

The Perceived Characteristics of ‘Knowledgeable’ by UK MOD Procurement Function Staff

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Abstract

A neglected aspect of the nature of expertise and knowledge is how personnel in public procurement are perceived. The purpose of this paper is to examine the characteristics of procurement staff who are perceived to be knowledgeable and those who are not. Fifty-eight UK Ministry of Defence procurement function staff completed an online survey. The study shows that how procurement personnel are regarded by colleagues is inclined towards ascribed attributes and this paper presents a delineation of those attributes to allow for greater understanding. An awareness of the perceptions of others has practical importance for procurement personnel and managers as it allows for the better understanding of how they are perceived and in doing so empowers them to build on strengths and identify areas for improvement. The study’s originality lies in the provision of an important insight into how staff within a complex and usually difficult to access public sector procurement environment are perceived by their colleagues.

Keywords

Perception, Expert, Knowledge, Procurement, Defence

1. Introduction

Those that are perceived to be knowledgeable are often afforded the name ‘expert’. However, Evetts et al., (2006) suggest that expert and expertise are relational notions where to be an expert always means to be an expert in contrast to non-experts. Although Nichols (2017) dramatically describes a skepticism towards experts as ‘the death of expertise’, citing factors such as layperson access to the myriad of knowledge on the internet, he notes that our modern society cannot function without reference to and belief in them. People can act on these beliefs, for example, in choosing to hire the services of individuals regarded as more expert than others (Yates and Tschirhart, 2006). The expectation then is that personnel who are in positions where their judgment is relied upon, are knowledgeable. In the normal course of business hiring or promoting an individual who is regarded as knowledgeable but who is later found not to be might have financial consequences, but in organisations such as the United Kingdom Ministry of Defence (MOD) the consequences for being regarded as being knowledgeable without the reality of having such knowledge can be catastrophic. This has been demonstrated by high profile cases such as the loss of Nimrod XV230 with 14 servicemen over Afghanistan in 2006 (Haddon-Cave, 2009). This then represents a neglected area of research, namely the perception of those who are regarded as knowledgeable and those who are not.

The aim of this study, part of a wider study on the perception of expertise, is therefore to examine the characteristics of procurement staff in the MOD who are perceived to be knowledgeable and those who are not.

1.1 Context: The Organisation under Study: United Kingdom Ministry of Defence

Public procurement involves significant sums of money and is an inherently politically sensitive activity (Schapper *et al.*, 2006). The MOD has the fifth largest defence budget in the world (GOV.UK, 2015) and is committed to meeting the NATO defence spending target of 2% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for the rest of the decade (HM Treasury, 2015). The MOD is British Industry's single largest customer and procurement staff placed approximately 2,300 new contracts in Financial year 2013/2014 with a spend of around £20.4 Billion (GOV.UK, 2015a). Commercial Officers are responsible for procurement within the MOD. They are civil servants placed within project teams in the UK and overseas.

2.1 Literature Review

This literature review will begin with an exploration of public sector procurement knowledge before considering its exploitation by the organisation and the individual and complete with an assessment of social perception.

2.2 Public Sector Procurement knowledge

Public procurement is in a state of continual evolution both conceptually and organizationally, driven by the mantra 'do more with less' (Thai, 2016). Pressures on public finances since the global financial crisis of 2007 have motivated a reassessment of the role of public procurement that has led to an ever-closer relationship between theory and practice (Flynn and Davis, 2014). Aligned to this has been a push by UK Government Departments to end the days of the 'gifted amateur' in place of a more specialized and professionalized civil service (Brecknell, 2016). However, this is not an easy undertaking because procurement encompasses a great many differing factors, functions and knowledge needs (Callender and Matthews, 2003). Indeed, the commercial function has been described by Lowe (2013, p. 3) as a "dynamic capability within organisations" that has become so through factors such as the processes of globalisation and more complex collaborations. This ever complex and changing world view means that currency of knowledge is paramount. Those such as Giunipero (2000); Humphreys (2001) and Wynstra *et al.* (2001) have argued that rather than just having a working appreciation of the content areas, procurement professionals need to be able to evaluate procurement influences across a range of discipline areas at a 'professional standard of knowledge'. In other words, it is not enough for procurement professionals to be merely aware of the myriad of subjects that make up the procurement body of knowledge they must have a deeper understanding and ability to apply the knowledge in the course of their duties.

