Personality assessment tools for business
Personality Plus—
Putting personality assessment tools to work for business

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

The players: In each chair sits an individual representing a department: information technology, business development, sales, marketing, customer service, and more. All are in business dress: women in a rainbow of tailored suits and silk scarves, men in somber suits, some with colored neckties. One is wearing a fedora.

The mood: Widely varied, from decidedly sour, to tentative, to excited. The head of sales is red-faced, his arms crossed. The marketing representative is tapping her fingers on the table and looking anxious. The CEO is smiling ear-to-ear. And the head of IT has his head down, as he stares dejectedly at a notebook in front of him and furiously scribbles notes.

Chances are, you've been in a meeting just like this one. You may wonder what has happened to elicit this response. For our purposes, it doesn't much matter. What matters far more is how people are reacting to what's happening, 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 get a bunch of widely varied personalities in the same room, and in addition to experiencing the innovation and creative bump that only diversity can deliver, chances are you'll encounter some bumps in the road, too. Truth be told, getting a room full of personalities to work together can be daunting, frustrating and downright exhausting. There's an immense amount of juggling of feelings and needs to be done, it seems, particularly when careers, ideals, money and values are at stake. And when personalities clash—whether it happens among the office staff, between boss and report, or among clients and staff, it can be a business challenger and at worst, 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 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 categorize them is anything but a new endeavor. In fact, pioneers in the field began chewing on the theory that personality traits could be categorized back in 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 favor, whether they are tried and true classic assessments, short and sassy questionnaires, intensely involved examinations or peer assessments.

Current research indicates about 80 percent of Fortune 500 companies utilize personality assessments to gain a deeper understanding of employees.¹ The information gathered within these organizations is used for a wide variety of purposes: coaching, employee development and team-building. For some organizations, personality assessments are engaged in an effort to forge wide differences between employees, and even leadership. For others, they are used even before an individual is offered a job—when the organization is considering whether or not the candidate is a good match for the company, and for the job opening 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 mine the avalanche of applicants.

Between changing careers, advancing technology, and an increasingly frenetic 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 powerful tools instead of divisive intrusions. We’re talking about putting our good intentions to work in a way that everybody wins.”

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 underscore and support behaviors that do not work well in business. And, some detractors 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 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 millions.

For some, these assessments offer a greater understanding of oneself, creating a treasure map that not only leads individuals to recognize their own strengths and weaknesses, but to also gain insight into how personality plays into the average person’s daily interactions with others. With personality assessments, individuals may be able to better understand others’ motivations, fears, needs and challenges, and can adjust their approaches accordingly—whether it be daily interactions with a coworker or spouse, teaching before 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:

- team building
- career guidance
- conflict resolution

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

**Personality assessments at work**

It is human nature to label people: she’s driven, he’s stuck-up, she’s a motor-mouth, they’re lazy, she’s friendly and outgoing, he’s organized. 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. None give us a true, full view of why people behave the way they do. None gives us direction on how to deal with these individual quirks or tendencies. We may have identified a personality preference—if peripherally—we’ve even at times placed a value judgment on it, but we have no idea where to go from here.

Back up a second, and think about the meeting atmosphere we discussed, the players and their varied reactions. 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 temper your methods of delivering information based on that knowledge?

Consider this scenario. It’s Friday afternoon, 3 p.m. You have a last-minute project to hand off to IT, which has to be turned around over the weekend. You know Sue would balk at the rush request, even get resentful, as she would feel like you were dumping 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 energized by the challenge; that it would feel like a reward to him to be able to work on a high-profile project? Rather than go to Sue, you might pivot on your heel and pay a visit to John instead.

Or consider this situation. You’re in a meeting, discussing the organization’s five-year plan. Everyone in the room has contributed their thoughts about what

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should be included in that long-range plan. Everyone, that is, but Tracey. While she looks alert, Tracey hasn’t said a word 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 recognize that Tracey is the kind of person who likes to think about problems, overnight if possible; and left to her own process, she would 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 behavior was not only predictable, but based on tendencies and preferences from birth, which could be categorized 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 company. 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:

• 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 ethical issues 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 organization 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 and overwhelm another.

- Meet deadlines more effectively by realizing how different personality types view 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, which can be measured through the highly-regarded yet alphabet-soup-like NEO PI-R. In the Enneagram, which has a decidedly spiritual bent to it, nine personality types are defined. The DiSC® behavioral model has four aspects of behavior. 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 flush 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 behavioral 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. As mentioned previously, 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 behaviors, underlying needs, motivations and organizational 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 behavioral style than do more simplistic assessments that provide a brief, general understanding. According to Warren Birge and Deborah Dorsett, executive consultants with 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 standardized 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 workplace, let’s take a closer look at a couple more of these tools.

The DiSC assessment
This assessment, and its system of dimensions of observable behavior, is sometimes known as the “universal language of behavior.” While every individual has all four domains of personality, what differs is the extent of each dimension. Proponents say understanding the differences between these combinations makes integration of team members a smoother process.

6 Ibid.
The goal with personality assessments such as DiSC, is rarely to change behavior of individuals (though some critics argue perhaps this would make the tests more effective in business) but to help refine characteristics. Each so-called dimension recognized in DiSC is arguably of value in the workplace. Knowing the balance of these characteristics enables you to clearly identify an individual’s value to the team, the environment and culture in which they would likely thrive, and what motivates them to perform. Here are some examples specific to the dominance dimension identified under DiSC.

People who score high in the intensity of the “D” styles factor tend to actively deal with problems or challenges in the workplace. Characteristics applied to high D scores are:

- demanding
- egocentric
- ambitious
- aggressive

People who score low in this dimension prefer to work on a problem, or conduct research before making a decision. People who score low in the D dimension tend to be:

- conservative
- cooperative
- cautious
- calculating

It is easy to see how a manager, upon learning she has both a high D- and low D-dominant employees would be able to better understand conflicts between the two, and perhaps develop a strategy for bridging the gap. For a person entering a workgroup unaware of these primary differences, the tension would likely be noticeable, but the solution would likely be evasive without this insight.

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

The Clifton StrengthsFinder

This assessment measures 34 talent themes, or regular patterns an individual experiences related to thoughts, feelings and behaviors. 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 behavior. 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 emphasizing 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, which helps them apply the strengths principles to managing employees.

**The job search**
Proponents 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 utilize 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 coworkers—all good things. But assessments aren’t a cure-all.

**Finding the best candidate for the job**
For managers who’ve hired new employees only to find that they’re not a good fit for the workgroup, 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 hire 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 hiring, most of us talk out of both sides of our mouth—extolling the virtues of variety and the value of diversity, then cloning our favorite workers and ourselves.

Under the Myers-Briggs assessment, most often, staffs 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 organization sooner.  

With increasing regularity, corporations are using some form of personality assessment in the new hire screening 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 hire 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.”

**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 in their hiring practices. 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

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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.”

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 corporations, this translates into a liability now
associated with administering assessments. In the case of
Wilson vs. 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
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.

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The possibility of falsified answers complicates the use of personality assessments. To untangle the issue, some organizations 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 organizations, 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 categorize and evaluate other people, and these personality assessments create politically correct, non-demographically-correlated stereotypes.”

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 Ibid.
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, hiring 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 up. 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. It's there they dream of building bridges between the anxious marketing representative at the meeting room table, the detached IT rep in a fedora and the enthusiastic CEO. 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.