

# Limited by language? Constructing a contemporary vocabulary for entrepreneurs



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## ABSTRACT

Despite the globally increasing number of women who are starting up and running successful enterprises, there remains a 'gender gap' in entrepreneurial engagement. One reason may be the gendered language used to describe entrepreneurship and the unspoken assumptions about "what it takes" to become a successful business owner. Entrepreneurs are often personified as masculine; therefore, gender stereotypes are embedded within the entrepreneurial construct. Consequently, females may not identify themselves as entrepreneurs and pursue entrepreneurship as a viable career option. The objective of this project was to inform the literature by developing a gender-neutral vocabulary and set of contemporary entrepreneurial characteristics. This was accomplished by conducting interviews with entrepreneurial subject matter experts (SMEs). These interviews examined how entrepreneurs describe themselves (and other entrepreneurs) and how entrepreneurs can be best represented by an index of inclusive, gender-neutral attributes. There were 18 entrepreneurial SMEs interviewed. An interpretive analysis was performed to identify a comprehensive set of attributes. Frequencies were then counted using excel. This study offers significant contributions to women's entrepreneurship and the development of a contemporary vocabulary that reflects both female and male entrepreneurial experience.

## BACKGROUND

Scholars have called for an examination of the gendered nature of entrepreneurship research, including the masculine language used to portray the characteristics of the entrepreneur.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Employing feminist discourse analysis, Ahl has demonstrated that the language used to describe entrepreneurs is male gendered.<sup>4</sup> This has established a body of knowledge on "entrepreneurs" that only reflects knowledge on male entrepreneurs.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

Orser and colleagues conducted an empirical study that explored the narratives that women use to characterize themselves as entrepreneurs.<sup>5</sup> Fifteen female entrepreneurs were invited to first describe themselves, and then to identify what attributes they would use to characterize themselves as female entrepreneurs and leaders by means of a semi-structured open-ended interview. The findings indicated that the participants did not identify with the vocabulary or stereotypical assumption that entrepreneurship is viewed as a traditional masculine role. Orser and colleagues called for the creation of an 'entrepreneurial' nomenclature or scale construction of entrepreneurial attributes that reflect women's voices, especially the central themes articulated by respondents related to passion, action, and vision.<sup>5</sup>

In response, a pilot study, which will be referred to as "Pilot Study One," was conducted in which a new scale was developed (modeled after Schein's Descriptive Index) by replacing Schein's 92 attributes with 70 self-identified characteristics of female entrepreneurs.<sup>7</sup> Respondents rated the attributes on how characteristic they were of themselves and of entrepreneurs. The results indicated that there were no significant gender differences between male and female scores.

This research follows up on Pilot Study One and continues to construct and validate a gender-neutral scale of entrepreneurial attributes.

## OBJECTIVES

The objective of this study is to further develop a gender-neutral vocabulary and index of entrepreneurial characteristics. This is a three-phase project; however, the scope of this poster focuses on phase one of the research: interviews with 18 SMEs. These interviews are a critical step in validating the index. The research questions are as follows:

- Research Question 1: How do entrepreneurs describe themselves and other entrepreneurs?
- Research Question 2: How can entrepreneurs be represented by a set of inclusive, gender-neutral attributes (i.e., characteristics relevant to both male and female entrepreneurs)?

## METHODS

- The researchers interviewed 18 SMEs, which included both male and female successful entrepreneurs and scholars of entrepreneurship. Schwandt's technique of purposive sampling was used to select SMEs for their relevance to the research questions.<sup>8</sup>
- Respondents were asked to think of a successful entrepreneur and list the first 10 attributes that come to mind, which will be referred to as "Top of Head" attributes. Respondents were also asked to review the list of entrepreneurial attributes from Pilot Test One and identify the top ten and bottom five attributes that they believe describe a successful entrepreneur.
- Analyses of the data were conducted using Excel to generate a comprehensive list of attributes describing entrepreneurial identity. Based on this information, the researchers validated the results of Pilot Test One. Furthermore, they made recommendations for modifications that would improve the index.

