

# The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator: An Interpersonal Tool for System Administrators

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## Abstract



Tools to automate, improve, and provide insights into the technical environment of system administrators are widely available. This paper focuses, in contrast, on a tool to improve the interpersonal environment within which system administrators work. SA's often become focal points for interpersonal communications, and they need to handle this aspect of their jobs well in order to fully realize technical success. This paper presents a tool which is widely used but which may not have been introduced to many system administrators.

The [Myers-Briggs Type Indicator](#)<sup>®</sup> describes interpersonal differences and provides a framework for problem solving and conflict resolution. This paper introduces the four dimensions of the MBTI, provides information on likely patterns of types represented by SA's and contrasts this with managers and users. We illustrate the four dimensions of the MBTI with applications from system administration. We provide some discussion of the limitations of the MBTI, and give practical examples of its use in an SA setting.

## 1. Introduction

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is one of today's most widely used personality assessment tools. Used properly, it can provide system administrators a framework for understanding themselves, their co-workers, and the user community.

There are 16 personality types in the Myers-Briggs taxonomy. Types are not right or wrong: they are simply different from one another. Type theory provides a non-judgmental way to describe and discuss differences. Once there is a language to describe differences, more effective communication can result.

As will be discussed later in this paper, the MBTI is not meant to be a panacea. We do not believe that the MBTI alone can explain all personality preferences, differences, strengths, and conflicts. We do believe that it is an easily learned tool that can help provide a greater understanding of the human dimension.

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## 2. Overview of Characteristics of Types

The MBTI is based on the premise that each person has a **preferred style** of operating. This is critical: The MBTI is not based on skills or aptitudes. The same skills can be exhibited in different styles, and people can occasionally exhibit a style other than the one they prefer. Since the MBTI is strictly a self-assessment, a person taking the inventory is essentially categorizing his or her own preferences.

This preferred method of operating can be measured in four different dimensions, discussed below.

### 2.1. Source and Direction of Energy: Extraverts<sup>†</sup> and Introverts

The Extravert/Introvert (E/I) dimension deals with a person's source of energy.

- Extraverts get their energy from outside themselves
- Introverts get their energy from inside themselves.

Extraverts are often characterized as gregarious, talkative, and expressive. They have an outer (external) focus., and often "speak to think." Introverts, in contrast, have an inner (internal) focus, and are often described as reflective, private, introspective. They like to "think to speak."

The E/I dimension also deals with where a person's energy flows out. Extraverts typically direct their energy outside themselves; introverts inside themselves.

Keirsey and Bates [1, p. 25] estimate that about 75% of the population is Extraverted, while only 25% are introverted. For college graduates, the distribution may be nearer 50-50 [2, pp. 14-15].

### 2.2. The Perceiving Function: Sensing and iNtuition

The perceiving function deals with how a person gathers information. If a person takes in data in a factual, realistic and literal fashion, using the five senses, he or she is probably a Sensor. An iNtuitior, in contrast, takes in information in a more theoretical, abstract, and conceptual manner. This is the S/N function: iNtuitiors are designated by the letter N to avoid confusion between this dimension and the Introverted dimension.

Most people with a Sensing preference describe themselves as practical; iNtuitiors often describe themselves as innovative. INtuitiors search for possibilities, relationships and meaning; and often focus on the future. Sensors are down to earth, realistic, and look to the past and the present.

Estimates are that 75% of the general population in America have a Sensing preference while 25% have a preference for iNtuition [1]. Other estimates of college graduates [2] give a distribution closer to 50-50, but note that even relatively large groups can have an overwhelming majority of those with S or N tendencies [3].

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<sup>†</sup> Dictionaries prefer the spelling *extrovert*, but C.G. Jung [see section 5.1] preferred *extravert* and the type theory literature follows his practice.

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### 2.3. The Decision Function: Thinking and Feeling

This dimension deals with how people make decisions. People with a Thinking preference, make decisions in an objective and impersonal fashion. Individuals with a Feeling preference, make choices based on more subjective and personal factors.

All people are capable of using both types of decision making skills. Feelers **do** think, and think quite well; Thinkers **do** feel. The only distinction is a person's preference.

The population is relatively evenly distributed between Thinkers and Feelers [1]. More men tend to be Thinkers, while more women prefer the Feeling function.