2.3 Utilisation of Knowledge

The utilisation of Knowledge in business is essential because it is a fundamental asset of organisations (Eris and Saatchiglu, 2007). Baumard (1999) suggests that organisations work 'intensely' to create and preserve their knowledge whilst Oleksak and Oleksak (2010, p.3) go as far as to describe knowledge as the new oil that is "part, directly or indirectly, of everything we use". Knowledge enables effective action, which in turn drives superior performance and competitive advantage (Nissen, 2011). Holste and Fields (2010) note that the willingness of members of an organisation to share and use tacit knowledge may be dependent on the extent that their contemporaries are trusted as recipients and sources. Levin and Cross (2004) note findings by those such as Pelz and Andrews (1966) and Mintzberg (1973) that suggests that people prefer to turn to other people rather than documents when they are seeking information. In asking for information, the seeker becomes vulnerable to the benevolence of the knowledge source (Lee, 1997). Trust in the individual providing the information has an effect on the perceived usefulness of the knowledge because where the knowledge source's competence is more trusted the seeker is more likely to listen to, absorb and take action on that knowledge (Levin *et al.*, 2004). Gau's (2011) research into the public sector showed that many people did not want to share knowledge with their colleagues because it was their way of protecting themselves. Wilson (2002, p.230) summarises this dilemma: 'If getting promotion, or holding your job, or finding a new one is based on the knowledge you possess - what incentive is there to reveal that knowledge and share it?' However, Stein and Ridderstrale (2001) note that a disadvantage in not articulating knowledge is that an individual may claim to possess knowledge that they do not have or that they are more knowledgeable than they actually are.

2.4 Perception

Santos and Garcia (2006, p. 753) define perception as: ‘the internal sensation that results from material impression made on our senses’; they suggest that it is the underlying layer that business decisions feed upon from external images, impressions or sensations through one of the senses. Cultural as well as individual existence depends on perceiving (Ittleson, 1973) and an individual can be construed in innumerable ways based upon identity, race, sex, age, emotional state, occupation, religion and so forth (Quinn and Rosenthal, 2012). Of all the influences on our working lives, Mullins (2005) suggests that it is perception that is at the root of all organisational behaviour. Understanding the processes that act to influence the manner in which individuals perceive things and the way they make judgments about other people is critical to the study of behaviour (Dick and Ellis, 2006). Vernon (1962) observes that individuals modify their judgments of perception to conform to the judgment of a social group, or the opinions expressed by others within the group. Indeed, within the organisation, those of knowledge who are regarded as experts are often revered by their peers and protected from outside competitors by a cautious management that considers their superior knowledge as vital to the competitiveness of the organisation (Sie and Yakhlef, 2009). The notion of experts being perceived as relational rather than absolute is described by Evetts *et al.* (2006). Being regarded as knowledgeable is then a matter of social perception, described by Steers and Black (1994, p. 69) as ‘those processes by which we perceive other people.’ Steers and Black (1994) present this ‘perception of others’ in their model (figure 1). This study utilises that part of the Steers and Black (1994) model related to the ‘characteristics of the person perceived’ to examine the characteristics of those who are perceived to be knowledgeable in the MOD. The remainder of the model will be explored in further work.

