

Call for the Rational Use of Personality Indicators

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IEEE Computer, January 1998, "Open Channel," p. 146-7.

Wouldn't it be nice if a test existed that predicted whether we would be good software engineers? In a recent issue of *Computer*, Lawrence Hardiman introduced the idea of possibly using the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) as such a test ("Personality Types and Software Engineers," Oct. 1997, p. 10).

Stop and think about it. Would you take such a test if the outcome might have serious consequences for your career and hiring possibilities? What would be your reaction if you learned that this test did not take into account your passion, experience, skills, knowledge, or determination? What if you learned that MBTI only measures your natural first preference for being with people and thinking about problems? Would you answer honestly questions such as "Does following a schedule appeal to you or cramp you?" and "Do you more often let your heart rule your head or your head rule your heart?"

MBTI is *not* a predictor of success in the job place.

Think more deeply. Is it even possible for a single test to accurately and reliably determine your degree of success in a field as broad as software engineering? The classified section of your local newspaper carries ads for a variety of people with skills in

requirements, analysis, program design, data design, human interface design, architecture, testing, teaching, security, maintenance, systems support, and technical support. Can one test determine success in all these specialities? No: The search for a single predictor of success in such a diverse field is doomed.

APPRECIATING DIVERSITY

Nevertheless, MBTI has great value as you work to develop an effective software development team. MBTI is an indicator, not a test. This means there is no right or wrong answer. MBTI helps you discover your natural preference in several areas: your source of personal energy, how you take in information about your world, what factors you use for making important decisions, and how much information you need before you are ready to make a decision.

MBTI's value is in helping team members learn to appreciate and take advantage of the people interaction skills and problem-solving styles that are different from their own. Strong teams are ones made of diverse perspectives, if the differences are appreciated! Exposure to MBTI can cause this appreciation to flourish.

On the basis of a small sample of colleagues, Hardiman theorizes that MBTI preference might indicate success in a job. A vast amount of research and data have gone into validating MBTI, and there is no evidence that type preference predicts success. Our own experience with thousands of students in our workshops entirely invalidates the conjecture Hardiman derived from his tiny sample. We see zero indication that MBTI preference correlates with job success, and we know of numerous examples of successful software engineers of all 16 types.

PREFERENCES AND ATTRACTIONS

There *is* evidence that people with certain type preferences are attracted to particular jobs, but that is all that is said. For example, males with a high score for "computer programmer: in the Strong-Campbell Interest

Inventory are more likely to have an I (introverted) MTBI preference; females are more likely have a T (thinking) preference. No other preference has statistical significance. (See Isabel Briggs Myers and Mary H. McCaulley, *Manual: A Guide to the Development and Use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*, Consulting Psychologists Press, 1993, p. 199).

Hardiman also has an opinion that people with an NF (intuitive, feeling) preference "have trouble with the sequential and process-oriented thinking required to design and implement software." The truth is there is no data to support such a conclusion and never will be any.

Preference is just that: It is not skills, abilities, education, experience, dedication, or passion. Preference is not a limitation that prevents someone from becoming good at some activity. Preference is a natural gift given to us. We can grow beyond any of our preferences and most successful people do just that. For instance, all three of us have NF preferences, and yet we have all had considerable success designing and implementing software systems.

Systematically excluding certain types from a team produces an imbalanced team that is likely to have very poor performance. A colleague of ours, Warren Montgomery of Lucent Technologies, wrote: "...most group tasks, including software development, need a broad set of skills. If the team lacks people with certain preferences, the tasks that would be natural for the excluded people are performed by others. The result being that the people who do those jobs are unhappy about having to do them and often don't do them well. A recurring example in my experience is that often I get on teams which lack E and I types. This means that the least introverted person finds he or she calls and leads the meeting and is not very comfortable in that role. Teams missing the F preference can struggle with interpersonal issues in the team or, worse yet, be oblivious to how customers will react with the team. (Of course someone has to handle problems, usually by trying to translate a human problem

The Myers Briggs Type Indicator preferences in four areas:

Your source of personal energy. Some people prefer to interact with other people. They get energy from those interactions, and are assigned the letter E. On the other hand, some people prefer the energy and inspiration they get by being alone with their own thoughts. These people are given the letter I.

How you take in information about your world. Some people are good at noticing details. They use their five senses very well and are given the letter S. Complementary to this, some people have a well-developed “sixth sense,” or an intuitive nature. They lean to new ideas beyond the facts. They receive the letter N.

What factors you use to make important decisions. Some of us naturally look at a situation, remove our feelings to make objective decisions. They are given the letter T. A contrasting preference is to consider the impact on people before deciding. People who prefer to make such decisions receive the letter F.

How much information you need before you are ready to make a decision. Some people have a strong preference for closure. They are likely to push for a decision as early as possible. This preference is represented with a J. Conversely, other people prefer to keep issues open as long as possible while more information is collected and are represented by a P. Thus someone who prefers the solitude of their own mind, notices the details in their environment, makes decisions based on objective analytical criteria, and seeks closure is represented as an ISTJ. The character Sherlock Holmes might easily fit this personality type. Some letter combinations are more pronounced than others, and you may see a summarizing in the following four letter pairs: SJ, SP, NT, and NF. These pairs are referred to as a *temperament type*.

into math and engineering
somehow).”

We urge the readers of *Computer* to learn about and use MBTI, but learn it more than superficially, and use it in a way that makes sense.



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