



The Influence of Personality on the Leadership Potential of Lawyers

“I'll never discuss my lawyer's character in his absence, so let's discuss his absence of character.”

Michael Lara

Most people who have worked in a law firm will agree that lawyers are ‘a bit different’, although the anecdotes offered to justify this point of view will vary – and some will be more flattering than others! There also seem to be distinct differences amongst lawyers, depending on their role within the firm and their area of legal expertise.

The partnership model, which still exists in the majority of UK law firms, works on the assumption that partners will emerge from the wider pool of lawyers and that they will possess the necessary abilities to manage complex teams, develop client relationships and provide strategic direction for the firm. This raises the question, what sets apart those lawyers who take on leadership positions from those who remain subject-matter experts?

Our research set out to investigate the influence of personality on leadership potential in lawyers and by doing so answer two related questions.

- 1) Are lawyers different to other business professionals?
- 2) Are certain kinds of lawyers different from one another?

Our findings indicate that the answer to both these questions is, yes. Having identified what these differences are, we also discuss the implications for the recruitment and development of lawyers.

Models of Leadership Potential

Our research is based on the responses of over 100 UK-based commercial lawyers and over 1500 individuals working in a variety of roles in other industry sectors. All participants were invited to complete the [High Potential Traits Indicator](#) (HPTI), a personality tool that provides insight into how well-suited an individual may be for a leadership role.

The HPTI measures six personality traits that affect performance at work:

Conscientiousness - Those with high conscientiousness tend to be goal-oriented, self-motivated and value professional achievement. Those with lower conscientiousness tend to be more easy-going and spontaneous.

Adjustment - Those with high adjustment are calm under pressure and feel less anxiety and stress. Those with lower adjustment tend to experience more anxiety and worry.

Curiosity - Those with high openness like novelty, learning and variety. Those with lower openness prefer proven methods and consistency.

Risk Approach - Those with high risk approach confront difficult situations and have difficult conversations in a reasoned and rational way. Those with lower risk approach make more instinctive or emotional decisions.

Ambiguity Acceptance - Those with high ambiguity acceptance thrive with uncertainty and complexity. Those with lower ambiguity acceptance like clear-cut answers and solutions.

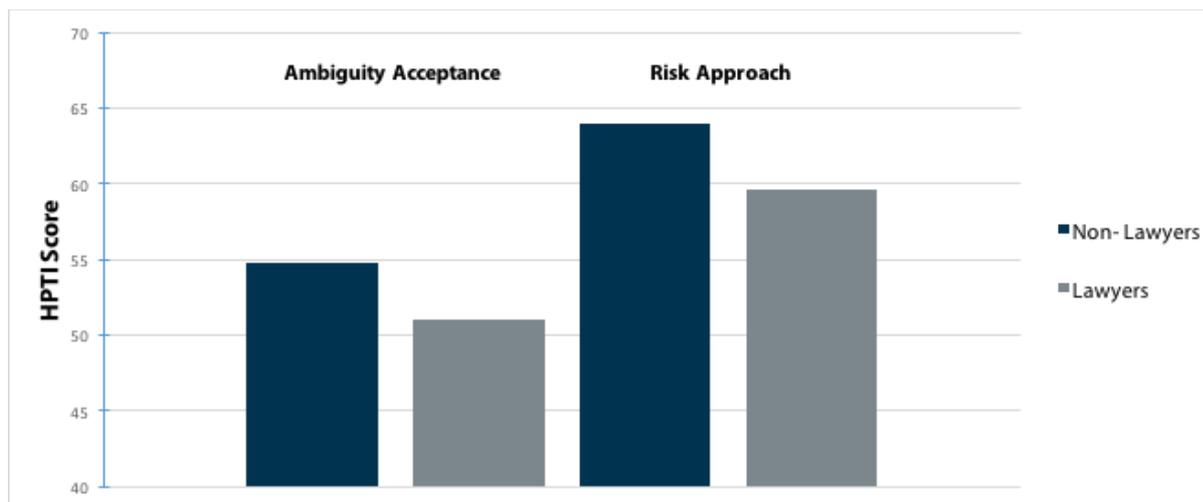
Competitiveness - Those with high competitiveness enjoy positions of power, influence and recognition. Those with lower competitiveness prefer cooperation, collaboration and may dislike the spotlight.

The relationship between these personality traits and leadership is curvilinear, this means both too much or too little of a given trait can impair leadership potential. HPTI trait scores are, therefore, classified as *Low, Moderate, Optimal, or Excessive*. Trait scores in the optimal zone suggest a good fit with most senior leadership positions. Moderate traits that are close to the optimal zone may be adapted to leadership roles. 'Low' or 'Excessive' traits can have a negative impact on leadership effectiveness in certain contexts, but may be advantageous in other roles. It is unusual for any individual to score in the optimal zone on all leadership traits, this is why different leadership styles emerge.

It is also important to note that while personality traits are relatively stable over time, some are more stable than others. Of the HPTI traits *conscientiousness* is the most stable and *competitiveness* the most likely to change over time.

