

# Getting to

In the search for qualified employees, stronger leaders and more cohesive teams, some trainers look to psychometric testing to help find the right fit.

BY JEFF BARBIAN

**W**anted: Four even-tempered extroverts with active imaginations to form a team of IT project managers. Must display acute sensitivity to the feelings of subordinates and be open to variety and improvisation. Candidates should be amenable to constructive criticism yet headstrong; easy going, yet dutiful; practical in thought, yet fearless in the face of change. Conservative introverts need not apply.

Since the days when Freud and Jung opened up their couches for business, nearly every segment of academia, industry and government has, to some measure, tried to link the content of our heads to our on-the-job potential. Today, psychometric testing, or mental measurement, is not only derisive in many companies' recruitment processes, but it also influences who gets promoted, transferred or mentored. Whether the tests determine cognitive ability, emotional intelligence or both, the objective remains the same: to forecast a worker's ability to fill a certain roll in an organization and predict future behavior.

"In a marriage, it can take 20 years to get to know each other," says Michelle Prim, general manager of Cascade Auto Group, Cuyahoga, Ohio. "Or, you can take counseling and get at the heart of the matter sooner. That's what we get from the tests."

The number of firms that administer psychometric tests, however, has declined of late. According to an American Management Association survey of some 2,100 reporting human resource managers, 46 percent of firms

employed some form of psychological measurement last year, down from 53 percent in 1998. For tests that strictly assess personality, the numbers for applicant and employee testing was at 19 percent in 1997, rose to 28 percent in 1998, but fell to 16 percent last year.

The reason, posits Ellen Bayer, A M A global human resources practice leader, is that in 1996-'97, companies faced the need to expand their workforces when the economy was booming and increased the use of psychological measurements—but found the ROI to be less than satisfactory.

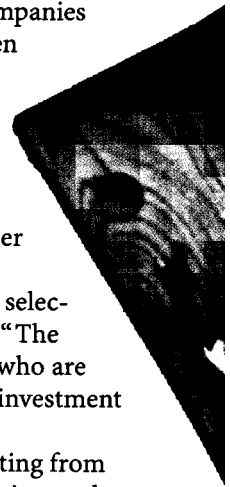
That's likely true to some extent, says Allen Raffetto, a psychologist and president of The Assessments Center, Sauk City, Wis. But another variable was a severe skills shortage in 1998. "When the pool of talent is low, it's hard to be selective—companies have to settle," Raffetto says. "The state of unemployment is down to the people who are unemployable, so it's hard to make a Cadillac investment in personality assessments."

Instead, companies may be shifting their testing from potential hires and rank-and-file employees to internal executive searches and training purposes, Raffetto explains. He claims that more than 80 percent of his company's personnel and organizational assessment tools are used internally for promotions and training purposes. "Why not get a handle on who you're bringing into a training situation?" Raffetto asks. "If you know the kind of people you have, you can tune and customize your training programs accordingly."

