



Personality Assessments under the spotlight

Personality plus: Putting personality assessment tools to work for business

The scene: A typical meeting room. A long, wooden table surrounded by a dozen comfortable - but not too comfortable - armchairs.

The players: In each chair sits an individual representing a department: IT, business development, sales, marketing, customer service, and more.

The mood: Varies widely from decidedly sour, to tentative, to excited. The head of sales is red-faced with arms crossed. The marketing representative is tapping their fingers on the table and looking anxious. The CEO is smiling from ear-to-ear. And the head of IT has their head down and are staring dejectedly at a notebook and scribbles notes furiously.



You could well have previously been in a meeting just like this one and you might be wondering what has happened to elicit this response. For our purposes, it doesn't really matter. What matters far more is how people are reacting to what's going on, because their reactions are all dependent upon their personalities. Depending on the perspective you have gathered, seated around this table you may find an INFJ, a five, a low "D" and a person strong in the Woo theme.

When it comes to personality, everyone has one, each with its own nuances and tendencies, celebrated differences and applauded gifts. Yet, if you put a bunch of widely varied personalities in the same room, in addition to experiencing the innovation and creativity that only diversity can deliver, the chances are that you'll encounter some friction too. To tell the truth, getting a room full of differing personalities to work together can be daunting, frustrating and downright exhausting. There can be an enormous amount of juggling of feelings and needs to be done, particularly when careers, ideals, money and values are at stake. And when personalities clash - whether it happens between office equals, the boss and staff, or among clients and staff, it can be a hugely disruptive business challenge and, worst case scenario: a business breaker.

Turning to assessments

With this perfect storm, ever brewing, and ever ready to accelerate into a

hurricane of emotions, it's no wonder that many business leaders turn to personality assessment tools to help them navigate the minefield of human wants, needs and aspirations. Although the use of personality assessment tools continues to gain popularity in the business world, examining personalities and attempting to define and categorise them is anything but a new endeavour. In fact, pioneers in the field began working on the theory that personality traits could be categorised as far back as the early 1900s. Amazingly, the findings of some of those long-ago studies, and the personality assessments that emerged from them, are still applicable, relevant and widely applied today. Of course, that doesn't stop a constant parade of new theorists from developing their own tools for personality assessment. And, research shows, the use of assessment tools in the workplace continues to gain favour, whether they are tried and true classic assessments, short and sassy questionnaires, intensely involved examinations or peer assessments.

Current research indicates that about 80% of Fortune 500 companies use personality assessments to gain a deeper understanding of employees.¹ The information gathered within these organisations is used for a wide variety of purposes: coaching, employee development and team-building. For some organisations, personality assessments are adopted in an effort to bridge wide differences between employees, and even leadership. For others, they are used before an individual is even offered a job - during the process of considering whether or not the candidate is a good match for the company, and for the vacancy for which he or she is applying. With the high cost of recruiting and retaining key talent, and the high numbers of job seekers, it's no surprise that companies are looking for relatively low cost solutions to help refine the mountain of applicants and avoid recruiting the wrong candidate.

Between changing careers, advancing technology, and an increasingly hectic pace, the ever-evolving atmosphere of the business environment today makes finding a touchstone of understanding more important than ever. "The ability of some companies to be able to survive and even thrive ... is directly linked to the degree with which employees and management communicate effectively with one another. We're not talking necessarily about an open and frank exchange of views, or about becoming best friends with your bosses, colleagues and subordinates. We're talking about turning the many differences among us into



¹ Dattner, Ben. "The Use and Misuse of Personality Tests for Coaching and Development." *Psychology Today*. 12 June 2008. Web. 06 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/minds-work/200806/the-use-and-misuse-personality-tests-coaching-and-development>>.

powerful tools instead of divisive intrusions. We're talking about putting our good intentions to work in a way that everybody wins" say Janet Theusen and Otto Krueger, authors of *Type Talk at Work*.²

A mixed bag

The use of personality assessments in the workplace has both supporters and critics. Advocates say personality assessments can illuminate insights that will help everything from workflow to meeting deadlines to creating the desired corporate culture. Critics say assessments don't give a full picture of an individual, that they tend to oversimplify so as not to offend anyone; that rather than empowering people by telling them the truth, they support behaviours that do not work well in business. And, some critics say assessments have little more validity or reliability than horoscopes.

