

# **Profiling the Small Business Owner-Manager: Identifying Personal Characteristics Linked to “Growth-Orientation”**

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports on work carried out with groups of owner-managers in the UK using a multiple-assessment approach. The resulting personal profile has been found to have practical value in increasing the owner-manager’s self-awareness and enhancing decision-making relating to personal and business development.

The assessment dimensions can be related to a criterion of “Growth-Orientation” (GO) such that characteristics which differentiate high, medium or low GO owner-managers can be identified. The practical and policy implications of the findings are discussed.

## **Introduction**

This paper reports on work in progress in the UK to profile small business owner-managers against a range of personality dimensions.

This profile is constructed from the results of an “Assessment for Enterprise” (ASSENT) workshop which is modeled on the Assessment/Development Centre (ADC) employed in large organisations to identify and develop managerial potential. The ADC generally has been shown to have validity as a means of assessing and predicting managerial performance (see eg Dulewicz 1989, Gaugler et al 1987, Thornton III and Byham 1982). As far as can be ascertained, the ADC approach has not been used with small business owner-managers. There was felt to be some potential benefit in using an adapted form of the ADC both to gain greater insight into individual owner-manager personality and also to improve the efficacy of management development interventions aimed at the owner-manager.

The ASSENT workshop has been piloted within extended management development programmes for owner-managers of both young and more established small businesses (ie 2 years or more). In general the businesses are either in the early survival phase or embarking on growth. Sometimes the growth involves building the management team and investing in people development. The profile of the owner-manager can therefore assist in identifying aspects of personal as well as business development which may need to be addressed through the programme. At the very least the profile provides a focus for discussion of individual values, needs, goals and of the “fit” between the individual and the business.

This approach has been used successfully with 75 owner-managers to date in two distinct regional contexts in England (North East and South West) and is currently also being tested in Atlantic Canada.

The purpose of this paper is to present some initial findings from the ASSENT workshops showing how the personality dimensions which constitute the individual's profile can be related to an independent measure of "Growth Orientation" (GO). This allows for differentiation of individual characteristics according to level (high, medium or low) of GO.

## Method

The approach advocated here with regard to investigating personality attributes is explicitly multi-dimensional utilising a wide-range of instruments to tap different aspects of motivation, cognition, ability etc. and relating these to the perceptions, plans, needs and goals of the individual owner-manager. The fact that the instruments may have been designed for general use is not a sufficiently robust argument for eschewing them (as eg Chell and Haworth 1992 have argued). However, clinically-oriented instruments are probably best avoided (Carsrud et al 1989) since, apart from their possible lack of validity in relation to the small business population, the feedback from them is likely to be highly controversial and may indeed be destructive of relationships between researcher and owner-manager. However, instruments developed and validated on "normal" populations would be appropriate since owner-managers (in general) are part of the "normal" population. Arguments for "domain specificity" (eg Robinson et al 1991) do not hold water unless there are valid and appropriate tools and measures for the domain and an agreed underlying theoretical model on which they are based. Neither palpably exist. Tools which have been specifically constructed to measure eg "entrepreneurial personality" tend to be highly unreliable due to the transparent nature of the items and the possibility of socially-desirable response bias (Caird 1993). There may therefore be a considerable advantage in employing instruments which have been designed for a wide range of application, are soundly-constructed, have been tested on a wide range of samples and embrace a model or concept which is of some relevance to the small business context. A similar approach has been employed within leadership development programmes for some time (Campbell and Van Velsor 1985).

The selection of instruments for ASSENT was determined on the basis of factors such as previous experience of using the instruments with groups of owner-managers; likely relevance of the underlying model or concept to the owner-manager role; evidence of reliability and validity (nb including face validity or acceptability to the user); cost; availability (nb some common US tests difficult to access in UK); ease of completion, scoring and interpretation; and the need for a broad spread of tests to produce a reasonably comprehensive individual profile. A number of combinations were tested within the piloting process for ASSENT and the ones which appeared to work well in terms of acceptability to the participants and in terms of producing worthwhile results, including discriminating in relevant and significant ways between participants, were retained.

