

The Washington Post

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Does it pay to know your type?



By [Lillian Cunningham](#), Published:
December 14, 2012

Some grandmothers pass down cameo necklaces. Katharine Cook Briggs passed down the world's most widely used personality test.

Chances are you've taken the [Myers-Briggs Type Indicator](#), or will. Roughly 2 million people a year do. It has become the gold standard of psychological assessments, used in businesses, government agencies and educational institutions. Along the way, it has spawned a multimillion-dollar business around its simple concept that everyone fits one of 16 personality types.

Now, 50 years after the first time anyone paid money for the test, the Myers-Briggs legacy is reaching the end of the family line. The youngest heirs don't want it. And it's not clear whether organizations should, either.

That's not to say it hasn't had a major influence.

More than 10,000 companies, 2,500 colleges and universities and 200 government agencies in the United States use the test. From the State Department to McKinsey & Co., it's a rite of passage. It's estimated that 50 million people have taken the Myers-Briggs personality test since the Educational Testing Service first added the research to its portfolio in 1962.

The test, whose first research guinea pigs were George Washington University students, has seen financial success commensurate to this cultlike devotion among its practitioners. [CPP](#), the private company that publishes Myers-Briggs, brings in roughly \$20 million a year from it and the 800 other products, such as coaching guides, that it has spawned.

Yet despite its widespread use and vast financial success, and although it was derived from the work of Carl Jung, one of the most famous psychologists of the 20th century, the test is highly questioned by the scientific community.

To begin even before its arrival in Washington: Myers-Briggs traces its history to 1921, when Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist, published his theory of personality types in the book "[Psychologische Typen](#)."

Jung had become well known for his pioneering work in psychoanalysis and close collaboration with Sigmund Freud, though by the 1920s the two had severed ties.

Psychoanalysis was a young field and one many regarded skeptically. Still, it had made its way across the Atlantic not only to the university offices of scientists but also to the home of a mother in Washington.

Katharine Cook Briggs was a voracious reader of the new psychology books coming out in Europe, and she shared her fascination with Jung's latest work — in which he developed the concepts of introversion and extroversion — with her daughter, Isabel Myers. They would later use Jung's work as a basis for their own theory, which would become the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. MBTI is their framework for classifying personality types along four distinct axes: introversion vs. extroversion, sensing vs. intuition, thinking vs. feeling and judging vs. perceiving. A person, according to their hypothesis, has one dominant preference in each of the four pairs. For example, he might be introverted, a sensor, a thinker and a perceiver. Or, in Myers-Briggs shorthand, an "ISTP."

Everyone, they posited, fits one of the 16 possible combinations.

Today, organizations administer the personality test to employees, then use the results as a basis for training programs. The basic idea is that knowing your personality type, and those of others, will help you interact more effectively with colleagues and better identify your own strengths. In educational institutions, the test is often used to help identify potential career fields.

The testing process seems simple enough: a multiple-choice questionnaire, with a discussion afterward about what your personality type says about you. And yet behind it lies the elaborate business model and enormous marketing push that have enthroned MBTI in the pantheon of human resources programs.

Corporate America has its own religions, and one of them is Myers-Briggs.

How the work began

It was World War II, and Isabel Myers was thinking about peace.

War and peace, in fact, are what the family would come to describe as the true cause and effect of developing the Myers-Briggs indicator. World War II created a need for women to fill professional jobs on the home front. Having read Jung's theories on type, Isabel Myers saw an opportunity to use personality testing as a way to identify women's job proclivities on the basis of innate character traits rather than prior professional experience, which many women did not have at the time.

"What Isabel decided was, if she could give people access to knowing their psychological type, it would be a contribution to world peace," says Katharine Myers, the daughter-in-law of Isabel Myers.

So Isabel had her mission. Soon her home filled with index cards mapping out her theory. Lots of index cards.

Isabel by that time was married, a mother herself and tending a home in Swarthmore, Pa. She found a

helper for her project in Katharine Downing, now Myers, whom she paid to help her hand-copy personality types onto 5-by-8-inch cards. The young girl went to school with Isabel's son Peter, an Eagle Scout.

"In eighth grade, I got a valentine in Morse code," Katharine recalls. It's one of her earliest memories of Peter, and the Myers family she would one day marry into. "And that was really the beginning of the rest of our lives."

