Case Archive

# Chapter 7: Administrative Reform

## Do Personalities Hold Back the Use of Data about Performance?

If there’s any brewing consensus about the next stage of reforming government, it’s that government leaders need to make more and better use of information. There is the emerging “big data” movement, which is working hard to distill insights about problems from massive amounts of data. For example, researchers are boiling down massive amounts of Twitter and Facebook posts for people who mention they aren’t feeling well, so they can track the spread of flu. There’s also the evidence-based government movement, which holds that government’s decision makers ought to base policies on information about which policies have been demonstrated to work, through careful and controlled experiments. And there’s the performance-management movement, which holds that governmental managers can significantly improve the results of public programs by collecting real-time data and providing relentless follow-up to solve problems.

But some experts in human resources warn that there can often be a major impediment to getting this valuable information into the hands of top decision makers. Analysts who build their careers on information often rise through the ranks to become chief information officers (CIOs) and similar high-ranking officials. They find themselves interacting constantly with other high-ranking officials who don’t have the same data pedigrees. They often find that their management styles are very different, and that makes it hard to transmit the information effectively.

Decades ago, two psychologists developed a test to gauge how people perceive and respond to problems. The researchers, Isabel Briggs Myers and her mother, Katharine Briggs, created the famous Myers-Briggs test, which is based on four basic categories:[[1]](#endnote-1)

* Preferred view of the world the world: Some individuals like to focus on the outer world, which the researchers call Extraversion (E), while others prefer to concentrate on their inner world, which they labeled Introversion (I).
* Information: Some individuals tend to focus on basic information, called Sensing (S), while others prefer to interpret that information and add their own meaning, called Intuition (N).
* Decisions: Some individuals begin with a search for logic and consistency in decision making, called Thinking (T), while others seek to understand the special circumstances that individuals bring, called Feeling (F).
* Structure: Some individuals prefer to have their outside world decided, called Judging (J), while others like to remain constantly open to new information and options, called Perceiving (P).

These four categories create sixteen different kinds of personality types (see the table at <http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/>).

Myers and Briggs did not argue that any one type was better than any other. Rather, they concluded that different personality types tended to approach the same problems very differently. By understanding these differences, they believed that individuals could understand their strengths and weaknesses in solving problems—and that they could understand why others didn’t see problems as they did.

How does this connect with the use of data by top officials? Joe Peppard, a professor in the European School of Management and Technology in Berlin, surveyed hundreds of private-sector chief information officers over the course of a decade. He discovered that 70 percent of these CIOs were a personality type labeled “ISTJ”—they tended to be introverted, sensing, thinking, and judgmental in approaching problems[[2]](#endnote-2). The connection between data work and the ISTJ makes great intuitive sense. According to the Myers and Briggs Foundation, ISTJ’s are “quietly systematic, factual, organized, logical, detailed, conscientious, analytical, responsible, pragmatic, critical, conservative, stable, concrete, efficient[[3]](#endnote-3).” Individuals interested in detailed work with data would be well-served by these characteristics—and individuals with these characteristics would be comfortable in the world of data and analysis. It’s also likely to make them effective in dealing with other ISTJs in the analysis community as they work their way up the career ladder. As one blogger put it, “some have said that the fictional character Spock from *Star Trek* is an ISTJ.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

When information technology experts reach executive levels, however, they often find themselves dealing more with other executives, especially the INTJs and ENTJs who dominate the positions of top-level executives. The big difference is in the “S” and “N” categories. Information technology professionals, with the “S” trait, frequently see the world in “sensing” terms, deriving meaning from data and facts. Other executives often see the world in “intuitive” terms, based on their “N” trait, and add meaning from their experiences and intuition to what the data suggest.

Outside experts say that data-based executives sometimes find themselves criticized for being rigid, for having too short a perspective, and for being focused on the past that is defined by the data. They’re often asked to focus more on the future, which can be difficult for them because it calls for action that lies beyond the data in hand. In a fast-moving world, top executives tend to be impatient with the data analysts. They often are looking for data leaders who can translate the information from the past into visions for the future—and that can prove very difficult for anISTJ.

## Notes

1. Myers and Briggs Foundation, “MBTI Basics,” <http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Rachel King, “The Personality Trait That Can Hold CIOs Back,” *Wall Street Journal* (December 23, 2014), <http://blogs.wsj.com/cio/2014/12/23/the-personality-trait-that-can-hold-cios-back/?mod=WSJ_hps_sections_cio> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. King, “The Personality Trait That Can Hold CIOs Back.”

   ## Questions to Consider

   Some critics question the value of the Myers-Briggs typology. Do you think it provides a useful explanation in this case—or not?

   One of the Myers-Briggs principles is that there is no “ideal” personality type, that many personality types can fit many roles, and that the key is understanding the strengths and weaknesses of each personality type for any given position. Do you find this line of argument useful?

   Suppose you’re an information technology executive finding herself or himself in a tense situation with others executives in the organization who just don’t seem to get you. Given the analysis in the case, are there steps you might take to improve your relationships?

   Now put yourself in the position of an executive who’s come up through a different background. Does this analysis give you any insights into how to deal with an “S”-type information technology specialist, who comes at problems differently?

   One of the keys to increasing the use of performance data in organizations is finding a way to communicate effectively—of translating what the data show into information that top executives can use. If you’re an information technology executive in this situation, can you devise strategies to improve the way you communicate what you know into information that others—especially “N”-type colleagues and bosses—will find persuasive? [↑](#endnote-ref-4)