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# **Performance-Avoid Goal Orientation and Task Engagement: Moderating Effect of Self-Efficacy**

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This study assessed the relationship between performance-avoid goal orientation and training task engagement in an adult learner sample. Results supported the hypothesized relationships, indicating, for trainees low in self-efficacy, those with higher performance-avoid orientation tended not to engage in training to the extent shown by those lower on performance-avoid orientation.

Goal orientation has been a construct of great interest in research, and has undergone many iterations that lead to its current definition and application (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005). Specifically, the bifurcation of performance goal orientation into prove and avoid dimensions has provided contextual understanding of the influence self-efficacy has on many relationships, including the relationship between performance-avoidance orientation and task engagement. This study uses field data to investigate the potential moderating effect of self-efficacy on the relationship between performance-avoid goal orientation and task engagement to further understand the role that self-efficacy plays in achievement engagement behavior.

At the foundation of goal orientation theory are two contrasting, and mutually exclusive, implicit theories of intelligence (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). The *incremental* theory maintains that intelligence is a malleable attribute. Individuals subscribing to this theory hold the implicit belief that intelligence can be controlled and, through this control, improved upon. In contrast, the *entity* theory maintains that intelligence is a fixed attribute. Individuals subscribing to this theory believe that intelligence cannot be controlled and any effort to do so is futile. Based upon empirical observations, Dweck and Leggett theorized that these two implicit theories of intelligence engender two distinct behavioral orientations: learning and performance.

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The incremental theory is theorized to engender a *learning goal orientation* (Dweck, 1986). The implicit belief in a malleable intelligence generates a cognitive framework through which individuals view effort as an opportunity for improvement. Thus, these individuals are oriented towards engaging in activities by which they can develop their competence. The entity theory is theorized to lead to a *performance goal orientation*. In contrast to the incremental theory, the implicit belief in a fixed intelligence generates a cognitive framework through which individuals view effort as an opportunity to either prove or disprove their ability. Thus, these individuals are oriented towards engaging in activities in which they will demonstrate their competence and receive positive evaluations of their fixed intelligence. Moreover, they are oriented towards avoiding activities in which they will fail to demonstrate their competence and receive negative judgments regarding their fixed intelligence.

These contrasting orientations are theorized to lead to specific behavior patterns based upon the perceived probability of success in the pending task (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; see Figure 1). Based upon this assessment, performance oriented individuals are theorized to employ one of two distinct behavior patterns. When performance oriented individuals feel that they cannot succeed in the pending task (i.e., low self-efficacy), they will demonstrate an *avoidance* behavior pattern. This pattern is demonstrated by attempts to disengage and withdraw from the current situation or, at the very least, derogate the task itself. This withdrawal behavior is an attempt to evade the perceived threat of potentially receiving negative judgments of the “fixed” attribute, from others or oneself. In contrast, performance oriented individuals who feel that they will succeed in the pending task (i.e., high self-efficacy) will demonstrate an

*engagement* behavior pattern. This pattern is highlighted by active commitment to the imminent task with the intent of successful completion. In essence, this engagement behavior is an attempt to gain positive judgments of the ‘fixed’ attribute.

The theoretical framework presented by Dweck and Leggett (1988) provides no behavioral distinction for individuals that are learning oriented. Because of the belief in intelligence as a malleable attribute, these individuals frame failure as being equally as much of a learning experience as it is success. Thus, the probability of success plays no role in their decisions with regard to task engagement for these individuals. Put simply, based upon the theory provided by Dweck and Leggett, the relationship between the learning orientation and behavior is not moderated by the perceived probability of success.

#### *Factor Structure of Goal Orientation*

Two types of measures have been used predominately in goal orientation research: a two-factor model (e.g., Button et al., 1996; Sujan, Weitz, & Kumar, 1994) and a three-factor model (e.g., Midgley, Kaplan, Middleton, Maehr, Urdan, Aderman, Anderman, & Roeser, 1998; VandeWalle, 1997). More recently, a four-factor model has also been introduced (Baranik, Barron, & Finney, 2007). All of these instruments utilize similar self-report items in an attempt to identify the particular goal orientation to which an individual prefers. The two-factor model simply evaluates the learning and performance orientations separately whereas the three-factor model evaluates the learning orientation and a bifurcated performance orientation. In the three-factor model maintains the learning orientation as it is in the two-factor model but splits the performance orientation into a performance-prove orientation and a performance-avoid

orientation. The four-factor solution expands on this by splitting the learning orientation into learning-prove and learning-avoid orientations.