Lawyer - Non-Lawyer Differences

Our initial analysis compared the HPTI scores of lawyers and non-lawyers. Two statistically significant differences emerged. Non-lawyers on average scored higher than lawyers on measures of *ambiguity acceptance* and *risk approach*. The strength of the differences would be considered 'medium' in statistical terms. Lawyer and non-lawyer scores on the four other trait measures were broadly comparable.



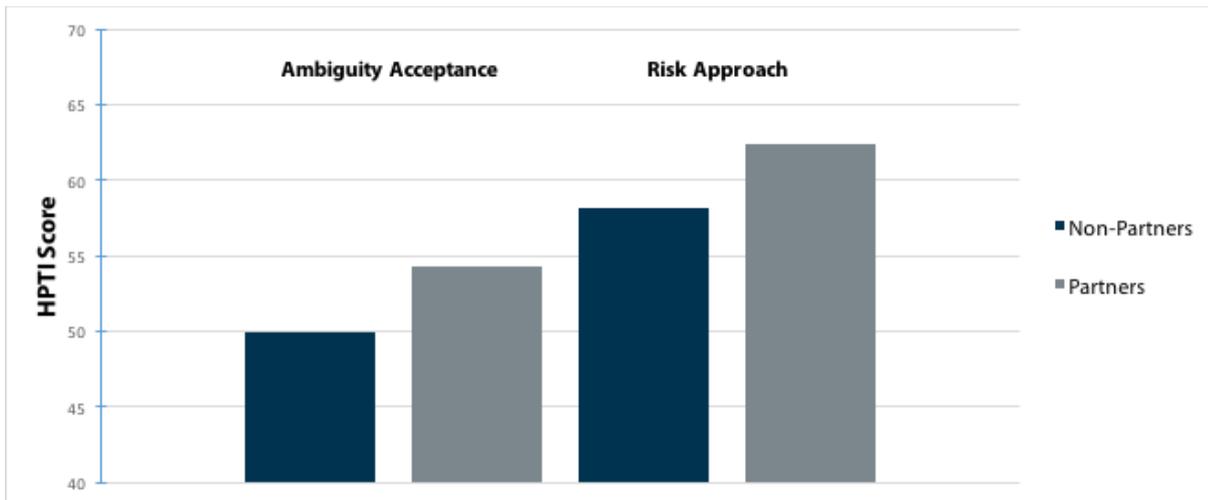
This would suggest that on average lawyers are somewhat less well-suited at handling difficult situations and coping with uncertainty than other professionals, which means they would need to adapt their natural style to a greater extent when undertaking a leadership role.

Differences Amongst Lawyers

Our analysis of the differences between groups of lawyers was restricted to comparing groups that were large enough to draw meaningful conclusions, should any differences be found. Participants who did not provide the relevant demographic data were excluded from the analysis.

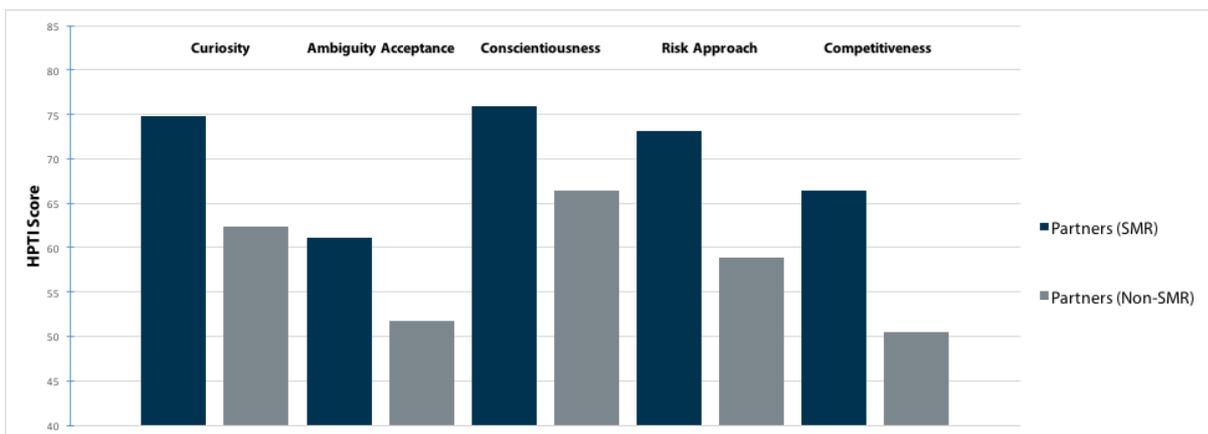
Partners & Non-Partners

We compared the test scores of lawyers currently in a partner role (28) with those in other roles (76). Two statistically significant differences emerged. Partners on average scored higher than non-partners on measures of *ambiguity acceptance* and *risk approach*. The strength of the differences would be considered 'medium' in statistical terms. The differences in the four other trait measures were non-significant.