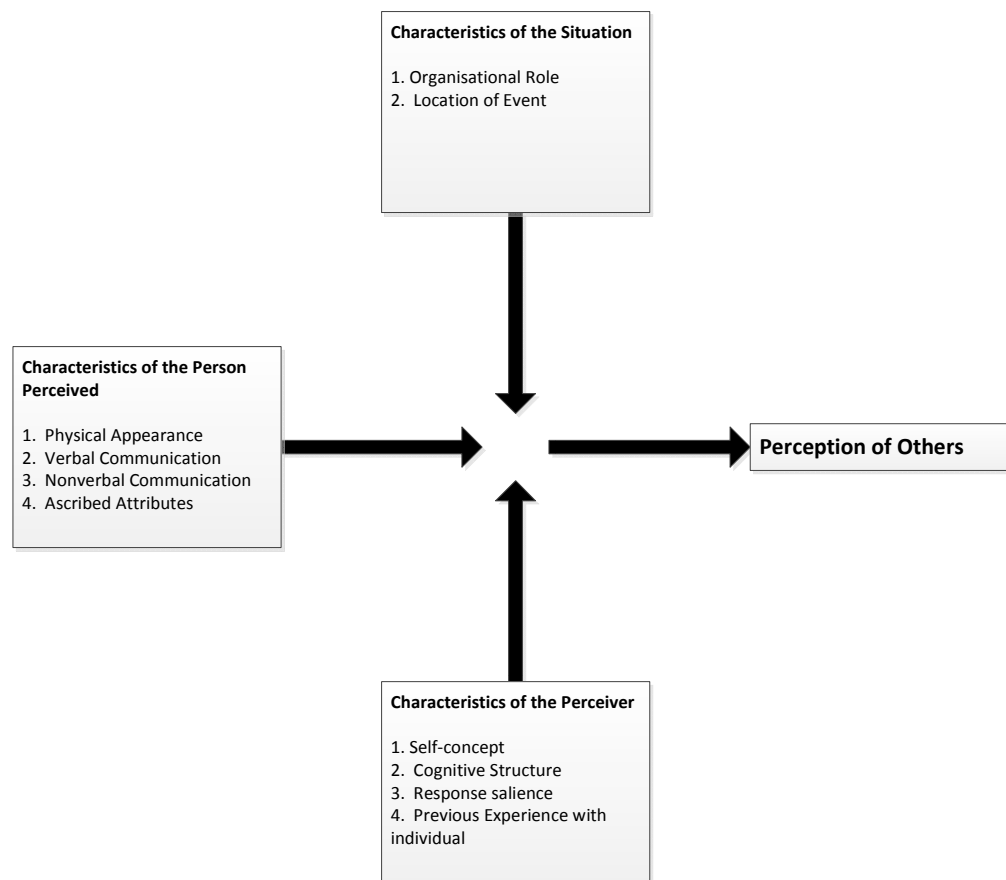


Figure 1. Major Influences on Social Perception in Organisations Steers and Black, (1994).

Steers and Black (1994) suggest that the manner in which others assess us is influenced by our individual characteristics, their model noted at figure 1 suggests four categories of personal characteristics: 1) physical appearance, 2) verbal communication, 3) nonverbal communication and 4) ascribed attributes. These are described

at Table 1. For the purposes of this study the researchers have used those four character types to evaluate the characteristics of MOD procurement staff who are perceived to be knowledgeable and those who are not.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Perceived Person. Based upon content from Steers and Black (1994, p. 69-71).

Characteristic	Description
Physical	Demographic characteristics such as age, sex, race, height and weight. Business suits for those who are perceived to be in positions of power and work clothes for those who are not
Verbal Communication	Precision of language use can influence perceptions of sophistication or education. Accent provides evidence for a person's geographic and social background. Tone of voice indicates a speaker's state of mind. The topics of conversation provide further clues.
Nonverbal Communication	How people behave. Facial expressions: for example, those who smile are thought to have positive attitudes (Secord, 1958). Body Language: examples include sitting up straight and appearing alert versus being relaxed; looking people in the eye versus looking away.
Ascribed Attributes	<i>Status</i> is ascribed to those such as executives. Those with higher status are perceived to have greater control over their behaviour, more self-confidence and competence. A person's <i>occupation</i> influences the manner in which they are perceived because of the image it conjures in the mind of the perceiver. <i>Personal Characteristics</i> can also have an influence on how people are perceived.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

This study comprises a survey of MOD Commercial function staff to determine the characteristics of staff who are perceived to be knowledgeable and those that are not. A total of fifty-eight (27 Female, 29 Male and 2 who did not indicate gender) UK Ministry of Defence procurement function staff completed an online survey. The participants were from a range of grades located at MOD Corsham, Abbey Wood and Glasgow. The lowest grade was 'graduate' and the highest Senior Civil Service Grade 1.