### *Task Engagement*

The primary aspect of goal orientation theory is the engage/avoid behavior pattern. From this pattern, it is hypothesized that learning oriented individuals should actively engage in learning tasks more so than performance oriented individuals (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Along these lines, in a study of fifth- and sixth-grade students, Meece, Blumenfeld, and Hoyle (1988) examined the relationship between goal orientation and learning activities. They observed that the learning orientation was positively related to active engagement in the task ( $r = .70$ ) and negatively related to superficial task engagement ( $r = -.43$ ). In contrast, the performance orientation was found to have a negative relationship with active engagement ( $r = -.39$ ) and a positive relationship with superficial engagement ( $r = .71$ ). Similarly, in a study of undergraduates engaged in a learning task, Fisher and Ford (1998) observed a negative relationship between the learning orientation and off-task attention ( $-.17$ ) while observing a positive relationship between the performance orientation and off-task attention ( $.34$ ).

Given the description of avoidance behavior patterns associated with performance-avoidance orientation (APGO), it is expected that this study will find that high performance-avoid individuals will be less likely to actively engage in the achievement task.

H1: Participants high in APGO will be less likely to engage in the achievement task than participants

low in APGO (negative relationship between APGO and task engagement).

### *Self-Efficacy and Task Engagement*

Previous research has also attempted to define the relationship between goal orientation and self-efficacy and this relationship's influence on task engagement. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's confidence in his or her capability to successfully complete a task or course of action (Bandura, 1977; 1997). Studies that theorize goal orientation as a two-factor structure have found inconsistent relationships between goal orientation and self-efficacy. For example, Ford and colleagues (1998) and Phillips and Gully (1997) found a negative relationship between performance orientation and self-efficacy. However, Steele-Johnson and colleagues (2000) found a positive relationship between performance orientation and self-efficacy under certain conditions. These conflicting findings have become better understood as later studies have conceptualized goal orientation as a three-factor structure. For example, Davis, Mero, and Goodman (2007) found that APGO orientation was negatively related to task performance under certain conditions (i.e., whether or not the individual was held accountable for their performance). Without the bifurcation of performance orientation, such a result would not have been detected. Furthermore, this result suggests that there is an additional variable that is influencing these demonstrated differences in task performance. Essentially, studies utilizing the three-factor structure of goal orientation produce distinct differences between performance-avoid and performance-prove individuals in terms of task engagement, but do not look at task self-efficacy levels as a possible reason for this difference.

As previous research suggests, but hasn't thoroughly tested, it is expected that the level of task self-efficacy will influence the magnitude of engagement reported by APGO individuals. Specifically, low task self-efficacy will lead to an avoidance behavior pattern, and high task self-efficacy will lead to an engagement behavior pattern.

H2: Participants high in APGO have high task self-efficacy will be more likely to engage in the achievement task than those who are high in APGO and have low task self-efficacy.

The objective of this study was to assess the influence of self-efficacy in the relationship between performance-avoid goal orientation and engagement in an achievement situation. Keeping in mind the original goal orientation model developed by Dweck (1986), it was expected that performance-avoid individuals with high task self-efficacy would engage in the achievement situation more than performance-avoid individuals with low task self-efficacy.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants were military personnel engaged in an 18 to 24 week initial acquisition foreign language training program. The length of training was 24 weeks for the more difficult languages. Initial acquisition language training in this context is intense in nature, requiring 30 classroom hours per week. The purpose of this training is to prepare Soldiers to use their foreign language skills on mission tasks during deployment to an area that speaks the language being taught.

As part of an on-going training evaluation study, questionnaires are administered to the trainees at standardized time points throughout language training. For this study, questionnaire responses from the 50% time point were utilized, meaning that responses were collected at the halfway point of the language program (at the 9 week mark for the 18 week initial acquisition training, and at the 12 week mark for the 24 week training).