After eight pilots of ASSENT, involving 75 owner-managers, a reasonably workable combination has been found to include:

- a general personality measure, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Briggs Myers 1993) which is particularly suitable for a developmental setting (nb tests such as 16PF which are more suitable for a selection/assessment setting were not found to be so suitable and moreover were difficult for participants to relate to and make use of)
- an instrument to measure learning style (eg Learning Styles Questionnaire - Honey and Mumford 1986) since this will be important in helping the participant make best use of the development programme as well as in understanding the learning process within his/her business
- a measure of managerial or leadership orientation (eg Leadership Opinion Questionnaire - Fleischman 1989) which is particularly important if the participant is intending to grow the business and having to take on much more of a people management and team development role (Harrison and Leitch 1994)
- a measure of preferred team role such as Belbin SAQ (Belbin 1981) since again this is an important consideration should the intention be to build a strong team for the future growth of the business
- a measure of values such as Survey of Personal Values and Survey of Interpersonal Values (Gordon 1984, 1976) which could indicate what were the most important “drivers” of the individual’s behaviour and were therefore likely to influence the shape and direction of the business; the SPV and SIV were felt to be particularly useful in this context since they include dimensions such as Achievement, Leadership, Independence and Decisiveness
- Additional measures have also been used from time to time in the piloting of ASSENT such as Alternate Uses (Guilford et al 1978) which is intended as a practical measure of creativity or more precisely of “spontaneous flexibility” (ie how many acceptable alternative uses of a particular, everyday object can the respondent think of under time pressure?); and ability measures such as an “in-basket” exercise to test information-processing ability and decision-making, and a problem-solving exercise. Due to high levels of missing values these measures have not been included in the analysis on which this paper is based.

The intention was not to attempt to test any specific trait or characteristic such as Need for Achievement, Locus of Control or Risk-Taking but to inductively examine a range of variables within the context of an attempt to profile the individual owner-manager. It might then be possible to see which factors were particularly important in an individual case and how these might impact on the development of the business. This was done through feedback and discussion of results with each participant following the one-day ASSENT workshop (usually one or two days later). Together with the information already known about each participant through their involvement on the particular development programme, this process helped to ensure that the profile constituted a valid picture of the individual and moreover enabled the individual to relate this picture to the business development process including decisions about personal development, recruitment and deployment of staff, team-building, delegation, and overall scale and pace of growth (if applicable). The author and an associate, as trained psychologists, were responsible for analysing the test results and constructing the profile for each individual usually in the form of a one-page narrative to aid assimilation and

comprehension, and then discussing the profile with the participant in a counselling/feedback session (usually lasting 45-60 minutes). Construction of the profile was found to be a highly complex and time-consuming exercise usually requiring 2-3 hours work per participant. Feedback from participants during the follow-up discussion and subsequently indicated the value of the profile in helping them to understand themselves better or at least validate their existing understanding. This is despite many of the participants initially being highly sceptical of the process although sufficiently curious to try it.

## Results

From a practical point of view, the approach described can be recommended as a means of profiling the individual owner-manager within a management development process. It may have other applications where an in-depth understanding of the owner-manager is required eg for venture capital providers, however these have not as yet been tested. Meanwhile the approach continues to be used within owner-manager programmes at Durham and is subject to continual refinement and development, including the introduction of new tools as appropriate. A set of guidelines has been issued (Moran 1994) to help other organisations set up their own version of an ADC along the lines of ASSENT.

As well as its practical utility, what research insights does the application of the ADC approach provide? These will be explored drawing on the existing database of ASSENT participants and relating their scores on the various measures to an appropriate criterion. In this case the criterion chosen was Growth Orientation (GO). This was felt to be particularly relevant because participants were in general looking to develop their businesses in a particular direction and many were indeed explicitly seeking growth. It should be noted that GO is primarily a measure of the individual rather than the business (although the one will inevitably impact on the other; see eg Miller 1983). The aim was to see whether there were any particular characteristics which differentiated those rated as “High GO” from those with “Medium GO” or “Low GO”.

