

Strengths and Weakness of Executive Functioning Skills

Response Inhibition --

People who are strong in response inhibition know how to hold their fire. They are the voice of reason in an argument, and before they say something they stop to consider whether what they have to say will improve the situation or make it worse.

People who are weak in response inhibition are frequently guilty of putting their foot in their proverbial mouth. They blurt out things without thinking, make decisions without considering all the ramifications, and make snap judgments that may lead them down the wrong path.

Working Memory --

People who have strong working memories have no trouble keeping track of things they have to do, promises they have made, or appointments they have to keep. They remember details from conversations and important information about the people they live or work with.

People who have weak working memories are forgetful. When they're focused on a particular thing, they may lose track of critical competing information (forgetting a dentist appointment because an emergency arose at work) or they may lose track of details or minor obligations (forgetting to do something your spouse or partner asked you to do when you left that morning).

Emotional Control--

People who are strong in emotional control are able to keep their emotions in check, even in stressful situations. They react calmly in the face of confrontation or in the midst of an emergency. They are not easily 'baited' either by an irate boss or by an angry teenage son or daughter.

People who are weak in emotional control tend to fly off the handle at minor provocations. They are easily stressed and find it hard to manage their feelings, particularly in emotionally charged situations.

Task Initiation--

People who have strong task initiation skills get started right away on projects and obligations. If someone asks them to do something, they're most comfortable if they can jump up and do it right then. They don't need deadlines as a motivator.

People who are weak in task initiation put things off. They think to themselves, "I'll do it later" or "I'll get to it tomorrow," and when the deadline looms they find themselves backed up and forced to ask for extensions. Sometimes they delay starting because their perfectionism leads them to

doubt they'll be able to produce to their own high standards, and sometimes they delay because the task appears too daunting or to require too much effort. The end results is the same: procrastination.

Sustained Attention:

People with a strength in sustained attention have no trouble persisting long enough to complete the task - even if it's something they find tedious. Effortful, or boring. They're able to screen out distractions and defer gratification in their drive to get tasks done.

Individuals with a weakness in sustained attention may be able to start tasks quickly, but they struggle to finish them. They are susceptible to interruptions and find it hard to get back to work after them. They often run out of steam before they finish the task. Sometimes people with weak sustained attention jump back and forth between multiple tasks because they can't tolerate spending too much time on any one task. This approach may work for some - but it's also fraught with pitfalls.

Planning/prioritizing --

People with strong planning and prioritizing skills excel at multi step tasks. They can visualize what the final outcome should be, and they can easily sequence the steps they need to follow to achieve the outcome. In the face of a complex task or too much information, they can zero in on the critical information and discard the rest.

People with weak planning and prioritizing skills, when confronted with complex or multi step tasks, have a difficult time sifting through all the information and identifying where to start. They may become bogged down in minor details and forget where they are heading. They are particularly challenged when the planning involved required them to manage others' work as well as their own.

Organization--

People with a strength in organization have neat and tidy work and living spaces. They have a place where things should go, and they dislike clutter. When they return from a trip, they unpack their suitcases right away.

People with a weakness in organization let clutter accumulate and find clearing it up painful. When someone asks them to find something, (whether it's on their desk, their laptop, or in the cupboards or garage) their answer is often "I know it's here someplace; I just can't find it right now".

Time Management--

People with strong time management skills meet deadlines, arrive on time for appointments or meetings, and can judge how long it takes to do any task thrown at them. They can make adjustments as well, speeding up to complete something quickly if time is at a premium.

People with weak time management skills tend to have a particularly hard time with time estimation. They routinely underestimate how long it takes to do something, and so they are sure they have time to “just do one more thing” before leaving work at the end of the day or heading off to an appointment. Their lives have improved measurably since the advent of cell phones because now they can call ahead and explain that they’re “running late.”

Flexibility--

Flexible people make easy adjustments when something unexpected happens. In addition to being able to “go with the flow,” they are often creative, nonlinear thinkers.

People who are inflexible are easily thrown for a loop when plans change or something unexpected happens. The need for backup plans seems to surprise them no matter how many times they’ve been in situations in which they had to come up with Plan B.

Metacognition --

People who are strong in metacognition are able to see the forest rather than just focusing on individual trees. They see how the pieces of the puzzle fit together. It’s hard to describe this skill without using metaphors -- and understanding metaphors is something metacognitive thinkers do well. They are good at making connections between disparate concepts and experiences.

People who are weak in metacognition tend to focus on isolated details. They revel in the immediate and the concrete and are not likely to spend a lot of time in introspection. Sometimes they have trouble “connecting the dots” and this may be a source of frustration to those around them who do that easily.

Goal-Directed Persistence --

People with a strength in goal-directed persistence are people who set long-term goals for themselves and pursue them, pulling themselves back on track and working around obstacles when they arise. Their goals may be lofty (writing a novel) or mundane (walking 30 minutes a day 5 days a week), but once they establish a goal they work to accomplish it no matter what gets in the way.

People for whom goal-directed persistence is not a strength tend to be less future oriented. They're happy with how things are unfolding and may not be driven to 'make it to the next level'. This weakness may not be particularly troubling to them -- unless they are dissatisfied with the status quo or they live or work with someone who is.