Yet the desire for clarity and tools to achieve it is strong among business leaders, and the popularity of these tests is undeniable. An article that appeared in the US magazine *Workforce Management* estimates the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® alone is administered over 2.5 million times every year. There are thousands of other tests on the market, and estimates of the number of employees who take them each year for purposes of both selection and development range in the tens of millions.³

For some, these assessments offer a greater understanding of oneself, creating a treasure map that not only leads individuals to recognise their own strengths and weaknesses, but to also enables them to gain insight into how personality affects the average person's daily interactions with others. With personality assessments, individuals may be able to better understand the motivations, fears, needs and challenges of others and be able to adjust their approach accordingly - whether it be in their daily interactions with a colleague or spouse, teaching a room full of highly-driven professionals, or delivering a strategically-crafted sales pitch.

Some of the most common applications for assessment tool findings in the workplace, depending on which is chosen, are:

² Kroeger, Otto, and Janet M. Thuesen. *Type Talk at Work*. New York, NY: Delacorte, 1992. Print.

³ Dattner, Ben. "The Use and Misuse of Personality Tests for Coaching and Development." *Psychology Today*. 12 June 2008. Web. 06 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/minds-work/200806/the-use-and-misuse-personality-tests-coaching-and-development>>.



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- team building
- career guidance
- conflict resolution
- executive coaching
- succession planning
- employee retention
- hiring and selection
- leadership development
- organisational alignment
- competency development⁴



From managers, to team members, to sales staff, supporters say assessments can provide some essential tools for business success, for yourself, for others and for your organisation.

Personality assessments at work

It is human nature to label people: she's driven, he's stuck-up, she's too loud, they're lazy, she's friendly and outgoing, he's organised. Think for a moment about these examples; they present a primary problem that exists with this human tendency of labeling one another: None of these labels are objective. They don't give us a rounded view of a person or why they behave the way that they do. Nor do they help us in knowing how to deal with these individual quirks or tendencies. They are massive generalisations based on our own preferences and world view.

Let's just pause a minute and think about the meeting atmosphere we presented at the start of this Blue Paper. What if you could not only identify the personality preferences of the people in the room, but anticipate an individual's reactions to specific situations, and adjust the way you deliver information based on that knowledge?

Consider this scenario. It's 3 o'clock on Friday afternoon. You have a last-minute project to hand over to the IT department, which has to be turned around over the weekend. You know Sue will cringe at the rush request, even get resentful, as she'll feel like you have dumped the project on her without sufficient notice. But what if you also knew, based on his personality tendencies, that John in IT would actually be energised by the challenge; that it would feel like a reward to him to be able to work on such a high-profile project? Rather than go to Sue, you might well decide to pay a visit to John instead.

⁴ Kroeger, Otto, and Janet M. Thuesen. *Type Talk at Work*. New York, NY: Delacorte, 1992. Print.

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Or consider this situation. You're in a meeting, discussing the organisation's future plans. Everyone in the room has contributed their thoughts about what should be included in that long-range plan. Everyone, that is, except Tracey. While she looks alert, Tracey hasn't said a word throughout the whole meeting. If you didn't know her very well, you might be tempted to call on her in front of everyone, and request thoughts directly from her, so that she would feel included. But if you knew her a bit better, and understood her personality preferences, you might realise that Tracey is the kind of person who likes to think about problems, overnight if possible; and left to her own devices, she will likely come back to the group tomorrow with an email that proposes several brilliant measures.

Humble beginnings, lasting effects

The first modern personality test was initially used in 1919. Coined the Woodworth Personal Data Sheet, it was designed to help the United States Army screen recruits who were most susceptible to experiencing shell shock. Just two years later, people began staring at ink to gain understanding, through the now well-known and now well-parodied Rorschach inkblot test. This allowed professionals to interpret personality preferences based on an individual's perception of inkblots.



