

Personality Tests and Types: The Value of MBTI in Management

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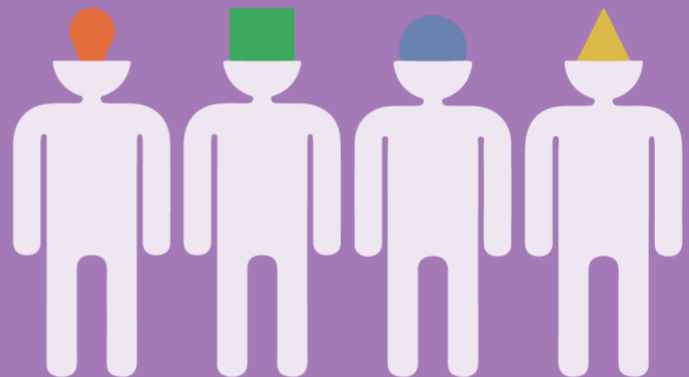


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Executive Summary

Personality testing is a growing industry that provides organizations with unique insights about their employees and how they work. One of the most prevalent personality assessments is the Myers-Griggs Type Indicator, or MBTI, which sorts people into one of sixteen personality types. While the MBTI has been and continues to be used by managers across the public and private sectors, it might be time to start thinking about alternatives. The MBTI's validity and reliability face growing skepticism among psychologists who question the benefit it adds to the workplace. This paper discusses the MBTI, its application in management, and the cautions of such a test.

Introduction

Personality testing has quickly grown over the last few decades from a \$400 to \$500 million dollar industry into a \$2 billion industry. Different kinds of tests are often administered by organizations including businesses, universities, and the military to assess personalities in their organization (Emre 2019). One of the most widely used and known personality assessments is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, or MBTI. About 200 federal agencies including the CIA and State Department report giving the MBTI to some of their employees with the EPA having given it to roughly 25% of its employees (Stromberg and Caswell 2015). According to the Myers and Briggs Foundation, the purpose of this personality inventory is to provide people with insights on type theory that are understandable and useful in everyday life. The MBTI has long been used by companies to better understand their employees and the ways that they interact and work. Roughly 80% of Fortune 100 companies utilize some type of personality assessment in pursuit of creating stronger, healthier organizations and building better teams (Bajic 2015). But what value or insight does the MBTI really provide for managers and leaders in the workplace?

While a variety of studies over the last few decades have concluded that the MBTI is both valid and reliable (Gardner and Martinko 1996, Rome 1990, Allen 1994, Bajic 2015), skepticism, especially from psychologists, has brought its prevalence and use into question. Some have turned to more psychologically substantiated tests, but MBTI personality types remain one of, if not *the*, most easily identifiable type frameworks. It has even become a fixture in many online dating profiles (Volpe 2019). People love talking about their MBTI.

Managers and organizations are constantly seeking ways to make their teams and businesses stronger. Millions of people every year complete the MBTI and whether it's on their own or guided by a certified MBTI consultant or coach, analyze what their personality type is, and identify potential strengths and weaknesses associated with their four-letter types. Some people do this for fun, but many experience the MBTI through some type of work or school activity. Differing beliefs and temperaments coupled with the vast cultural and psychological factors that make an employee or individual unique means that understanding and managing people is a challenging task. By understanding how employees recharge their mental batteries, gather information, reach conclusions, and perceive the world around them, MBTI gives people the opportunity to become more self-aware and reflect on the differences between them and their colleagues. This can certainly lead to positive change in the workplace.



The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)

With more than 3.5 million assessments administered annually, MBTI is the most widely used personality assessment in the world (Bajic 2015). The MBTI is based on theories that were published in *Psychological Types*, a book by the Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung. The 93 question assessment itself was then developed over the next thirty years by mother-daughter duo, Isabel Briggs Myers and Katherine C. Briggs utilizing Jung's theories (Rome 1990). Myers believed that knowledge of personality type through MBTI would help individuals and groups deal positively with change and help people identify their most viable career path (Allen 1994). Through a series of questions, the MBTI is a psychological testing tool that categorizes a person's personality into one of sixteen different types across four dichotomies: extraversion vs. introversion, intuitive vs. sensing, feeling vs. thinking, and judging vs. perceiving (MacCarthy).

