

# Personality Tests Are the Astrology of the Office

By [Emma Goldberg](#) Published Sept. 17, 2019



Illustration by Shannon Lin/The New York Times

On his first day working at the University of Phoenix, Eric Shapiro found out the good news: He had tested red-yellow.

To the layperson this doesn't mean much. But to those well-versed in the psychology of Dr. Taylor Hartman's "Color Code," as all employees of the University of Phoenix's enrollment office were required to be, it was a career-maker.

Red meant you were a person motivated by power and yellow by fun. This was an ideal combination for someone looking to climb the ranks in an admissions

team that demanded the ability to schmooze and then hit recruitment targets: equal parts charisma and competitiveness.

"The dominant people in the office, most of the leadership staff including myself when I got promoted, we were heavy red and yellows," said Mr. Shapiro, who is 36. "Yellows tend to be really good at working the room. Reds tend to be more type A, like bulls in a china shop. You're passionate, you're not sensitive, you get over things quicker."

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As Mr. Shapiro rose to be a manager, he became fluent in the color-code vocabulary. It helped him diagnose office problems ("Sally is really struggling because she's a blue, so every time she gets rejected on the phone she stewes about it," he said) and identify areas for professional growth ("Billy, the yellow guy, is really good on the phone and everybody loves him, but he can't sit still because he's always trying to crack jokes").

The taxonomy didn't typically have a direct influence on hiring decisions, Mr. Shapiro said, but managers knew which color types were most likely to thrive when reviewing applications. (He said a 45-minute assessment was included in the job application process to purportedly identify each subject's primary behavioral motivator, which he added was later discontinued.)

"We tried to be ethical but it's tough because we were hiring for what's actually a sales position, so if you were a blue-white those traits really didn't line up," he said (blues are motivated by desire for intimacy and the whites by peace).

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The code is just one example of the kinds of psychometric tests now being administered in workplaces. There's CliftonStrengths, owned by Gallup, which tells you your five best professional qualities; there's Insights Discovery, which assigns you a color and an associated workplace archetype like coordinator, inspirer or observer.

The DiSC model, which has been used by The Times, diagnoses a person's dominance, influence, steadiness and conscientiousness. A new test on the scene, [Dr. Helen Fisher's Temperament Inventory](#), identifies whether you're a testosterone, dopamine, estrogen or serotonin, purportedly in the name of love.

The most popular of the group is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, roughly based on Dr. Carl Jung's psychology, which since the 1960s has sorted some 50 million subjects into introvert or extrovert, sensing or intuiting, thinking or feeling and judging or perceiving. Along the way, it has spawned [dating sites](#), [couples therapy](#), [diet services](#), spinoffs [for your pet](#) and [some backlash](#).

Adam Grant, professor of organizational psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, said there's a concerning lack of evidence for the test's accuracy. "The Myers-Briggs is like asking people what do you like more: shoelaces or earrings?" he said. "You tend to infer that there's going to be an 'aha!' even though it's not a valid question." Dr. Grant has tested both as an INTJ and ESFP. It "creates the illusion of expertise about psychology," he said.

Even Dr. Jung, whose work inspired the test, acknowledged the limitations of type. "There is no such thing as a pure extrovert or a pure introvert," he wrote. "Such a man would be in the lunatic asylum."

## Where Y'All Sitting?

Personality testing is now a [\\$500 million industry](#), with growth rates estimated at 10 to 15 percent annually, and appeal to consulting firms, hedge funds and start-ups alike. At McKinsey & Company, incoming associates discover their Myers-Briggs profile within days of coming aboard; at Bridgewater, the test is often administered during the application or onboarding process.

"The Color Code" assessment was created by Dr. Hartman, a psychologist from Salt Lake City, Utah, in his self-published 1987 book of the same name, which he said has sold hundreds of thousands of copies. It bills itself as "the most accurate, comprehensive and easy to use personality test available."

For Mr. Shapiro and some of his colleagues, it became something of a religion. "The color code helped me figure out my relationship with my mother," he said. "It helped me figure out why dating certain girls was easier than others. To this day I still think about it in my relationships."

That the generals of corporate America, as well as its soldiers, have embraced the personality test is hardly surprising. Hyper-efficiency remains, as ever, the workplace holy grail.

But "soft" factors, like close-knit team dynamics, are increasingly considered valuable by employers and employees alike; after all, most workers spend more time at the office than they do with their own families. [TED Talks](#) and [self-help books](#) instruct audiences to "bring our whole selves to work."

Personality assessments short-circuit the messiness of building what is now referred to as a "culture." They deliver on all the complexities of interpersonal office dynamics, but without the intimate, and expensive, process of actually speaking with employees to determine their quirks and preferences.

They appeal also, perhaps, for the same reason astrology, numerology and other hocus-pocus systems do: because it's fun to divide people into categories. They tap into the angst of the "[where y'all sitting](#)" meme, the hunger to know where you belong in the lunchtime cafeteria scene.

Myers-Briggs makes human resources into an algorithm: Give your employee an online quiz, and within minutes you'll know whether they're social (E) or quiet (I), interested in details (S) or the big picture (N). Forget all the messy, expensive team off-sites and one-on-ones — how much easier is it to compress assessments into four little letters, puzzle pieces on the page? It's H.R. tailor-made for the BuzzFeed quiz generation.

Katherine Wang, 26, a consultant at one of the largest global management consulting firms (which asks its employees not to disclose their work affiliation to the press), said she found out her Myers-Briggs profile at her first company training. Immediately, she was seated with others who shared her type for conversation on how their personality traits might affect their working styles. She quickly memorized her profile and others. Each time she began a new case, she'd study her teammates's Myers-Briggs before even considering the client's needs.