"Typewatching," is a method based on the work of Carl G. Jung, who suggested that human behaviour was not only predictable, but based on tendencies and preferences from birth, which could be categorised and anticipated throughout the course of a person's life. Simply put, people behave in predictable ways. To Jung, there were essentially eight preferences, or basic functions of the personality, and as a result, a person's attractions and aversions made them classifiable.

At the same time Jung was developing his theories on personality, two women also entered the same realm of thought: Katharine Briggs, and her daughter, Isabel Briggs Myers. In the 1930s, the women were inspired to examine these categories upon noticing that many people were not a good fit for their roles in the war effort. Briggs and Jung joined ranks, and soon the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) was born; an assessment tool still used today. The idea behind it: to establish individual preferences and achieve more constructive use of individuals by pairing them with tasks better suited to their personalities.⁵

According to the theory behind typewatching, every one of us is born with four of eight personality preference alternatives:

⁵ *Ibid.*

- Extraverted (E) or Introverted (I)
- Sensing (S) or iNtuitive (N) (the I is already used)
- Thinking (T) or Feeling (F)
- Judging (J) or Perceiving (P)

Typewatching maintains its relevance in the workplace even today, many believe, because of its people-oriented nature. With the high cost of finding and recruiting the right staff, retaining your treasured human capital is vital to the survival of any organisation. Creating greater harmony in the workplace by understanding individual needs and desires and working with personality differences seems to be a natural and a necessary step in that process.

Implementation of findings

Today, there are hundreds of assessment tools from which to choose, many of them based on the initial work of Jung and Briggs. In Type Talk at Work, analysts say the understanding you achieve by using tools like these and employing techniques like typewatching can help you to:

- Conduct more effective meetings by allowing different points of view to be expressed and heard, while meeting the needs of different people.
- Better match job requirements and positions with individual personalities, by enabling you to consider strengths and weaknesses in each person.
- Advance your own career by gaining insight into your own strengths and challenges, and learning to work with them.
- Resolve conflicts more easily by learning to define problems in terms of personality types.
- Achieve greater interviewing success, no matter what side of the interviewing table you're on, by drilling down to the real issues.
- Navigate ethical issues with less difficulty, understanding that they are defined by individual personalities, and everyone believes they have the purest definition.



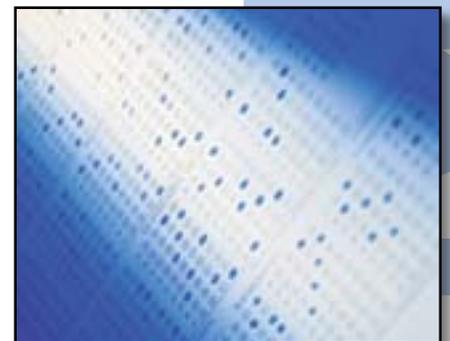
- Create increased synergy in the workplace by allowing each person to work according to their own personal style, while allowing everyone to understand what everyone else is working on.
- Set more realistic goals for the organisation by drawing in a wide variety of perspectives from your workgroup, and carefully considering the thoughts, ideas and needs of each.
- Reduce office stress and burnout by better understanding how one project may excite one employee whilst overwhelming another.
- Meet deadlines more effectively by realising how different personality types view, prioritise and value time.

Growing interest

The availability of personality assessments has increased exponentially since Jung's initial steps toward self awareness for all: Myers-Briggs offers a 16-type indicator. In *The Owner's Manual for Personality at Work*, the "Big Five" personality traits are identified. In the Enneagram, which has a decidedly spiritual bent to it, nine personality types are defined. The DiSC behavioural model has four aspects of behaviour. And the Clifton StrengthsFinder defines 34 talent themes. The list goes on and on. These assessments, though widely varied in scope, approach and outcomes, are only the beginning, and searching for the right one for your workplace or your personal needs can be a challenge. The Internet is packed with free tools as well as tools for sale at a wide variety of price points. In general, the more comprehensive the assessment, the greater the cost.

According to one report, some of the most popular personality assessment tools are as follows:

- Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), based on Carl Jung's typology of the functions of the human psyche.
- Insights® Discovery System, which is a model based on the personality profiling work of Jung.
- Profile XT® Assessment which is billed as a "total person assessment." This assessment measures behavioural traits, occupational interests and thinking styles.
- The Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI), which measures normal personality, and claims to predict employee



performance. This assessment was developed specifically for the business world.