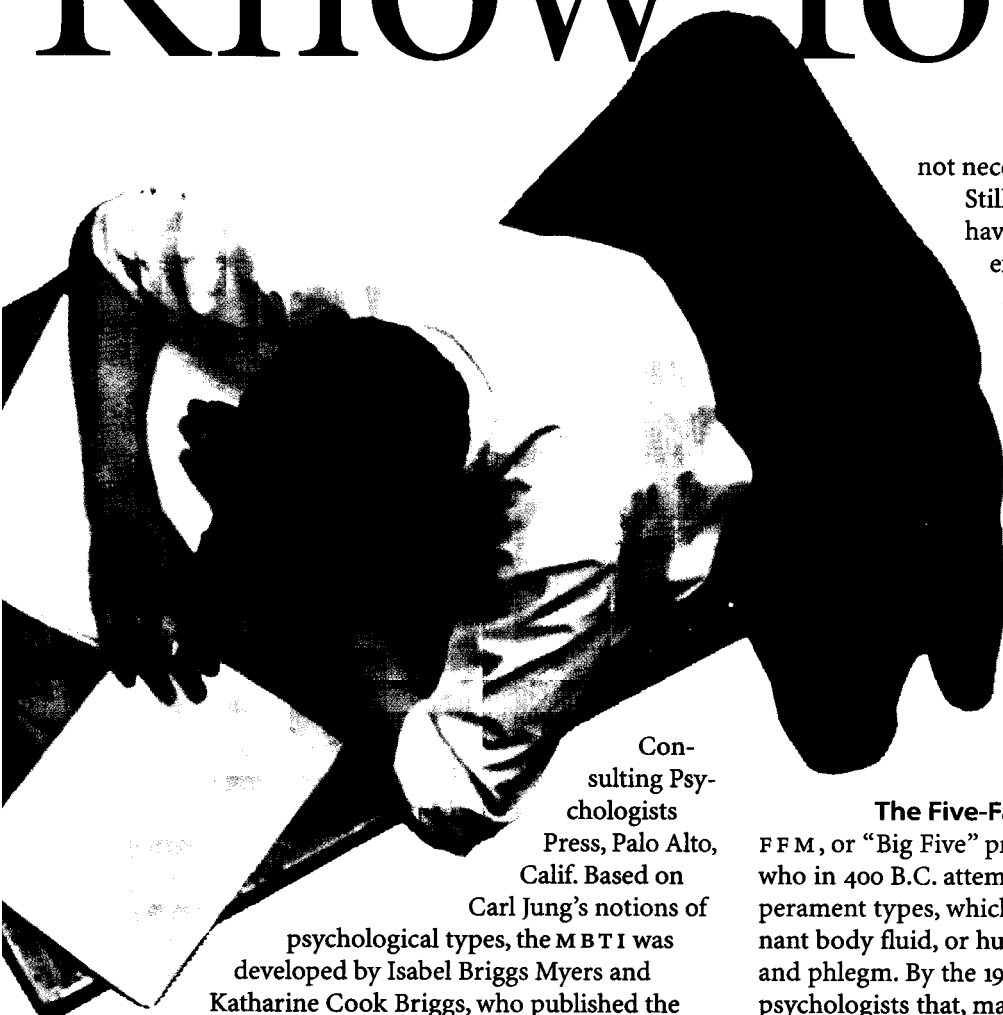
**It's Raining Tests** In the print and online market, psychometric tests abound—3,009 of them are listed in *Tests in Print V* (Buros Institute, 1999) alone. And with the rampant migration—and in many cases mutation—of tests available online (see sidebar page 62), how do you know which test is right for your organization? Some tests tell you if you're an extrovert or a good leader, others attempt to measure your behaviors, such as how creative or practical you are. Still others compute your raw cognitive abilities as a means to determine your ability to grasp, understand and solve real-life problems. The following is a summary of a few of the most well-known psychometric theories and assessments.

## Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is administered to about 2 million people annually, making it the most widely known and used personality profile test, according to



# Know You



Consulting Psychologists Press, Palo Alto, Calif. Based on

Carl Jung's notions of psychological types, the MBTI was developed by Isabel Briggs Myers and Katharine Cook Briggs, who published the first manual in 1962. The MBTI measures a person's inclinations using four scales with opposite poles—Extroversion (E)/Introversion (I), Sensing (S)/Intuition (N), Thinking (T)/Feeling (F) and Judging (J)/Perceiving (P). The assorted combinations of these preferences result in 16 personality types, typically denoted by four letters: ESFJ, for example.

Despite its grounding in Jungian notions, the MBTI has seldom been in favor with the scientific community—perhaps because you don't need a Ph.D. to administer and analyze the test. "It's overhyped and 95 percent nonsense," says John Hollenbeck, Eli Broad professor of management at Michigan State University. "It has an industry around it and it's marketed and sold very well, but it's less of a success in terms of scientific prediction. People like it because it's simple and intuitive."