Ms. Wang was skeptical of all the talk of INTJs and ENFPs when she first arrived on the job, but within a few months she came to appreciate the test's value. It provided a shorthand to talk about a whole range of personal needs: how much you like to fill your calendar, how you want your manager to give feedback, how personal you want to get with colleagues at the water cooler.

For Nerissa Clarke, 33, a researcher at a public policy group, her company's all-day training on the Insights Discovery test served as a much-needed reprieve from a routine of spreadsheet analysis.

"We sit there crunching numbers in Excel so it's good for us to do team-

building," Ms. Clarke said, though perhaps efficiency comes at the expense of naturalness. "At my old job we had much more of a culture of people getting to know each other in an organic way."

At Harley-Davidson, the motorcycle company, Kelly Arnold, a 40-year-old project manager, said employees are required to learn their top five strengths through CliftonStrengths. These are then included on email signatures and hung on cubicles beneath nameplates.

Ms. Arnold noted that Harley-Davidson's adoption of personality tests might come as a surprise to outsiders. Aren't its workers supposed to be gruff, leather-wearing biker dudes with no time for conversation on personality? But it showed, she said, that "we're in tune with our inner selves, just like any other company."

Just recently, one human resources director ran a workshop for Ms. Arnold's team on a personality test called the [enneagram](#), and Arnold learned that she's a "number six." "That means when I meet people I'm suspicious, but once I work with them and see their true colors, I learn that I can trust them," she said.

For Ms. Arnold, personality testing helped with professional development, but others have been negatively affected by the test results.

## Not All Reds and Roses

Alison Green, creator of the popular blog "[Ask a Manager](#)," said she has received a number of letters from people whose careers were directly affected by their Myers-Briggs results. She has heard from workers staffed on less desirable projects or denied leadership opportunities because of their personality types. Given the [broad consensus](#) about its lack of scientific validity, Ms. Green is alarmed by heavy reliance on the test.

There's a mystery surrounding the growth of Myers-Briggs, one that Merve Emre, an associate professor of English at Oxford University, documents in "The Personality Brokers," a history of the test and the mother-daughter duo who invented it. Katharine Cook Briggs, a homemaker, and her daughter Isabel Myers were obsessed with Dr. Jung, but lacking in any psychological training when they began distributing the earliest version of the type indicator in 1943. The test has ballooned in popularity even as it's been shown, again and again, to have no science behind it.

"It shouldn't be a tool to assign work or decide who to promote," Ms. Green wrote in an email. "That's not how those tests are designed to be used. And pushing it on employees who aren't into personality tests ends up alienating them or making them uncomfortable."

Darshana Narayanan, a neuroscientist, went to work for a company designing psychometric tests for human resource purposes after completing her Ph.D. at Princeton. The company used artificial intelligence to create logic and personality assessments "matching talent to opportunity, bias-free," like "Color Code" hitting Silicon Valley. Having since left the industry, she is skeptical of attempts to use psychometric tests in hiring and staffing.

"My impression of these kinds of tests is that they don't work," Dr. Narayanan said. "Human behavior is multifaceted and complex and dependent on your environment and biological state, whether you're depressive, manic, caffeinated. I'm skeptical of what you can learn from answering ten questions or observing someone's behavior for just 30 minutes."

She pointed out that while a rigorous assessment of someone's personality would have to involve multiple close observations of their behavior over a sustained period, the typical psychometric test comes as a one-and-done. Subjects take a single, brief online assessment and boom, they're typified.

Coming from the world of academia, where any experimental result has to be repeated under varying circumstances to be proven legitimate, Dr. Narayanan bristled at this practice.

She acknowledged, though, that when psychometric tests are used for hiring purposes, the challenges they're intended to address are just as real as the problems they pose. Often hiring managers will use personality assessments when they need to evaluate a large group of candidates without looking to more class-driven criteria, like where an applicant went to college or whom they know at the firm.

Caitlin MacGregor, founder and CEO of Plum, a psychometric testing company, said hiring managers typically form judgments about an applicant within 0.2 seconds of hearing their name and conclude the outcome of an interview within 10 seconds. These snap decisions lead to hires that have a 46 percent chance of leaving within 18 months. She said Plum's tests, which combine artificial intelligence and organizational psychology, provide more valuable data about an applicant's personality than the cursory review of a resume could.

Dr. Narayanan said personality tests provide the most useful information when used at scale rather than as a means of understanding individuals, contrary to the ways in which they're typically deployed. Among a large group of candidates, these tests can help managers filter out those especially ill-suited to a role, but they can't provide reliable information about a single worker's character. The limits of their applicability are something she fears people have lost sight of in the rush to apply the tests at every level, from hiring to team building.

She also hopes to see more careful attention paid toward the people who designed these tests. [Criticism of facial recognition software](#) has shown the



danger in quickly deploying large systems without closely considering the demographics of the people who first created and tested them.

"It's hard to know what you don't know especially with these tests and algorithms that reach scale very fast," Dr. Narayana said. "Suddenly there are half a million people going through your system and you're deciding what their future is going to look like and it's a black box without any discussion for them."

But as phrases like ENFP, INTJ, red-yellow and blue-white continue to seep into corporate lingo, the enthusiasm is difficult to quash.

"If I was the United States czar of psychometric tests, there'd need to be some evidence base," said Mr. Shapiro, the enthusiastic red. "But I also think that they can be really helpful, as long as people with power know they can't just be used as a litmus test."

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