OLYMPIADS SCHOOL - SAT PREP - HOMEWORK 11

NAME (FIRST AND LAST):____________________________________ GRADE:___

DAY, TIME, TEACHER:____

Instructions: Write an essay about how the article below persuades readers to think more critically about the role of personality tests in building a workforce.

USING POP SCIENCE TO BUILD THE PERFECT WORKFORCE

How personality tests took over corporate Canada—and might be keeping you from the job you want

BY SEBASTIAN LECKUPDATED 14:31, AUG. 6, 2019 | PUBLISHED 13:35, AUG. 2, 2019

PERSONALITY TESTS promise to tell you who you are. “Rate each statement according to how well it describes you,” they instruct, as you grade yourself—from strongly agree to strongly disagree—on certain factors like “I enjoy social gatherings” or “I often feel sad.” The results translate your quirks into categories, grouping you with other like-minded people: extroverts, introverts, thinkers, feelers. In the world of personality tests, everyone belongs somewhere.

The tests have expanded into career centres, high schools, and universities across North America, becoming an industry worth, by some estimates, as much as $4 billion. You can find hundreds of free versions of these tests online, from BuzzFeed quizzes to ongoing psychological studies. Knowing your personality type will tell you which careers will make you happy, what you need in a relationship, and how you will parent. But there’s another side to this tool, one that’s about corporate efficiency rather than self-understanding.

Personality tests have today become a popular screening tool. In 2016, a global HR study found that 48 percent of businesses surveyed in the US and 57 percent of businesses surveyed in the UK were using personality questionnaires. Two years earlier, the *Wall Street Journal* had found that between 60 and 70 percent of job seekers in the US took personality tests, which screened out nearly one-third of prospective employees. Recent Canadian stats are harder to find, but we know that in 2013 almost 30 percent of small and medium Canadian businesses reported using them. By relying on these tests, employers can ask questions that would be inappropriate—or at best bizarre—in a traditional interview. At Michaels, a North America–wide arts-and-crafts supply store, for example, Canadians who applied for a job online in March 2017 were directed to a questionnaire that asked them to assess themselves in reference to around 200 items. Among them were these four:

“When I am in a bad mood, it affects my work.”
“Over the course of the day, I can experience many mood changes.”
“I am always happy.”
“When I look at the world around me, I have little hope for mankind.”

Twenty-four-year-old Ashleigh was a university student when she took the Michaels test. She says she found it “very invasive.” At the time, she was suffering from depression and anxiety, so her mood fluctuated throughout the day, and she had taken time off work to take care of her mental health. She fears the test was a subtle method for weeding out people like her. “They’re not allowed to ask, ‘Are you schizophrenic? Do you have Asperger’s?’” she says. “But they can ask something similar.” The system rated Ashleigh on a slate of personality traits, comparing her profile to the most productive salespeople, and then spat out a scorecard on her compatibility. If Ashleigh's responses showed any unusual patterns—say she answered "strongly agree" too often or reacted to the questions too quickly—her results would have been flagged with an "authenticity alert."

Ashleigh never heard back from Michaels, and doesn't know if the test had any effect on her application. But, for corporations who have bought into the idea that an ideal personality exists for each specific role, such exams have become serious business. Decades of research into how employees think and behave have gone into personality testing. Bad hires can be costly for companies, and the tests are now used to screen everyone from minimum-wage employees to consultants and top-level executives. But there is the risk that people saddled with the wrong scores will be screened out en masse without a chance to prove themselves. As part of an attempt to build a perfect capitalist meritocracy, algorithms are effectively monitoring the workforce to decide which traits are deemed desirable—and who gets left behind.

MODERN PERSONALITY typing was popularized by American educator Katherine Briggs and her daughter Isabel Myers, who together developed the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator in the 1940s. Myers wanted the tests to help companies hire the right people and, more importantly, improve morale by convincing employees that their jobs were their destiny. "You get them to do that kind of job willingly," says Merve Emre, who recently published *The Personality Brokers*, a history of the Myers-Briggs Indicator, "under the illusion that they were doing exactly what they were meant to be doing."

Myers-Briggs sorts people into four-letter types, with two options for each letter: introverted (I) or extroverted (E), intuitive (N) or sensing (S), thinking (T) or feeling (F), and perceiving (P) or judging (J). Emre scores as an **ENTJ**, for example, which would make her extroverted, intuitive (she pays attention to meaning and patterns, rather than hands-on experience), thinking (she makes decisions in a logically consistent way), and judging (she is structured and decisive rather than flexible).

Emre first learned her Myers-Briggs type when she worked as an associate consultant at the management consulting firm Bain & Company. After taking the test, she says it wasn't unusual for people to describe themselves, and everyone else, in categories like introvert and extrovert. "It takes people's psychological livelihood and sense of self and really narrows it," she says.