The assignment of participants to the GO categories was based on the following considerations:

- a. how the business has developed to date
- b. intentions/plans with respect to future development of the business
- c. the nature of the market in which the business is operating (eg dynamic v static)
- d. the position of the business within its market (eg niche player v “common or garden”)
- e. extent of innovation in the business (products, processes, market approaches, people development etc.)
- f. participant’s power of decision-making within the business
- g. score on a proprietary measure of “enterprise tendency” (eg General Enterprise Tendency or Self-Evaluation of Business Style - both developed at Durham Small Business Centre)

To be categorised as “High GO”, the individual would need to exhibit ALL of the following:

- a. a business which has been growing to date AND
- b. future intentions/plans for growth AND
- c. in a dynamic/growth market sector AND
- d. holding an unique/niche position in the market AND
- e. with evidence of innovative capability and processes AND
- f. the key decision-maker in the business AND
- g. with high overall scores on GET or SEBS (ie “enterprising tendency”)

For Medium GO, the individual would have at least some of the above; for Low GO the individual might have f and possibly one other but in the main would have none of the above. It will be noted that a number of the elements are interrelated such that having eg c, d and e, it is highly probable that the individual will also have b. Therefore, the GO categorisation was felt to be a reasonable way of differentiating between participants particularly because the knowledge of the individual required to make such an assessment could be gained both through their involvement to date in the particular development programme and through the in-depth discussion following the ADC. Such a categorisation of the individual was important because some participants turned out not to be the main decision-maker in the business (see f above), but were the “number 2” or son/daughter of the owner being groomed for succession. Even though the business may have been growing, it would be hard to make a case for these to be categorised as High GO since they may have had little to do with the growth and general performance to date. Therefore, the High GO category was reserved for those who were the “prime mover” in the business and also fulfilled the other requirements of growth performance and intentions etc.

The sample of 75 on which the analysis is based were categorised as follows against the GO criterion:

High GO	=	22
Medium GO	=	37
Low GO	=	16

It was not intended that the sample should be statistically representative since by their very nature the groups were self-selecting, not only because they chose to enrol on a management development programme but because they volunteered to take part in the ADC exercise. This does limit the generalisability of the findings with regard to the small business population as a whole. However, it could be that a sample such as this represents a sub-set of the population who are strongly oriented to their own development, are open to the external environment and may, in some cases at least, represent the successful businesses of the future (at least within their own regions). In other words, the type of business which is of particular interest to the policy-maker and the support networks. Generalisability of the findings are likely, therefore, to be of particular interest to these two constituencies.

While space precludes a full presentation of the findings, the following significant differences were found between High, Medium and Low GO owner-managers using a Kruskal-Wallis One-Way Anova (2 degrees of freedom):

<b>Dimension*</b>	<b>Chi-Square (corrected for ties)</b>	<b>Significance</b>
Introversion (MBTI)	- 6.04	< 0.05
Activist (LSQ)	13.26	< 0.005
Pragmatist (LSQ)	6.56	< 0.05
Structure (LOQ)	9.78	< 0.01
Company Worker (Belbin SAQ)	- 15.63	< 0.0005
Shaper (Belbin SAQ)	8.11	< 0.05
Team Worker (Belbin SAQ)	- 6.01	< 0.05
Completer Finisher (Belbin SAQ)	- 8.10	< 0.05
Decisiveness (SPV)	8.25	< 0.05
Orderliness (SPV)	- 6.44	< 0.05
Leadership (SIV)	8.56	< 0.05

\* See Appendix for description of personality dimensions.