### *Measures*

*Goal Orientation.* The self-report goal orientation measure developed by Vandewalle (1997) was used for this study. The measure was constructed using a three-factor conceptualization of goal orientation (learning, performance prove, and performance avoid orientation factors). Responses were made on a 7-point agreement scale (ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Specifically, the five items that measure performance-avoid orientation were analyzed to achieve the objectives of this study. Coefficient alpha was .93 for APGO.

*Global Task-Specific Self-Efficacy.* This construct was assessed using the 20-item self-report measure developed by the consulting firm conducting the research to assess student confidence on a number of tasks that are global in nature, yet are easily customized to their job. An example of such an item is "In the language being trained, I am confident in my current ability to use various levels of formality when interacting with individuals". A 7-point agreement scale (ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) was provided to participants for these items. These items were created using the curriculum provided by the training organization and taught in the courses across languages. The items

represent tasks learned throughout the entire span of the training program.

*General cognitive ability.* The Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) is used to assess trainee cognitive ability using four components: word knowledge, paragraph comprehension, arithmetic reasoning, and mathematics knowledge. These component scores are mathematically combined to yield an AFQT raw score. Previous research has used AFQT as a measure of cognitive ability (Driskell, Hogan, Salas, & Hoskin, 1994; Silva & White, 1993).

*Engagement in Achievement Task.* One self-report item included in the survey given to participants measured the active engagement of each student within the foreign language classroom. The item asked “in the past 3 weeks, approximately what percentage of time did you speak in the target language?” and responses were given on an 11-point percentage scale (ranging from 1 = 0% to 11 = 100%). Response to this item was used to operationalize student engagement in an achievement situation, which is a behavioral result of goal orientation.

Recently, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) released a position statement on the use of target language in the classroom (ACTFL, 2008). The statement indicates that a significant level of meaningful, interactive communication in the target language is needed in foreign language classrooms to develop student language and cultural proficiency. Therefore, ACTFL is recommending that the target language be used by the students during at least 90% of classroom time, and also encourages use of the target language outside of the classroom. In essence, the more a student engages in creating with the language (i.e., speaking),

the more proficiency the student will eventually achieve.

## Results

As expected, performance-avoid goal orientation had a significant negative relationship with task engagement (see Table 1 for all means, standard deviations, and correlations). This supports our first hypothesis, that complements previous research that has found similar negative relationships between the performance-avoid factor and task engagement.

A moderator regression analysis was conducted to assess the potential moderating effect of global-task-specific self-efficacy (GTSSE) on the relationship between performance-avoid goal orientation (APGO) and engagement in the classroom (an achievement setting), as outlined in our second hypothesis. Results of the analysis indicate that GTSSE does have a moderating effect on the relationship between APGO goal orientation and classroom engagement,  $R^2 = .180, p = .027, Z_{ENG} = -.121 * Z_{APGO} + .364 * Z_{GTSSE} - .142 * Z_{Interact}$  (see Table 2). Specifically, as GTSSE extended one standard deviation from the mean, the moderator had an impact on engagement (see Figures 2-4).

To account for cognitive ability, the relationships between composite AFQT scores, the predictors (APGO and GTSSE) and criterion (engagement) were explored. For the 150 cases in which AFQT scores were available, the resulting correlations between performance-avoid goal orientation ( $r = -.201, p = .017$ ), global task-specific self-efficacy ( $-.104, ns$ ), and the criterion ( $.009, ns$ ) demonstrate that cognitive ability is not highly related to any variable included in the moderator analysis (for all correlations, see Table 1). Furthermore, a regression analysis including APGO, GTSSE, and AFQT demonstrates that

cognitive ability does not contribute significant variance in the relationship between APGO, GTSSE, and engagement ( $\beta = .025$ , ns).

### Discussion

Results of this study are congruent with Dweck's (1986) original goal orientation model that expects individuals high in performance-avoid orientation to disengage from the task unless their self-efficacy is high enough that they are confident others will not perceive them as being incompetent. In this case, high self-efficacy in the task does not create a situation where performance-avoid individuals need to disengage from the task to avoid negative judgments from others. Therefore, there is no desire to disengage from the task because no social comparison threat is present.

