



TAKE THE LEAD

# Who Are We?

*What you should know about psychometric tests—and how they are being applied in the workplace*

BY KIMBERLY OLSON

**S**KILLS AND KNOWLEDGE ARE key in the workplace. But personality traits—persistence, helpfulness, the ability to manage stress—also influence how well we fare in a role. To assess those traits, many companies use personality testing, a \$2 billion industry that's growing at 15 percent annually.

The recruiting firm Atrium, for example, uses the Predictive Index (PI) Assessment to get a fuller picture of job candidates. "The PI helps us to understand whether a candidate's personality will align with the role that we are seeking to fill, and helps guide the interview," says Casey O'Connor, associate director of Learning and Development.

"When used properly, personality tests can provide valuable insight into a candidate's strengths, weaknesses, and work style, allowing hiring managers to make informed decisions about whether the candidate is a good fit for the position and the team," adds

Tracy Duberman, PhD, president and CEO of the Leadership Development Group, a talent development firm.

There are two main types of psychometric tests—evaluations of personality and aptitude—on the market today. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator reveals people's natural preferences in four areas: extraversion or introversion, sensing or intuition, thinking or feeling, and judging or perceiving. More than 80 percent of the Fortune 100 use the Myers-Briggs, as do many universities and the US military.

The other main type, the Big Five Inventory, measures test takers across five dimensions: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience.

Most personality tests today are based on one of these two types, or a combination. Some tests are industry-specific, such as Suited, which is marketed to law firms, banks, and other professional-services firms.

## For hiring and beyond

Organizations use personality tests for everything from recruitment to assembling effective work teams. "Personality tests can be used as a tool to inform and explain differences, including strengths and weaknesses, so employees can better understand one another, potentially reduce conflict, and work together more efficiently and effectively," says Simone Phipps, MBA,

# What's Your Type?

Curious to learn more about yourself and your team? Here's a rundown of some of the most popular personality assessments being used in workplaces today.

## Big Five

The Big Five model is based on five personality dimensions—openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism—as well as 30 personality traits within those dimensions. The Big Five framework, while not perfect, has appeared in more than 700 research studies and been deemed reliable by many academics. Various personality tests are based on the Big Five model, including one offered by Truity. [truity.com](http://truity.com)

## HEXACO

Another popular test, HEXACO measures six broad dimensions in this framework—honesty-humility, emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. HEXACO, which has shown validity in research, is similar to the Big Five tests but distinguishes honesty-humility. [hexaco.org](http://hexaco.org)

## Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

The world's most popular personality test, the Myers-Briggs assesses innate preferences, such as “judging” and “feeling.” Unlike Big Five–based tests, which measure people along a spectrum, the Myers-Briggs boxes test takers into 16 personality types. [myersbriggs.org](http://myersbriggs.org)

## Enneagram

The Enneagram test describes nine personality types, such as the Giver and the Skeptic, each with its own virtues, motivations, and fears. Each test taker has a core personality type, which is associated with two neighboring types—called “wings”—that the person can transition into to unlock greater potential. Better suited for people seeking personal growth than those trying to create a better workplace. [enneagraminstitute.com](http://enneagraminstitute.com)

## DiSC

The DiSC model, designed to capture situational behavior, helps people understand which of four main types they gravitate toward—Dominance (D), Influence (I), Steadiness (S), and Conscientiousness (C). The DiSC test can help people find a position that matches their natural strengths and also helps build understanding between colleagues. [discprofile.com](http://discprofile.com)

PhD, a scholar at the Academy of Management and professor of management at Middle Georgia State University.

When Duberman's organization was hired by a pharmaceutical company to help a new R&D leader manage an existing team, for example, it employed a styles inventory called DiSC. This test determines how people fit into four main personality styles.

“By identifying their own strengths and challenges, team members can learn how to work more effectively with others who have different styles,” Duberman says. “For example, someone with a Dominant style might be focused on achieving results and making decisions quickly, while someone with a Steadiness style might prioritize stability, predictability, and maintaining relationships. Understanding these differences can help team members appreciate the strengths that each style brings to the team, and collaborate more effectively.”

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The DiSC assessment may also lead to better collaboration. “Two team members with a Dominant style might clash over leadership or decision-making, while someone with an Influence style [characterized by openness, optimism, energy] might frustrate a Conscientiousness team member who values precision and accuracy,” Duberman explains. “By understanding these differences, team members can learn to communicate more effectively and avoid potential conflicts. They can also identify strategies to leverage their strengths and work together to achieve common goals.”

O'Connor says that when managers gain a deeper understanding of their employees, they often become better

leaders. “The Predictive Index provides tools such as team-building activities and info on team strengths and potential blind spots, in addition to management strategies for each employee, which [managers] can reference to view what drives that employee,” she says. “What environment will they be most successful in? What are the needs of this employee?”

Duberman says such tests can be revelatory for managers. “There are always these incredible ahas,” she says. “They feel that this is a missing piece in their overall careers in terms of being able to lead more effectively. Once you've mastered your skills and knowledge, what matters is this soft stuff.”

Some people are even eager to expand their newfound awareness into other areas of their lives. “They’ll say, ‘Can I have my family do this as well? If I could understand how my spouse or my kids think, that would really be helpful,’” Duberman says.