## RESULTS

### Demographics

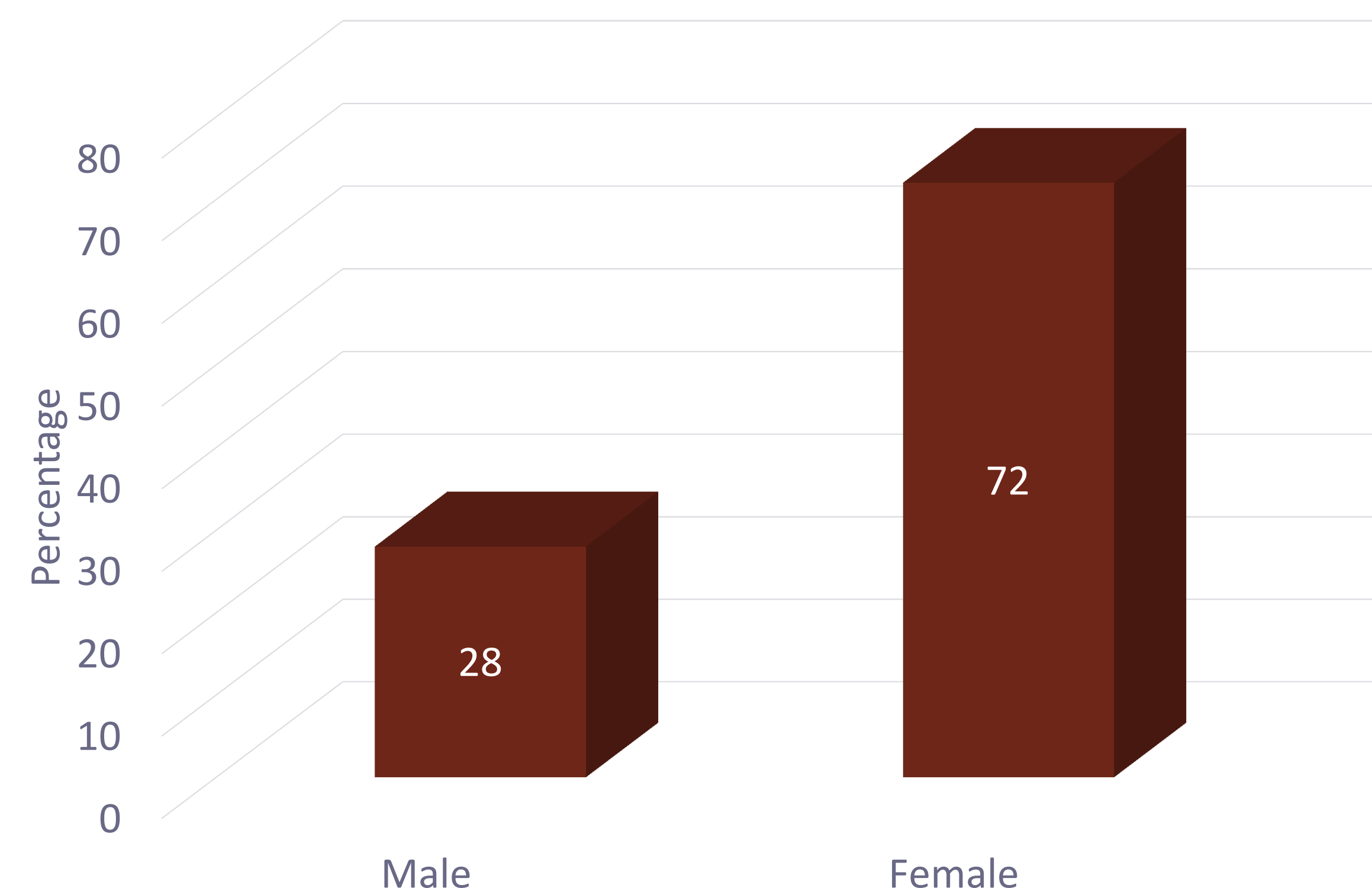


Figure 1.

- Of the 18 respondents, 83% had started their own business(es) in the following sectors: food, education, social, survey, construction, real estate, technology, recreation, hygiene, apparel, consulting, landscaping, and service. Forty-four (44%) were aged 21-30, 11% were aged 31-40, and 22% were aged 41-50. Figure 1 shows the percentage of males and females interviewed.

