

**The Mysterious Popularity of the Meaningless Myers-Briggs (MBTI)**By **Todd Essig**, from *Forbes*, Sep 29, 2014

(1) Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) assessments are extremely popular, as well as profitable for both the publisher and the many consultants who use them. In fact, they are so popular as to be nearly **ubiquitous** in corporations and large organizations, including 89 of *Fortune* 100 companies. But they are also part of a **mystery**.

(2) According to the web-site of its publisher CPP, as you might already know, the MBTI “measures four pairs of opposing preferences to form a person’s four-letter type.” The tool discerns a preference for either “Extraversion (E) or Introversion (I),” “Sensing (S) or Intuition (N),” “Thinking (T) or Feeling (F),” and “Judging (J) or Perceiving (P).” The result is 16 different personality types, like an ISTF or ENTP. The publishers claim that by knowing **these**, companies can “maximize individual and team effectiveness from entry to executive levels.”

(3) Sounds pretty good, no mystery here, except for one thing. The MBTI is pretty much nonsense. As is well-established by research, it is no more reliable than a good Tarot card reading. To show just how unreliable it is, let’s imagine that the assessment included a similar single-letter Weight Indicator. You stand on the scale, and it says you are either obese (O) or anorexic (A), with no designations in between. Can you imagine taking that seriously? It’s **absurd** and so too is the actual MBTI with its “four pairs of opposing preferences.” Personality traits just don’t fit the either/or structure of the MBTI any more than weight does. But wait, it gets worse. Half of the people who take the MBTI more than one time get different results.

(4) Which brings us to the mystery: Why are 2 million people a year using **a tool** that generates approximately \$20 million in fees for its publishers when the results are essentially meaningless? Why not use something that actually predicts success, details strengths and weaknesses, or supports skills development?

(5) Maybe people just don’t know the MBTI is so meaningless. **That** would explain the mystery. Except that as early as 1993, experts have been warning that there is “a large body of research that suggests that the claims made about the MBTI cannot be supported.” \_\_\_\_\_, research conducted at the University of Washington found that the MBTI was an inaccurate predictor of an employee’s on-the-job performance and recommended that the test not be used for hiring purposes.

(6) OK, but who reads the professional psychology literature except some psychologists? Business people, career counselors, and academic advisors who continue to use the MBTI for personnel decisions and career planning cannot really be blamed for not having read an academic article saying “Myers-Briggs should not be used for career planning counseling.” Maybe **they** just don’t know. Except there are lots of journalists who have done a great job bringing results from the professional literature into the mainstream popular press. Just do a google search on Myers-Briggs criticism and sample some of the recent work. One of the best is a recent piece in *Vox* by **Joseph Stromberg** titled “Why the Myers-Briggs test is totally meaningless.” So, the information is out there, deepening the mystery of the MBTI’s popularity.

(7) The NY Times recently suggested the enduring popularity of the MBTI is because people like to take the test: “part of its appeal may be that regular people just like taking it,” like **a BuzzFeed**

**quiz.** And the MBTI has actually been shown to be useful as a method for starting conversations about personality issues within workgroups and teams. For example, after first showing that MBTI profiles did not predict team development, **a 2009 study** of “1,630 people working in 156 teams in a Swedish industrial organization” concluded that MBTI personality profiles could be “a way for group members to gain a better understanding of each other” because it gives them something to talk about.

(8) But can being an entertaining conversation starter really **account for** \$20 million of sales a year? I don’t think so. More must be going on.

(9) Part of it is that **popularity is self-reinforcing**. Like those popular but mean kids in high school who were popular because they were popular, the MBTI is popular because it’s popular. People use it because other people use it. Loren Comstock, an executive coach and partner at The Sigma Group, told me “if an organization uses it, I will work with it.” \_\_\_\_\_, in her own individual coaching work with senior level leaders, “I never use the Meyers Briggs.”

(10) But here’s what I think: the meaninglessness of the Myers-Briggs assessment is actually its strength. MBTI profiles give companies the illusion of understanding something important about human complexity, and this illusion is necessary to the running of any large organization. Let me explain. Business executives can only stop worrying if they think that the people to whom they’ve entrusted important tasks are trustworthy. Without trust, companies can’t operate. But how to know who to trust? Well, you can’t, not completely. Human beings are notoriously complex, and history is full of stories of traitors and incompetents. The MBTI remains popular because it reduces all this messy human complexity to 16 easy-to-manage categories. And as a result, top managers and administrators can relax, and the organization can function day-to-day.