For Gary Lear, CEO of Resource Development Systems, Lake City, Fla., the MBTI's focus on personality, not behaviors, makes its use in the workforce unscrupulous. "A company cannot dictate how someone should feel or how they should think," states Lear, "only how they should behave in the work setting. Personality does

not necessarily correlate with behaviors." Still, others have found the MBTI to have value in team development and executive and management coaching. "I've had great success using the MBTI to help identify underlying causes of conflict in work groups," says Sherril Nossum, HR and customer relations manager for the Public Utilities District, Goldendale, Wash. "What was learned has resulted in greater understanding and much less time spent sniping and complaining about exaggerated misunderstandings. I know this is small scale, but in that application, self-discovery has been very helpful in increasing productivity."

**The Five-Factor Model** This history of the FFM, or "Big Five" probably has its roots in Hypocrites, who in 400 B.C. attempted to define psychological temperament types, which he accounted for by a predominant body fluid, or humor—blood, black bile, yellow bile and phlegm. By the 1920s, it became evident to many psychologists that, mathematically, combinations of five factors were useful in describing personality, rather than the some 15,000 personality trait-terms in the English language. The model is comprised of five personality dimensions (O.C.E.A.N.): Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extroversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism.

Tests grounded in the "Big Five" concept dominate the landscape of current psychological research and since the late '80s have caught fire in the corporate domain, according to Hollenbeck. One company embracing the FFM is Chicago-based Wonderlic, (see Apropos, page 78), which administers the Personal Characteristic Inventory. The PCI was developed by FFM gurus Murray Barrick and Michael Mount, who supplanted "neuroticism" in the O.C.E.A.N. model with "emotional stability."

At the Cascade Auto Group, Prim administers the PCI to current and potential sales managers because not only does the test help her management team get a sense of themselves, it also helps her appraise how she relates to her employees. "When their tendencies are defined, we're able to defer more to our strengths and the dynamic of

## Who Am I, Hal?

Take the "Ant Test" and find out how your personality relates to, say, a worker or queen ant. Take the "Braintricks: The Inner Dummy Test" to measure your connection to power, sex and relationships. Or try the "Stress-O-Meter" and have a specially calibrated super computer measure the precise amount of stress you are experiencing in your work environment.

Predictably, the Web has become a handy medium for personality tests and evaluations. Many, like the quizzes often found in lifestyle or fashion magazines, are primarily used for entertainment purposes. But a bevy of online assessments make quite serious claims—similar in flavor to respected offline testing—only these tests are scored online, in real time and, frequently, offer links to book offers or additional help for a fee.

It's a risky business, caution psychometric professionals. For one, dubious tests can have harmful consequences if they lead people to develop misleading stories and prejudices about themselves.

"Anybody can generate a set of items, give it a clever spin, make it look good with graphics and put it on the Web," says Allen Raffetto, a psychologist and president of The Assessments Center, Sauk City, Wis. "There's all kinds of crap out there, and we need a way to verify that those instruments have been constructed following sound procedures."

If you're seriously considering an online personality test for yourself, your friends and family, or coworkers, the first step is to ensure the test fulfills the basic requirements outlined in *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (American Psychological Association & American Educational Research Association, 2000).

Keep in mind, the APA does not approve tests as "valid." Rather, a test's validity lies in whether it accomplishes what it claims it does.

To avoid psychological hucksterism, Raffetto also recommends that you seek out an online test site's credentials, which should be backed by research and references. Generally, an online test intended for fun will say so, but if the site's authors endorse their instruments' professional worthiness, make them back it up.

Although far from exhaustive, the following links provide an ample battery of personality tests, amusing or otherwise, available on the Web:

[www.2h.com/Tests/personality.phtml](http://www.2h.com/Tests/personality.phtml)

[www.wizardrealm.com/tests/personality.html](http://www.wizardrealm.com/tests/personality.html)

[www.queendom.com](http://www.queendom.com).

—J.B.

White Collar Supervision Test



the group. If you don't have a sense of their personality, it's a crap shoot," says Prim.