### 2.4. Relating to the Outer World: Judging and Perceiving

Persons who prefer the Judging function, generally choose closure over keeping options open. Perceivers are more spontaneous and flexible, and are typically amenable to looking at new options, information, and possibilities that might change their plans. A Judging person tends to be very structured, organized, and focused; a Perceiving person is more adaptable and spontaneous.

Estimates, [1], are that about 50-60% of the population prefers Judging while the rest prefer the Perceiving function. One sample of college graduates, [2], rates them as even more likely to favor the Judging preference. Some samples reported in [3] (all of size at least 50) are more than 90% Judging, but none are more than 70% Perceiving.

## 3. Illustrations from System Administration

In this section, we give further examples of the four dimensions of the MBTI with reference to life in system administration. We emphasize that a good system administrator can exhibit any of the eight preferences. Our goal here is to make the above discussion more concrete.

### 3.1. Extravert/Introvert: Approaches to Meetings

Few things may generate as many negative comments in the workplace as the dreaded **meeting**:

I didn't get anything done today (all week? all month?) since all the time was spent in meetings.

That meeting was a complete waste of time.

A system administrator's role often ensures that there will be several meetings during the week: meetings with management, meetings with users, meetings with vendors, meetings with other members of the technical staff.

Granted, organizations that ignore principles of well run meetings (see, for example, [4]) can waste everyone's time. But some meetings, particularly less formal ones, can be made more productive (or at least less frustrating) if looked at through the lens of the Myers-Briggs Extravert/Introvert dimension.

Remember that Extraverts get their energy from others and enjoy generating ideas with a group. They may present tentative ideas before they are fully worked out, and use the

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experience of talking through the idea to refine it. For an Introvert, this sounds like rambling and fuzzy thinking. If, however, the Introverts can suspend judgment until a more fully formed idea appears, they can contribute to the group effort by performing the role of a sounding board. The Extraverts can help by giving signals ("I'm just brainstorming here", "Let's try out this idea") when they are talking without a clear destination in mind.

Introverts, on the other hand, prefer to generate their ideas in private and tend to be reserved in group situations. They may appear to Extraverts to be disconnected from the meeting. They may not formulate their reactions until after the meeting has adjourned. There is a risk that their contributions will be overlooked, and recognizing this risk before the meeting is important for both the Introverts and Extraverts. If the Introverts' contributions will be required, an early, clear agenda may be invaluable in allowing the Introverts the private time for preparation. Issues that arise on the spur of the moment might be better handled with a "pre-meeting" to allow the Extraverts to brainstorm the issues followed by an intermission to allow the Introverts to formulate their responses. During the meeting, an awareness of the Introverts' tendency to hold back can make the Extraverts more willing to explicitly yield the floor.

### 3.2. Sensing/iNtuitive: Approaches to information on system usage

Recall that the Sensing and iNtuitive functions represent the two preferred modes of gathering information. Let's go through an example of a system administrator doing initial research to justify a system upgrade.

The Sensing SA may prepare data showing the history of disk space usage, CPU usage, memory usage, network bandwidth and the time to complete a typical "job". The iNtuitive SA may note that the number of calls on "slow response time" has increased, recognize that a major new application appears more often at the top of **ps** listings, and feel that the number of complaints of applications crashing for want of swap space has become unacceptable.

All of this information is useful: both "just the facts" and "the bigger picture" will be helpful in convincing either Sensing or iNtuitive managers to accept the SA's recommendation. The MBTI implication for SA in this dimension is to be careful to gather information using **both** modes - if necessary, enlist an accomplice with the other preference.

### 3.3. Thinking/Feeling: Approaches to a request for time off

Differences in the Thinking/Feeling dimension are apt to be easy to spot in personnel decisions. Consider being the leader of a team charged with converting a production system from one hardware platform to another. Everyone's been working hard for three months and cutover is a week away. A member of the team asks for two days off to spend time with a relative who has suddenly dropped into town. What do you do? Your Thinking or Feeling preference does not determine your decision, but it does determine the criteria you consider in reaching that decision.