(11) Business consultant James Woollen agrees with my **hypothesis**. Organizations that use the MBTI end up “being assured that what feels so unpredictable and complex is, in fact, pretty simple.” And with that said, it seems unlikely that the MBTI’s popularity will decline any time soon, despite all the research about its unreliability.

### Questions

1. (1 point) The main purpose of the article is to...
  - a. persuade business leaders to keep using the MBTI despite its weaknesses.
  - b. suggest a reason why many companies and organizations still use the MBTI.**
  - c. report on new research showing how unreliable the MBTI assessment is.
  - d. inform readers of the strengths and weaknesses of the Myers-Briggs test.
  
2. (2 points) In your own words, what is the *mystery* that the author discusses in the article?

**It is baffling that so many people and companies use the MBTI even though it is not accurate, and expensive to boot.**

Cf. article:

¶4: Which brings us to the mystery: Why are 2 million people a year using a tool that generates approximately \$20 million in fees for its publishers when the results are essentially meaningless?

¶6: So, the information is out there, deepening the mystery of the MBTI’s popularity.

3. (1 point) Which of these is not a possible Myers-Briggs personality type?

- a. ISTJ
- b. ESFP
- c. INTP
- d. EIST

Cf. article:

¶2: the MBTI “measures four pairs of opposing preferences to form a person’s four-letter type.” The tool discerns a preference for either “Extraversion (E) or Introversion (I),” “Sensing (S) or Intuition (N),” “Thinking (T) or Feeling (F),” and “Judging (J) or Perceiving (P).”

4. (1 point) In paragraph 6, Joseph Stromberg is an example of a(an) journalist who has written to tell general readers that research has found the MBTI to be unreliable.

Cf. article:

¶6: Maybe they just don’t know. Except there are lots of journalists who have done a great job bringing results from the professional literature into the mainstream popular press. Just do a google search on Myers-Briggs criticism and sample some of the recent work. One of the best is a recent piece in *Vox* by Joseph Stromberg titled “Why the Myers-Briggs test is totally meaningless.”

5. (1 point) A BuzzFeed quiz (paragraph 7)...

- a. is difficult to answer.
- b. is fun to take.
- c. has the same purpose as the MBTI.
- d. appears in the NY Times.

Cf. article:

¶7: The NY Times recently suggested the enduring popularity of the MBTI is because people like to take the test: “part of its appeal may be that regular people just like taking it,” like a BuzzFeed quiz.

6. (1 point) In your own words, how does the 2009 study mentioned in paragraph 7 explain why some companies might choose to use the Myers-Briggs test with their employees?

The MBTI encourages discussion among their employees about individual styles and habits.

Cf. article:

¶7: the MBTI has actually been shown to be useful as a method for starting conversations about personality issues within workgroups and teams. For example, after first showing that MBTI profiles did not predict team development, a 2009 study of “1,630 people working in 156 teams in a Swedish industrial organization” concluded that MBTI personality profiles could be “a way for group members to gain a better understanding of each other” because it gives them something to talk about.

7. (1 point) What does this sentence mean: *Popularity is self-reinforcing* (paragraph 9)?

Something is popular because many people use it which in turn causes more people to use it.

Popularity operates in a positive feedback cycle.

Cf. article:

¶9: popularity is self-reinforcing. Like those popular but mean kids in high school who were popular because they were popular, the MBTI is popular because it's popular. People use it because other people use it.

8. (1 point) Which of these statements best expresses why the author thinks that the Myers-Briggs is still popular today?
- Myers-Briggs is the fastest and least expensive way for companies to evaluate how honest their employees are.
  - Researchers and journalists have not done enough to persuade organizations that the MBTI is meaningless.
  - The MBTI lets leaders of businesses and other organizations feel more in control about complex issues.
  - No other test is better than Myers-Briggs for predicting how successful new employees will be.

Cf. article:

¶10: The MBTI remains popular because it reduces all this messy human complexity to 16 easy-to-manage categories.

¶10: MBTI profiles give companies the illusion of understanding something important about human complexity, and this illusion is necessary to the running of any large organization.

9. (1 point) Complete this sentence in your own words. In the last paragraph, the author predicts that people will still use the MBTI.  
that the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator will continue to be widely used well into the future even though it has been shown to be inaccurate.

Cf. article:

¶11: Organizations that use the MBTI end up “being assured that what feels so unpredictable and complex is, in fact, pretty simple.” And with that said, it seems unlikely that the MBTI’s popularity will decline any time soon, despite all the research about its unreliability.

