

Second thoughts about the MBTI

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Summary:

Growing criticism is resulting from the popularity being enjoyed by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) psychological test. Critics of the MBTI, which is taken by between 1.5 million and 2 million people in the US and which is most commonly used in business and industry, claim that it has become an excuse for problems within corporate organizations, including substandard employee performance.

Critics likewise attack the MBTI's giving birth to 'typomania,' which is causing people to exert excessive effort to belong to the more illustrious personality types specified by the MBTI. People not subscribing to the concept of the MBTI are likewise annoyed by overly zealous practitioners of the instrument.

Business and industry make up a nice-sized chunk of the market for psychological tests. By one estimate, sales of tests and inventories for selection, team building, and career and management development weigh in at about \$100 Million a year.

Hottest of the lot is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or MBTI as insiders call it. Every year, between 1.5 million and 2 million people in the United States take the MBTI. Developed by the mother-daughter team of Katharine Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers, and refined over a 40-year period dating to World War 11, the test is based on the theories of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung. The MBTI divides people into 16 distinguishable personality types, based on high and low scores on four scales."

According to the theory, these scales are measures of four independent, intrinsic predispositions (see box on page 45). Though often given during career and marriage counseling, the Myers-Briggs is most commonly used in the corporate world. Trainers and organization development specialists frequently use the MBTI in team building and communications training. For example, members of a department or task team who must work closely or intensively on the same project are given copies of the instrument to fill out. Then, as a group, they are led through exercises and explanations that impress upon them how the panoply of psychological types on the team can be both a barrier and an asset to working together effectively.

As a communications-style analyzer, the MBTI is touted as helpful to salespeople and executives learning to become more effective in both one-on-one and group situations. The ability to cater to a customer's-or boss's-style or type, it is held, makes you more effective. What could be more leader-like than a speech to the troops that has a little something in it for all 16 of the MBTI personality configurations?

THE CRITICS

As the MBTI has grown in popularity it has attracted increasing critical scrutiny. G. Stephen Taylor, a management professor at Mississippi State University' is typical of one class of skeptic. He worries about the tendency of managers to see any personality test as an easy answer to organizational problems. (MBTI aficionados object to the word "test," demanding that the instrument be called a "type indicator," but Taylor's point still applies.)

"I ask managers whether they are planning to pay people to be likable or to do a good job," he says. "They get the point." According to Taylor, the best research available shows a very weak relationship between personality and performance: "On average, personality accounts for about 10 percent of the variance between success and failure in group performance. That means there are a lot more important factors to be concerned with."

Even if an organization does want to delve into its employees' personalities, the fact that the MBTI is a "manipulable" test can make its readings questionable. As Taylor puts it, "I've taken it a number of times, and I pretty much have been able to get the profile I want." More on this later.

Another common objection targets the claim that the MBTI is useful in helping individuals value differences." More often, critics say, the instrument becomes a way of pigeonholing people and even giving them type-based excuses for substandard performance. ("You know how we N's are; we never like to spell a word the same way twice.")

A corporate trainer in the Atlanta area, who asked not to be identified, worries that her organization has gone "type happy." "Around here," she says, "everyone knows that it's important to be an 'E' extrovert and troublesome to be an 'I' introvert. So people work real hard at looking like ~E's.' whether that's comfortable or not, and getting into one of the fight types on the test. It's like making sure you drink the same single-malt scotch the CEO drinks and that you work out at the right health club."

The vogue in this organization is brownbag lunches and MBTI. "It's a little like a mass horoscope reading or something," she says. In other words, it's quick and easy. "First you call Domino's, and then you call the training department. We both deliver in 30 minutes or less."

The almost giddy zeal that surrounds the MBTI in this Atlanta organization isn't unique. It also surfaces in published reports about the instrument. A recent opinion piece in The Wall Street Journal by Ernest Averbach, former president and chief operating officer of

New York Life Worldwide Holding Inc. demonstrated the evangelical spirit that can seize adherents. "Insights provided by the MBTI are so extraordinarily useful," Auerbach wrote, "that the test should be routinely administered to adults as they enter the workplace, to parents raising children and to young adults thinking about getting married."

Typomania also leads to stories like one that showed up last year in USA Today. Editors of the paper called upon Otto Kroeger, author of Types Talk: The 16 Personality Types That Determine How We Live, Love and Work, to assess George Bush's MBTI style - based on "key words

White House watchers used to describe him" - and interpret Bush's management strengths. Kroeger pronounced Bush an INFP. This means, he said, that the president "has high ideals, and he's a gracious, gentle person with a low need to be hard-charging, macho."

