

TESTING TIMES

Pychological illusionist Derren Brown recently performed a trick on TV in which he asked a group of people to each draw round their hand and put the drawing in an envelope with a personal item. An hour later, he handed each person a two-page reading of their personality. They all gasped at the accuracy of their profiles, which included statements such as: 'You feel you could write a great novel but the fear of being disappointed prevents you from attempting it.' But when Derren got them to swap, they found their readings were identical.

I was less than astonished. A natural cynic, I've long been suspicious of anyone or anything claiming to be able to get inside my head – or anyone else's for that matter. Which is why I've never been a fan of psychometric tests. The fact that the only job application I ever failed included a personality questionnaire hasn't helped endear me to them either. So when the phone rings and I am offered the chance to trial five online assessments for *Edge*, I jump at the opportunity to put my scepticism to the test – and see what, if anything, I can learn about myself.

Personality tests are a type of psychometric assessment designed to measure individual difference in the workplace by testing people in key areas such as ability to manage stress

and change. Cynics aside, they have been hailed as a vital tool in the modern workplace. Managers can use them to help teams work together more effectively, while potential employers use them to assess candidates. 'Well-developed tests produce results that differentiate between people,' explains Professor David Bartram, chair of the British Psychological Society (BPS) Steering Committee on Test Standards. 'Because those differences can be measured with a degree of precision, and we know what they relate to in terms of workplace behaviour, psychometric testing offers valuable insights to employers.'

Jan Suart, career coach and managing director of HRS Consulting (UK), agrees that psychometrics can be incredibly useful, providing they are used properly – with the testing and interpretation of the results carried out by a qualified facilitator.

VIRTUAL UNCERTAINTY

The sharp rise in the number of companies offering online testing means psychometrics have never been more convenient or accessible. 'Now people can complete a questionnaire in their own time, wherever they are in the world,' says Geoff Trickey, MD of The Psychological Consultancy, 'rather than sending candidates to an assessment centre, incurring travel and accommodation costs only to quickly realise a third are completely unsuitable.'

But the rise in online assessment ►

Thanks to the rise of online testing, psychometric profiling has never been easier or more affordable. But just how reliable are these internet-based assessments? Self-confessed sceptic **Alison Hjul** braves some popular tests to find out

◀ also raises issues about best practice, says Professor Bartram. 'For example, research needs to establish that delivery of tests in unsupervised mode doesn't affect their validity.'

FIVE OF THE BEST

For my road test, I selected five of the most popular online tests on the market: Belbin (Belbin Associates), Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Advanced People Strategies), Profile:Match (The Psychological Consultancy), Team Management Profile (TMS Development International) and Type Dynamics Indicator (Team Focus). Given the vast number available, my research was far from exhaustive, but it did provide some valuable insights – and even knocked a few of my preconceptions on the head.

Belbin's questionnaire had the fewest questions (seven) but required most thought per question. Each section required me to score ten statements from one to ten based on how strongly I felt each one applied to me. Interestingly, I found I was less decisive on positive statements such as 'what I can contribute to a team' than problem areas such as 'my shortcomings in teamwork'.

The Belbin test assesses behaviour in the workplace and assigns people to one of nine team roles (see page 19). Most have logical names, such as Teamworker and Co-ordinator – although my role, Plant, is pretty quirky, admits Belbin's Peter Lancaster. 'Other models give it a name like Ideas Generator. This means I'm "creative, imaginative and unorthodox" but also often "too preoccupied with my own thoughts".'

At just four pages, the Belbin Self-Perception report was brief and easy to absorb. And costing just £25, it's certainly affordable. Its real value, says Peter, comes through how others see you, as we all play different roles at different times. So other participants are encouraged to add observations – four are needed to receive a full report. After including

“ I DISCOVER MY PREFERRED ROLE IS ASSESSOR DEVELOPER – MEANING I 'RELY HEAVILY ON MY CREATIVITY' AND 'GET BORED AS SOON AS A JOB BECOMES ROUTINE' ”

my observer's feedback my preferred role was still Plant, but my next role had shifted to Resource Investigator from Completer Finisher, giving me a profile closer to the other tests.

Of the remaining four tests, the Team Management Profile, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and Type Dynamics Indicator are all designed to identify the subject's work preferences and are based on the understanding that we're all far more likely to perform well in the jobs we enjoy.