**DISC Theory** DISC has its origins in the early 1920s when psychologist William Moulton Marston developed a theory of four emotional responses—Dominance, Influence, Steadiness and Compliance. The DISC concept attempts to go beyond a basic understanding of one personality type and instead recognizes that we are all a blend of the four basic personality types, and we can adapt to certain situations.

DISC first came to prominence in the U.S. Army's recruitment process during the years leading up to World War II. The first assessment test based on Marston's DISC theory was developed by Walter C. Clarke in 1954. Since then, DISC assessments, in many formats, have been used by more than 30 million people, according to accounting consultants, Dynamic Management Solutions, London.

Intelligent Information Systems, Durham, N.C., which specializes in transforming older computer systems into newer ones, administers a DISC personality test regularly to product and organizational managers as a means of building more functional teams. The tests, says Shail Jain, CEO and president of IIS, were implemented to increase his employees' awareness of their emotional patterns and thinking, but not to rate their value as employees.

"The tests are more to complement people," says Jain. "We don't label them or pigeonhole them with their profiles or make value judgements because they scored high or low in a certain trait. It's more to understand who we are and what our strengths are. I think the DISC test fosters a culture of nonjudgement and acceptance that helps the usefulness of these profiles."

### Loved Leaders Lost

Psychometric data also can be used to salvage group chemistry. Take, for example, a sitcom or weekly drama series that loses a popular character, either because the actor dies or simply leaves the show. The concern for the producers becomes how best to fill the shoes of the departed cast member. Should they find an actor with similar attributes? Or do they gamble with a freshly written character markedly unlike the original? Either way, the producers run the risk of throwing off the chemistry of the cast and alienating the show's audience. Such is the dilemma facing a company looking to find new leadership or meld together new members.

"Invariably, the traits of the person you bring in to replace a departed manager or leader will provoke emo-

tional reactions in the remaining team," says MSU's Hollenbeck. "If the person was perceived as a quiet, highly conscientious introvert and you introduce a high extrovert low on conscientiousness, there's going to be a negative reaction because this poor person is being judged against somebody he or she never even met."

Hollenbeck's research at MSU examines how best to take data from psychological profiles and staff a team based on worker traits. For instance, when it comes to conscientiousness, Hollenbeck says, it's crucial to have homogeneity. Say you're assembling four teams with four people on each team. After a profile test you can rank the 16 people in order of their conscientiousness. You may be tempted to put the four top ranked people onto separate teams so that each team has a strong presence of emotional stability and motivation. MSU's research, however, shows this to be a mistake.

"People are sensitive to social loafing," Hollenbeck says. "The minute they see one person that's not working hard or not trying, they start restricting their own levels, while the other team members feel like the person high on conscientiousness is too anal retentive, and they don't appreciate his style."

Conversely, when it comes to extroversion, heterogeneity rules the day. There, Hollenbeck recommends, you should distribute your four most extroverted workers into each of the teams as a means to flesh out the introverts. "Imagine if you put all the extroverts together," says Hollenbeck. "Everyone is talking, but nobody is listening. With a team of introverts, you can hear the clock ticking on the wall."

In other words, you're not just looking to fill a job, you're also filling a spot in a social structure, and profile testing can give you an early read on where individuals might fit in or clash with the current culture.

"More than anything, we look at incongruous traits," says Michelle Prim of Cascade Auto Group. Prim recalls an instance when a parts-counter worker with good experience and a credible track record was groomed to take over a management position. The personality assessment convinced her that his leadership traits would fit well with the environment of the job—and so far so good.

Ultimately, what leads to an employee's failure in an organization may not be a lack of skills and capabilities, but an inability to develop interpersonal relationships with coworkers and customers, says Mark Schmit, industrial/occupational psychologist and senior vice president for online assessment developer ePredix, San Francisco.

Says Schmit, "Really, in the last 10 years, companies interested in considering personality tests are seeing that what really determines if a person fails or succeeds is the softer skills, leadership skills, motivation and the ability to get along with others." ■

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