If your preference is Thinking, you may weigh the effect of the person's two days off on the schedule, on the workload of the other team members, on the risks associated with

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that person's particular expertise being unavailable, and on the amount of time off that person has taken in the past. If your preference is Feeling, you may consider how one person's absence will affect the others' morale, or how the employee will feel if allowed or not allowed to spend time with the relative. Weighing these factors may lead you to either a "yes" or a "no" decision, or to a compromise position. The lesson of the MBTI is to recognize your tendency to prefer the Thinking or the Feeling mode, and, particularly for critical decisions, be sure that you have considered factors from the side that you do not prefer.

### 3.4. Perceiving/Judging: Approaches to installing a new package

With this dimension, there is a good chance for a system administrator's type to contrast strongly with the rest of the organization. While Judgers thrive on order and work well with schedules, Perceivers rough out plans as they wait to see what new information will present itself. A Perceiving tendency, then, can be an asset in the many system administration positions where it is difficult to predict what issues might arise. This tentativeness in plans can seem like disorganization to the surrounding Judgers.

Consider the task of installing a new software package. An SA with a Perceiving style would schedule the installation and expect it to take perhaps two hours. As the installation starts, she realizes that the disk for local software will be filled in the next couple of months, so she starts rearranging the file systems. This leads to the installation of the new disk drive that has been sitting in the storeroom for a few days. And this can lead to updating the storeroom inventory. And on and on. Two things are apparent:

- When managing such a complex TODO list, a Perceiver needs to be careful that tasks are completed in a correct order and that tasks do not get "lost".
- Never give anyone the original 2 hour estimate!

The Judger, on the other hand, would tend to see the work that the Perceiver accomplished as discrete tasks, separately scheduled, and would be more likely to complete the "software installation" in a time frame close to the original estimate.

The Perceiving and Judging dimension is the one where the second author has seen the strongest contrast between her style as a working system administrator and the style of the organization surrounding her. She is a confirmed P, and has invariably reported to managers who exhibited J preferences. Learning about the difference in this dimension has helped explain the success of tactics that did work with certain managers. For instance, trying to prepare a detailed timeline for projects seemed hopeless: new information changed the schedule so that things were late before they started. On the other hand, providing higher level lists of work in progress satisfied one manager's need for a "schedule", but could be made flexible enough to be useful in keeping the system administration work on track. Understanding and acknowledging the Judger's need for schedules improved the SA's motivation to give priority to the task of preparing the lists. Understanding the benefits of approaching an SA job as a Perceiver allowed the manager to accept the less formal schedules.

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<b>ISTJ</b> Life's Natural Organizers	<b>ISFJ</b> Committed to Getting the Job Done	<b>INFJ</b> An Inspiring Leader and Follower	<b>INTJ</b> Life's Independent Thinkers
<b>ISTP</b> Just Do It	<b>ISFP</b> Actions Speak Louder Than Words	<b>INFP</b> Making Life Kinder and Gentler	<b>INTP</b> Life's Problem Solvers
<b>ESTP</b> Making the Most of the Moment	<b>ESFP</b> Let's Make Work Fun	<b>ENFP</b> People are the Product	<b>ENTP</b> Progress is the Product
<b>ESTJ</b> Life's Natural Administrators	<b>ESFJ</b> Everyone's Trusted Friend	<b>ENFJ</b> Smooth-Talking Persuaders	<b>ENTJ</b> Life's Natural Leaders

**FIG 1: The Type Table<sup>†</sup>**

### 4. Working together

Now that we have discussed the eight functions, let's move on to discuss how the preferences interact.

#### 4.1. The 16 Types

It is a tenet of "Typewatching" that knowing your own or others' four preferences, e.g. Extraverted, Sensing, Feeling, Judger (ESFJ) will give information that you can use to improve communications. The four dimensions are independent, so there are 16 possible combinations. In the MBTI literature, these sixteen "types" are shown in a four by four matrix, the type table.

A complete type table is shown in Figure 1, giving the 16 combinations and a short, simplistic description of each type. Kroeger and Thuesen, [5] or [6], provide a description of the 16 types that is much more detailed than we are able to give here.

How can this list of 16 types help you? First of all, it can be a "hook" to help you know yourself by understanding your type and your preferences. If you already know your type, validate it through self-examination. If you do not know your type, review sections 2 and 3, and try to ascertain your 4-letter designation. Compare it to the description in Figure 1. You will be given an opportunity to take the MBTI at the LISA VII conference.

