

# Personality

## Plus

There are thousands of companies in the U.S. that claim to know you and your staff better than you know yourselves.

By: David Zuckerman

**T**he notion that a survey can accurately describe a person and predict his or her behavior is nothing new. An early assessment tool, the Personal Data Sheet, was created during World War I to measure the mental stability of new recruits—who would be susceptible, for example, to shell shock or to being turned by enemy intelligence.

Today, most assessment companies offer their own proprietary test, which means there are hundreds of different options on the market—and the industry is still growing. Personality assessments, once the province of large institutions, have gained traction across a broad spectrum of organizations as a tool for hiring, employee development, and intra-office communication.

As in other industries, personality testing is gaining acceptance among a growing number of remodelers. Companies of all sizes have administered tests, sometimes as a one-shot effort to improve staff communication, sometimes to applicants as part of the hiring process.

The idea behind using personality assessments in the workplace is a simple one: unique personal characteristics suit workers to particular roles, environments, and ways of interacting. Assessments are supposed to measure those traits to make sure everyone is well matched with colleagues, managers, and the atmosphere in the workplace. According to assessment providers, a worker who doesn't fit - the proverbial square peg in a round hole - is doomed to unhappiness and low productivity. "It doesn't matter what your values are," says Robert Hogan founder of personality profiler Hogan Assessment Systems, "if they don't match the company culture, you're toast."

### CAVEAT EMPTOR

If you have doubts about whether seems incongruent questions can tell a total stranger how you might behave in the future, you're not alone. In fact, there are serious questions about some of the most popular tests on the market. Though they're presented as **proven and reliable**, critics note that

many of these assessments are biased on outdated theories that were discredited years ago. Worse, many of the tests have not been properly validated.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is probably the single most popular personality assessment, with a devoted worldwide following that includes 89 of the *Fortune* 100 companies among its users. But despite its popularity the test's merits are in doubt. The Myers-Briggs method of defining people in terms of distinct types is problematic, says Dr. William Revelle, a professor of psychology at Northwestern University, because personality traits tend to appear as dimensions measured along a scale.

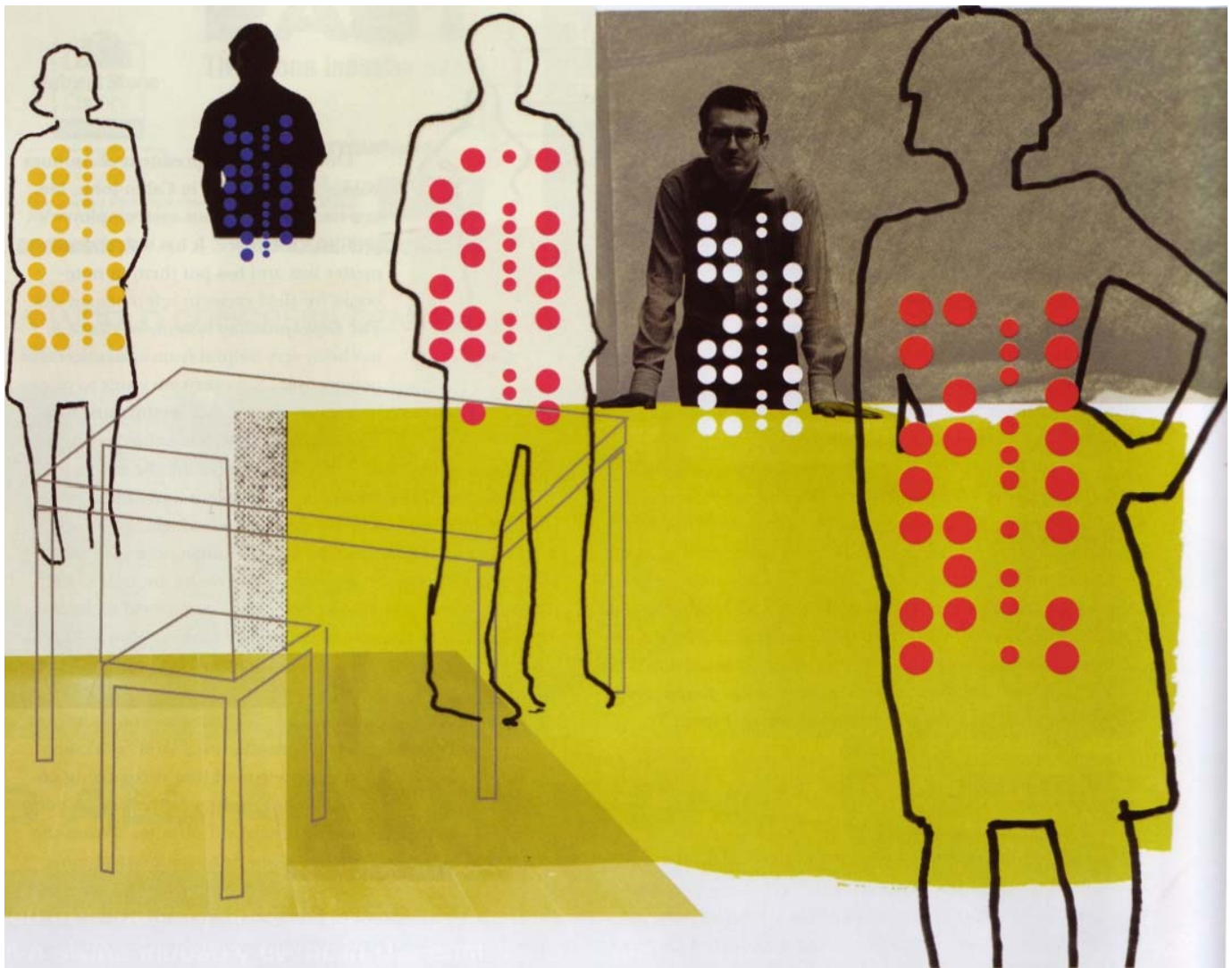
"It's like saying people are either tall or short instead of saying people are different heights," Revelle says. "You're throwing away information." Revelle and others say that while it may have some benefit as a communications tool, the Myers-Briggs should not be used for selection.