Then came the money

At 86 years old, Katharine and Peter are the last living copyright holders of his mother's and grandmother's legacy. CPP, however, is the exclusive publisher of the test.

"The folklore is that when it started it made about a thousand dollars," says Jeffrey Hayes, chief executive of CPP. He won't say precisely how much it makes today. Just "millions," as he put it.

The number is more like \$20 million in revenue a year.

The framework itself has barely changed since Katharine Cook Briggs and Isabel Myers created it decades ago, but in the meantime CPP has developed nearly 800 products related to the assessment — guides to interpreting your results, guides for coaching others on interpreting their results, guides for enhancing team-building based on everyone's results — and translations of the material into 24 languages.

In addition to its Mountain View, Calif., headquarters, CPP has offices in Singapore and Australia and distribution arrangements around the globe. "I like to refer to it as the CPP federation," Hayes says.

Myers-Briggs, one of five major assessments that CPP publishes, is the company's "flagship product — and should be," according to Hayes.

Hayes began at CPP in 1987 as an assistant manager for customer service and worked his way up to co-president in 2004 and president and CEO in 2007. Even on the phone, you can tell he's extroverted—the E in his ENTP type. "I attribute much of my success to my better understanding of myself through my Myers-Briggs," he says.

MBTI is the most widely used personality assessment on the planet, but as Hayes says, "There's a lot that goes on behind the scenes to make that happen."

In the past 20 years, CPP has created a cadre of regional sales teams to pitch organizations on how they could use Myers-Briggs. The company also, according to Katharine Downing Myers, "has a lawyer in practically every country in the world looking for plagiarism — and there's lots of it."

Here's how the business model works: It costs \$15 to \$40 for an individual to take a Myers-Briggs assessment, depending on the depth of the test and how fast a customer wants the results interpreted. Supplemental guides and tool kits quickly make the cost grow. Moreover, the only way to take the test is through a certified administrator. And the only way to become a certified administrator is to pay \$1,700 for a four-day training class.

In short, CPP makes money off the test taker and the test giver.

Organizations administer the MBTI assessment to employees in one of two ways. They either pay for someone in their human-resources department to become certified, then pay the materials costs each time employees take the test. Or, they contract with certified, independent training consultants or leadership coaches.

Last year 2,500 Americans became certified to administer the Myers-Briggs.

They are part of a corporate-training industry that nets more than \$50 billion annually. And for independent consultants in this field, paying to get your MBTI certification has become almost a base-line cost, a badge that companies all but require before contracting with you — even for work outside of Myers-Briggs testing. Tens of thousands of coaches and consultants hold that badge.

“They just want to see that you have it,” says Rebecca Dallek, a District resident who attended a spring MBTI certification course at the American Management Association’s offices in Arlington. After having two kids, Dallek made a career change from the educational technology industry to her own career coaching practice. She works with professionals, from federal employees to nonprofit workers to lobbyists. The \$2,500 fee to CPP, she says, was quickly recouped.

To help new recruits, CPP provides a suite of informational guides and Power Point slides on its Web site that show how to pitch your services as a certified Myers-Briggs administrator. Coaches can increase the charge for the products at their discretion, but many provide them at face value and then turn a profit from fees for time spent working with the test takers and walking them through the results. There is no real industry standard for coaching rates, and hourly fees can run from \$75 to \$1,000.

As a result, CPP has combined the power of its own marketing efforts and its roughly 200 employees with the sales efforts of the thousands of professional-development coaches who pay CPP for certification and then essentially sell the test on the publishing company’s behalf.

“We get a percentage of the sales,” Katharine Downing Myers says of the copyright. “I have more money than I expected to have in life.”

A boost from CPP

Isabel Myers would turn out, by her own rubric, to be an INFP — an introvert, an intuitor, a feeler and a perceiver. She would also turn out to be highly possessive and obsessive about the indicator.

It would take roughly two decades for her work to make it from the stacks of index cards to the research holdings of the Educational Testing Service in the early 1960s. In the interim, she had looked for more and more opportunities to legitimize her homegrown project. “That was her mission in life,” Katharine Downing Myers recalls, “and she worked on it early in the morning until she went to bed at night.”

Peter remembers the sound of her typewriter downstairs as he would lie in bed as a child. He also recalls taking cards to school in his back pocket so he could help his mother by asking personality

questions of classmates and recording their responses.

