

NEWS+ANALYSIS Personality Test

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Agencies use psychological profiles to cultivate teamwork.

Everybody has a type, including Phil Varnak.

"I'm an extrovert," says Varnak, a labor relations consultant and former manager at the Interior and Veterans Affairs departments. "Extroverts tend to run over introverts. If introverts are thinking about an answer, extroverts will ask two or three or four more questions before they can even answer the first."

Varnak learned his lesson as an employee of the Bureau of Reclamation in Denver in the mid-1990s. His nine-person human resources office hired a consultant to improve its teamwork. The consultant wielded an increasingly popular tool: the personality test. In this case, it was the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator[®] instrument]. The MBTI[®] assessment], as it is known in human resources circles, was created in the 1940s by the mother-daughter team of Katharine Cook Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers, based on Carl Jung's psychological types.

[The] MBTI [assessment] neatly categorizes everyone into one of 16 personality types, a combination of Extroversion-Introversion, Sensing-Intuition, Thinking-Feeling and Judging-Perceiving, based on answers to questions such as:

"Are you more attracted to a person with a quick and brilliant mind, or a practical person with a lot of common sense?"

"When you start a big project that is due in a week, do you take time to list the separate things to be done and the order of doing them, or plunge in?"

Federal agencies have been using the test for decades in an attempt to improve management.

Jeffrey Hayes, co-president of the company that owns the Myers-Briggs [tool], says government agencies account for about 20 percent of sales at CPP, Inc. of Mountain View, Calif.

Myers-Briggs[[®] assessment] results are supposed to illuminate employee personalities and ease collaboration. Varnak's office consultant sat his team down and walked through the personality types of everyone. For an office that handled the rather concrete work of staffing, budgeting and awards, the rather elastic stuff of personality seemed to make a difference.

"Individuals who leaned toward the feeling end of the scale want to consider the views of individuals and how they're going to be affected," Varnak says. "Finding this out . . . really assisted us in understanding how others would respond."

That means for some, the human touch helps. For others, it hinders. Knowing your own type is the first step for wannabe leaders. That's the stance taken at the USDA Graduate School Executive Leadership Program, which uses [the] Myers-Briggs [assessment] heavily.

The \$3,500 program involves nine months of training for employees at the GS-11 to GS-13 levels hoping to gain supervisory experience. At the end of the program, teams present the results of a long-term project, such as marketing products to increase visitors to an obscure park service monument or a program to collect data on congressional budgeting.

When new students come to the leadership program, the Myers-Briggs [assessment] is one of the first things they do. Their project teams are formed from the results, though organizers are careful to put a diverse mix of personality types into each group.

"The purpose is so they understand how to work with people who have different preferences," says Sharon Barcellos, program manager for the USDA Graduate School. "That is valuable to our program, but then it is extremely valuable to them when they go back to their organization and have to work with people that work in a different mode than they work."

Varnak and Barcellos are hardly alone in using the psychological test in an effort to boost efficiency. The Agriculture Department, Office of Personnel Management, Federal Reserve, Environmental Protection

Agency, Army and Navy use [the] Myers-Briggs [assessment] , according to Hayes of CPP. At EPA, employees have become certified to analyze the results of the Myers-Briggs [assessment]. "We have actively encouraged members of our training staff to become qualified to administer the MBTI [assessment]," says Brian Twillman, organization development specialist at EPA headquarters.

"A substantial number of the managers and staff know their preferences for how they are energized, gather information, make decisions and organize or interact with the world around them. This self-awareness leads to better personal and working relationships." CPP is offering a do-it-yourself online version of the test, called MBTI[®] Complete. Instead of a trained consultant or in-house administrator, employees can take the test and read an interpretation of their results online.

Myers-Briggs [assessment] has the name recognition and is trying to stay fresh with its new online version, but there are competitors. At the U.S. Geological Survey's Office of Employee Development, the personality assessment of choice is the Dominance Influence Steadiness Conscientiousness test, according to Alan Ward, training coordinator in Denver.

"The DISC instrument is a little more contextual and [has] a little more preferences for behaviors that are a little less dyed in the wool," Ward says. Employees "can apply it to their work situations a little more readily."

Ward used [the] Myers-Briggs [assessment] in the past, but says, "I would literally use the word dated. It ran its course."

Varnak and Barcellos would disagree. Barcellos says some of her students have said the test is so good it even helped them at home. They'll say "for years my husband and I couldn't come to an agreement on how we deal with this, but now I understand it is how he makes his decisions," Barcellos says.

Similarly, Varnak and his wife started giving the Myers-Briggs [assessment] at their church. "We've had couples come up to us after they've taken it and say 'that has saved our marriage,' " he says.