### "Top of Head" Attributes

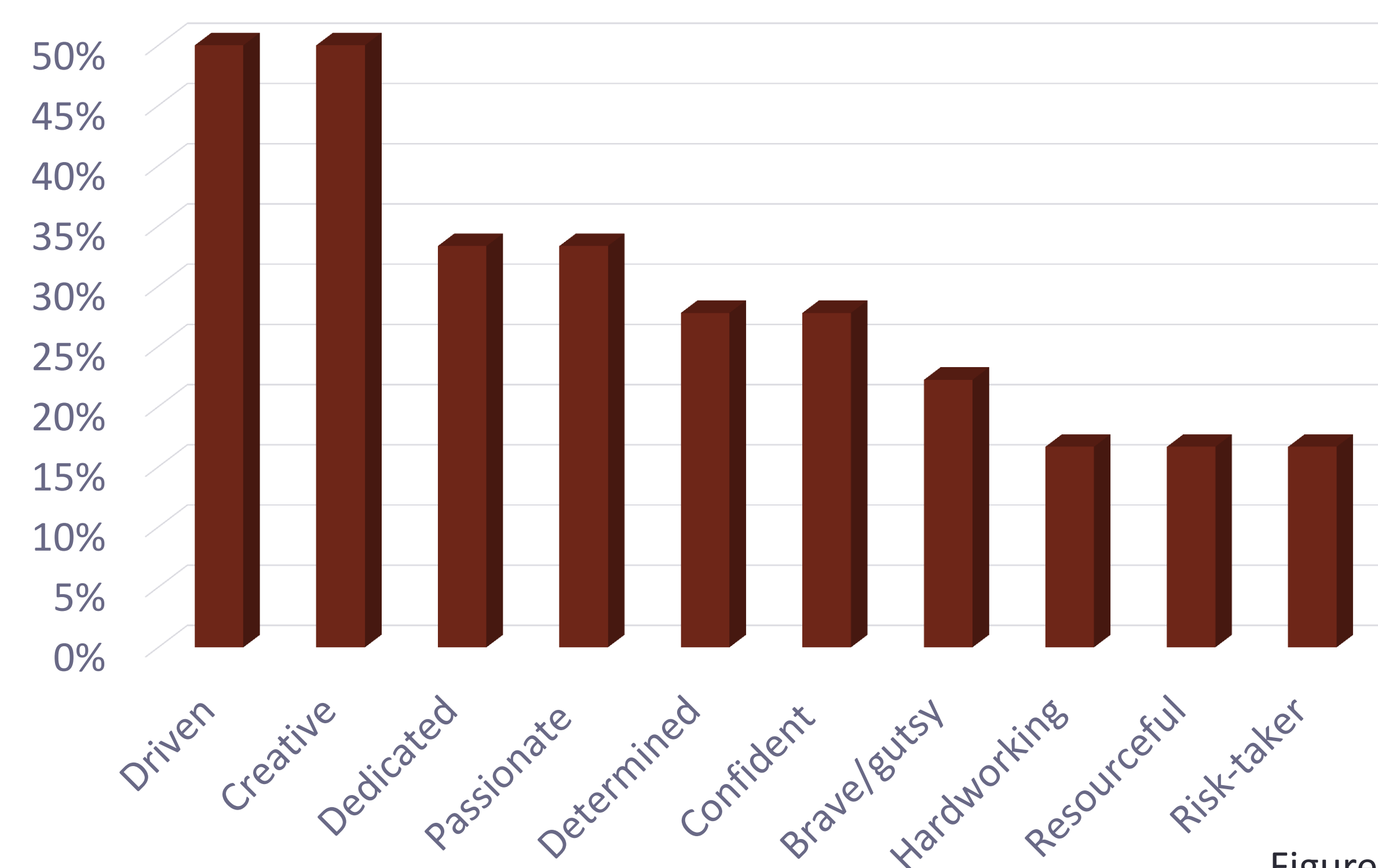


Figure 2.

- Attributes with a frequency of +16% are shown in Figure 2. Attributes with the highest frequencies include driven (50%), creative (50%), dedicated (33%), and passionate (33%). With the exception of dedicated, brave/gutsy, and resourceful, the attributes with the highest frequencies were the same for Pilot Test One and the "Top of Head" data. However, top attributes in Pilot Test One include adventurous and well connected, which are similar to brave/gutsy and resourceful.