- The DiSC Assessment, this tool explores four domains: dominance, influence, steadiness and conscientiousness/compliance.
- 16PF® (Pearson Assessments), which have been commonly used for a variety of applications, including support for vocational guidance, hiring and promotion recommendations.
- The Birkman Method®, which focuses on five domains: productive and stress behaviours, underlying needs, motivations and organisational orientation.⁶

While these tests vary, most share one thing in common: The majority of personality assessment tools used by the general public and in the workplace today are based on a self-report inventory. Simply put, the assessment data is gathered based on the user's response to a number of questions, true/false statements or options which users rate based on their personal preferences. In addition to the self-evaluation tools, there are a few other types of assessments, including observational measures, peer report studies (sometimes called 360-degree feedback), and projective tests (like the inkblot test).

"In-depth personality assessments offer more insight into a person's behavioural style than do more simplistic assessments that provide a brief, general understanding. According to Warren Birge and Deborah Dorsett, executive consultants from US based Personalysis Corporation, an instrument that measures instinctive dimensions as well as rational and social ones should be used to gain a deeper understanding of one's personality. Instinctive elements in a personality test measure inherent traits, rational elements disclose how employees solve task problems and accomplish task work, and social elements show how they interact with others."⁷ Some experts say the more simplified and standardised personality tests, which may offer little more than an overview paragraph of a person's tendencies, may not offer enough depth to accurately predict an employee's performance in the workplace. So, if what you're looking for is a comprehensive, in-depth report, be prepared to have to pay for a more involved assessment for yourself or your employees.

A closer look

To show how these assessment results can be directly applied to the



⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Trends in Personality Assessments and Applications." Birkman.com. Birkman International, 2007. Web. 5 Oct 2011. <http://birkman.com/news/Trends_Report.pdf>.

be noticeable, but the solution might not be obvious without the benefit of this insight.

Of course, DiSC explores three other dimensions, and goes into far more detail than outlined here.

The Clifton StrengthsFinder

This assessment measures 34 talent themes, or regular patterns an individual experiences related to thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Like DiSC, the assessment is built on the premise that the more each 'theme' holds influence over the assessment user, the greater its influence on the individual's behaviour. Here are just a few examples of the talent themes used in Strengths Finder: ⁸

Achiever®

Individuals with a strong Achiever influence work hard and find satisfaction in being busy and productive.

Belief®

People who are strong in the Belief theme adhere strictly to their personal core values. These will never change throughout the course of their lives, and often determine their life's purpose.

Empathy®

Those who are strong in the Empathy theme are able to imagine themselves in other's situations, and as such are able to tune in to the feelings of others.

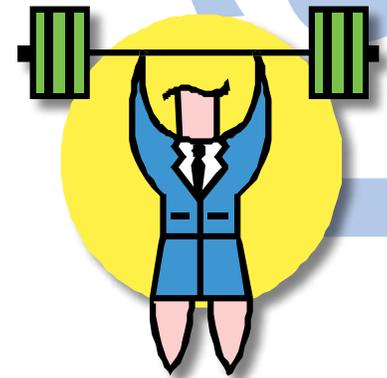
Restorative®

People strong in the Restorative theme are gifted at handling problems and solving them.

Woo®

Individuals strong in the Woo theme love meeting people, winning them over and forging connections with them.

This is just a small sample of the themes used in StrengthsFinder. Overall, this assessment tool is aimed at promoting a person's strengths, rather than emphasising shortcomings or perceived weaknesses. The author of this method, Marcus Buckingham, felt that the best results would be gleaned from leveraging individual strengths. StrengthsFinder also offers a follow-up tool for managers,



⁸ "Now Discover Your Strengths – StrengthsFinder Themes." StrengthsTest.com. Web. 05 Oct. 2011. <http://www.strengthstest.com/theme_summary.php>.

which helps them apply the strengths principles to managing employees.