As you go through the process of type validation remember several key points. There are no "wrong" types, nor are certain types "better" than others. Taken individually, each of the four "letters" indicates your preference for operating in a particular domain; together, the four letter designations are indicative of characteristics of a group of people with

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Temperament	4 MBTI Types	Primary Concern	Style
NF: Idealist	ENFJ, INFJ, ENFP, INFP	Identity, self-realization of higher good	Catalysts
NT: Rationals	ENTJ, INTJ, ENTP, INTP	Knowledge and competence	Visionary
SJ: Guardians	ESTJ, ISTJ, ESFJ, ISFJ	Belonging; the preservation of resources	Stabilizer and Traditionalist
SP: Artisans	ESTP, ISTP, ESFP, ISFP	Variation and Spontaneity; Action	Trouble Shooter and Negotiator

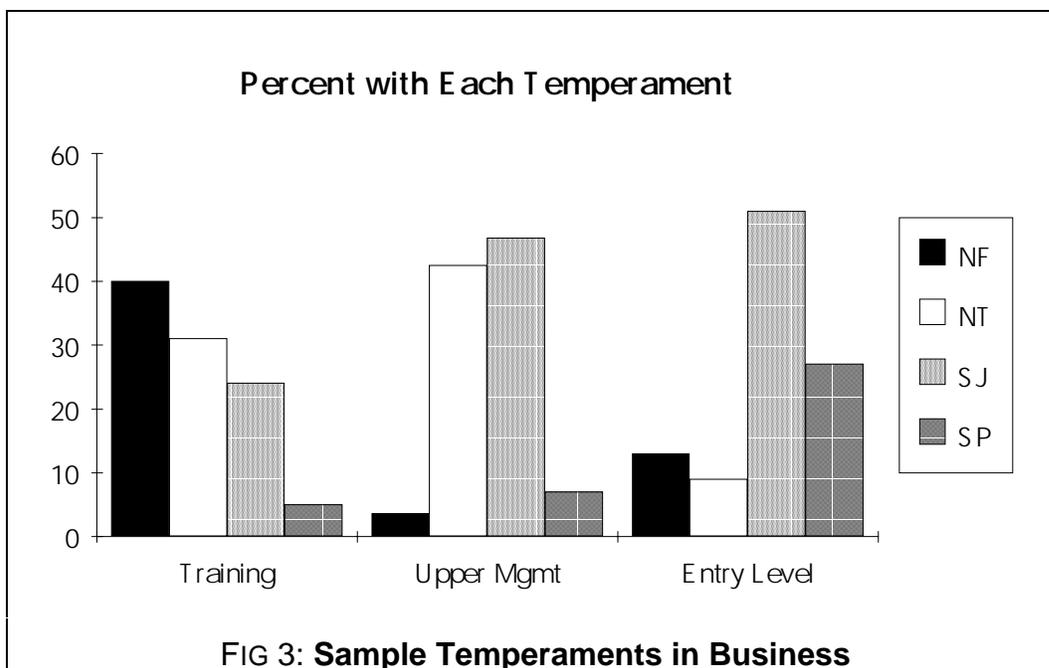
**FIG 2: The Four Temperaments**

similar preferences. These characteristics are generalizations only and in no way undermine the uniqueness of the individual.

