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By

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Do You Feel Lucky? Then You Might Be Courting Disaster

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Why be good when you can be lucky, says my favorite lawyer when a golf ball bounces off a tree and back onto the fairway. But golf is a game. In the business of practicing law, he doesn't count on luck.

Luck defined here means overconfidence in outcomes that rely chiefly on chance. Weather in Pittsburgh in late October will favor an outdoor event. The stock market will end the year over 15,000. No rival can match your technology for at least 12 months. A hurricane won't cripple your main supplier. Your delivery van won't break down at a crucial moment.

In business, luck is a fickle ally at best. At worst, luck is treacherous.

I don't mean to squelch optimism grounded in compelling evidence. Excessive faith in luck, however, exposes companies to risks that should be averted or hedged. If a manager depends too much on luck, danger often lurks. Wouldn't a forewarning be useful?

[Michael Wohl](#) thinks so, and in fact has devised a way to measure your dependency on luck. An associate professor of psychology at Carlton University in Ottawa, Wohl probes luck with an eye to helping chronic gamblers get a grip on their affliction. Managers addicted to luck have a problem that even if it surfaces infrequently it might injure a career and a bottom line.

"If you believe you possess a personal quality called luck," Wohl warns, "then the normal rules of cause and effect don't necessarily apply to you." The false sense of exemption invites poor decisions. Although Wohl has gamblers in mind where luck is concerned, it's not a big stretch to see implications in the everyday workplace. Imagine a simple way to identify and educate managers who reckon too readily that luck is on their side.

Wohl calls it the PLUS scale, unveiled in a new academic paper entitled "[Personal Luck Usage Scale \(PLUS\): Psychometric Validation of a Measure of Gambling-Related Belief in Luck as Personal Possession.](#)" The scale features 12 questions that measure dependency on luck. Here they are with one change. I substituted "work" for "gamble."

- 1) I believe some people are luckier than others.
- 2) I consider myself to be a lucky person.
- 3) My wins are evidence that I have luck related to work.
- 4) My luck helps me win.
- 5) I am really lucky when I work.
- 6) My luck plays an important part in my work.

- 7) I feel secure about working, because I am a lucky person.
- 8) I am not a lucky person.
- 9) My luck influences the probability that I will win.
- 10) I try to use my luck when I work.
- 11) I am likely to win when working because I am lucky.
- 12) I am not any luckier than other workers.

Assign a score to each answer from 1 to 7, where 1 means strongest agreement and 7 strongest disagreement. Note, however, that questions 8 and 12 seek the same information as earlier questions but in reverse, a routine validation technique statisticians use. For those two questions, reverse your answers. Switch a 1 to a 7, for example, or a 2 to a 6. Then add up the scores and divide by the number of questions to compute an individual luck usage scale. Divide the total of all individual results by the number of tests and you have a luck metric. There is no absolute benchmark. Use your own result to see how you stack up against others, particularly those you work with. You may be as vulnerable to chance as the weakest link.

I took the test myself and scored a 68 that gives me a 5.7 on the luck usage scale, which feels about right. As luck goes I believe some people have more luck than others some of the time, but apart from occasional serendipity in finding assignments luck is a negligible component in my work.

As usage scales approach 1, fate may depend more and more on fortune's intervention. That is when a warning bell should alert sound companies and savvy managers that feeling too lucky poses too much risk.

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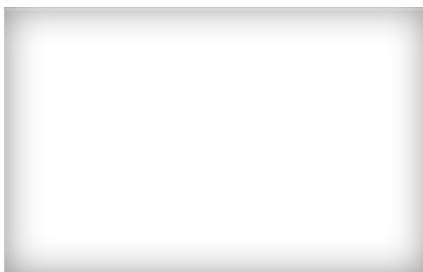


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