Kroeger runs one of the four groups in the United States that are authorized by the Center for Applications of Psychological Type (CAPT) in Gainesville, FL, to train and qualify professionals to administer the MBTI. Nevertheless, such horoscope-like use of the MBTI concepts does not necessarily sit well with CAPT. Comments Jerry Macdaid, the center's director of research: "Speculation of that kind in a public forum undermines our seriousness about the integrity of psychological assessments. It runs the danger of trivializing what's very complex." But what is it about the MBTI that engenders such enthusiasm in the first place? According to Paul Thayer, head of the psychology department at North Carolina State University, the test's popularity is not hard to understand. "It is an interesting instrument. The logic and descriptions of Jung's types are straightforward and non-threatening.

The feedback makes you feel good about yourself. It encourages you to feel you can be successful. It leads you to think you know more about yourself and that you can kind of read others. There's something very appealing to all of us in that."

In addition, Thayer observes, the MBTI is well-packaged and marketed, and it's easy to use. "The training manuals by organizational behavior consultant Sandra Hirsch and others have everything you need to make very professional presentations. You can become a very successful presenter fairly quickly."

Still, as a research psychologist Thayer is concerned about the popularity and widespread use of MBTI. "I am not down on the instrument per se," he says. I'd just like to see a hell of a lot of good research done. As it stands, all the things claimed for it - well, it sounds more like a panacea than a psychological instrument."

Among the things that trouble Thayer are claims that the MBTI can be used to put together more effective teams. "The evidence is very spotty," he says. "The research that has been done is not very good."

That applies to team building in general, as well as to the ancillary use of personality instruments, he says. Enthusiasts talk about putting together "complementary" teams, meaning teams composed of people whose various thinking styles or communication styles or Jungian types complement one another in such a way as to make the team optimally effective. "There are one or two studies that are quite supportive of that" Thayer says. "But other studies clearly show that the definitions of 'complementary' are highly unreliable. People don't even agree as to what these are."

Another concern involves the training that frequently accompanies MBTI feedback Says Thayer: "It is very doubtful whether a couple of hours of insight training accompanied by the instrumented feedback can change much behavior. Even in behavior modeling training, which we know changes behavior, there has to be a lot of opportunity for trainees to practice. You don't get sufficient practice a couple of hours."

RESEARCH

Because of the many claims made for the MBTI, the National Research Council, a subgroup of the National Academy of Sciences, included the MBTI in a 1991 examination of several training techniques alleged to have exceptional impact on human performance. The examination, conducted by a panel of 14 psychologists, covered both the published, refereed literature and a special evaluation of the use of MBTI and five other instruments in four advanced training programs for U.S. Army officers.

In a report released last September, the National Research Council Committee on Techniques for the Enhancement of Human Performance announced four conclusions about the MBTI:

1. The types are "memorable." Of the five instruments used in the Army programs, MBTI was far and away the best remembered by trainees who had been exposed to it. Specifically, the committee found that trainees remembered filling out the MBTI and receiving feedback on it better than they remembered doing so with any other instrument (97 percent recall vs. 68 percent for the second-highest-scoring instrument).
2. Particularly impressive was the recall of specific styles. Eighty-seven percent of trainees remembered their MBTI style designation-and what the letter abbreviations meant compared to 26 percent recall of "similar" details for the next-best-remembered instrument.
3. Trainees see their MBTI results as "true" and valuable. Eighty-four percent of the Army officers said the MBTI confirmed what they already knew about themselves (compared to 55 percent for the second-place instrument) and that the results confirmed what supervisors and/or peers had said about them. A significant percentage believed they would find this confirming feedback valuable in their work relationships.
4. The instrument has a high self-perceived impact. Eighty percent of respondents indicated that MBTI had either "very much" or "some" impact on their behavior. This compares to 39 percent for the second-highest-scoring instrument. Seventy-four percent said the MBTI caused them to change the way they related to others-though they did not or could not indicate exactly how their behavior had changed. Few respondents attributed any such change to the other instruments used in the programs.
5. The MBTI is often the highlight of a training program. Sixty-one percent of the Army trainees rated the MBTI as the most powerful part or element of the program they had attended. Equally interesting, 26 percent rated the MBTI as the most uncomfortable part of the program. Sixty-one percent of respondents said that they would change their behavior based on MBTI feedback. Again, however, few could specify what they would change.

These obviously impressive results led the NRC committee to conclude: "The MBTI had a very different effect on respondents than all the other instruments - on memory, on self-insights, and on short- and long-term planning and actions."

In addition, the reviewers were impressed that, compared to the MBTI, none of the other instruments in these programs were well-remembered. Also, none of them prompted much intent to change or seemed to provide much personal insight.

The committee concluded that the MBTI is probably the most popular instrument in use today for developing self-insight and insight into others' behavior. That certainly sounds like a glowing endorsement. In fact however, the National Research Council's report is much less positive about the MBTI than the foregoing suggests. Unfortunately," the report continues, "the popularity of the instrument is not coincident with research results."

Specifically, the NRC's researchers - and other investigators - point to three areas of concern: The instrument's reliability, its validity and its effectiveness in some of the situations for which it is recommended.