3.2 Procedure and Questionnaire

Participants each received an email with a link to an online survey. The survey required the participants to provide three words or phrases of their choice that 1) describe someone who is knowledgeable in the procurement function and 2) is not knowledgeable in the procurement function. The request for words did not indicate a particular individual, team, case study or project.

4. Analysis

The data from the online survey was exported into a spreadsheet and a copy held by both researchers. In phase one of the analysis the researchers undertook independent thematic analysis; grouping the phrases and words. For instance, 'CIPS' is a procurement qualification and so it was grouped with the phrases and words that referred to 'qualified'. Phase two of the analysis consisted of a cross-comparison of each researcher's findings and where differences had occurred or the words were anomalous the researchers undertook a review of their work before discussing each of the words in order to reach consensus. In the third phase the researchers assessed each word against the Steers and Black (1994) descriptors at Table 1 to determine which description matched the word the MOD commercial staff had provided, again discussing each choice to reach consensus.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 MOD Commercial Function: Characteristics of the Person Perceived

There are 53 characteristics that MOD Commercial Staff have used to describe someone they perceive to be knowledgeable and 51 characteristics used to describe someone who they perceive is not. Table 2 details an extract of the words provided by the MOD commercial officers and characteristic ‘type’ utilizing the Steers and Black (1994) descriptors at Table 1. The full list of words and character types is provided at Appendix 1.

Table 2 Extract of words or phrases used to describe someone who is/is not knowledgeable

IS Knowledgeable				IS NOT Knowledgeable			
Word	f	%	Type	Word	f	%	Type
Experienced	14	8.8	AA	Novice	15	10.9	AA
Aware-Commercial	11	6.9	AA	Risk	9	6.6	AA
Competent	10	6.3	AA	Limited	8	5.8	AA
Professional	10	6.3	AA	Non-Procurer	8	5.8	AA
Expert	9	5.7	AA	Inexperienced	7	5.1	AA
Qualified	9	5.7	AA	Dangerous	6	4.4	AA
Asset	6	3.8	AA	Liability	5	3.6	AA
Leader	6	3.8	AA	Insular	4	2.9	AA
Aware-Finance	4	2.5	AA	Unaware-Commercial	4	2.9	AA
Knowledgeable	4	2.5	AA	Unaware-Finance	4	2.9	AA
Problem Solver	4	2.5	AA	Unconfident	4	2.9	AA
Reliable	4	2.5	AA	Adversarial	3	2.2	AA

The majority of characteristics are assigned to those that express ascribed attributes (AA). There is no occurrence of attributes related to physical characteristics. This may suggest that the Civil Service training on equality and diversity has had the effect of excluding these characteristics as a factor in the perception of knowledgeable.

Experience and a lack of it is the overriding factor that affects the perception of whether someone is or is not knowledgeable. The words ‘experience, aware-commercial, competent, professional, expert and qualified’ are the most commonly used, accounting for 39.7 % of the percentage total of words used. The researchers are aware from their service and interaction with the MOD that experience is likely to refer to time-served. However, along with the assignment of ‘expert’ status, previous research by those such as Cassidy and Buede (2009) has shown that time served does not guarantee enhanced performance. The use of the word ‘qualified’ is likely a reference to Membership of the Chartered Institute of Procurement and Supply (MCIPS) or attainment of the Defence Acquisition in Management MSc, which are the principle qualifications currently pursued by procurement staff in the MOD. The study indicates that being new to the function, inexperience and the resultant risk of that inexperience factors high in the perception of someone who is not knowledgeable. It is interesting that the perception of knowledgeable is linked to that of leadership. The inference is that someone who is knowledgeable will also be a leader. The research does not provide an indication of whether that leader will be good or bad, merely that to the mind of the commercial officer the knowledge equates to being a leader in some form. Culturally the MOD commercial function has a greater appreciation of those who lead if they have ‘come up through the ranks’ and can readily display their commercial knowledge.