With the exception of Introversion and Team Worker, all the above were also found to be significant using the more rigorous Scheffe test. Thus the key positive indicators of the High GO owner-manager appear to be:

- Activist and Pragmatist learning styles (i.e. learning by experience and application)
- A leadership orientation towards Structure (nb Consideration is also likely to be in evidence but this does not differentiate to such an extent in relation to Growth-Orientation)
- A Shaper team-role which tends to be strongly task-focused, action-oriented and competitive (nb may not be conducive to bringing the best out of others)
- Importance of Decisiveness as a personal value (ie rapid decision-making, having the strength of one's own convictions)

The key negative indicators appear to be:

- less likelihood of playing team roles involving turning ideas and concepts into practical working procedures (Company Worker) and ensuring attention to detail and adherence to standards (Completer-Finisher)
- less likelihood of valuing Orderliness (ie system, structure, order)

It will be interesting to see to what extent the differences identified above persist as the database of results is added to from subsequent implementations of ASSENT. It will also be useful to carry out some cross-cultural comparisons, perhaps in the first instance focusing on North America.

## Discussion

The picture which emerges of the High GO owner-manager is of an individual who feels it is important to be the leader and decision-maker, who puts a lot of energy and drive into this, and who learns almost solely by doing. This person does not, however, tend to operate as a conventional manager and would prefer not to be too wrapped up with the more organisational/administrative tasks.

This suggests that the High GO owner-manager may equate to the “entrepreneurial leader” although it is interesting to note that attributes such as Achievement, Goal-Orientedness and Practical-Mindedness (materialism/instrumentality) which are often associated with successful business owners turned out to be relatively unimportant for the High GO owner-managers (and, in the case of Achievement, for all three groups).

Independence (on SIV) was found to be an important attribute for all the sample (and particularly for High and Medium GO groups) but did not differentiate significantly between High, Medium and Low GO. It is probable that Independence is an important value for performing the owner-manager role but does not necessarily differentiate the more from the less entrepreneurial.

Finally, Variety (on SPV) was found to be the highest personal value for High GO group indicating the importance of openness to change for these owner-managers. However, this did not significantly differentiate between the three groups, largely because it was also important to the Low GO group. The Medium GO group, on the other hand, gave priority to Practical-Mindedness and therefore may view obtaining a “payoff” for their efforts as being more important than other factors.

Indeed, the Medium GO owner-manager may be said to be less change-oriented and more concerned with stability, conformity and organisation. This group may be thought of as “incrementalists” in relation to growth, and would not be expected to take too many risks or introduce major changes. This is reinforced by the Myers-Briggs profile for this group of ESTJ (“pragmatic administrator”) in contrast to the ENTP profile (“enthusiastic innovator”) for the High GO group. The Learning Styles for both High and Medium GO groups also exhibit contrasts - the former as noted above emphasising the Activist/Pragmatist combination (“Executor”); while the latter emphasises the Theorist/Pragmatist combination (“Converger”).

The Low GO group, by way of further contrast, has a Reflector/Theorist Learning Style (“Assimilator”) and, although having a similar Myers-Briggs profile to the Medium GO group, tends to have less of an “executive” orientation and more concern with orderliness and system and more dependence on others. The Low GO owner-manager may therefore have in-built constraints on growth deriving from their personality and values but may, nevertheless, be effective within an environment where there is co-operation and mutual support and relatively little requirement for executive decision-making and leadership.

In summary, the process used in this study to derive a personal profile of the owner-manager can also reveal differences between owner-managers on particular personality dimensions dependent on their assessed level of Growth-Orientation. The resulting “clusters” indicate that a particular combination of personality attributes is appropriate for different levels of Growth-Orientation. This may suggest that the High GO owner-manager can to some degree be identified “in advance” and appropriate interventions provided to enable him/her to maximise growth opportunities within a business setting. However, it is not known whether and to what extent personality may be modified by experience of being in the owner-manager role. In other words, which way does causality operate? This can only be assessed by tracking owner-managers from pre-start to ongoing business utilising an appropriate combination of measures at the outset and repeating them at appropriate intervals. Such a longitudinal study (see also Bygrave 1989, Sexton 1982), could be enriched by using an ADC approach such as ASSENT to assess the degree of stability or change of the individual personality through successive transition phases in the development of the business.