## RESULTS

### Top Attributes Identified from Pilot Study One

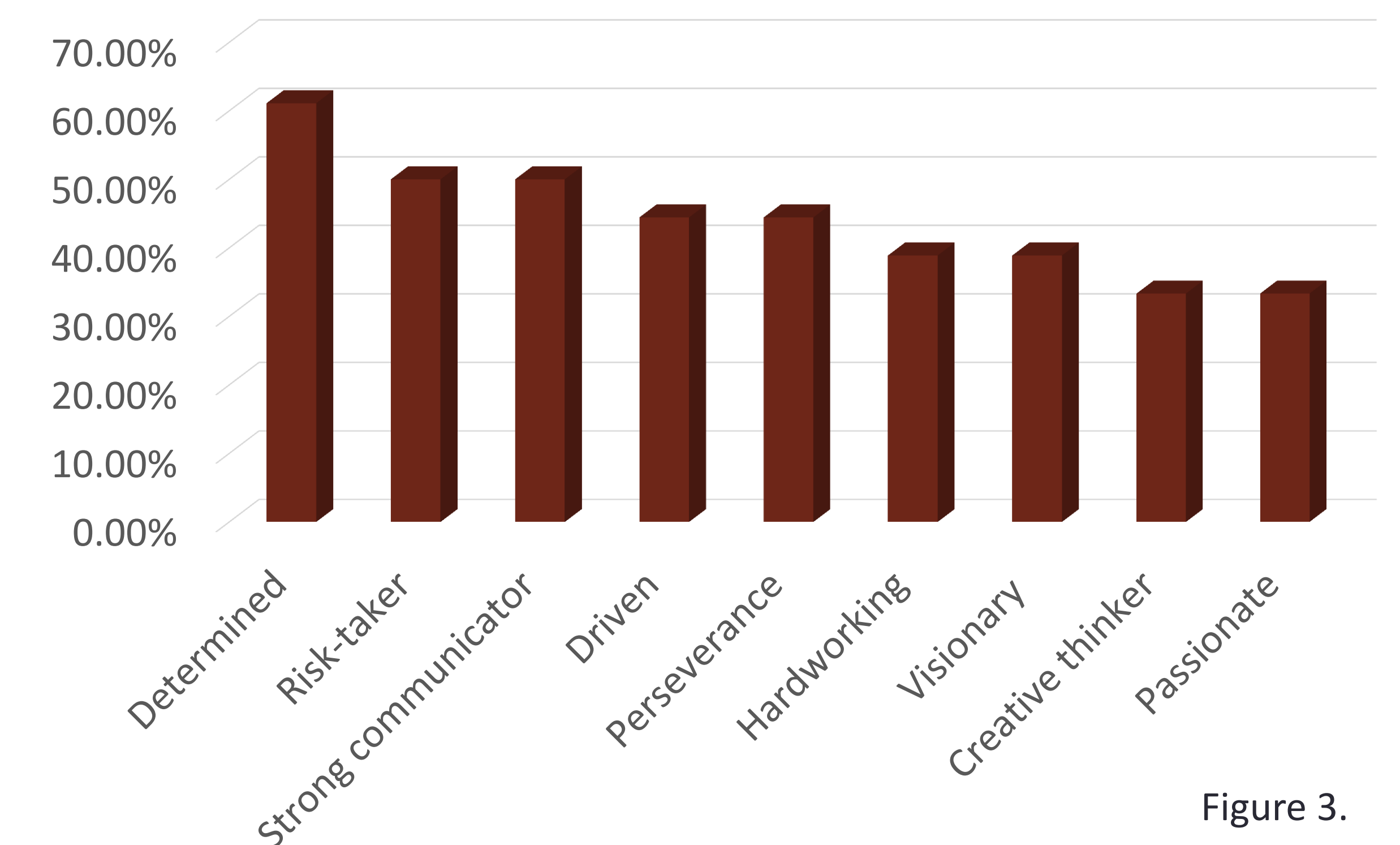


Figure 3.

- Figure 3 shows the top attributes which were identified most frequently by participants from Pilot Test One. Consistent with both Pilot Study One and "Top of Head" results, determined (61%), risk-taker (50%), driven (44%), and perseverance (44%) are top attributes identified. Although only 11% of respondents mentioned strong communicator in the "Top of Head" list, it was a top attribute identified from Pilot Test One.