The words ‘novice, risk, limited, non-procurer, inexperienced, dangerous and liability’ are the most commonly used and account for 42.2% of the percentage total of words used. This suggests that those who are outside of the function are viewed with suspicion. Those who come to the function from industry, from other functions under a conversion scheme or as graduates may struggle initially to convince those they work with or manage that they are capable of leading on procurement projects. The commercial function is by its nature heavily driven by process and procedure; it is a ‘steep learning curve’ and it takes time to assimilate the range of knowledge required at each grade

progression and in each project. Those that are new to commercial or have failed to assimilate that range of knowledge are likely to be accorded with low regard. They will be regarded as ‘dangerous’ because the risk of them making a mistake in process, procedure or in negotiation can have serious consequences for the project area they are working within, which in turn affects their colleagues in terms such as timescales and reputation.

5.3 Status, Occupation and Personal Characteristics

Steers and Black (1994) suggest that ascribed attributes can be further divided into three categories: Status, Occupation and Personal Characteristics (SOPC).

Table 3 – Summary of SOPC for those perceived to be knowledgeable

Number of words use by commercial staff	Status, Occupation or Personal Characteristics (SOPC)	% of total SOPC
18	Occupation	38.3
15	Status	31.9
13	Personal Characteristic	27.7

Table 3 details that the perceived knowledge of another member of procurement staff was most often indicated by ascribed attributes that related to their occupation (38.3%). Being perceived to be experienced, commercially aware and ‘professional’ who is competent and has an awareness of risk associated with the processes of the function is noted as an indicator of someone who is perceived to be knowledgeable. The study shows that in order to be highly regarded an individual must be able to impress upon an observer that they are competent in the occupation. Status is seen as a secondary but important factor in determining perception of knowledgeable (31.9%). Being perceived as qualified or an expert carries great weight in the commercial staff psyche where such an individual is regarded as an asset to the organisation and colleagues. However, the researcher’s experience of the function indicates that ‘grade’ status does not equate directly to perceptions of knowledge or expertise. For example, there are personnel who are highly regarded for their knowledge and perceived expertise in particular specialist areas such as policy and cost engineering who may not have senior grades. Their status is determined by their demonstrations of knowledge and ability to assist with problem solving more than their grade. Personal characteristics are tertiary (27.7%) and are headed by words that indicate a reliable problem solver. Commercial officers are presented with a myriad of complex relationship and process issues on a daily basis and, as they are subject to the whim and wane of political influence and customer requirement change; being perceived to act with flexibility and the capability of making and implementing decisions is desirable. Operating in a manner that is ethical is core to the civil service code and so the appearance of it within the list is not a surprise, its absence would have been a concern.

Table 4 – Summary of SOPC for those perceived not to be knowledgeable

Number of words used by commercial staff	Status, Occupation or Personal Characteristics (SOPC)	% of total SOPC
20	Occupation	46.5
20	Personal Characteristic	46.5
3	Status	7.0

Table 4 summarises the ascribed attributes of someone who is perceived *not* to be knowledgeable, they are equally split between those related to occupation and those related to personal characteristics (46.5%). The data presents a picture of an individual who is perceived to lack experience, with limited abilities in the function and who represents a risk to the organisation and the team. The personal characteristics of an individual who is regarded as not being knowledgeable are given greater weight (46.5%) than those who are regarded as knowledgeable (27.7%). Those personal characteristics manifest in being regarded as insular and lacking in confidence, suggesting that to the commercial staff indecision is an indicator of not being knowledgeable. However, one could argue that those who are new to a function are more likely to ask probing questions and explore processes that are often blindly followed by those who have become used to them and no longer challenge them. One might speculate that those that are ‘time served’ and perceived to be knowledgeable may have just reached a state of acceptance of the state of things and

that a novice could build credibility by securing Commercial outcomes that more senior and experienced staff acknowledge as best practice. This would be especially useful where more experienced colleagues of the novice operating at grades between themselves and the senior officer had advised an easier but less optimal approach. The study indicates that status is a low factor in regarding whether someone is knowledgeable (7%); this may be because low status is not generally regarded as an 'attribute'. The word 'novice' occurs more often in this study than any other word (15 times) with 'inexperienced' appearing seven times. Its appearance in such numbers further emphasizes the threat felt by personnel who may have to work with an individual whose lack of knowledge might cause delays, disruption or internal and external reputational damage.

