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Testing the tests

I discovered this week that I was an INFJ, or I might have been an INFP. It was such a close call. After some further investigation it turned out that I was really an INTP.

These seemingly baffling initials are all recognised shorthand for personality types that emerged from a session filling out a personality questionnaire. Some may go through their whole careers without ever encountering such ratings but the chances of doing so are decreasing with every generation as psychometric tests increase in popularity among recruiters.

Having survived 22 years and five career moves plus a few internal moves without confronting a personality test I thought it was time I put myself through one, partly out of interest and partly out of a feeling of self-indulgence.

Would the test reveal the real me as I saw myself or as others saw me? The test was provided by Recruitment and Assessment Services, the recently privatised former recruitment arm of the civil service. Over the years RAS testers have been responsible for advising on some of the most senior civil service appointments.

Rachel Frost, a principal psychologist at RAS brought along two well-known personality tests - the 16 personality factor questionnaire (16PF) and the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). Both are among the most widely used personality tests, along with the Occupational Personality Questionnaire (OPQ) and the California Psychological Inventory (CPI). All profess to determine your particular personality traits - that is how you see yourself reacting to certain circumstances.

The 16PF, devised by Raymond Cattell and originally published in 1949, was the first to be developed for commercial use. It has some 186 questions which take about 40 minutes to complete. The questions seek agreement or otherwise to various proposals such as whether you would prefer to go to a party or read a book at home. You answer by using a tick box indicator to one of three options - either true, false or questionable. The questionable category enables the candidate to indicate that to answer true or false would depend on the circumstances.

The final 10 questions measure reasoning ability as something of an added extra since this is outside the scope of personality tests. Ms Frost chose additionally to use the Myers Briggs test just to make sure of her findings. She says that RAS no longer uses the test by itself in recruitment but it is sometimes used as a back-up to check out various findings.

She explained that normally before testing someone for a specific job she would first compile a list of traits or qualities that would be desired for the job by talking with either managers or the previous incumbents. The findings of the test are then compared with these traits and tested against statements in an interview or, for some jobs, in a work simulation exercise. A few findings in my tests - a strong leaning towards non-conformity and autonomy and a tendency to follow urges without much self-restraint, she said, might not have gone down too well in the civil service.

On the other hand, she found a lot of evidence of what she called flexible thinking which would be a help for the job I was doing. Although these tests are recognised for their validity in uncovering people's personality traits I could not help thinking that
some of the descriptions seemed rather like those you would get from Gipsy Rose Lee when she reads your palm. But then the test had indicated that I was the sort of person who would make that kind of subjective observation.

The 16PF test suggested my personality was somewhere between an INFJ or INFP - both introverted intuitive types, as was the INTP type which the Myers Briggs test indicated. All the letters stand for elements of personality - I is for introversion, N stands for intuition, F is for feeling, T for thinking, P for perceiving, and J is for judging. There are eight elements. The two that did not show up in my tests were E for extraversion and S for sensing. Sensing types tend to be practical people.

It mattered little which personality box Ms Frost read from, they all seemed to induce a warm glow of approval. The INFJs, for example, "succeed by perseverance, originality, and desire to do whatever is needed or wanted. They put their best efforts into their work and are quietly forceful, conscientious and concerned for others".

This all seemed good stuff. The INFP type, however, looked equally promising - "Full of enthusiasm and loyalties, but seldom talk of these until they know you well. They care about learning, ideas, language and independent projects of their own." But perhaps the Myers Briggs outcome of INTP was preferable. These people, it says are, "Quiet and reserved. They especially enjoy theoretical or scientific pursuits." Ms Frost said this was in fact her own type so we settled for that one. So that's what I am.

Returning home, I read the results from the 16PF feedback sheet to my wife who agreed they all just about had my personality right. Unfortunately I was reading from the wrong boxes. She disagreed with the boxes which had actually been crossed but then she's only known me 20 years.

Personality testing is an expensive option in recruitment. I have no doubt that it is useful in reassuring interviewers that they are concentrating on the traits they might be looking for. I did not try to fake the result but I feel sure that if someone wanted to do so they could produce different findings. It would probably be a waste of time to do so, however, because it would be difficult to engineer the sort of results that you might expect the recruiters to be looking for.

Testing can also provide a uniform approach where scrupulous fairness might be an issue. Whether such tests are really necessary, however, in a properly structured interview - for a top executive post for example - when certain questions could be posed to search for reactions that betray personality traits, is debatable.

It was notable that each of the 16 personality boxes stressed positive aspects of character. Not one suggested that the individual was a lazy, good-for-nothing type, yet we all know such people exist. As the Myers Briggs paper stated: "Type is not an excuse for doing or not doing anything."

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