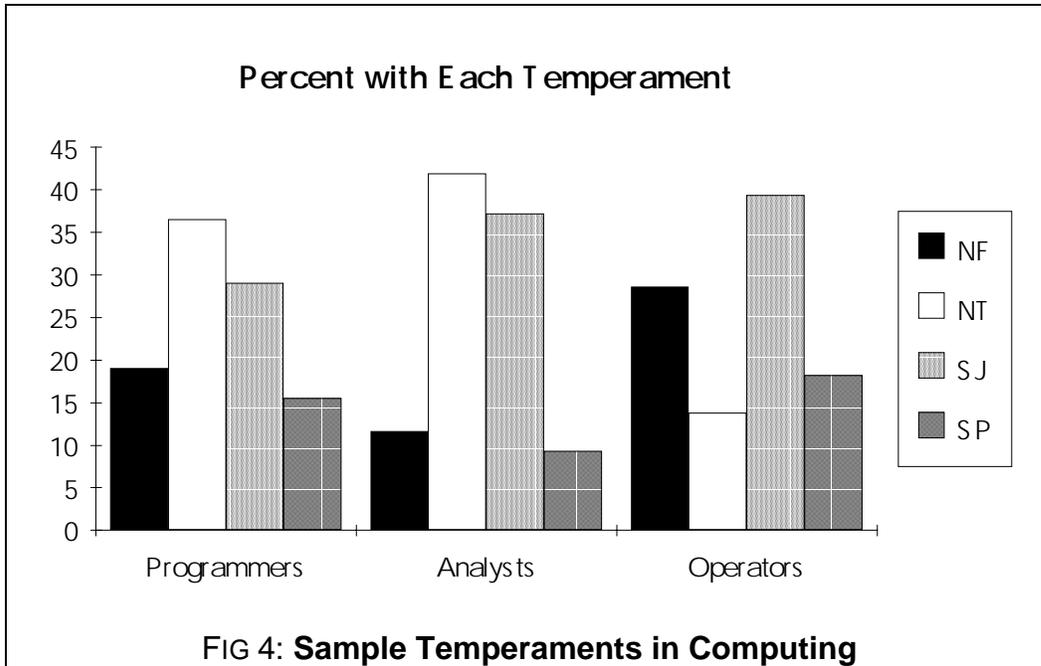
Once you know and validate your type, you can begin to extend your type exploration to examining other people, their preferences, and their types. The insights you gain into how others think and act can be invaluable.

### 4.2. The Four Temperaments

Related to the MBTI is David Keirsey's work on temperaments, [1]. Sometimes referred to as a "Shortcut," the temperaments provide a way to group the MBTI types into four



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"temperaments" that can simplify looking at interrelationships between types. Figure 2 illustrates the temperaments and their characteristics. In the remainder of this section we will discuss the distribution of temperaments and how different people of different temperaments can work together.

While we emphasize that the types apply to individuals, it can be useful to look at different patterns of the distribution of temperaments in groups. Kroeger and Thuesen [5] give summary type tables for a number of different groups. Choosing three of their groups - trainers and educational specialists, upper managers, and entry level employees - we show the distribution of temperaments in Figure 3.

Differences in styles are also apparent in computer professionals. Selecting the data from three of the tables in the **CAPT-MBTI Atlas**, [3] - computer and peripheral equipment operators, computer programmers, and computer systems analysts and support representatives - we get the summary table of temperaments shown in Figure 4.

Given the data for other computer professionals, we would expect to find all four temperaments (indeed, all 16 types) represented in the population of system administrators. Again, the MBTI says nothing about technical skills and aptitudes, but a working style can, perhaps, be more or less effective in relation to a particular environment. Contrast the environment of a well-established production network with that of a startup venture going through rapid change. While each system administrator may exercise many of the same skills, an SJ/Stabilizer **style** may be better accepted in the production environment while an NT/Visionary may better match the startup. On the other hand, since the MBTI type is a **preference**, recognizing a variation in styles may allow a system administrator to modify his or her behavior to improve communications with management and users. If we go beyond considering features of the work environment and look at any system administration job in greater detail, we often see that

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one person is now handling tasks that a 1970's "computer center" would have assigned to many different people (with, perhaps, different temperaments). The context switch from systems programmer to user consultant, can be a shift of **style**, not just skills. Looking at the shift in terms of MBTI preferences can add a new dimension to understanding the challenges of the system administrator role.

Knowledge of what types are "typical" of certain groups or occupations may, in the absence of any other information, help you prepare for a meeting with new people. If you are thinking of changing jobs, that knowledge may even give you some guidance on whether that would be a "comfortable" area for you to explore. But do note that people of all types are found in all occupations. With that in mind, let's describe the different temperaments and make some suggestions for working with them.

### 4.2.1. NTs: Rationals

Many system administrators and systems designers are iNtuitive Thinkers (NTs). NTs are powerful visionaries, conceptualizers, and systems planners. They tend to be competent and consistent, firm minded, and fair. NTs generally are high achievers and are often non-conformists. They value knowledge, maintain objective perceptions, and are independent and intellectually curious. If you are an NT, you probably like to "word smith," you maintain high principles, enjoy complexity, and like to work independently. NTs are architects of change: they like to ask (and answer) "What would happen if?"