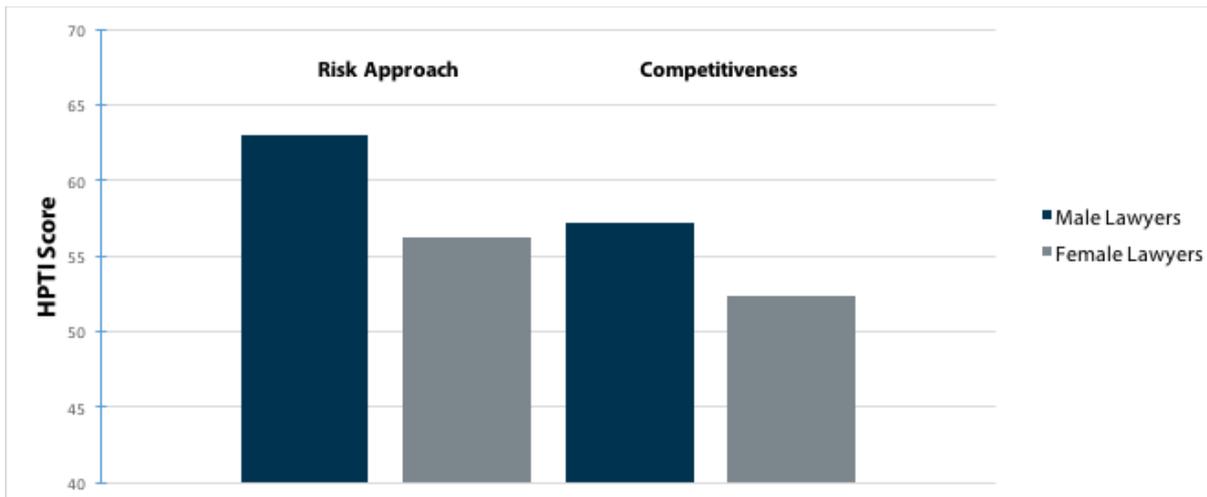
This would suggest that on average partners are better-suited to handling difficult situations and coping with uncertainty than other lawyers, which means they would need to adapt their natural style less when undertaking a leadership role. Indeed, the partners' scores on these two traits were broadly similar to non-lawyers working in other industries.

A promising area for further research is comparing partners who have management responsibility for a firm or practice area with those who do not. Although such partners only accounted for 25% of the overall partner sample it was interesting to note that partners with senior management responsibility (SMR) scored significantly higher than other partners on all trait measures, with the exception of adjustment. The strength of the differences would be considered 'large' in statistical terms. However, it is recommended that further research with a larger sample is conducted before drawing firm conclusions.



Gender

We compared the test scores of lawyers who identified as male (46) with those who identified as female (55). Two statistically significant differences emerged. Male lawyers on averaged scored higher than female lawyers on measures of *risk approach* and *competitiveness*. The strength of the differences would be considered 'large' and 'medium' respectively, in statistical terms. The differences in the four other trait measures were non-significant.



This would suggest that male and female lawyers may have different leadership styles to one another, with both needing to adapt their natural style to differing degrees, depending upon the context.

Experience

In order to ensure that the observed gender differences did not just reflect differences in levels of experience (as certain personality traits can change over time), the same analysis was conducted controlling for experience. This analysis revealed no statistically significant differences in scores between lawyers of different levels of experience. Comparisons were made between: lawyers who had not yet qualified; those with 0-10 years PQE and; those with 10+ years PQE.

When looking to see if there were any interactions between gender and experience a marginally significant interaction was found. This showed that as experience levels increased *risk approach* scores for male lawyers fell, in contrast to female lawyers whose scores rose, such that the average scores were broadly comparable amongst male and female lawyers with 10+ years PQE. However, it is recommended that further research with a larger sample is conducted before drawing firm conclusions.

Implications

Most law firms recruit lawyers without reference to personality testing. Although personality testing should not be used in isolation to make selection decisions, firms may find the use of tools such as the HPTI a valuable addition to existing tests of cognitive ability and biographical data. This is particularly relevant to the recruitment of trainee solicitors, where the volume of applicants is high and it can be hard to identify candidates with leadership potential, due to their limited work experience.

Law firms with a limited number of internal candidates for senior leadership positions, may in the short-term find it beneficial to recruit individuals, whose personality traits indicate they would be well-suited to such roles, from outside the firm. In most instances these are likely to be senior lawyers working elsewhere, however more forward-thinking firms might also consider recruiting individuals from other sectors, something which is already common-place in many other industries. The HPTI could be a useful tool to use as one element of internal promotion processes, or during executive search assignments, especially when the position being recruited for requires management responsibility of either the firm or a practice group.

Personality testing may also be a useful development tool for law firm L&D teams. Use of tools such as the HPTI could help identify individuals with leadership potential from within the existing lawyer population. These lawyers can then be offered relevant experience that will help them develop this potential e.g. secondments or involvement in board-sponsored projects. This is important as such development opportunities are often in limited supply.

Individuals whose trait scores are marginally below the optimal level may benefit from development opportunities aimed at growing their capacity in deficit areas (possibly facilitated by an executive coach). Individuals with *low* or *excessive* trait scores can be considered for alternative career paths that better suit their personality profile e.g. developing new products or focusing on business development.

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