Isabel was born in Washington just before the turn of the century and was home-schooled by her mother. Her father, Lyman Briggs, was a career federal worker who served for more than a decade as the director of the U.S. Bureau of Standards, now the National Institute of Standards and Technology. He also led President Franklin Roosevelt's Uranium Committee, which explored the feasibility of an atomic bomb.

War, and peace.

In addition to chiming in with his scientific acumen, father Briggs did another favor to help his wife's and daughter's project grow in its early days: He used his clout in the capital to persuade the George Washington University Medical School to let its students serve as guinea pigs for the new psychological assessment. That was 1945, and it marked the first major study conducted with the MBTI. Over several years, Isabel administered tests to more than 5,000 students, charted their personalities and then looked for correlations between their psychological type and the medical specializations they chose.

She would go on to conduct more of her own studies, mostly in medical and educational settings, through the time the Educational Testing Service acquired Myers-Briggs for research use. "Our vacations were often trips collecting data, or collecting agreements to provide data," Peter recalls. They must have visited 50 or 60 colleges.

Yet ETS did not want to promote the indicator or administer it as part of its testing portfolio, so by 1975 Isabel struck a deal with Stanford professor John Black allowing his young publishing company, Consulting Psychologists Press (now CPP), to take over the exclusive publishing rights.

Says Katharine Myers: "Isabel was very protective — fiercely protective — of the indicator, and she didn't want anyone messing it up."

Says Hayes: "Isabel didn't feel like ETS was doing enough to bring MBTI to the commercial world."

Sure enough, shortly after transferring the rights to CPP, Isabel saw the test gain momentum in the marketplace. Its use in organizations benefited from CPP's aggressive marketing push. And yet, its living-room origins would cast a shadow over its scientific validity that remains today.

Doubts among psychologists

"What concerns me is the cultlike devotion of many consultants and practitioners to it without the examination of the evidence," says Adam Grant, a professor of industrial psychology at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School.

Despite the far-reaching use of the assessment in organizations, the academic psychological community has been slow to embrace it. No major journal has published research on the MBTI, which academics consider a strong repudiation of the test's authority. What makes this even more striking is that CPP has three prominent psychologists on its corporate board — Carl Thoresen, Wayne Cascio and Christina Maslach — who presumably could have used their stature in the field to help.

Thoresen, the CPP board's chairman, is a long-time and highly regarded professor of psychology at Stanford. His role at the helm of CPP gives the image of strong institutional support for the test. And yet of the roughly 150 papers he has published in his career, there isn't one mention of Myers-Briggs.

"I used it practically, but I didn't use it in any of my research," Thoresen says. "In part because it would be questioned by my academic colleagues. That was always a barrier."

It is a classic chicken-and-egg problem: No major journal has published on it, therefore no elite academic will support it, therefore no major journal will publish on it.

But there are concrete reasons it was not welcomed in the first place.

"Carl Jung was a pioneer in terms of really creative and novel theory and ideas, but a lot of his work was done before psychology was an empirical science," says Grant, the Wharton psychology professor. And the 16 Myers-Briggs personality types, remember, are even a step removed from that — they are an interpretation and recasting of Jung's theory. Even more compromising, according to Grant, is the fact that Katharine Cook Briggs and Isabel Myers created the framework in their living room before doing any robust scientific research, rather than the other way around.

The research that most psychologists today hold up as the best attempt to derive personality types from empirical data is called the [Five Factor](#) theory, which emerged from several large-scale independent projects that, conducted over decades, pointed to the same broad set of conclusions. The studies found five core axes that underpin personality, versus the MBTI's four. They are represented by the acronym OCEAN: openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. Of the five, only extroversion closely maps with Myers-Briggs.

Yet the Five Factor theory has a small commercial problem.

"There's no individual or group who owns it," Grant says. "It's something that's collectively owned by the academic community." That means it's harder to copyright and package.

There's another problem: Not all the personality traits delineated by the Five Factor theory are positive. One of the traits in this framework is neuroticism, for example, which has undeniably negative associations.

One of the major selling points of Myers-Briggs is that it is unequivocally positive. No personality type in its framework is better or worse than any other; each is billed as having unique and constructive strengths.