In the context of foreign language learning, language learners are highly susceptible to social judgment and comparison, especially when the training's focus is on speaking. Therefore, for performance-avoid oriented individuals in this context, engagement in a speaking task is highly susceptible to social comparison by class peers and instructors.

### *Limitations*

One potential limitation of this study is that the global task specific self-efficacy

items were generated using the language training curriculum for contextual references in the items. Therefore, the GTSSE measure is specific to the military initial acquisition language training context and may not generalize to other training contexts.

Another potential limitation of this study is the self-report nature of the criterion. Students were asked to rate themselves on the amount of time they spent speaking the target language in the classroom. Self-report items are vulnerable to response distortion (Barrick & Mount, 1996). Either type of response distortion (self-deception or impression management) may lead to an inaccurate assessment of a student's time spent speaking in the target language.

### *Future Research*

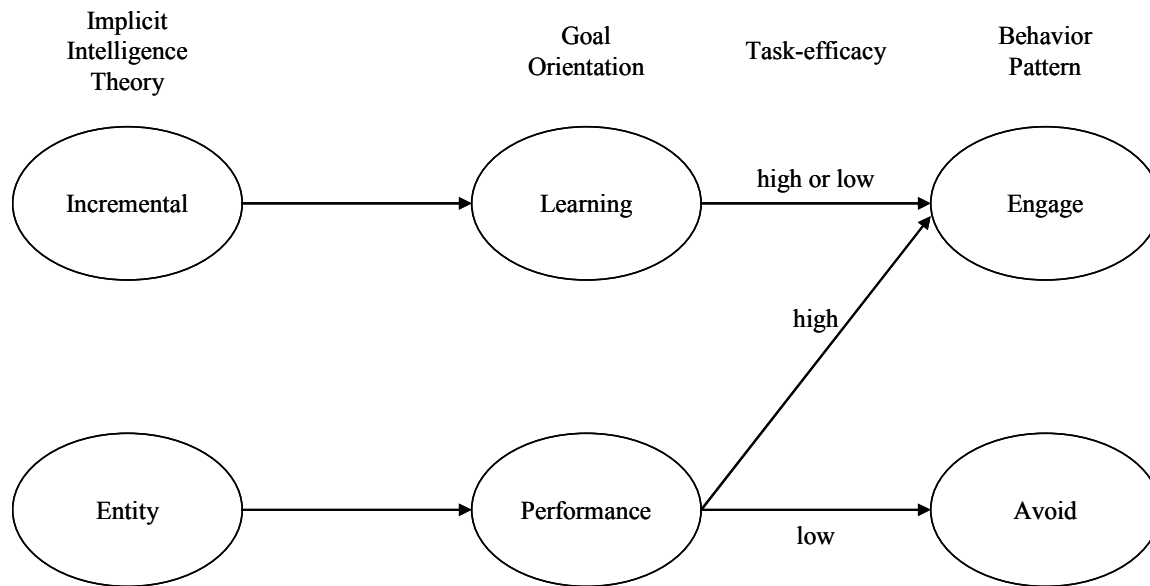
Exploration of the moderating effects of self-efficacy over time in the relationship between performance-avoid goal orientation and achievement task engagement (i.e., time spent speaking the target language in a foreign language classroom) would provide deeper understanding of self-efficacy's impact on performance-avoid oriented individuals. Specifically, the potential strengthening or weakening of the moderating effect as the training progresses may further demonstrate the tendency of high self-efficacy to influence the engagement of performance-goal oriented individuals in achievement situations.

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Figure 1. Original Goal Orientation Theory (Dweck, 1986)



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*Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Performance-avoid orientation	10.47	4.95	1.00			
2. Global task specific self- efficacy	100.52	17.67	-.120	1.00		
3. AFQT	230.59	20.85	-.201*	-.104	1.00	
4. Task engagement	6.71	1.91	-.172*	.384**	.009	1.00

*Note.* N = 211 (APGO), N = 208 (GTSSE), N = 210 (Task Engagement), and N = 150 (AFQT)

\*\*p < .01, \* p < .05, two-tailed

Table 2. Regression Analyses

	$R^2$	$\beta$
Model 1 (GTSSE and APGO)	.160	
APGO		-.122
GTSSE		.367**
Model 2 (GTSSE, APGO, and Interaction)	.180	
APGO		-.121
GTSSE		.364**
Interaction (GTSSE*APGO)		.142*