As leaders, NTs hunger for competency and knowledge, work well with ideas and concepts, are intrigued and challenged by riddles, see systematic relationships, and focus on possibilities through non personal analysis. NTs are responsive to new ideas.

As learners, NTs are interested in principles and logic, enjoy developing their own ideas, and find technology appealing. They tend to need constant success experiences, and exert constantly escalating standards on themselves and others.

### Working with NTs

Work with these individuals by appealing to their intellect, love of technology, interest in principles and logic, and their desire for fairness. Recognize that to the NT, "Knowing" is of primary importance. Also know that "scratch an NT, find a scientist"[1]. You are well advised to provide your NT customers with the knowledge, information, and assistance they seek.

### 4.2.2. NFs: Idealists

People who are NFs are interested in meaning and significance, and in guiding others. As iNtuitives (a designation they share with many computer professionals), they see possibilities in relationships and institutions. Their F preference means that they are intricately concerned with others' feelings. Often referred to as "catalysts," NFs look for identity, growth, and for ways to make a better world (thus the designation idealists). As empathic individuals, they are fine people motivators and persuaders.

### Working with NF's

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When dealing with an NF in the user community, keep in mind that NFs are "becoming;" searching for self-realization of some higher good. NFs thrive on interactions with other people. When you deal with an NF, provide him or her with acceptance, caring, and support. If you give the NF "strokes," you will receive strokes in return. Your NF systems user would appreciate and respond to your praise, encouragement and recognition. NFs enjoy group interaction, prefer cooperation over competition, and like to focus more on people than the abstract. They learn best in personal, "face to face" situations.

We believe that the more people-oriented you can make your orientation to NF users, the more the relationship will thrive. Avoid conflict, focus on the positive, be sympathetic and understanding, and help them avoid any situations in which they might feel guilty.

### 4.2.3. SPs: Artisans

Persons with a preference for Sensing (S) and Perceiving (P) are known as Artisans. These individuals are concerned with variation and spontaneity. They seek action (doing), and often act as trouble shooters, problem solvers, and negotiators. SPs are practical and resourceful. They deal well with the immediate and are quick starters. They hunger for risk and excitement, desire freedom, and love to make a deal. In short, they love life and live it to the fullest (Remember Auntie Mame?).

#### Working with SPs

In their desire for variation, SPs may occasionally ignore protocol, procedures, regulations, and customs. If procedures are important to you or your work, you may need to reinforce this with SP users. Since SPs thrive on the verbal and the visual, and enjoy hands-on experiences, use these techniques to your advantage when working with them.

### 4.2.4. SJs: Guardians

SJs are often found in management positions and throughout the computer field. Guardians prefer to use their Sensing(S) and Judging (J) functions. They long for membership in meaningful institutions and the preservation of resources. SJs are traditionalists. They see their duty clearly, and are responsible and accountable. In fact, "serving" is important to them. SJs are precise, "take charge" people. They like and need organization, schedules, and the discipline of structure and authority.

#### Working with SJs

When working with SJs, use a very organized, structured, precise manner. Keep this in mind when you are explaining or teaching them about a system, software, or hardware. SJs like procedures; and so the more procedures you can build into the systems, the happier the SJ will be. SJs are sometimes thought of as somewhat rigid, so be aware that what appears to be rigidity is actually a strong level of comfort with organization and structure.

### 4.2.5. Looking at the "Whole" Person

As you learn to work with temperaments, remember that it is useful to look at individuals' other preferences as well.

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For example, if the person you are interacting with is gregarious and tends to initiate relationships, he or she may be an Extrovert. If they wait for you to make the first move and then respond to that move, they may be Introverted. You may have to be more proactive with regard to initiating working relationships with Introverts than Extroverts.

Other dimensions are their preference for structure and criteria used for making decisions. Generally, "role directive" people are those with a Thinking and/or Judging preference who are comfortable giving directives and structure to others. "Role informative" people may have a Feeling and/or Perceiving preference and may rely on others (you, for example, in your system administrator role) to make decisions.

### 5. Background on the MBTI

In this section we go into some of the work that has led to the current use of the MBTI, document some of its successes and discuss the views of some of its critics.

