

SUPERIOR PRODUCTIVITY
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American history is rich with stories of how some unnamed, untamed piece of land became a camp, then, with favorable conditions, transformed into a village, a town, a city and a regional center of influence, all because of one driving force: **productivity**.

American history also presents stories about individuals whose burning desire was to become remarkably productive, successful and realize the “American Dream”. To be sure, location presents the circumstance conducive to producing things, but no single place can sustain consistent productivity without a willing *and* able population. Productivity takes good people who have “the right stuff”.

For Superior the favorable condition was its location being just right for a port on the Great Lakes. Port cities were productive first because they offered a workable location for distributing goods and people. Then port industries would spring up to manufacture products for distribution. Productivity thus became what was made in the port as much as what was distributed through it.

In Superior’s case the main products became lumber, ore, grain, steel and ships. As these industries flourished so too did the city. And the city steadily changed consistent with the productivity changes in these industries. At the same time the one anchor for the city’s vitality remained its productive people who through their creativity and ingenuity built their lifetimes in this location. What drove those unique, productive people to maintain and thrive in a challenging work environment?

Those who grew up knowing about their ancestors may suspect the qualities that produced first generations of success and longevity in the Northland. Their knowledge has passed on but we can still describe today’s productive Superior workers. In the mid-twentieth century non-clinical psychology started identifying primary qualities that supported workplace “wellness”. By 2000 the research had settled on between five and ten major factors influencing productivity and “wellness” in the workplace. With these we can create a “factor portrait” of today’s Superior workforce showing the distinct energies behind personal productivity and excellence.

The Profile Evaluation System (PES) is an assessment tool I’ve worked with for over twenty years. It allows me a quick yet clear view of productive workplace personalities. Recently I’ve been able to assess the energies many Superior workers bring to their workplaces to get things done. With those data I identified about 36 “very productive” employees, and then used their results to build a composite of factors associated with high-productive workers in Superior.

For the analytically inclined let me note that the sample, while adequate, is not representative of all industries in the Superior area, and the criteria for “very productive” are based on each company’s judgments of their employees. Caution! Your results may vary.

I chose to use a *super-majority* of scores from the sample group. A super-majority means that *at least 80%* of my sample group falls within the areas I identified. The purpose of this step is to counteract sample “noise” by removing the influence of extreme outlier scores. This increases the descriptive robustness of the results.

Of the fifteen major factors measured by the tool eight support a relationship with productivity while seven others indicate no unique connection between the factor and productivity. All PES data are cast onto a set of nine-point scales. Each scale is named (e.g., Dominance) and the scale extremes are anchored with opposite descriptors (cooperative =1, assertive =9).

The assumptions: A “narrow” range is four or fewer scale units wide while a broad range is six or more scale units wide. When 80% or more of obtained scores fall within a narrow range on a scale, we view the factor behind those scores as clearly related to being productive. When 80% fall across a wide range on a scale, we conclude that factor is unrelated to individual productivity.

For example, 80% of the scores on the *Sociability* factor (reserved to outgoing) fall in a narrow 4-unit area (3-6) compared to the *Work Motivation* factor (security motivated to recognition motivated) where scores fall across two-thirds of the nine-point scale. The interpretation is that very productive employees are concentrated in being “modestly outgoing”. By contrast they’re not concentrated in any segment of *Work Motivation*. They are as likely motivated to avoid most risks as they are to accept “calculated” risks.

Sometimes negative results tell as much as a positive finding. Our sample of workers yielded *Work Habits* scores spanning seven of the nine scale points. The anchors for Work Habits are reactive/spontaneous (1) and proactive/planful (9). This outcome seems to contradict the common sense that planful people are more successful producers. To the contrary our results show that productive Superior employees are as likely to be quite reactive (spontaneous) in executing steps to complete a job as they are proactive (planful) in the orderly executing of steps to job completion.