Two other points need to be made. First, the assessment of GO is dependent to a large extent on prior knowledge of the owner-managers such as to be able to score them against the set-down criteria. This in-depth knowledge may however affect objectivity, and therefore the process of assigning owner-managers to GO category may need to be done by panel rather than one assessor. Whichever method is used, the categorisations will inevitably be less than ideal and, in any case, may over time be subject to revision (eg as the business grows and/or the owner-manager develops). Secondly, the profiles derived from ASSENT need to be checked against actual behaviour and performance of the owner-managers in order to ensure that they are actually valid “measures”.

With these provisos in mind the approach described in this paper can enrich our understanding of small business owner-managers and moreover help them to understand themselves better. The practical consequences of this include:

1. The owner-manager is able to see more clearly how “the way they are” shapes the way the business is run and influences its strategic development. Thus decisions can be made about future business direction, team-building, personal development, employee development, human resource management practice etc. from a position of greater self-awareness and self-knowledge.
2. Those involved in training and developing owner-managers are able to use the results of ASSENT as a means of gaining greater insight into their clients’ characteristics and needs and hence design programmes which are better oriented to successful personal and business development.
3. For the small business support network generally, there arises the possibility of SEGMENTING provision more appropriately in accordance with Growth Orientation or similar. For example, the professional, middle-management background of many of those in the small business support network may predispose them to deal with the Medium GO owner-manager, who is likely to be of a more stable, conventional, predictable disposition as compared with the High GO client. Equally those from a community development or micro-business back ground may be more comfortable dealing with the Low GO client. The question arises as to who in the support

networks will be predisposed to deal with the High GO owner-manager? Perhaps only other High GO owner-managers? There may however be a role for those in the training and development and HR field to assist the High GO owner-managers to think through the key “people” implications of growth and adapt their strategy accordingly.

4. Those involved in shaping policy for the small business sector can do so on the basis of a better understanding of the people who are the main recipients or targets for the policy. This may lead to more focused policy interventions with more likelihood that they will achieve their objectives.
5. Finally, those involved in funding small business, particularly from a risk capital perspective may be able to make better decisions on the basis of a more in-depth understanding of the person.

From a research perspective, the findings highlight the deficiencies in existing models of the owner-manager/entrepreneur which tend to be overly simplistic and one-dimensional. Employing a multi-dimensional approach such as ASSENT can begin to provide greater insight into the depth and complexity of the subject and may over time contribute to the building of theoretical models of greater sophistication and practical application.

In conclusion, the ASSENT approach has been shown to have some value in enhancing our understanding of owner-managers and, in particular, in distinguishing between owner-managers having different levels of Growth-Orientation. It can thus contribute to improving the relevance of strategic interventions in the small business sector and enriching our models of the “entrepreneurial” personality.

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# Appendix

## Summary of Dimensions Assessed During “Assent”

### Myers Briggs Type Indicator

Extraversion (E):	oriented to the external world of people and events and draw energy from this; likely to be sociable and expressive, learn by doing and discussion, and have a breadth of interests.
Introversion (I):	oriented to the inner world of ideas and experiences and draw energy from this; likely to be private and contained, learn by reflection and mental practice, and have a depth of interest in 1 or 2 particular things.
Sensing (S):	prefer to deal with the practical here-and-now; observant, factual, concrete, notice the details, want information step-by-step (sequential processing).
Intuition (N):	like to see the “big picture” and the relationships between facts/events; look for patterns and possibilities and new ways of doing things, abstract/theoretical, future-oriented, trust to inspiration, jump around/leap in anywhere (parallel processing).
Thinking (T):	prefer to make decisions on the basis of logic, objectivity, analysis; look for an objective standard of truth, orientation to problem-solving, reasonable/fair.
Feeling (F):	prefer to make decisions based on person-centred values; look for harmony and recognition of individuals, sympathetic, compassionate and supportive of others.
Judging (J):	prefer to live in a planned, orderly way; like to have things settled and decided, tend to stick to a plan or schedule and see things through to completion, systematic, organised, methodical, eliminate ambiguity and uncertainty.
Perceiving (P):	prefer to live in a flexible, spontaneous way; seek to experience and understand life rather than control it, adaptable, open to change, energised by last-minute pressures, comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty.