\*\*p < .01, \* p < .05, two-tailed

Figure 2. Relationship between APGO and Engagement When GTSSE is One Standard Deviation Below the Mean

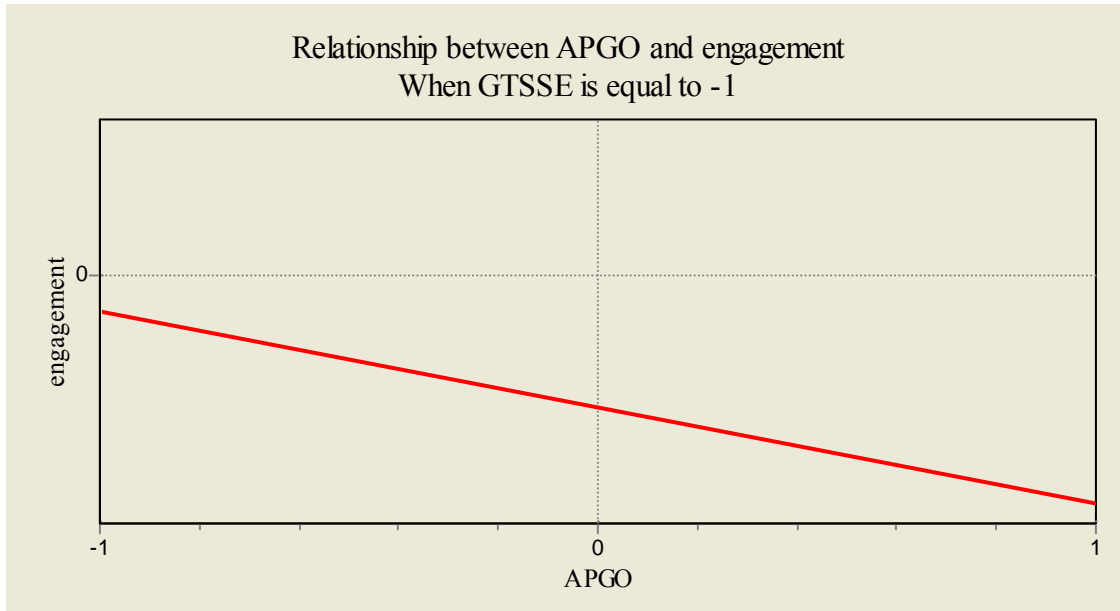
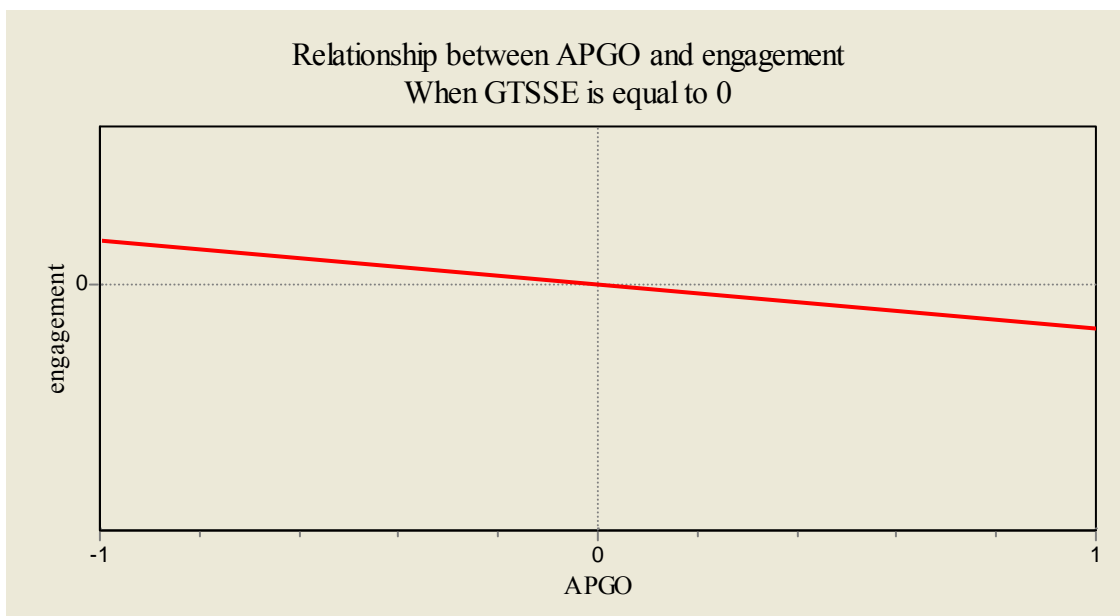
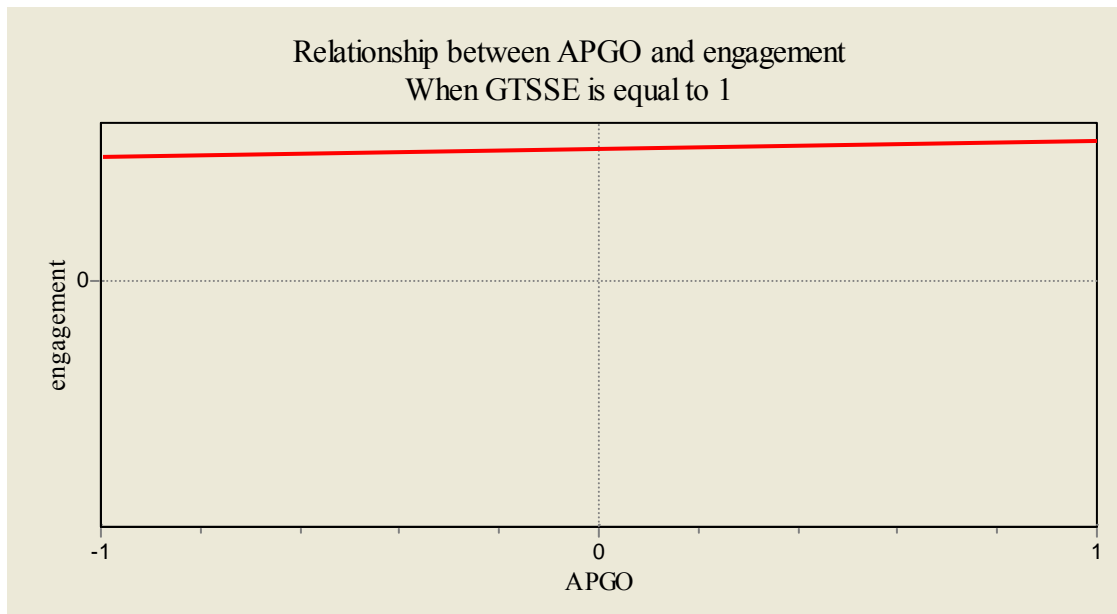