This rubric has massive marketing appeal for organizations, especially given that much of the literature and language around talent development in the past few decades has taken a decidedly soft approach. Words like passion, motivation and collaboration have rooted themselves in the corporate lexicon, and they have been part of a larger wave of management theory that has turned its focus to motivating and eliciting best behavior.

"There's been a huge wave in positive psychology. It's been remarkably refreshing," Thoresen says. "But it's controversial, and it makes many psychologists nervous because it's not in their bailiwick."

Use of psychological assessments in organizations really picked up in the late 20th century, alongside a growing trend in seeing talent management as a core component of a company's competitive advantage. Myers-Briggs became one of its first and shiniest symbols. An organization that used the test showed that it recognized people, and their diversity of background and thought, as one of its biggest assets.

"To raise questions about [Myers-Briggs's] reliability and validity is like commenting on the tastiness of communion wine. Or how good a yarmulke is at protecting your head," says Brian Little, a former psychology professor at Harvard University who is now at the University of Cambridge. "It's simply the wrong question, from their perspective."

That is, from the perspective of MBTI adherents who find the test both enlightening and empowering.

Brian Twillman of the Environmental Protection Agency is one of them.

MBTI's pervasiveness

The EPA estimates that it has given the MBTI to at least a quarter of its 17,000 federal employees, from senior political leaders to frontline staff.

Twillman, a training coordinator at the agency, has been there since 1989. "There hasn't been a year that resources haven't gone to MBTI," he says. "If we had not had the MBTI introduced into the agency as it's been, there would be a lot of blind spots within the agency with managers."

Twillman is an INFP in an INTJ organization. Which, he says, can be hard.

He first found out about Myers-Briggs as a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University in 1977. Since then, he's been, as he describes it, "an active player in psychological type." He has served on the Association of Psychological Type board and has helped make the EPA one of the most active agencies in promoting the Myers-Briggs.

"I gave the test to someone I met on the first date," Twillman says. "Now we have two children and are happily married."

Like many other enthusiasts, he describes himself as a "type watcher" — someone who takes pleasure in guessing strangers' MBTI personality types. A common line from supporters is that the test starts an important dialogue around who we are and how we interact with others.

"Insight from the Myers-Briggs can start that conversation, but unfortunately it often ends the conversation. You've got your type stamped on your forehead," says Little, the professor. "It really is scripting down the complexity and the delight of human interaction."

Still, it's a mainstay in professional-development portfolios. Brian McCann, a sales consultant for CPP in the D.C. area, says about 200 federal agencies pay for Myers-Briggs as part of their training programs. The military, he adds, has been one of the test's longest and most avid users. "There's a story that goes around that says if you've risen to the rank of major in the Army, you've taken the MBTI at least once," he says.

It's widely used within the State Department, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the CIA and nearly every federal department you could name.

Yet of all those who use the test, only a few have set out to quantify the gains from such an investment.

Take St. Luke's Hospital and Health Network in Pennsylvania, where more than half of the 8,200-person staff has taken the test and 15 percent of training funds go to Myers-Briggs.

"Back in 2002, there was no measure of the effectiveness of using MBTI in an organization," says Robert Weigland, director of management training. "We embarked on creating the model."

Weigland has since co-authored a report, published by CPP, showing how organizations can determine the return on their investment. It involves estimating how behavioral improvements in employees translate into higher revenue. It's an inexact science, but it's an attempt to address a problem that plagues HR professionals across the public and private sectors: How do you assess whether a program is effective and worth the price?

Because of the complexity of measuring such an investment, many organizations hardly bother trying to do the math. "There is almost a 'rite de passage' to taking the Myers-Briggs, and it's becoming a very symbolic thing," Little says.

Or as Barry Edwards, a self-described "big fan" of MBTI and a training senior manager at the large government contractor CACI, put it: "It's like religion. Believe what you want. Get out of it what you want."

Should companies use this?

Academics would contend that is precisely Myers-Briggs biggest flaw: It's about belief much more than scientific evidence. And it's administered by leadership coaches who, by and large, have no formal education in the science of psychology.

"People like it because it reveals something they didn't know about themselves or others," says Wharton's Grant. "That could be true of a horoscope, too."

Even Katharine Downing Myers concedes that "psychologists had no use for the indicator; they felt that Jung was a crazy mystic."