5.6 Verbal and Non-Verbal Characteristics

Verbal and non-verbal communication does not feature very highly on the list of characteristics. Appendix 2 indicates that those who are perceived to be knowledgeable are outward looking and ready and wanting to receive communication. They are perceived to be open-minded and, through a network, able to accumulate knowledge. However, they may face a challenge to apply knowledge that is not based upon the procurement function in an environment that is constrained by process, procedure, status and hierarchy. Those that are perceived to not be knowledgeable are regarded as disinterested and ignorant and through these characteristics they are seen negatively. They are perceived to be unaware of the need to build relationships and as unsupportive and creators of uncertainty.

6. Conclusion

This research represents the first use of the Steers and Black (1994) model (personal communication Allen-Steers, 16 January 2017) and this study has therefore contributed to knowledge by providing a practical application of a theoretical model. The value of this research also lies in the provision of an important insight into how staff within a complex and usually difficult to access public sector procurement environment are perceived by their colleagues. With procurement personnel under increasing scrutiny to provide ever-greater value for money against continued reduction in resources, this research represents a timely commentary on the characteristics of those who are regarded as knowledgeable and those who are not. An awareness of these perceptions is important for procurement personnel and managers as it allows for the better understanding of how they are perceived and by doing so empowers them to build on strengths and identify areas for improvement.

As with all research, this study has some limitations. The study focuses entirely on the UK Ministry of Defence procurement function. The nature of the study means that no claims to generalisation are made; although the sample is taken from across the procurement function in a range of grades and with a range of experience and so one could argue that the sample size indicates that the sample is indicative rather than representational. To provide for a fuller understanding of perception utilizing the Steers and Black (1994) model further research will examine the characteristics of the situation and characteristics of the perceiver.