### Learning Styles Questionnaire

Activist (A):	Learning by experiencing; open-minded, gregarious, try anything new, act first/think about the consequences later, jump from one activity to the next, get bored with consolidation/implementation, tackle problems by brainstorming.
Reflector (R):	Learning by reflection/observation; cautious, thoughtful, look at all angles before reaching a decision, low-profile, listen to others and get the drift of a discussion before making their own points, tackle problems by collection and analysis of data.
Theorist (T):	Learning by assimilation/conceptualisation; adapt and integrate observations into theories, interested in basic assumptions, like to fit things into a rational scheme, uncomfortable with the subjective or ambiguous, tackle problems by logic.
Pragmatist (P):	Learning by testing/practice; keen to try out new theories, techniques and ideas, respond to problems and opportunities as a challenge, practical, down-to-earth, decisive, tackle problems by action/application.

### Leadership Opinion Questionnaire

Consideration (C):	Emphasis on creating opportunities, releasing potential, encouraging growth, providing guidance; “management creates the framework within which people achieve their own and the organisation’s goals”; “management by objectives”.
Structure (S):	Emphasis on intervention, direction, persuasion, supervision, rewards/punishments; “management consists of getting things done through people”; “management by control”

### Belbin Self-Assessment Questionnaire

Company Worker (CW)*:	Hard-working, practical, disciplined, loyal, reliable; will do what needs to be done irrespective of personal preference; may be prone to rigidity.
Chairman (CH)*:	Mature, trusting, confident; good at spotting individual talents and harnessing them to group effort, strong on delegation; may be better at dealing with colleagues of equal or near rank than directing subordinates.
Shaper (SH):	Energetic, strong drive, competitive, assertive, challenging; thrive under pressure; will take the unpopular decisions; action-oriented; may be insensitive to others.
Plant (PL):	Innovative, unconventional, independent; generate new proposals; solve complex problems; may lack practical constraint.
Resource Investigator (RI):	Outgoing, inquisitive; adept at developing contacts externally and exploring new opportunities; natural negotiators; need to be stimulated by others or may lose enthusiasm.
Monitor Evaluator (ME):	Serious, prudent, high in critical thinking; thinks things through before reaching a decision; seldom wrong; may appear dry and over-critical.
Team Worker (TW):	Supportive, sociable, perceptive, diplomatic, flexible; good listeners; promote morale and harmonious relations; may be indecisive and avoid friction.
Completer Finisher (CF):	Strong on follow-through and attention to detail; foster sense of urgency; concern with high standards; may be unwilling to delegate and become overloaded.

\* Company Worker and Chairman have been re-named as Implementer and Co-ordinator respectively in the more recent version of Belbin's model.

### Gordon's Survey of Personal Values

Practical Mindedness (P):	To always get one's money's worth, to take good care of one's property, to do things that will pay off.
Achievement (A):	To work on difficult problems, to have a challenging job to tackle, to set the highest standards of accomplishment for oneself.
Variety (V):	To do things that are new and different, to have a variety of experiences, to travel a great deal, to experience an element of danger.
Decisiveness (D):	To have strong and firm convictions, to make decisions quickly, to come directly to the point, to come to a decision and stick to it.
Orderliness (O):	To have well-organised work habits, to keep things in their proper place, to follow a systematic approach, to work according to a schedule.
Goal Orientation (G):	To have a definite goal toward which to work, to stick to a problem until it is solved, to direct one's efforts towards clear-cut objectives.

### Gordon's Survey of Interpersonal Values

Support (S):	Being treated with understanding, receiving encouragement from others, being treated with kindness and consideration.
Conformity (C):	Doing what is socially correct, following regulations closely, doing what is accepted and proper.
Recognition (R):	Being looked up to and admired, being considered important, attracting favourable notice.
Independence (I):	Being free to make one's own decisions, being able to do things in one's own way.
Benevolence (B):	Doing things for other people, sharing with others, being generous.
Leadership (L):	Being in charge of other people, having authority over others.