And yet the psychological community has been reticent to speak up too vocally against it. The fact is, many psychology professors do lucrative side work as organizational consultants. And as taboo as it is to praise Myers-Briggs in U.S. academia, it's equally taboo to disparage it in corporate America.

"Some psychologists see it as a necessary evil," Grant says. They think: "I want to have influence with practitioners, so I can't poke a hole in their sacred cow."

It is sacred because CPP has done such a thorough job of ingraining it in organizational culture, because company norms are hard to break, because institutions are attracted to the safety of its

all-personalities-are-created-equal message, and because — despite what Myers-Briggs advocates would call the complexity and depth of the tool — it is, in the end, elegantly simple.

Add all those together, and you have an organizational Goliath. “You begin to figure out,” Grant says, “is this a battle that you want to fight?”

The marketplace

While not many individual academics are fighting the fight, plenty of publishing companies are. The Hogan Personality Inventory and DiSC are two personality assessments that map more closely to the Five Factor research espoused by the majority of academics in psychology. DiSC is the Myers-Briggs indicator’s biggest competitor, and its trademark is held by Inscape Publishing, which was [acquired](#) by John Wiley & Sons in February for \$85 million.

“It is a crowded market,” CPP’s Hayes says.

In addition to more competition, CPP is facing another trend: belt-tightening in the budgets for leadership training programs. “We had several organizations where the departments we were working with were reduced from 15 to two,” Hayes says. He adds that “some of the big organizations that went under [in the recession] were customers of ours.”

These factors, while not leaving CPP anything less than ultra profitable, are making it seem increasingly important that Myers-Briggs finds a way to get the blessing of the academic community before other tests emerge that have both mass-market appeal and a scientific seal of approval.

“Being an academic myself, I’ve always been pushing CPP to get some publications in major psychological journals,” Thoresen says. “Particularly in the business field, in large corporations especially, they like to know that there is some evidence that this is a valid test.”

To that end, CPP has plans to make a large research push over the next three or four years, which would amass millions of its cases and pull them into research that Thoresen thinks should be publishable by the top-tier psychological journals.

There would still be a problem, though, according to Little: “It’s a little bit like taking a Dodge Caravan and trying to turn it into a Rolls Royce.” Theoretically, Little says, it could be possible to do substantive research that would improve MBTI’s validity, but CPP — and the Myers-Briggs family — would have to raze any parts of its theory that prove unsound. And that is highly unlikely.

“It became a case of copyright over designing an assessment technique that could be adaptive,” Little says. “From a business perspective, [adaptation] is a pain in the neck. From a scientific perspective, it’s the only way to go.”

The end of the line

When the copyright passed to Katharine and Peter in 1980, after Isabel’s death, the pair became the vision keepers of her legacy. “We have been partners in really carrying out her dream,” Katharine says. “I think of it as protecting both the instrument and the theory on which it is based.”

For decades the couple, who are divorced but still close, attended meetings three times a year with CPP to discuss the indicator and to make sure its use was not wandering too far from Isabel's intentions. "She'd be astounded," Peter says. "Even in her wildest dreams, I'm sure she never imagined the breadth of it, the reach, the number of languages it's been translated into."

Katharine recently retired from the meetings but still gets the notes.

She lives by herself in a two-bedroom cottage in a Quaker retirement community just outside Kennett Square, Pa. It is 25 miles from where she was born 86 years ago, and 25 miles from where she met Peter.

When they die, the copyright will go to the Myers-Briggs Foundation, which funds research and helps maintain the nonprofit Center for Applications of Psychological Type. They both have children from separate marriages, but "they won't be putting into it what Peter and I do," Katharine says. "For Peter and me, it became our life's work."

When asked if he is sad his children won't carry on the family legacy, Peter replies, "Yes, but that's the luck of the draw."

And so the old pair made the decision to end the line here.

Among the Quaker cottages, where Katharine intends to live out the last of her years, she still feels the presence of Myers-Briggs. She has started a small group of retirees who meet to talk about Carl Jung's theory and the indicator that has been such a force in her life.

"It was a family that didn't think you had to go to a class to learn something," Katharine recalls of her mother and grandmother-in-law. "You could just learn it on your own."

The 2,500 people who got their Myers-Briggs certification last year likely agree.

By Lillian Cunningham ([@lily_cunningham](#))

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