The Team Management Profile identifies one preferred role and two related roles for the test taker. Profiles are generated by measuring candidates' approach to work in four areas, such as decision making. Their answers are then grouped into eight key roles covering the areas teams should address, such as advising, innovating and developing.

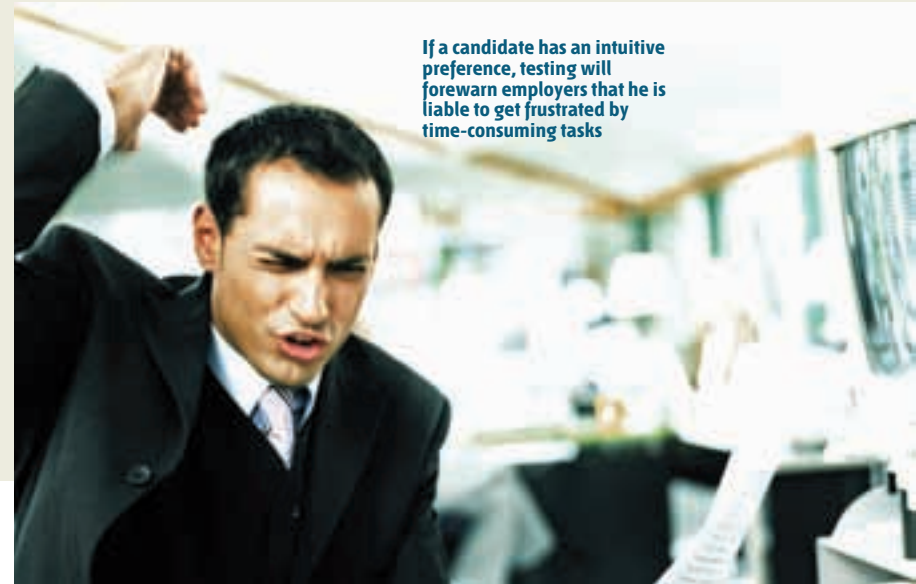
I discover my preferred role is Assessor Developer, meaning I 'rely heavily on my ideas and creativity' and 'get bored as soon as the job becomes routine'. As a freelance editor and writer I do tend to work on several projects at once so this is pretty accurate and also matches my Belbin profile. But I disagreed with the assertion that I 'set long-range goals' – much as I would like to plan ahead, this has never been one of my strengths. TMSDI's training manager, Janet Leonard, admits the results will

rarely be 100% accurate, explaining: 'People tend to identify with about 85–90%, and we then explore any queries they have together.'

All three preference tests gave comprehensive reports backed by helpful phone support, but I was particularly impressed with the feedback from the Team Management Profile, which included an hour-long discussion and 25-page report. At £260, over four times the cost of the next most expensive test, you are paying for this service, and I also found this test was relatively painless to complete. By contrast, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which costs just £49, allows only true or false answers, making it a lot more taxing. But it did make me think more carefully about my answers and I felt that report was probably the most accurate.

Of the five tests, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is probably the best-known, with around 3.5 million taken every year. Like the Team Management Profile, assessment is based on four categories such as 'Where you focus your attention'. Each category has two opposing preferences such as extraversion and introversion. The four preferences identified as most like the test taker are combined into one of 16 types.

My Myers-Briggs type was revealed as ENTP, indicating extraversion, intuition, thinking and perceiving. This, says my report,



If a candidate has an intuitive preference, testing will forewarn employers that he is liable to get frustrated by time-consuming tasks



Trialling tests on existing high fliers will help employers identify the kinds of people they are looking for

means I am 'innovative, versatile, analytical and entrepreneurial', I prefer 'variety and challenges' and am 'impatient with long, slow jobs'.

I like the sound of this, so is ENTP a good type to be? There are no 'good' or 'bad' types, chides Chris Humphreys, managing director of Advanced People Strategies. 'There are lots of positives to each one. The report is more of an insight rather than saying "this is what you are".'

Team Focus' Type Dynamics Indicator test (a steal at only £8-10 per candidate) also suggests a preferred

style based on 16 personality types, using names such as Improviser (my type) and Co-ordinator. People taking the test are asked to answer questions in terms of both 'is' and 'want' – their current preferences and how they would like to be at work.

'This is more dynamic and allows for the fact that people aren't all one type,' says Team Focus managing director Roy Childs. He says about 70% of people report different 'is' and 'want' types, and in particular want to be more extrovert. 'But you can still be an introvert who is interested in

people and a good manager,' he points out.