Appendix 1 – Words or phrases to describe someone who is/is not knowledgeable

Is Knowledgeable					IS NOT Knowledgeable				
Word	f	%	Type	S/O/PC	Word	f	%	Type	S/O/PC
Experienced	14	8.8	AA	O	Novice	15	10.9	AA	S
Aware-Commercial	11	6.9	AA	O	Risk	9	6.6	AA	O
Competent	10	6.3	AA	O	Limited	8	5.8	AA	O
Professional	10	6.3	AA	O	Non-Procurer	8	5.8	AA	O
Expert	9	5.7	AA	S	Inexperienced	7	5.1	AA	S
Qualified	9	5.7	AA	S	Dangerous	6	4.4	AA	O
Asset	6	3.8	AA	S	Liability	5	3.6	AA	O
Leader	6	3.8	AA	S	Insular	4	2.9	AA	PC
Aware-Finance	4	2.5	AA	O	Unaware-Commercial	4	2.9	AA	O
Knowledgeable	4	2.5	AA	O	Unaware-Finance	4	2.9	AA	O
Problem Solver	4	2.5	AA	PC	Unconfident	4	2.9	AA	PC
Reliable	4	2.5	AA	PC	Adversarial	3	2.2	AA	PC
Achiever	3	1.9	AA	S/PC	Disinterested	3	2.2	VC/NVC	none
Attentive	3	1.9	VC/NVC	none	Ignorant	3	2.2	NVC	none
Aware-Risk	3	1.9	AA	O	Ineffective	3	2.2	AA	O
Communicator	3	1.9	VC/NVC	none	Inflexible	3	2.2	AA	PC
Current	3	1.9	AA	O	Myopic	3	2.2	AA	PC
Ethical	3	1.9	AA	PC	Unaware-Relationships	3	2.2	VC/NVC	none
Flexible	3	1.9	AA	PC	Acquiescent	2	1.5	AA	PC
Open-minded	3	1.9	AA/NVC	PC	Biased	2	1.5	AA	PC
Relationship-developer	3	1.9	VC/NVC	none	Blinkered	2	1.5	AA	PC
Skilled	3	1.9	AA	O	Hindrance	2	1.5	AA	PC
Adds Value	2	1.3	AA	O	Incompetent	2	1.5	AA	O
Analysar	2	1.3	AA	O	Poor-Communicator	2	1.5	VC/NVC	none
Aware-Legal	2	1.3	AA	O	Unaware-Market	2	1.5	AA	O
Aware-Process	2	1.3	AA	O	Unprofessional	2	1.5	AA	O
Aware-Product	2	1.3	AA	O	Unqualified	2	1.5	AA	O
Enabler	2	1.3	AA	O	Untrained	2	1.5	AA	O
POC	2	1.3	AA	S	Category manager	1	0.7	AA	O
Role Model	2	1.3	AA	S	Cautious	1	0.7	AA	PC
Strategic	2	1.3	AA	S	Detached	1	0.7	AA	PC
Time-Served	2	1.3	AA	S	Generalist	1	0.7	AA	O
Astute	1	0.6	AA	PC	Illiterate	1	0.7	VC/NVC	none
Coach	1	0.6	AA	S	Illogical	1	0.7	AA	PC
Confident	1	0.6	AA	PC	Indecisive	1	0.7	AA	PC
Credible	1	0.6	AA	S	Indignant	1	0.7	AA	PC
Effective	1	0.6	AA	O	Intransigent	1	0.7	AA	PC
Emotional-Intelligence	1	0.6	AA	PC	Maverick	1	0.7	AA	PC
Influencer	1	0.6	AA	S	Overqualified	1	0.7	AA	O
Innovator	1	0.6	AA	PC	Over reliant	1	0.7	AA	O
Manager	1	0.6	AA	S	Parasitic	1	0.7	AA	O
Meticulous	1	0.6	AA	PC	Private Sector	1	0.7	AA	S

Multi Skilled	1	0.6	AA	O	Subjective	1	0.7	AA	PC
Networker	1	0.6	VC	none	Unaware-Product	1	0.7	AA	O
Patient	1	0.6	AA	PC	Uncertain	1	0.7	AA/VC/ NVC	none
Practitioner	1	0.6	AA	O	Unethical	1	0.7	AA	PC
Resourceful	1	0.6	AA	PC	Unprincipled	1	0.7	AA	PC
Respected	1	0.6	AA	S	Unskilled	1	0.7	AA	O
Studious	1	0.6	AA	PC	Unsuitable	1	0.7	AA	O
Supportive	1	0.6	VC/NVC	none	Unsupportive	1	0.7	VC/NVC	none
Team-Player	1	0.6	AA	S					
Vital	1	0.6	AA	S					

Appendix 2 – verbal and Non-Verbal Characteristics of someone who *IS/IS NOT* knowledgeable

(2) IS Knowledgeable			
Word	f	%	Type
Attentive	3	1.9	VC/NVC
Communicator	3	1.9	VC/NVC
Open-minded	3	1.9	AA/NVC
Relationship-developer	3	1.9	VC/NVC
Networker	1	0.6	VC
Supportive	1	0.6	VC/NVC

(3) IS NOT Knowledgeable			
Word	f	%	Type
Disinterested	3	2.2	VC/NVC
Ignorant	3	2.2	NVC
Unaware-Relationships	3	2.2	VC/NVC
Poor-Communicator	2	1.5	VC/NVC
Illiterate	1	0.7	VC/NVC
Uncertain	1	0.7	AA/VC/NVC
Unsupportive	1	0.7	VC/NVC

Key:

AA – Ascribed Attribute, VC – Verbal Communication, NVC – Non-Verbal Communication, S – Status, O – Occupation, PC – Personal Characteristic.

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