The ability of the Myers-Briggs test to predict outcomes has come into question. As Adam Grant, an organizational psychologist writes, "there is no convincing body of evidence that [Myers-Briggs] types affect job performance or team effectiveness." People aren't either introverts or extroverts—most score somewhere in the middle. The same test takers can also receive different results from day to day.

In the 1980s, a new theory took hold. Instead of creating types, researchers used statistical methods to cluster personality traits together to create the "big five" personality test. Someone described as "talkative," would likely be "energetic" as well, and so on. Psychologists grouped traits together until they arrived at five "big" measures: conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, neuroticism, and open-mindedness. The test gives a score for each one. Virtually all industrial psychologists who study human behaviour in the workplace accept it as a legitimate test of personality—conscientiousness, it turns out, does, in fact, correlate with success at work.

The goal of the big five categories is largely the same as that of the Myers-Briggs: to match a personality to a particular role. The often-proprietary formulas that go into deciding that match, however, may be leaving lots of job seekers out in the cold.

SOMETIME IN 2012, Kyle Behm, a young man in Tennessee with bipolar disorder, wanted a part-time job. He applied to a Kroger supermarket but learned from his friend, an employee at the store, that he was “red lighted” by a personality test that he had taken as part of his application, according to the *Guardian*. After learning the news, his father encouraged him to apply to six more companies—all of which used the same personality test. Kyle never got an interview, and his father filed complaints against all seven companies for violating the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Behm wasn’t alone in his concerns about the questionnaires. In 2011, the Rhode Island Commission for Human Rights found that there was “probable cause” to believe that personality-test statements used by **CVS** Pharmacy violated state antidiscrimination laws. **CVS** agreed to remove the statements, which included “you change from happy to sad without any reason,” “you get angry more often than nervous,” and “your moods are steady from day to day.”

No discrimination cases have arisen in Canada, and it’s unclear what would happen if one did. Michael Lynk, a professor Western University’s Faculty of Law, said employers shouldn’t be asking questions that reveal someone’s mental health. “Asking if you’re happy all the time, asking if your moods swing a lot, those are just red flags that no employer should ask,” he said.

Questions like these, including some on Ashleigh’s test, relate to the Big Five trait of neuroticism. Broadly speaking, neurotic people are more likely to feel negative emotions, such as fear, anger, and anxiety. Infor, the software company that designed the test Ashleigh took for Michaels, says it was testing for a different characteristic, one that determined “the degree to where you reflect the behaviours of those people around you.”

Willi Wiesner, a professor of human resources and management at McMaster University, says a test for neuroticism might include statements like “I get stressed easily,” “I worry about things,” “I’m easily disturbed,” or “my mood changes a lot.” He says they are fair game, because there’s a difference between a mental disorder and normal worrying. “People who have a tendency to experience those kinds of mood disturbances or anxieties, that does play out in terms of negative performance.”

Jill Strange, Infor’s vice-president of human capital management science applications, said the questions Ashleigh saw were from an old test from 2009. (Michaels, through a spokesperson, declined to comment.) She says Michaels isn’t using Infor’s assessments anymore, and Infor has since created an entirely new, shorter test to improve “candidate experience.”

Strange is a passionate defender of personality tests and argues the tests provide no useful information for diagnosing a mental disorder. Her company tests 18 million people a year to build profiles for each job. They test people already working at a company—say, salespeople at a clothes store—to find the personalities of the most successful workers. Then they score new candidates based on how they compare. If extroverts sell the most T-shirts, the test optimizes for them.

Such relentless optimization can lead to uncomfortable results. Ambitious people, for instance, aren’t necessarily recommended for fast-food jobs, because they often quit. But Strange argues that personality tests can be fairer than interviews alone. After analyzing data from 51,000 hires by their clients, Infor reported that hiring of black and Hispanic applicants had risen by 26 percent. Managers tend to hire people who are similar to themselves: they look the same, attended the same university, or grew up in the same town. Infor’s algorithm doesn’t care about any of that. It compares a job seeker to the most successful employees based on cognitive ability as well as personality, which corrects for the messiness of in-person interviews.

Still, some critics say personality tests give companies too much power. Elizabeth D. De Armond, a professor of legal research and writing at Chicago-Kent College of Law, likens personality tests to an "**MRI** scan of the soul" and suggests banning them, except in cases where a business can convincingly argue that hiring for a certain personality is essential (police officers must be able to handle highly stressful situations, for example). The tests seek "to observe not just what an employee does, but how that employee thinks—processes that pertain not just to the employee's presence on the job, but the employee's being at all times," De Armond wrote in 2012.