#### 5.1. History

The MBTI has its roots in the work of C.G. Jung (1875 - 1961), a Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist. Jung believed that people are born with a predisposition to prefer certain functions over others. His research identified the attitudes of extraversion and introversion; he also identified the four psychological functions as Thinking, Feeling, Sensing, and Intuition.

Katherine Briggs, a non-psychologist, began observing and classifying differences among people around the turn of the century. When Jung's work was published in English in 1923, she was captivated by his theories and astounded at the similarities between his work and hers. Along with her daughter, Isabel Briggs Myers, Briggs began working to measure the differences between people. The MBTI was born as a result of their efforts to test Jung's theory and put it to practical use. The first indicator was developed in the early 1940s.

Briggs and Myers added two new dimensions to Jung's work. The dimension of perceiving and judging provided, in their view, a fuller understanding of Jung's work and a more complete comprehension of individual personalities.

Briggs and Myers spent the post-World War II years collecting additional data to support their theories and refine the MBTI. In 1956, the Educational Testing Service published the MBTI for use as a research instrument. New MBTI forms were developed over the next several years. Gradually, the instrument gained visibility; researchers and clinicians began to find it useful. In 1975, Consulting Psychologists Press, the current MBTI publisher, began publishing the indicator, and the instrument became more widely available. Today, it is one of the most widely used personality assessment tools in the United States.

#### 5.2. Positive Perceptions

The MBTI has many positive factors, and is often the highlight of a training, team building, or career development program.

An Army career development program research study revealed that individuals who took the MBTI generally remembered taking the test, recalled their "letter" designations, and

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even remembered their scores. The respondents indicated that the results were true in that they confirmed what they already knew about themselves; and that the MBTI had either "very much" or "some" impact on their behavior. In this regard, they felt the MBTI made them more aware of themselves and others, which helped them adapt their behavior when relating to others. The instrument was so influential that respondents suggested additional follow-up as a means to improve the career program. [See 7, p. 96]

On an organizational level, Isachsen and Berens, [8], describe their work with five different organizations. The MBTI helped each firm realize four significant accomplishments:

- They went from describing themselves as somewhat mediocre to a high-performance organization
- The MBTI legitimized the opportunity for all top and middle managers to influence the thinking of his or her peer group, as well as subordinates and superiors.
- Each firm became more focused and more strategic, as energy was freed up to bring about the conditions most favorable to their organization in the overall competitive environment.
- Each firm was better able to define the overall purpose of its organization, and a superordinate goal emerged for each firm.

Isachsen and Berens generalize that the use of personality types applied to interpersonal relationships at work can help improve those relationships, reduce stress, and increase both teamwork and productivity.

Other authors draw similar conclusions. Otto Kroeger and Janet M. Thuesen, [see 5 and 6], advocate applying "Typewatching" to resolving conflicts and solving problems in the workplace. At the Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae), the MBTI was found to be a fundamental tool in team building and interpersonal skills work, [9].

Finally, the first author's work as a team trainer and facilitator has proven time and again that by understanding others' personalities, individuals can appreciate and capitalize on strengths and personality differences. This is the essence of team building.

### 5.3. Negative perceptions

As we've said before, type theory is not a panacea, and it does have its critics. The skepticism centers on three major issues: reliability, validity and effectiveness. [See 7, 10, and 11].

The reliability question is "Are the test results are repeatable?" If you take the test twice, will it give you the same four letter designation? Studies have shown that a significant number of people do change type over time. While this change may indicate "learning" to use a function that is not preferred, it does challenge the theoretical basis for the indicator. More problematic is the question of a person's ability to "fake" answers to come out with a predetermined result, perhaps the one that the hiring manager wants to see. Again, this has been shown to be possible and is an argument for warnings against using the MBTI as a selection instrument.

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The validity question is "Does the test measure anything 'real'?" [10]. This is answered by looking at how well the MBTI correlates with other personality assessments. While we note that there are disagreements on this in the psychology literature, there is a large body of work that takes the MBTI to be a serious indicator of underlying personality traits. See [7], [2] and [11] for more details.