It helps here to have an assessment that taps into more than habits of work actions. Our trainers know that habits for executing your work in a planful manner aren’t enough to assure truly productive outcomes. They place more training emphasis on people setting priorities to “do first what matters most”. The best productivity comes from those people who practice prioritizing **combined** with an execution style that works within the company’s culture. For the *Prioritizing* factor the results from my worker sample show a strong four-unit cluster favoring rule-driven prioritizing as opposed to a no-rules, expediency habit.

So far I’ve focused on how narrow and dense clusters of scores have been. However, there are times when “extremeness” must be considered. Productive Superior employees generally avoid extremes on the scales. Nationwide about 4% of all 20 million plus

respondents, who have taken PES, score at either extreme of the nine-point scale. Therefore, when scores concentrate at one end of the scale, it deserves special attention.

Our sample revealed two such factors: Competitiveness (with a 5-unit area from one to five); and Stamina (with a 4-unit area from one to four). That end of the Stamina scale is anchored by the descriptor, “sensitive”, meaning both physically and emotionally sensitive. This result seems counterintuitive. Conventional wisdom tells us that productive people are tough. Nothing gets them down and they can always hunker down and get the job done! What benefit is there for the productive person to be sensitive? In our workplace model “sensitive” also refers to “mentally and emotionally aware” as much as it refers to physically sensitive and vulnerable. Sensitive-but-hardy employees pick up on what’s happening around them and somehow use that awareness to stay productive. My evidence suggests that their method is to be effective question askers. When you question what you are aware of, your mind and behavior will get stronger.

The Competitiveness factor is more difficult to understand because we confuse “team oriented” as the opposite of “winning oriented”. Every “Sports Sunday” we celebrate individuals’ “winning” and competitive natures. There’s another form of competitiveness celebrated bi-annually: The Olympics. Olympic competition is driven much more by Peak Performance. The focus isn’t on everyone else losing while someone does just enough to win. Rather, “gold medal wins” come from being better than everyone else that day by achieving a peak, near-perfect performance. Individual peak performance is the opposite of individual winning. High productivity takes greater effort than being slightly better than runner-up “losers”.

As a business owner how will these results improve the “bottom line?” Here are some interpretations and recommendations.

Because habits of Priority Setting must interact with habits of Work Execution, productivity training needs to integrate both factors and the bigger payoff will come from materials pertaining to prioritizing, planning and goal setting. In short make training investments that emphasize a habit and attitude for doing first what matters most and include executing actions for results management.

There is competitiveness in being productive, but it has little to do with winning. Productive Superior workers prefer to do their best and enjoy being peak performers. Being the best or even among the best does matter to them. Trophies and wall plaques don’t matter, unless they’re gold medals for being the best. Invest in training that emphasizes an attitude of peak performance and teaches the mindset for excellence. Incidentally, your employees will also learn the value of long-term client relationships.

The complete PES composite* lays out an “investment strategy” for productivity training that includes:

- Train people using programs with planned repetition. Any “one-and-done” workshop produces little if any change. Insist on an active learning method!

- Find processes that emphasize using powerful questions. Productive people know how to question what's going on and then figure out how to make things work.
- If your company is committed to an “incentive system” mindset, connect your payouts to top performance, and expect to reward multiple top-honor achievers.

The value this information can be to your business is that it will help you build your company's greatest existing asset, *your people*. The main reason we hire new people is for the positive energy they bring your company. However, if companies desire a peak level of performance from them, they need to develop that energy by new employee training beyond job descriptions and skills so that *habits of attitude* are developed.

Not that long ago Superior and much of Wisconsin was a manufacturing powerhouse. Many people in our area still work in manufacturing and are “pretty damn good” at high productivity. But now many more people are working in non-manufacturing sectors of the economy. For this majority we can't use widgets-per-hour and imaginary production lines. We need new productivity metrics and methods. (1585 words)

* For the full Profile Evaluation System's picture of Superior's Productive employees visit my web site, www.theraffettogroup.com and click on the Profile Patterns link.