Recent surveys find that employers look for soft skills in new hires (Cengage, 2019). A Wall Street Journal survey of executives found that over 90% said soft skills were as or more important than technical skills, yet nearly as many said they had a difficult time finding applicants with the right skills (Davidson, 2016). Communication skills, interpersonal skills, initiative, problem-solving, work ethic and leadership are among the most sought-after skills. This finding is not limited to what employers tell interviewers they are looking for; the same conclusion can be drawn from analyses of skills sought in online job advertisements (Rios, Ling, Pugh, Becker, & Bacall, 2020).

Business schools have responded to this demand with increased offerings of soft-skills coursework (Weiss, 2018). But, there is also growing interest in evaluating students' soft skills as part of the business school admissions process (Ethier, 2019). Over the years, business schools and other graduate and professional schools have used personal statements, letters of recommendations, essays, interviews and other informal means to assess applicants' soft skills. These have sometimes come in the form of more standardized measures (Kyllonen, 2006), and there have been pilot studies with self-ratings (Rothstein, Paunonen, Rush, & King, 1994) and situational judgment tests (Hedlund, Wilt, Nebel, Ashford, & Sternberg, 2006) as potential supplements to standardized tests such as GMAT® and GRE® [tests].

More recently, there have been several developments that have led to a rise in the use of behavioral assessments or what used to be called personality inventories. First, the Big 5 model from personality psychology has provided a common language for describing the most important attributes — the characteristic ways people differ from one another in their thoughts, feelings and behaviors. These attributes are not permanently engrained in people, but are better thought of as habits — fairly stable, but changeable (Srivastava, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2003), particularly with interventions designed to change them (Roberts, Luo, Briley, Chow, Su, & Hill). The Big 5 are the broad dimensions of Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism ("OCEAN"). More specific facets fit under the broad label. For example, Extraversion is a more abstract description of two lower order facets — gregariousness and social dominance, which develop differently (gregariousness peaks in the teen years; social dominance grows through one's working life, see Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). Conscientiousness can be expressed as being a determined striver or as having a clean desk.

So, the Big 5 really represents only a high-level description — many of the important differentiators appear as facet dimensions or more fine-grained distinctions beneath the Big 5. In any event, having a common standard — or in this case, a common language for describing individual characteristics — is key and important for
progress. For example, numerous meta-analyses (summaries of research studies) have been made possible by the adoption of a common terminology — from these we now know what the most important factors are for success in school (Poropat, 2009) and in the workforce (Hurtz & Donovan, 2001).

Second, we now have evidence that a particular method for getting information on someone’s standing on the Big 5 and related factors is superior to other methods. That method is forced-choice, and particularly, multidimensional forced-choice. Most behavioral assessments use rating scales [like] the common Likert scale that asks how much you agree with a statement such as “I am a hard worker,” with the choices being “strongly agree,” “agree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “disagree” and “strongly disagree.” The problem with this method is that it is easy for a respondent to spot what the “correct” answer is when applying for a job, a scholarship or admission to business school.

Multidimensional forced-choice, in contrast, pits two statements against each other, such as “I am a hard worker” vs. “I work well with others,” and asks the respondent to choose between them. The two statements both reflect desirable qualities, and therefore, there is no obvious correct answer. Through the judicious selection of statement pairs to present to respondents, it is possible with this method to measure the Big 5 and related factors the same way they are measured with Likert scales, but with the advantage of being less susceptible to gaming or faking. Research has shown that the multidimensional forced-choice method does indeed reduce faking (Cao & Drasgow, 2019) and that it leads to better prediction of outcomes as well (Salgado & Tauriz, 2014).

A question is how can soft skills assessments be used in business schools? In our conversations with admissions staff and faculty members, we hear support for two distinct uses. One is in the admissions process itself, where a soft skills assessment can be administered along with the traditional standardized tests, the GMAT and GRE [tests], to provide additional information about students that can be considered in admissions decisions. Often, admissions staff are looking for information that will help improve the forecast for who will succeed in business school — in particular to reduce the number of students who are expected to succeed based on their test scores and then underperform and also to identify students who “don’t test well,” but in fact would have succeeded had they been admitted. Behavioral assessments, or soft skills assessments, are designed to capture those crucial attributes associated with academic success that otherwise might go unrecognized. In addition, business schools are often looking for qualities other than strictly academic ones — such as leadership, volunteerism and contributing to the community generally — that are typically not well predicted at all by standardized testing.

Another use for soft skills assessments is developmental. A soft skills assessment can provide a snapshot of where a student stands at the moment on various dimensions, such as leadership, collaboration, work ethic and communication. This information can be useful in advising or for self-reflection purposes in which the assessment provides students with feedback on strengths and challenges, which students can use in tailoring activities for capitalizing on strengths and for self-improvement in challenging areas. The norms provided by soft skills assessments allow a student an unbiased read on where they stand on various nonacademic attributes in the same way that grades provide information on their achievement levels in different academic domains.

Developments in recent years have increased our understanding of the role and importance of soft skills in business school and in the workplace. We also know now better than before how best to assess soft skills in students and job applicants to get higher quality information to help in better decision making, whether for admissions or student development. We see these new soft skills assessments as becoming increasingly recognized for their value and becoming increasingly commonplace in business schools.
References