Finally, there's an effectiveness question, "Does the use of the MBTI in a training program change the behavior of the trainees?" There are no studies answering this question definitively, but there is a large population of practitioners committed to the use of the indicator, and there are organizations, e.g. [9], saying, in effect, "It works for us." The important answer to this question is whether it "works" for you.

### 6. Recommendations

Throughout this paper, we've given examples of using the MBTI as a descriptive tool, rather than a prescriptive one. By this we mean that you can use the MBTI dimensions to categorize and describe interpersonal differences, but that the MBTI in itself gives no hard and fast **rules** that take precedence over other factors in determining the outcome of interpersonal interactions. With knowledge of the MBTI differences, you can change **your** behavior, but standard warnings about the inability to directly affect others' behavior still apply. When used as part of a training program for a group of coworkers, the MBTI can provide a framework for discussing differences, resolving conflicts and capitalizing on strengths. When you are the only member of the group to describe differences using the MBTI dimensions, its power may be muted, but you can still reap some benefits from this knowledge. If you find yourself having the MBTI "imposed" on you, some knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the instrument can help you determine your reaction to the process and its outcome.

With all that in mind, we would like to make the following recommendations:

**Avoid** using the MBTI dimensions to justify or excuse communication problems.

While the Myers-Briggs dimensions can provide insight into the source of conflicts, they do describe **preferences**, not absolute behavior patterns.

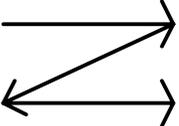
Recognizing the preferences may give you clues as to what other patterns may be more effective. This information may be helpful in overcoming the communication problems, and lessen the need for continuing to live with the problem.

**Be skeptical** when using the MBTI dimensions for career counseling, job placement, applicant screening and selecting team members for complementary types. Given the reliability, validity and effectiveness issues noted above, you can be wary of attempts to pigeonhole people based primarily on the results of an MBTI assessment. At best, the MBTI should be used in conjunction with as much other information as possible on team members' skills and aptitudes.

**Do use** the MBTI to improve your self-knowledge. The MBTI has been shown to be an accessible and memorable way to categorize personality differences. Recognizing your own preferences, and how they may fit or not fit with your environment, can be a lens through which your own **choices** of work style can be clarified.

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**Try** the MBTI for recognizing and working through differences with others, particularly if the MBTI is generally available to others in your workplace. When team members have knowledge of the others' preferences, discussions can be structured to take these preferences into account. When conflicts are framed as differences in Myers-Briggs preferences, often a solution to the conflict is apparent. When a team needs to develop a solution to a problem, consider implementation of Isabel Myers' "Z method":[5, p. 162]

- |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| 1. Use <b>Sensing</b> to gather the facts of the case. |  | 2. Use <b>iNtuition</b> to generate alternative interpretations. |
| 3. Use <b>Thinking</b> to reach a tentative decision.  |   | 4. Use <b>Feeling</b> to validate the decision.                  |

For more details on this method of problem solving, see [5]

### 7. Where to get more information

As noted before, the MBTI is a popular instrument in programs to build teamwork and to enhance communications. If you work for a corporation, you can check with your human resources office to see if they offer MBTI workshops. You may find public MBTI workshops offered through college and university psychology departments, community counseling centers, or private organizations. Expect a workshop explaining the four Myers-Briggs dimensions to take a half-day. A workshop introducing new skills based on the MBTI can take a day or more.

While the authors recommend a class or workshop that encourages the active participation that will reinforce new skills and insights, there are references that go into more detail than we've been able to do in this paper. See in particular, Kroeger and Thuesen, [5] and [6], and Keirse and Bates, [1].

For more information on the MBTI itself, contact the Center for Applications of Psychological Type [CAPT] at 800-777-2278 or Consulting Psychologists Press at 800-624-1765.

### 8. Summary

This paper has focused on:

- An overview of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.
- An introduction to the 16 MBTI Types
- An explanation of Temperaments
- Hints for using the MBTI as a practical tool in your day to day work
- Some cautionary notes to avoid abuse or misuse of the MBTI, and
- Sources for additional information.

We encourage you to try using the MBTI to assist you in your day to day work. Our experience and research have convinced us that while the MBTI is not a panacea, it can be an invaluable problem-solving and communications tool to help system administrators do their jobs more effectively.

## Myers-Briggs for System Administrators

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