Extraversion (E) vs. Introversion (I)

The MBTI defines the first pair of psychological preferences around where someone puts their attention and gets their energy. Extraverts direct their attention to the world around them, enjoy variety, and easily engage in conversation. To recharge their energy, extraverts often seek others and don't enjoy solitude. On the other side of the spectrum, introverts direct their attention to their inner world, enjoy working alone, and value depth more than variety. They like to recharge their energy on their own (Allen, 1994).

Sensing (S) vs. Intuition (N)

The S/N pair of psychological preferences is defined by how people mentally perceive and collect information about the world around them (MBTI). People who are categorized as sensing pay more attention to the world through their five physical senses (Allen, 1994). They enjoy agendas and routine. Intuitive types are more likely to follow their "sixth-sense" and look for patterns and abstractions (MacCarthy).

Thinking (T) vs. Feeling (F)

The third letter pair refers to how people make decisions. Thinkers enjoy looking at facts and data to inform their decision making. They are logical and analytic. Feelers are more likely to make decisions based on their feeling and emotions. A thinker wants a decision to make sense, but a feeler wants to decision to feel right (Sample 2017).

Judging (J) vs. Perceiving (P)

The final dichotomy refers to how a person orients themselves to the world. Those who score highly on the judging scale prefer structure and organization. They order or structure the world to make things happen. Perceivers prefer to have more flexibility. They remain open and adaptable to any opportunities that may present themselves (Rome 1990).



These four dichotomies are each used on scales to create a combination of E/I, S/N, F/T, and J/P. Specific questions related to each dichotomy are asked with correlated answers that place the person taking the test somewhere on each spectrum (i.e. someone with an E may have provided answers that assessed them as 60% extroverted and 40% introverted). The sixteen different personality types can be seen in Figure 1 along with a variety of descriptive words associated with each type.

The MBTI Foundation has paid certifications and consulting services through which the test can be administered. If not administered by an MBTI professional, it can be taken online for a fee. A more recent framework called 16Personalities has evolved from the MBTI with an additional dimension that looks at identity on an assertive vs. turbulent (A/T) dichotomy. 16Personalities is free to take and in-depth descriptions of each type are widely available through the site.



Figure 1 - A chart that depicts and details attributes of the 16 personality types from the MBTI.



Applications in Management

There is a variety of literature detailing the benefits of using the MBTI in the realm of management. Despite some criticisms of MBTI's validity and reliability, there are some quality reviews of the research and applications of the MBTI in organizations and management that have been done in the past. Gardner and Martinko published their findings that MBTI was both valid and reliable for the study of "relationships among managerial personalities, cognitions, behaviors, effectiveness and situational variables" (1996). P. Brian Cunningham was a chemical engineer at Louisiana State University when they published a case study documenting how the use of MBTI improved communication, teamwork, and allowed the constructive appreciation of differences in personality types on his team of researchers (2000).

Linda Rome was a librarian in Mentor, Ohio who wrote about using MBTI to better manage library resources and staff to boost creativity and productivity of the services that libraries provide. Rome interviewed and used examples from three different libraries. The Baltimore County Public Library cited improved communication. Monterey County Free Libraries thought MBTI was helpful in their team building. Interpersonal understanding was improved at the Davenport Public Library. There was a consensus that MBTI was of distinct use to many library administrators (Rome 1990).

Elena Bajic, an author for Forbes, considers the following ways that businesses, like JetBlue, build stronger and more successful organizations through the use of MBTI:

- **Assembling teams:** Managers can assemble teams with complementary strengths and weaknesses and without clashing personality types.
- **Facilitating communication:** Knowing your personality type and your team members personality types can help everyone understand better ways to communicate with each other.
- **Motivating employees:** It is easier for managers to tailor their employee interactions on what an individual employee might value more than another.
- **Less conflict, greater efficiency:** The different ways people perceive, and process information is evident in work habits. Understanding these differences can lead to less confusion and better integration of new team members.
- **Leadership development:** The MBTI requires self-reflection and creates a better understanding of differences between others.
- **Leading well:** Understanding your MBTI type can make you more self-aware, a foundational strength for leaders (2015).