Figure 3. Relationship between APGO and Engagement when GTSSE is at the Mean



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Figure 4. Relationship between APGO and Engagement when GTSSE is One Standard Deviation Above the Mean



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SWA Consulting Inc. (formerly Surface, Ward, and Associates) provides analytics and evidence-based solutions for clients using the principles and methods of industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology. Since 1997, SWA has advised and assisted corporate, non-profit and governmental clients on:

- Training and development
- Performance measurement and management
- Organizational effectiveness
- Test development and validation
- Program/training evaluation
- Work/job analysis
- Needs assessment
- Selection system design
- Study and analysis related to human capital issues
- Metric development and data collection
- Advanced data analysis

One specific practice area is analytics, research, and consulting on foreign language and culture in work contexts. In this area, SWA has conducted numerous projects, including language assessment validation and psychometric research; evaluations of language training, training tools, and job aids; language and culture focused needs assessments and job analysis; and advanced analysis of language research data.

Based in Raleigh, NC, and led by Drs. Eric A. Surface and Stephen J. Ward, SWA now employs close to twenty I/O professionals at the masters and PhD levels. SWA professionals are committed to providing clients the best data and analysis with which to make solid data-driven decisions. Taking a scientist-practitioner perspective, SWA professionals conduct model-based, evidence-driven research and consulting to provide the best answers and solutions to enhance our clients' mission and business objectives. SWA has competencies in measurement, data collection, analytics, data modeling, systematic reviews, validation, and evaluation.

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