10. (1 point) The best completion for the blank in paragraph 5 is...
- In fact
  - In contrast
  - For example
  - As a result

Cf. article:

¶5: there is “a large body of research that suggests that the claims made about the MBTI cannot be supported.” \_\_\_\_\_, research conducted at the University of Washington found that the MBTI was an inaccurate predictor of an employee’s on-the-job performance

11. (1 point) The best completion for the blank in paragraph 9 is...
- However
  - Therefore
  - Moreover
  - Finally

Cf. article:

¶9: Loren Comstock, an executive coach and partner at The Sigma Group, told me “if an organization uses it, I will work with it.” \_\_\_\_\_, in her own individual coaching work with senior level leaders, “I never use the Meyers Briggs.”

12. (4 points) Are these statements TRUE or FALSE? If a statement is TRUE, write TRUE in the blank. If false, write FALSE. Then find a sentence in the article that is evidence for your answer, and copy it where it says EVIDENCE. Also, write the number of the paragraph where that sentence is found.

- a. **FALSE** The author thinks that too little research has been done to persuade companies to stop using the Myers-Briggs test.

EVIDENCE: (paragraph 5) as early as 1993, experts have been warning that there is “a large body of research that suggests that the claims made about the MBTI cannot be supported.”

- b. **FALSE** The Myers-Briggs assessment classifies people by how much they weigh.

EVIDENCE: (paragraph 3) let’s imagine that the assessment included a similar single-letter Weight Indicator

EVIDENCE: (paragraph 2) MBTI “measures four pairs of opposing preferences to form a person’s four-letter type.” [...] The result is 16 different personality types.

- c. **FALSE** People are only allowed to take the MBTI assessment one time.

EVIDENCE: (paragraph 3) Half of the people who take the MBTI more than one time get different results.

- d. **TRUE** According to the author, it is very important for top executives to have confidence in their employees.

EVIDENCE: (paragraph 10) Business executives can only stop worrying if they think that the people to whom they’ve entrusted important tasks are trustworthy. Without trust, companies can’t operate.

13. (2 points) Circle the letter of the best meaning for the words below as they are used in context.

13.1 *ubiquitous* (paragraph 1)

- a. found everywhere  
 b. world-famous  
 c. extremely popular  
 d. unusually rare

Cf. article:

¶1: In fact, they are so popular as to be nearly **ubiquitous** in corporations and large organizations, including 89 of *Fortune* 100 companies.

13.2 *absurd* (paragraph 3)

- a. unreasonable  
 b. serious  
 c. imaginative  
 d. significant

Cf. article:

¶3: Can you imagine taking that seriously? It's **absurd** and so too is the actual MBTI with its "four pairs of opposing preferences." Personality traits just don't fit the either/or structure of the MBTI any more than weight does.

13.3 *account for* (paragraph 8)

- a. add up
- b. relate to
- c. explain**
- d. contribute

Cf. article:

¶8: But can being an entertaining conversation starter really **account for** \$20 million of sales a year? I don't think so. More must be going on.

13.4 *hypothesis* (paragraph 11)

- a. confirmed proof
- b. possible explanation**
- c. simple solution
- d. future prediction

Cf. article:

¶10: But here's what I think: the meaninglessness of the Myers-Briggs assessment is actually its strength.

¶11: Business consultant James Woollen agrees with my **hypothesis**.

14. (2 points) What do the following refer to?

- a. *these* (paragraph 2) **MBTI personality types**

Cf. article:

¶2: The result is 16 different personality types, like an ISTF or ENTP. The publishers claim that by knowing **these**, companies can "maximize individual and team effectiveness from entry to executive levels."

- b. *a tool* (paragraph 4) **a personality test (i.e. the MBTI)**

Cf. article:

¶4: Why are 2 million people a year using **a tool** that generates approximately \$20 million in fees for its publishers when the results are essentially meaningless?

- c. *that* (paragraph 5) **People not knowing that the MBTI is meaningless**

Cf. article:

¶5: Maybe people just don't know the MBTI is so meaningless. **That** would explain the mystery.

- d. *they* (paragraph 6) **Businesses that continue to use the MBTI**  
**People who**

Cf. article:

¶5: Maybe people just don't know the MBTI is so meaningless.

¶6: Business people, career counselors, and academic advisors who continue to use the MBTI for personnel decisions and career planning cannot really be blamed for not

having read an academic article saying “Myers-Briggs should not be used for career planning counseling.” Maybe they just don’t know.