The job search

Supporters agree, a personality assessment tool can be helpful when it comes to professional development. Career-wise, it can help point individual users in the direction of careers which may be suitable for their personal preferences, finding the right fit for them as a person. But experts caution that it's important not to rely solely on personality tests to help you hone in on the right jobs. Rather, if you choose to utilise assessment tools, tap their ability to push you in the general direction of your professional future. They can help you identify your strengths, understand your weaknesses, and develop an awareness that can foster a team atmosphere and bridge differences between staff - all good things. But assessments aren't a cure-all.

Finding the best candidate for the job

For managers who've employed new employees only to find that they're not a good fit for the team, harnessing the power of assessment tools to pre-screen applicants can be a huge temptation. But beware: the rationale behind using these tools can sometimes be faulty. Is the goal to ensure you recruit employees who are just like you and your team members? If so, you will stand to lose the creative power and varied insights that come with a diverse employee base. As a rule, if you are duplicating, you aren't innovating. In fact, when it comes to recruitment, many of us talk out of both sides of our mouth - praising the virtues of variety and the value of diversity, but then cloning our favourite workers and ourselves. Under the Myers-Briggs assessment, most often, workforces resemble those at the top, typologically speaking. Likewise, leadership share preferences for objective decision making (also known as Thinking) and structure, schedule and order (Judging). In a system dependent upon productivity and financial gain, Thinking-Judging types have the edge. The bad news? Other types, while just as effective, are likely to leave the organisation sooner.⁹



With increasing regularity, organisations are using some form of personality assessment in the recruitment process with success. "Personality assessments may be better than skill tests for matching a candidate's strengths with the job's responsibilities. Further, it has been stated that companies who use personality assessments in pre-employment screenings are three to five times more likely to employ the right person for the job the first time. This finding is evidence of the growing amount of research that substantiates the effectiveness of personality assessments."¹⁰

⁹ Kroeger, Otto, and Janet M. Thuesen. *Type Talk at Work*. New York, NY: Delacorte, 1992. Print.

¹⁰ "Trends in Personality Assessments and Applications." *Birkman.com*. Birkman International, 2007. Web. 5 Oct 2011. <http://birkman.com/news/Trends_Report.pdf>.

Risks in the workplace

Employing assessment tools in the workplace does have its risks. A recent study by the American Management Association shows that 39 percent of companies use some form of personality testing when recruiting.¹¹ Their use continues to increase due to a number of factors, including the relatively low cost and the potential for time savings. One issue of concern over this increased use is the question of how far assessments can go, and what companies or individuals will do with the information. "Companies are increasingly giving job candidates personality tests as part of the hiring process. But they're not trying to discern whether you're an extrovert or an introvert. These are specific evaluations - often 200 or more questions - that attempt to get to the heart of your personality, values and the things make you successful ... or not. Hiring managers say these tests more accurately predict whether a candidate will be successful instead of solely relying on a face-to-face interview."¹²

Critics question the ethics of pushing personality tests on employees, or using them for any non-clinical purpose, for that matter. As early as the 1960s, more company employees were given personality assessments than psychiatric patients. As their popularity continues to grow today, so does the popularity of efforts to automate the process of filling these assessments out. These days, it is even possible to use software applications developed specifically for that purpose, possibly negating any results and rendering the time and money spent on assessments worthless.



Perhaps of equal concern to some critics is the intrusiveness of the assessments, and the possibility of causing damage to individuals when their personality is made clear to them. For organisations, this translates into a liability now associated with administering assessments. In the case of *Wilson v Johnson & Johnson*, the plaintiff (Wilson) sued his past employer (Johnson & Johnson) for irreparable damages caused by an over abundance of personality tests he was required to take for work. The plaintiff claimed this repeated examination of his personality caused him to have a breakdown. The court agreed, and Wilson was awarded \$4.7 million for his personal pain and grief. The case has been followed by a number of similar cases which also ruled in favor of the mental health rights of employees.

Faking responses

¹¹ "Trends in Personality Assessments and Applications." *Birkman.com*. Birkman International, 2007. Web. 5 Oct 2011. <http://birkman.com/news/Trends_Report.pdf>.

¹² "Surviving The Personality Test - Forbes.com." *Information for the World's Business Leaders - Forbes.com*. 21 Feb 2007. Web. 06 Oct. 2011. <http://www.forbes.com/2007/02/21/personality-tests-interviewing-leadership-careers_cx_tw_0222bizbasics.html>.