### Bottom Attributes Identified from Pilot Study One

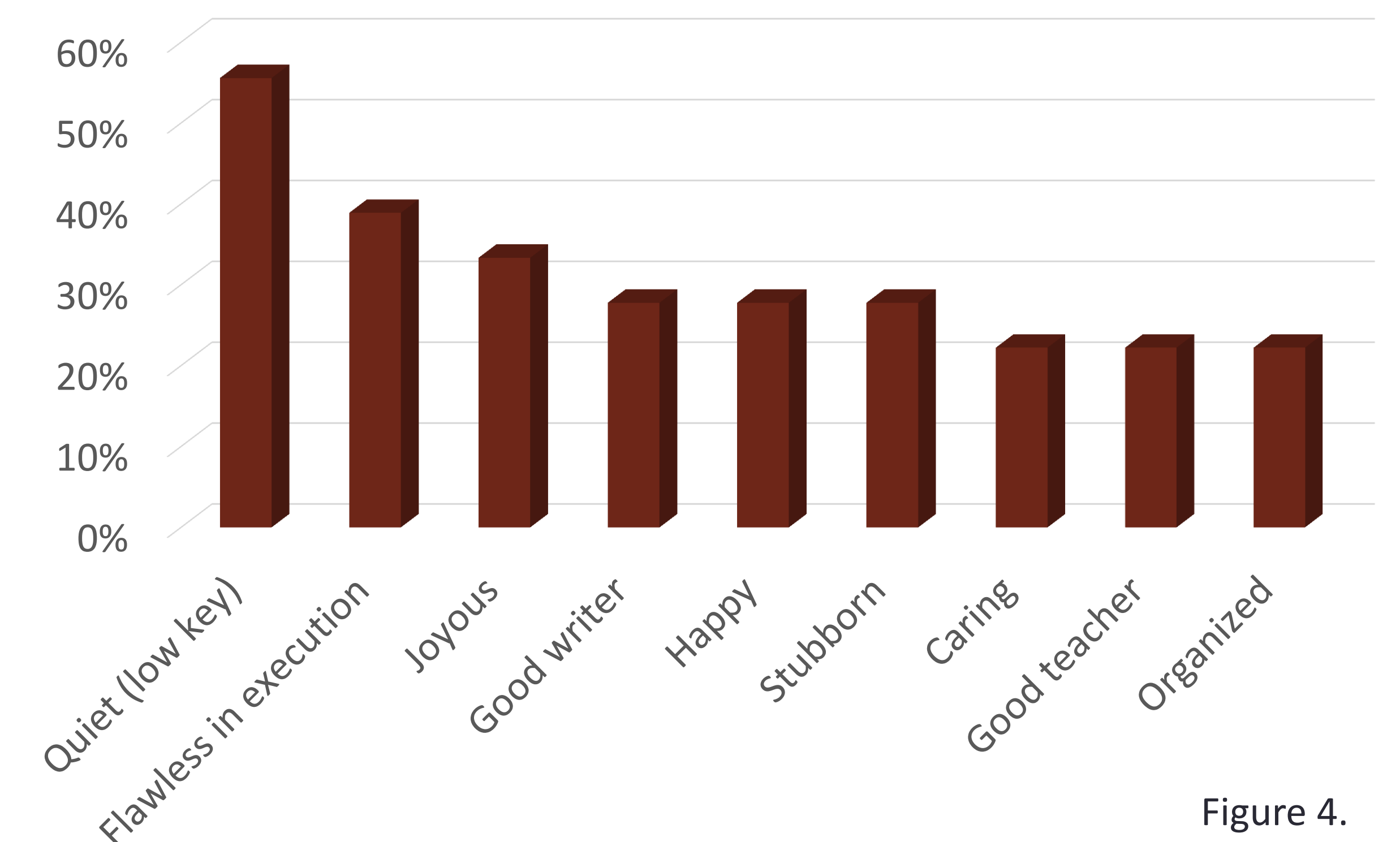


Figure 4.

- Figure 4 shows the bottom identified attributes with a frequency of +20%. As expected, quiet (56%), joyous (33%), stubborn (28%), and caring (22%) were also identified as bottom attributes in the pilot test.

## CONCLUSIONS

- The results of this study help to validate Pilot Study One as being a representative contemporary index of male and female characteristics. The top self-generated attributes by entrepreneurs were also those with the highest frequencies in Pilot Test One. These results continue to challenge stereotypical language used to identify entrepreneurs, such as aggressive, forceful, and competitive.<sup>7</sup>
- When asking entrepreneurs to identify top and bottom attributes of successful entrepreneurs using the pre-formulated attribute index, the results were consistent with Pilot Test One with the exception of 'share's leadership', which only one respondent rated as a bottom attribute.
- The results from Phase 1 have contributed to validating the index. It is recommended that in Phase 2, a cluster analysis be performed to group similar characteristics together to reduce the number of attributes in the index. The results also suggest removing quiet, flawless in execution, joyous, happy, stubborn, and caring from the index as these have consistently been rated as bottom attributes in both this test and Pilot Test One.

References are available through the provided QR code.