There is a lot of documented experience in the field of management that has shown the value of MBTI. However, the vast majority of any published research or studies on MBTI's value come from the 90s and early 2000s.



Cautions and Criticisms

More recent discussions of the MBTI have not spoken as highly of the instrument. Merve Emre, professor at the University of Oxford recently published a book, *The Personality Brokers: The Strange History of Myers-Briggs and the Birth of Personality Training* (2019), that details how the mother-daughter duo who had no formal training in psychology were able to develop the world's most popular personality indicator. Their intent was to create a test to help identify what personality type a child is and what they should specialize in to prevent parents from forcing their children to partake in activities that they did not prefer ("Personality Puzzler", 2018). Further studies would show the lack of effectiveness that the MBTI has on predicting any type of job or specialization preferences. Jung's theories of psychological types were untested and based on individual observations that he made in life (Stromberg and Caswell, 2015). Educational Testing Services (ETS), maker of the SAT, was one of the institutions initially interested in being the primary publisher for MBTI in the 60s. Their interest waned when their team of statisticians could not find a way to validate the assessment. Instead, they found that 50% of people get a different result when they take the test a second time ("Personality Puzzler", 2018).

Adam Grant, an organizational psychologist, criticizes the MBTI of oversimplifying human personality and relying on limited binaries. Grant says it overlooks important predictors of individual and group patterns of thought, feeling, and action like emotional stability vs. reactivity (MacCarthy). Because MBTI has little scientific evidence behind it, "the characteristics measured by the test have almost no predictive power on how happy you'll be in a situation, how you'll perform at your job, or how happy you'll be in your marriage" (Grant 2018). Psychologists have moved away from using the MBTI when assessing personality traits through tests and assessments. By its design, MBTI isn't meant to accurately categorize people in any way, but it gives them a flattering description and scenarios that they relate to (Stromberg and Caswell, 2015). There aren't any inherently negative or bad traits identifiable in the MBTI typology and framework but in reality, individuals can have many potential negative personality traits.

Even those who have advocated for the MBTI note some of the limitations. In one of the most often cited reviews of MBTI, Gardner and Martinko provide legitimate concerns about type theory and its operationalization. They emphasize the necessity of further refinement and study on MBTI's value to the management field and caution some of the limitations to MBTI's use, especially in hiring (1996). Figure 2 presents a comedic example of MBTI being used in the workplace.





Figure 2 - A Dilbert comic that pokes fun at the use of MBTI in the workplace. Source: United Feature Syndicate, Inc. 2000

Amidst the growing concerns and criticisms against MBTI, more psychologically studied personality assessments have arisen. One example is the Big Five personality traits, an assessment that meets much more rigorous standards of reliability in predicting team effectiveness and job performance. The Big Five was created by trained professional psychologists using the scientific method (Grant 2018). But most people don't know their Big Five in the same way they know their 4-letter Myers-Briggs type, making it less culturally relevant and less useful in casual conversation.

Conclusion

If there so little evidence and so much criticism about the use of the MBTI, why does it clearly remain one of the most prevalent personality assessments? In my own experience, I have taken the MBTI through coursework and just for fun on multiple occasions. While the MBTI may be scientifically unsubstantiated, people enjoy the process of taking the test and reading about their personality identification. Even if it is “about as [scientifically] reliable as a horoscope” (MacCarthy). While not backed by science, the appeal of horoscopes is still beneficial in an individual's understanding of themselves and how they interact with the world around them. The MBTI does not have proven effectiveness in terms of predicting job performance or interest, but its undeniable that such an assessment provokes self-exploration. People see themselves in their Myers-Briggs type in the same ways that they see themselves in their star sign. It is a great starting point in considering how we work with and relate to those around us and has great potential to improve one's emotional intelligence. However, it might be time for the private and public sector organizations to stop spending money on MBTI and start spending money on better systems to evaluate personality types.



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