Because personality assessments are typically self-reporting, some dispute the findings of assessments as inexact, and claim it is possible to skew results by distorting responses. This can especially be a problem when an individual's job or workload depends on the assessment outcome, or whenever decisions being made will be affected by the test results. Some studies have shown that when students have been asked to fake a personality test, they have been able to do so.

The possibility of falsified answers complicates the use of personality assessments. To untangle the issue, some organisations will take steps to ensure they are getting truthful responses:

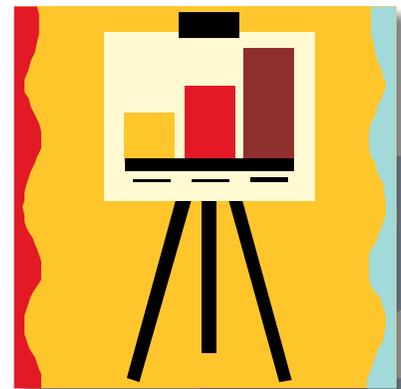
- Issuing a warning with the test that there are methods in place for detecting fake answers, and negative consequences will result
- Determining the social desirability of answers and using lie scales can help detect response patterns
- Instituting item response profiles can help flag test takers who may be lying

Supporters of assessments say it is impossible to fake answers, because to do so, a person would have to know the most desired answer for each question. Assessment takers can also tend to make assumptions about what a question is measuring that are not at all in line with what the test issuer is seeking.

Assessments: An imperfect solution

In spite of these drawbacks: the liability, the questionable reliability and the potential limitations, data shows many companies continue to use these tests. But why? For many organisations, personality assessments are used as team-building tools, and the results, they hope, will help people with different personality preferences work together better. It is a result that is difficult, if not impossible to quantify.

Yet some believe it is the inherent limitations in the tests that contribute to their continued popularity. "They present a simplified view of human nature, and it can be reassuring to some people to be able to fit themselves and their colleagues into neat, predictable, pre-determined boxes. We are all susceptible to using oversimplified stereotypes to categorise and evaluate other people, and these personality assessments create politically correct, non-demographically-correlated stereotypes."¹³



¹³ Dattner, Ben. "The Use and Misuse of Personality Tests for Coaching and Development." *Psychology Today*. 12 June 2008. Web. 06 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/minds-work/200806/the-use-and->

In the end, most personality assessments point out the differences between individuals, but give a general sense that these differences are okay - without giving any actual evaluation of substance. "The test publishers claim 'There's no good or bad 'type' of person,' although they acknowledge that different 'types' of persons may be more or less suited to different kinds of roles or organizational context."¹⁴

To test, or not to test?

Arguably, the most important consideration when it comes to personality assessments is whether they make a difference in workplace communication, recruitment and overall business success. By many indications, they do. "For example, in pre-employment settings, one study showed that of HR professionals who applied metrics to their pre-employment assessments, 89 percent said these assessments have had a positive impact on their company. According to the same survey, 63 percent of assessment users felt the instruments added value to their company."¹⁵

Reliability and validity are also essential characteristics of any business tool. So, how reliable are personality tests? One study by the American Psychological Association showed that psychological tests were just as effective at predicting outcomes as are medical tests.¹⁶

Personality experts continue to develop new tools, write books, build websites and hold conferences to prove the effectiveness of assessment tools, and believers - or even the cautiously optimistic - continue to buy them. It makes sense; in a time when workplace diversity is the desired norm, workers change careers frequently throughout their lives, and the bottom line depends on flexibility and communication. Business leaders are eager to get their hands on any tool that will help nail down that often-elusive middle ground. While communication shortfalls can ring the death knell in business, clear communication can be the Holy Grail. Personality assessments promise a hope - albeit an imperfect one - of finding it.

With the wealth of personality assessment options available, the biggest challenge may come in identifying which tools will give you the information you need to get the desired measurable outcome: business success.



[misuse-personality-tests-coaching-and-development](#)>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Trends in Personality Assessments and Applications." Birkman.com. Birkman International, 2007. Web. 5 Oct 2011. <http://birkman.com/news/Trends_Report.pdf>.

¹⁶ Ibid.



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