Reliability. An instrument is reliable if it yields the same scores every time you take it. Just as you would be suspicious of a thermometer that gave you three radically different readings within a five-minute period, you have to question the reliability of a personality test that can assign you a different personality each time you take it.

The NRC report cites a review of 11 studies of MBTI test-retest outcomes that showed that type stability ranged from 24 percent to 61 percent; that is, as few as 24 percent of respondents - and no more than 61 percent-were assigned the same type when they took the test a second time. A change in at least one of the four categories occurred for 27 percent to 44 percent of test takers. The median of test takers changing on at least one factor was 37 percent.

This question of basic reliability has been further sharpened by studies of purposive faking or manipulation of type scores. A recent study done at the University of London, for example, found that MBTI was one of the most easily manipulable instruments among those scrutinized.

In other words, you can make the MBTI describe you pretty much as whatever type you like. MBTI advocates object that the instrument is not intended to place people in rigid categories. They even suggest that changes in MBTI results can depend upon current assignments and pressures, and that work and non-work situations may evoke different responses to the same questions.

But this sort of transience is frowned upon by psychometricians, particularly those involved with tests used to guide hiring decisions. They suggest that assessment instruments that can be influenced so easily do not, in fact, deliver useful information.

When it comes to hiring, many MBTI supporters do not argue the point. The Center for Applications of Psychological Type says that while the MBTI is useful for placement and counseling, it is not intended to be used as a selection instrument. CAPT's Macdaid doesn't dispute that the instrument's type scores can be swayed. "It is quite possible that a person wanting to make a good impression can influence the scores on the scales," he says.

Allen L. Hammer is a researcher with Consulting Psychologists Press Inc. of Palo Alto, CA, the publisher of the MBTI, and editor-in-chief of the company's interpretation manuals. He contends that the MBTI is being held to psychometric standards different from other career development instruments. "The underlying concept for the use of instruments in career counseling since the

1930s is matching people with a job that is congruent with their interests and preferences. The MBTI does that as well or better than any instrument on the market," Hammer says.

Validity. An instrument's validity hinges upon whether it measures anything "real." For the MBTI, validity includes at least three touchstones: a) Does the instrument give the same readings that skilled Jungian psychologist/therapists give? b) Does the instrument agree with other instruments that measure similar attributes? c) Do the instrument's results agree with the "self-typing" of people knowledgeable about MBTI or Jungian personality theory?

How well does the MBTI stack up against these criteria? According to the National Research Council, the answer is, so-so. In general, the Introversive/Extroversive scale of MBTI receives high marks from researchers on all three major tests of validity. But the Sensing/Intuition and Thinking/Feeling scales show generally weak validity. CPPI's Hammer argues that the NRC'S report missed some solid evidence for the validity of MBTI'S scales. But he agrees that the validity of the 16 individual types, as opposed to that of the four broad scales, is open to question. "The validity of the types as types needs work," he says.

A just-published book titled Portraits of Type, by Hanison Goth and Avril Thorne, two of the best-known personality researchers in the world, reviews five decades of research on MBTI types and makes a more positive assessment about their validity than did the NRC, according to Hammer. "But you can't fault NRC for not referencing the book," he adds. "It wasn't published when they did their review."

Effectiveness. For businesses, and especially for trainers, a critical issue is whether or not the MBTI is useful in team building, communications and other applications. Evidence comes in two forms: anecdotal and sketchy.

North Carolina State's Thayer, who did a background paper for the NRC on the Myers-Briggs, concludes that the research on applications in the education, training and development and team-building areas is incomplete, inconsistent and flawed.

However, he adds, the body of research is growing in quantity and quality. Because of the popularity of MBTI in team building, for example, considerable work is in process. "There is a study going here at NC State between my department and chemical engineering looking at type and teaching success," he says.

CPPI's Hammer shrugs at skepticism about the usefulness of MBTI in team building. "Organizational development people have been using the MBTI for team building for 20 years, and they repeatedly see the same patterns and successes. That is pretty powerful to me," he says.

And there's more evidence to come. Consultant Sandra Hirsh, author of Introduction to Type in Organizations, has a book in press that explores team building with the MBTI.

BOTTOM LINE

Where does all this leave us? To some extent, MBTI undoubtedly has become a victim of its own success. Its very popularity makes it a target of criticism. The zeal that some practitioners bring to their use and advocacy of the MBTI can be off-putting to the nonbeliever.

T-shirts, coffee mugs and wall placards declaring "ENTJ Spoken Here" and "INFPS Do It Better," lead to skepticism, particularly on the part of academics unaccustomed to such fervent endorsement of a psychological instrument. "It ain't natural," one of the critics told us.

Yet according to the accumulating evidence, the instrument does something for those who buy into it. Just what that something is, is an open question, depending upon whom you ask.

Perhaps the best advice is to keep your eyes - and your options - open, and see how the current spate of claims, counterclaims, criticisms and new research initiatives play out. As Thayer put it, "It would be nice if the MBTI turns out to be half as useful as some of the claims."