When I interviewed Ashleigh, she had worked several retail jobs in Toronto between 2011 and 2017. A number of them required personality tests. Some asked situational questions, like what she would do if she caught a coworker stealing—which she found reasonable—while others, like Michaels's, asked about her essence as a person. "There's a difference between questions that ask you about your morality and ask you about your emotional makeup. It's especially trying if it's for a minimum-wage job, and they're asking if you're happy all the time," she says. "If I was at an interview and someone asked me that, I'd be like, Wait, what? Am I interviewing to work with the **FBI**?"

She says she found it dehumanizing to be asked personal questions in online portals, over and over again, while never hearing from a human being. To her, it communicated that the only thing that mattered was maximum productivity, not employee health or well-being. "They don't create the environment where you feel comfortable and safe coming up to them to tell them, 'Hey, I had a rough night last night. I can't come in today,' or 'I will be able to cash these things out, but I'm not going to be able to smile at every single person who comes through the line.'"

The tests feel, at least for Ashleigh, like an attempt to control not only what employees do but their emotions as well. It's not enough to act passionate. Today, there's a test to measure how ambitious or optimistic you truly are. It's framed positively as a way to find your true calling. But it also constricts employees, turning up the cultural pressure to smile, think positive thoughts, and be a happier worker on the inside too.

IN GRADUATE SCHOOL, I applied to a retail store that asked me if I "feel anxious or nervous for no reason" or if I "sometimes feel sad for no reason." They seemed like horribly unfair questions at the time, since I couldn't *not* be anxious. Strange, though, assures me that everyone's personality is good in some way. Sure, neuroticism sounds bad, she says, but neurotic people can be better at empathizing with customers. "There's not a bad personality," she says. "We don't believe that. It's so one dimensional."

We were speaking over a video call so she could show me the screen she was seeing. After months of correspondence, she had offered to let me take Infor's test. The company calls the results "assessment reports" even as they come with a long legal disclaimer making "no warranty" that the assessment "BE ACCURATE, RELIABLE OR TIMELY."

"I notice the negative aspects of my job," the test asked. *Agree*. "I am never stressed at work." *Strongly disagree*. "I will agree with my boss to prevent a confrontation." *Agree*? A half hour later, my results arrived. Displayed on an image of a man in a business suit, the traits sounded flattering, including "intellectual," "modest," "questioning," "inventive," "reflective," and "committed." But there were problems. "I'd say, based on our interactions, that you're a little on the skeptical side," Strange said, pointing out my low score on optimism.

She showed me the screen, which compared my profile to the ideal personality of a telephone salesperson. I scored in the right range for "insight into other people," but I was too flexible for a rough-and-tumble sales job. “You can’t say, ‘Sure I’ll adjust the price, I’ll just fix that for you,’” she said. As a pessimist, the employer could expect me to “voice opinions about concerns.”

Sometimes, a client hires someone Infor doesn’t recommend. In that case, the company offer articles and training guides to help managers with an employee who, as Strange puts it, is “not a good behavioural fit.” But an introvert can’t become an extrovert overnight. “We think about it like a rubber band. If you stretch it a little bit, it’s okay,” she says. “We don’t want to give you tools that stretch you so much that you end up breaking.”

It’s hard to criticize Infor for doing exactly what its clients want. Employers have always discriminated against people who are antisocial and difficult to work with but in ways that were rife with racist and sexist biases. With personality tests, a hiring manager no longer has to rely on a bad vibe; a number on a screen tells them if someone is too disorganized or emotionally unstable for a job.

But the tests also feed into a culture of intense competition, where pressure to be authentically passionate becomes a cage. In this twenty-first-century vision of Isabel Myer’s perfect workplace, there are no power struggles between employees and employers, because every employee loves their job. Emre says the idea that we are born with unchanging traits is so intoxicating that it’s easy to forget the tests are, in the end, tools for compliance.

“All of these tests are registering the interests of power, and capitalist power specifically,” Emre says. “Just because that power is being routed through and sanitized by a scientific proof doesn’t mean it’s not power.”

Instructions: Write an essay about how the article below persuades readers to think more critically about the role of personality tests in building a workforce. You can limit the time you spend on this (e.g., 40 minutes, 50 minutes, an hour). Try not to spend more than an hour and a half on your essay. Try implementing some of the skills that you might have learned in class (e.g., annotating the text and categorizing your ideas into 2 or 3 sub-categories, describing the stakes of the writer’s argument in the introduction, maintaining parallel structure in the thesis statement, critiquing the writer in a constructive way (even if you have reservations about the writer’s choice of evidence, rhetoric, or reasoning), and using specific action verbs. As much as you can, de-personalize your presentation of the article by focusing on the writing rather than the writer’s intentions per se, though of course it is often difficult to divorce the two.

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THE END