

The cult of personality

By Megan Byrne, Published: 21 March 2009

The Age 'My Career' – Road test of Career Management Systems

Just what do career counsellors do and how useful are the tests they use? We sent Megan Byrne and two volunteers to find out.

The personality tests I have done in the past were intriguing but they also left me conflicted. The idealist in me wants to believe they will reveal my life's direction but the sceptic in me knows that mood can affect the responses and that if someone wants to believe something badly enough, they will.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator described me as an INFP, an Introverted, iNtuitive, Feeling and Perceiving type, suited to caring, teaching, human resources and arts-related careers. The Humm-

Wadsworth Temperament Scale says that apart from an acting career, a consulting role in something like creative marketing would be highly suitable. And the Chandler MacLeod's CMyPeople assessment says I would make an excellent lab technician. Wrong. Having studied chemistry at university, I know a science lab will never be my happy place.

So My Career approached Shawn Price at Career Management Systems for an assessment of me and two others - graphic designer Paul Weedon, and travel consultant Katrina Stoel. He sent us the Birkman Method, a 298-question online test that reveals a person's usual behaviour, underlying needs, stress behaviours, interests and organisational focus. It has three sections: the first two relate to how you see yourself and others; the third asks you to choose your preferred two jobs from a series of groups of four.

Having done my test, I arrived at Mr Price's office expecting a list of personality traits and prospective careers but before discussing my results, he talked to me about my family, upbringing and education, my work history and my visions for the future. Only then did he present my spiral-bound, colour-coded test results, and reveal how I learn, think, make decisions and relate to others.

With a degree in mathematics, another in psychology and years of career counselling experience, Mr Price displayed a sensitivity for my wellbeing. Mr Weedon was also impressed. "He was genuine and very understanding. He didn't try to offer me ready answers, but gave useful assistance in finding the answers for myself," he says.

The Birkman Method described me as a flexible, enthusiastic and sociable person who needs to be surrounded by friendly, rational people that give me plenty to do and clear decisions to make. It revealed strong interests in creating, planning, and thinking theoretically, and that my usual preference for structure and order at work has the potential to clash with my need to express creativity. I still don't know which of two facts I am more surprised by: that ticking boxes on a computer could reveal such detailed information or that the information was so accurate. Twenty-nine year-old Ms Stoel was also surprised by the accuracy of her results. "The tests summarised me perfectly; my personality, my stressors - everything," she says.

Such clear predictions make it easier to consider or eliminate certain career paths. While my current career as a journalist is a good fit, Mr Price also suggested following artistic, musical or literary occupations, and applying my skills to a career in the arts, perhaps in PR or management. But how to get there? Luckily, he has answers there too; in a follow-up appointment we discussed my career options, and used my personality traits, interests and life goals to create a plan of attack.

Although all three of our experiences were positive, there can be a huge variation in the quality of assessments, says My Career columnist Jim Bright, partner of career management consultancy Bright and Associates, and professor of career education and development at ACU National.

"There is a buyer-beware element here - I have great reservations about free internet tests that spit out results in minutes," Professor Bright says. "Tests should only be one component of a career assessment - good counsellors will get a detailed background of the client's interests, abilities and work history, because these things all influence our job suitabilities and preferences."

The national president of the Career Development Association of Australia, Dr Peter Carey, says although the tests themselves weren't perfect, their reliability and validity had improved dramatically over the past 25 years.

"The 'best' tests have Australian comparison groups rather than American or English groups, and they are more sophisticated in their design, which has decreased test bias," he says.

The most important thing is that the people administering tests were trained to use them, Professor Bright says.

"Ideally, consultants will have qualifications in career development or psychology. If they are just trained to use a particular test, they may have a narrow perspective and limited results," he says.

What they thought:

Katrina Stoel, travel consultant, 29

"The assessment made me think about what I'm passionate about, and encouraged me to work on that and to try some courses, even if it's just a social thing. It also taught me about setting goals in my personal life and my career."

Paul Weedon, graphic designer, 50

"The assessment confirmed some choices I'd already made, and offered a few other possibilities. It did a fairly good job of locating my strengths and interests, and gave me insights into how to manage any barriers or challenges. I have some really valuable tools and plenty of food for thought."

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