

They're popular but are they worth it?

Revealing the essential flaw in organizational personality tests



Whether it's part of the recruitment process or a team development initiative, most people have completed one of the popular organizational personality tests. It could be Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), DISC or one of the many others. Personality tests have become a de facto in corporate life. But do they really work? Is all the investment making a tangible difference? Well, that all depends on who answers the test!



Why are personality tests so popular?

Personality tests are used by organizations to assess the intangible information. What's not on the C.V/resume or LinkedIn, such as strengths, weaknesses, work preferences, and values. They can also be an indicator for how someone might fit into the organizational culture or if they're suitable for a particular role.

In essence, organizations are using these tools as a way to understand your personality from which they hope to determine your behavioral traits. For instance, the MBTI categorization is underpinned by 4 letters. It shows whether you're an introvert or extrovert; whether you have an intuitive or sensing preference when processing information and when making decisions is it feeling or thinking oriented. Another well-known test is DISC, that measures your personality traits and plots them against the quadrants of Dominant, Influential, Compliant and Steady; or variations on those names.

So popular are the personality tests that [The New Yorker magazine](#) reported that there were more than two thousand tests on the market. With [the New Republic](#) highlighting that MBTI is taken by over 2 million people per year! It's no wonder that the [European CEO magazine](#) estimated that the industry is worth between \$500m (€438m) and \$4bn (€3.5bn). That's a lot of money!

Is the investment worth it?

Initially, it's great! You've learned about a framework where you can position yourself and that of your colleagues. It also gives you an idea why you work well with some people in the team, but others cause a reaction: frustration, for instance. In many ways, the test provides a common language for talking about your personal styles and individual differences. Hopefully, it also spurs some self-reflection.

Yet to gauge its return on investment you'd expect to see visible changes on the work floor. Sustainable improvements in terms of productivity, efficiency or communication based on those insights. Is that honestly the case? No! At best, it improves tolerance for a while. However, all too quickly after the training, it's back to business as usual. At worst, it causes polarization and apathy. "Katy is 'blue', no wonder I can't work with her – let's ignore her from now on."

And let's not forget, it's also possible for an employee to take the same test more than once and get different results! Why is that? It might be strange to say – it's all down to the personality taking the test!

What's the essential flaw?

The underlying premise of personality tests is that the person taking the test has just one personality. That's not the case. No one has just one. We're all made up of sub-personalities.

Sub-personalities are a vital element to our being. For example, the Rebel, the Judge, the Perfectionist, the Victim, the Critic. There's no good or bad sub-personality. Each personality is formed as a coping mechanism in response to childhood circumstances and is used in present time when triggered by a similar situation. More often than not, the change of personality occurs without conscious control.

But to cater to the wide audience, personality tests generalize. The questions take the form of broad statements, with little to no context of the situation. Which sub-personality comes to the fore will depend entirely on a given situation. How can an organization hope to properly assess a candidate's fit or define an individual development program based on that outcome? After all, it's only in real life situations that the Rebel, for instance, is triggered and will come to the surface.

What's an alternative?

One alternative is to bring the theory of psychoanalytic models such as Transactional Analysis and Sub-Personalities alive through practical exercises or role plays. Such exercises have multiple benefits for an individual as well as an organization.

For the person, it's about looking at the individual rather than generalizing. They experience what is happening inside them and gain deeper insight into the triggers. For example - What causes Marie's Perfectionist to come out when starting a new task?

Why does Jim's Inner Critic come alive under pressure? And what is causing William to become quiet and completely retract in meetings? Such exercises unlock an appreciation about the workings of 'self'. This helps you recognize what pushes your buttons and understand why you react the way you do. Only then can you take responsibility for your behaviour which results in a sustained positive change. This is not only beneficial in a professional environment but also in your personal life!

From an organizational perspective, by understanding the true potential of their employees and their areas for development, HR budgets can be better aligned to meet those needs. This ensures the allocated monies go further and have a greater impact. What's more, such an approach is based on the organizational requirements. Now, managers can really see how individuals and teams function. It may even shine a light on employee's strengths that the more generic personality tests overlook - revealing hidden talent in the workforce.

Recognizing, coaching and supporting your employees to grow will pay dividends. Real improvements in productivity, efficiency and communication can be sustained. The added bonus is employees who feel valued are happier, more motivated and more loyal! Yes, this approach is different. It requires the organization to provide a safe environment for such exercises and the individuals need to trust and have the courage to be vulnerable. But the result will be phenomenal!



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