As an Improviser I am told I'm happiest in environments that involve 'change, flexibility, self-expression, creativity and contact with others'. An Improviser is equivalent to ENFP in Myers-Briggs-speak – pretty close to my type of ENTP (a Catalyst in Type Dynamics terms). Before doing the tests I had read the descriptions and decided Catalyst/ENTP was probably my best fit, and Improviser/ENFP the next best, so I was impressed that the results matched my conclusions. ▶

THE TESTS

Belbin

Belbin Associates, www.belbin.com

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

Advanced People Strategies,
www.advancedpeoplestrategies.co.uk

Profile:Match

The Psychological Consultancy,
www.profilematchassessments.com

Team Management Profile

TMS Development International,
www.tmsdi.com

Type Dynamics Indicator

Team Focus, www.profilingforsuccess.com

◀ However, the Type Dynamics Indicator revealed I actually want to be an Adviser – ‘comfortable in groups, enthusiastic, good with words’, which seemed true too.

But when seeking an objective assessment of myself, I am probably the last person to trust. So, to put the results to the pretty unscientific test, I sent the descriptions to eight close friends and colleagues and asked them to say which they felt best applied to me. They mostly selected two or three types and there was quite a spread of suggestions. Only my partner got it spot on, pegging me as ‘either an Improviser/ENFP or Catalyst/ENTP’.

Perhaps the most honest – if less than flattering – was the ‘friend’ who said: ‘I don’t think any of the descriptions are realistic because they’re all too nice.’ Indeed, the profiles do focus on strengths, which is why test providers stress that they should be used as tools for exploration and development rather than a means to stick people in boxes.

This makes them largely unsuitable for job selection, warns Jan Suart, where you’re deciding how people might behave in the role they’re being assessed for. ‘Because the results are open to different interpretations. You can’t say “this is a definitive picture of this individual”.’

But preference-based profiles can be fantastic for team building and development, she says, because they help people to better understand themselves and their colleagues.

They also give an insight into how someone fits into a team, says Chris Humphreys, and help people to appreciate individual strengths. ‘From a commercial point of view, it’s good to have differences on a team, even though it may create conflict and take longer to solve problems.’

Managers should play to people’s strengths, says Chris. ‘For example, someone with an intuitive preference is very entrepreneurial and creative, and may get frustrated with jobs that take a long time. A good manager would think, “how do we motivate that person?”’

JUST THE JOB

Unlike the other tests, Profile:Match is designed to be used for job selection by objectively interpreting personality data to produce candidates’ job competency ratings.

Employers pay £20 per candidate taking the test, and can select up to ten competencies, such as project management and decision making – at £5 a pop – from a library of 22. Once the competencies are decided, candidates are asked to complete an online questionnaire consisting of 216

true/false statements. They receive a report describing their characteristics and listing possible concerns under each competency.

Like the others, the Profile:Match profile is meant to be used to stimulate discussion. As such it is a helpful recruitment tool – the possible concerns are excellent prompts for interview questions. The most difficult part of the process is selecting the right competencies and this needs careful consideration.

But surely job applicants can skew their test results? ‘They can try,’ says Jan Suart, ‘but a good interviewer will quickly see if someone is trying to be something they’re not. A lot depends on the quality of test construction – the more sophisticated ones have built-in checks.’

So how does an employer select the right test? Jan admits it’s tough but suggests, for recruitment purposes, trying out a test on a small sample of your company’s high performers to see what kind of profile comes out. ‘You then have an idea of the sort of factors that would be useful in potential candidates.’

Having put a handful of psychometrics to the test, I certainly have a more positive attitude to personality profiling tools. While I felt none were completely accurate, the key findings were largely true and encouraged me to question whether I spend enough time doing the work I most enjoy. At the same time, I can also see that, in team or recruitment situations, they need to be skilfully managed.

‘The danger is when they’re used by someone who isn’t trained, who misinterprets them, uses them wrongly, or uses them over and above everything else, such as evidence of somebody’s past performance,’ says Jan. Which suddenly explains why I was ever turned down for that job... ■

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FURTHER INFORMATION

- British Psychological Society, www.bps.org.uk
- International Test Commission, www.intestcom.org
- HRS Consulting (UK) www.hrsconsulting-uk.com