DISC is another popular assessment model developed from theories that experts feel are out of step with current thinking. The test reduces the complexities of personality to an even greater degree than Myers-Briggs, determining that one of a set of four is a person's defining personality trait. That method, psychologists say, is neither comprehensive nor reliable enough to predict behavior.

Hogan likens the current state of the assessment industry to that of pharmaceuticals in the 19th century. "There are a lot of people selling snake oil," he says.

Hogan, of course, has incentive to discredit his competitors, but he's not alone in complaining about the exaggerated claims and bad science that abound in the assessment world. And he can claim his own tangible successes. In one widely reported example, the Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI) helped the trucking industry bring about drastic reductions in driver turnover.

The HPI is part of a generation of assessments developed around newer and better-tested personality theories. These tests assign scores to several dimensions (anywhere from five to 16) and suggest what kind of behavior those results are likely to produce.



Unlike DISC or Myers-Briggs, they don't assign types or suggest that any one of the dimensions is more prominent or significant. And they have held up under validity studies, earning the approval of the research community.

Other new-wave assessments include the NEO-PI-R, the Personality Research Form, the Predictive Index, and the 16PF test, which, though created in 1949, has performed comparably to newer tests in validity studies.

#### LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

Though many assessments are subject to criticism as hiring tools, even questionable tests have proved useful for other applications, such as improving communication. Some assessment reports list ways that a person prefers to talk and be talked to. Remodelers have capitalized on that information to foster better interpersonal relations at their companies.

**At Mark IV Builders in Bethesda, Md., owner Mark Scott and production manager Andy Hannah have culled what they think are the most important items from each employee's DISC profile to create a companywide master list of communication "dos" and "don'ts." When disputes arise, Scott says he sits the employees down and gives each the other's dos-and-don'ts lists.**

**"In 30 seconds, whatever the issue was has disappeared," Scott says. "That in itself is worth any penny I spent."**

Elizabeth Wilder, president of Anthony Wilder Design/Build in Cabin John, Md., says her company posts each employee's profile in the office. It has also created master lists and has put them in notebooks for field crews to reference on site. The DISC profiling system, Wilder says, has been very helpful from a management perspective. "Not everyone wants

to or can be communicated with in the same way," she says, "and DISC has helped everyone here understand that." Employees appreciate the effort, too, Wilder adds. "They respect our investment in trying to understand them better and treat them as individuals."

For some companies, simply introducing the idea that individuals communicate differently can be enough to help. One-day consultant-guided workshops can provide a basic introduction to the principles behind personality assessment and give employees a framework for understanding interpersonal differences.

Stephen Gidus, co-owner of PSG Construction in Winter Park, Fla., says a consultant-led DISC workshop helped his staff understand that recognizing coworkers' personalities in their behavior can help defuse tension and head off disputes. "What the workshop did was allow us to understand more about the dynamics of the company ... and how we respond to problems differently," Gidus says.

Bob Weickgenannt of Starcom Design Build, Columbia, Md., used a Myers-Briggs workshop to calm a roiling dispute between two long-standing and valued employees who just couldn't be made to cooperate. Weickgenannt says the solutions the workshop provided were not revelatory to him. But by placing the resolution process - and its conclusions about employees' distinct interpersonal styles - in such a credible contest, Weickgenannt says, he got his staff to listen.

"Employees can hear things from you over and over again, or they might hear it from another employee," Weickgenannt says. "But when you have a consultant or a certified tester tell them the same thing, sometimes the light just goes on."

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