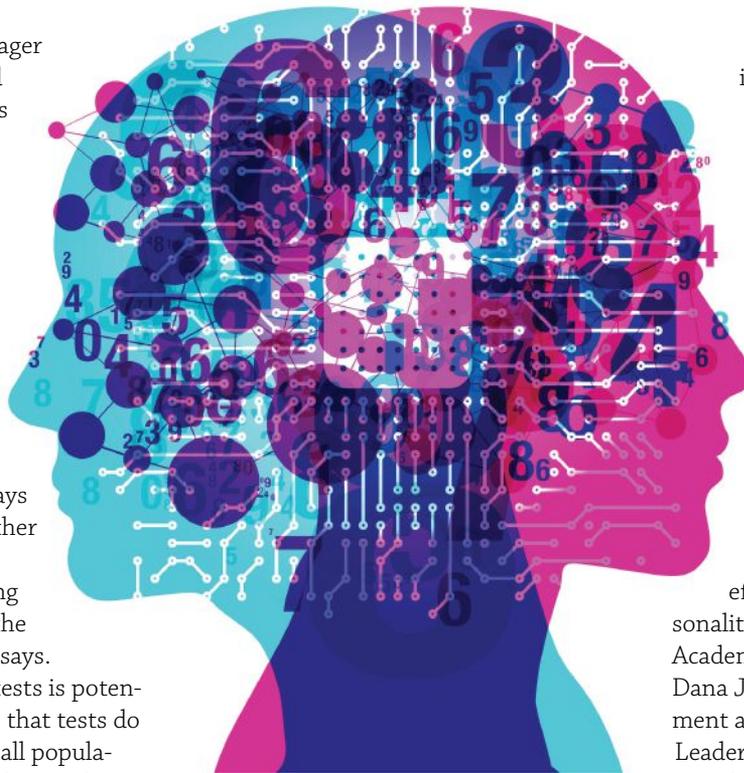
### Beware bias

While personality tests can provide insights, experts say they should always be used in concert with other tools. “[A personality test] is not the ultimate deciding factor of whether to hire the person or not,” O’Connor says.

One downside of such tests is potential bias. “There’s evidence that tests do not function similarly for all populations,” says Maria Elena Oliveri, PhD, a psychometric testing expert with the Buros Center for Testing at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (opinions expressed are her own). “So there may be an incorrect decision being made about promotions or prehire if the individual taking the test doesn’t fit the mainstream population for whom the test was developed.”

While conducting research for her book *The Personality Brokers*, Merve Emre, PhD, associate professor of American literature at Oxford, discovered that Myers-Briggs cocreator Isabel Briggs Myers had been a mystery writer. While Briggs Myers was considered progressive for her time in certain ways, Emre calls her novel *Give Me Death* “horrifyingly racist.” Briggs Myers also believed that women were biologically more prone to feeling than men (and thus originally created a separate Myers-Briggs answer key for them) and wouldn’t test anyone with an IQ under 100 (believing they couldn’t assess their own traits).

Since the Myers-Briggs was introduced in the 1940s, new iterations have been created. But most personality tests



have been designed by middle-aged white men, and experts say any such tool inescapably incorporates the creator’s preexisting values and biases.

“These biases may lead to the disqualification of very qualified candidates for hire, promotion, special assignments, etcetera,” Phipps says. “They may also reinforce stereotypes and relegate women or people with disabilities to certain roles.”

Phipps cautions that there may even be legal ramifications if a test is found to be biased against a job candidate. Certain personality tests—or improper use of one—may violate the Americans with Disabilities Act, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, or other laws prohibiting employment discrimination. “An example is a woman who is hearing- and speech-impaired, who sued a supermarket for not hiring her after she failed a personality test that was designed to predict whether she would be friendly and communicate well with others,” Phipps says.

Personality tests may also penalize neurodivergent people. A 2018 meta-analysis of research comprising 4,000 people, for example, found that those with autism score lower on the Big Five traits. Personality assessments may screen out people with mental health conditions too.

### A part of the whole

Personality tests may provide insights—and lead to helpful, and even fun, discussions—but they’re just one type of data. “Companies overemphasize the efficient, easily comparable personality tests,” says Wendy Smith, PhD, Academy of Management scholar and Dana J. Johnson professor of management and cofounder of the Women’s Leadership Initiative at the University of Delaware. “These tests will vet out the rich diversity that leads to organizational creativity, innovation, and sustainability. Effectively addressing biases depends on using multiple inputs.”

So it’s important to gather other information about employees through behavioral interviews, online qualification screening questionnaires, skills testing, and the like.

Also, upon choosing a personality test, use it for its intended purpose. The Myers-Briggs Company warns organizations not to use its test for hiring, for example, and has even stopped selling the assessment to organizations that insist on using it for that purpose.

Experts urge any organization hoping to use personality tests to reflect on some key questions. “Understand the basis for which you’re using a test,” Oliveri suggests. “Is it for prehire? Is it to find culture fit? Is it for 360-degree feedback? To nurture talent? To engage employees and have a light discussion around the scores? For different purposes, there are different degrees of rigor. For high-stakes decisions, more strict criteria are really important.” **DW**