Personality tests: Can they identify the real you?

The next time you apply for a job, you might be asked to take a personality test. Even though the companies that make the tests are not keen on them actually being used to select staff during the interview process, the business of personality is big and growing. But do the tests work?

A few years back, my niece was looking for a summer job. (----- 1 ----- ) But before the interview, she had to fill out an online application including a psychometric test – a test which would reveal a lot about her personality. She explained that there was a whole section on ethics and how you'd react in a particular situation, like dealing with an difficult customer, for example. And apparently the message was pretty clear – if you're easily annoyed, don't be a waitress.

(----- 2 ----- ) Personality tests are now appearing in all types of industry. In a global recession, many firms want to be sure they are employing the most suitable person for the job. They cannot afford to pick the wrong one. Smaller profits also mean staff are working under more stress. Therefore, companies want to make sure their employees get on with each other. Disagreements are costly and inefficient.

In the US alone, there are about 2,500 personality tests on the market. One of the most popular is called the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or MBTI. (----- 3 ----- ) It has also been adopted by governments and military agencies around the world.

“Myers-Briggs is the most successful psychometric test out there and deservedly so,” says Rachel Robinson of the consultancy firm YSC in central London. “It has been a fantastic vehicle for people to think about themselves and how others are different.”

Perhaps its attraction lies in its simplicity – according to the MBTI, we all match one of 16 character types. But it’s the fact that it is so straightforward that makes some people suspicious.

Like many personality tests, MBTI is based on the work of Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist who, together with Sigmund Freud, helped lay the foundations of modern psychology. Jung developed the idea of opposite pairs of characteristics. This refers to qualities such as being friendly or unfriendly, or lazy or hard-working, which are present in all of us. (----- 4 ----- )

The MBTI was invented thanks to an awkward relationship between a woman and her future son-in-law. Katherine Briggs, a wealthy housewife from Washington DC, realized Clarence Myers was a good match for her daughter, Isabel, when she brought him home from college. He seemed like a nice young man, but his way of thinking was so strange to her that she turned to books for help.

Jung's Psychological Types fascinated her, and soon Isabel was infected by her mother's enthusiasm. (----- 5 ----- ). Jung only identified eight personality types, but Isabel Briggs Myers eventually doubled that number. According to the MBTI, everybody can be described by four letters chosen out of a total of eight, for example ISFJ or ENTP. The various combinations of letters make up the sixteen personality types.

Apparently the overwhelming majority of the 2.5 million Americans who take the MBTI assessment each year feel their results do fit their personalities. However, the Myers Briggs Foundation itself discourages the use of the test for hiring and firing. Instead, they see it mainly as a means of getting employees to think about how they interact with colleagues and work as a team. So, if you are asked to do a personality test at some point in the future, think carefully about the reason behind it. It may not for the reason you thought!

A Used by 89 of the top 100 companies, it has been translated into 24 languages.

B She heard the tips were good in a restaurant in Chicago, and decided to apply.

C Over the next two decades, the pair became very interested in how people behave.

D On the other hand, according to one author, as much as 75% of test takers achieve a different personality type when tested for a second time.

E He suggested that in terms of each pair of qualities, we tend to be one or the other.

F She was surprised, but was faced with a similar test when she applied to work in a bookshop.