evaluating their lives and work (in that order) with very different criteria. Organizations who struggle to reinvent and provide cultures, careers and structures which facilitate individual connection, growth and flexibility will simply struggle to exist.

3. Thaw the core

For so long, the core of many businesses has been frozen. The layer of middle managers, pushing emails up and down the business, feeling zero accountability or empowerment

to take decisions that make a difference. If you want to build an organization based on trust, then make sure it runs visibly through your whole business. Take a look at your management teams. Are they empowered to make decisions? Or do they feel stuck in a sandwich of bureaucracy?

Managers are there to make things happen— to motivate and inspire, to solve problems, to identify opportunities, to make people feel good about themselves and their jobs on a daily basis. One way to make a really
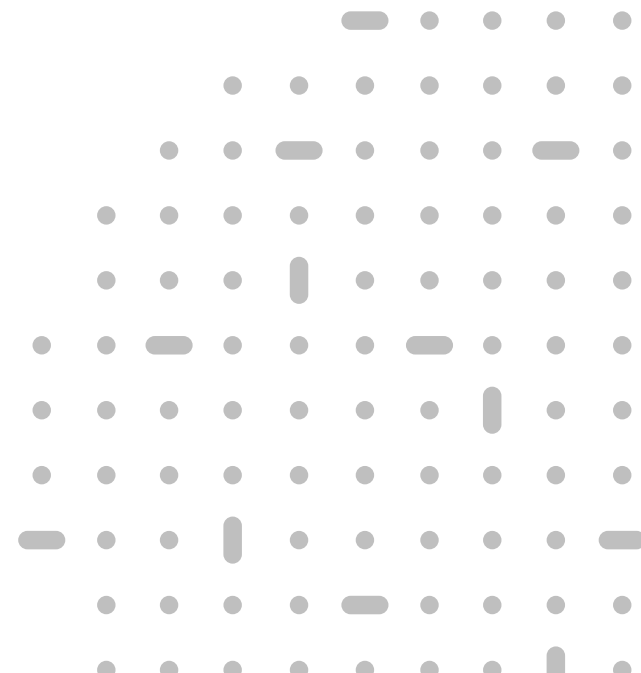
big difference to your organization and its culture is to focus on ways you can empower your management teams to run the business and reduce the requirement for escalation, approval, and sign-off. Guide them with clear purpose and mission statements about your business, its vision and strategy. It will quickly pay dividends in the symbol of trust and empowerment that permeates through your business.

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4. Create a feeling of belonging

Collectively, we have developed a strong desire to connect our work with something greater. To understand the impact we have, and for this to be about more than profit. Sustainability and inclusion are now non-negotiables for businesses if they are to

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stand as reputable organizations on the world stage. Within organizations, this now must ring true as daily experiences. Research repeatedly shows that more diverse teams achieve greater results. Finding the balance between acknowledging differences and aligning values will be critical for organizations as building a sense of belonging quickly becomes more important.

Employees will increasingly hold their employers to account for fairness, objectivity in processes and decisions, and for building truly representative teams and organizations. A great place to start is examining your company's purpose, and its relevance in today's world. Do employees feel a galvanizing connection? Can everyone relate to this and is it visible in their day-to-day roles? Recognizing contributions and saying thank you to individuals and teams across departments and roles, is also a great

way to drive visibility of your company's purpose and mission, and to build a sense of belonging in the fabric of your people.

5. Have some fun!

Life has (understandably) gotten very serious and for many, incredibly task focused. Don't forget that as humans we need to have some fun. Find the moments to bring social connection into interactions, allowing individuals and teams time to breathe and be themselves. This is a journey, not a destination, and the relationships, laughs and fun along the way, are often remembered more than the outcomes achieved.

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Conclusion

Research has shown that major life events can change personality, despite the general perception that personality is fairly stable over time. In the past two years, the world has experienced a collective trauma due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a rare and disruptive life event. Throughout this period, our research team examined the impact of the pandemic on our personality preferences, using SHL's Occupational Personality Questionnaire, OPQ. The findings showed a consistent downward shift in competency scores across the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic time period. Specifically, the average scores on Adaptability and Resilience decreased by 5% and 8%, respectively, suggesting that people are finding it more difficult to exhibit adaptable and resilient behaviors due to the onset of the pandemic.

In the midst of the pandemic, other social issues such as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the Great Resignation also arose, demanding change and making it more difficult to recover from the pandemic. This sent a clear message to organizations to start the healing process. Leaders are now called upon to adapt and lead with empathy, build individual psychological contracts, ensure trust runs through the whole organization visibly, create a sense of belonging, and finally, find moments to enjoy the process.

Now is our opportunity to change, and the risk of not changing is huge. Communities and society that are suffering trauma and do not know the right way to heal will lead to negative outcomes not only to the individuals involved, but also to organizations. Leaders have to acknowledge things are different now—in fact, personality changing is a sign of what we have suffered. Priorities have also changed (e.g., Profit to purpose, etc.) and leaders that are able to evolve their mindsets, cultures, and priorities are those that will succeed in flourishing organizations of tomorrow.

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