

# BUSINESS MONDAY

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## You say 'tomato,' I say...

### Firms testing their employees' personality traits

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Intelligencer Journal Staff

**I**t's a matter of dollars and cents. Make that dollars and sensibilities.

Personality profiling, the latest buzz term to hit local businesses, might just turn a strife-torn workplace into a kinder, gentler office.

While the application seems new, Leola business consultant Ira Wolfe said "personality tests," as they're sometimes called, have been around for years.

Wolfe, owner of Success Performance Solutions, uses assessment software to test individuals looking to improve their "soft skills" or people skills. Once overlooked by employers in favor of more practical talents pertinent to the job, people skills are being weighed by employers more heavily than ever these days.

"Have you ever seen the comedian Robin Williams perform? He's very motivated, very high energy," Wolfe said. "But there are certainly environments in which you don't want Robin Williams working for you."

Wolfe said the benefits of such tests can be multifold. For one thing, employers can assess job candidates for how well they would fit the job description, corporate culture and managers' style. Employees can use test results to adapt their personal style to that of clients and co-workers. Employers who want to foster better teamwork can align teams based on employees' strengths as they pertain to a given project.

"Businesses are beginning to realize that it's very expensive to hire and fire somebody," Wolfe said, adding that today's persistently low unemployment has also forced employers to find ways to improve "diamond in the rough" employees rather than competing with other businesses to attract new ones.



Intelligencer Journal photo by Barry Zecher

Going over some of North Star Marketing's test results are, from left, North Star owner Kae Groshong, Success Performance Solutions owner Ira Wolfe, and North Star employees Suzanne High, George Mummert, Fran Edgar, Leah Davis and Rose Cole. More

The nation is buying into personality profiling. Wolfe said 35 percent of Fortune 500 companies used some type of assessment in the late '90s. Today, that figure lingers at 65 percent. A year 2000 study by American Management Association showed nearly half of 1,085 employers polled use at least one assessment in their interviewing process.

"More and more, in this tight job market, companies are investing in people, especially management-track people," said Colleen O'Sullivan, who develops execu-

tive training programs for AchieveGlobal, a Tampa, Fla.-based corporate training and development giant. "It's in their best interest to help (employees)."

Loren Martin, president of Terre Hill's G. Earl Martin Inc., a wall and ceiling contracting firm, said his is not the typical company using assessments. But he attended an academy offered last year by Wolfe on coaching and mentoring because he thought it might be useful in hiring and getting the most of current employees.

"The construction industry is

and more companies are turning to personality assessments, not only for their initial hiring decisions, but also to help current employees work more smoothly and efficiently together in an ever-more-hectic workplace.

probably not on the cutting edge of a lot of these concepts," Martin said. "But there is more pressure on employers to deal with things that were personal issues 10 to 15 years ago. We're finding people today are just really stressed out. They have issues that spill into the workplace and influence a person's job and ability to succeed."

Wolfe said the tests also give people a better understanding of others — even those who haven't been tested — because it quantifies simple, observable behavior. Those who have taken such tests

gain more insight into what makes others tick. What may seem like an annoying trait in a co-worker might just be a different style. And quantifying personality styles can cut tension in the workplace.

"The starting point is to understand yourself," Wolfe said. "The next piece is to understand other people's behaviors and pick up their characteristics. The third piece is, if you know where they are and you know where you are,

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# Personality: Employers put workers to the test

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how do you adapt to them?"

But just how well can a software program interpret what's happening inside a human brain? Wolfe stipulates the tests only assess observable behavior — such as introversion versus extroversion or how someone reacts to stressful situations. Given that, Wolfe said even skeptics are surprised at the results.

"I can't think of anyone who said after we were done, 'This is trash,'" Wolfe said. "At first a lot of people say, 'Well, this isn't me.'

But I tell them before they decide that, ask someone who knows them well about the points they disagree with. Ninety-nine percent of the time they end up agreeing with it."

Take Suzanne High, a marketing associate at Lancaster's North Star Marketing Inc. She said she was skeptical about the assessments Wolfe administered to North Star employees. But when the results came back...

"Wow! It was 100 percent accurate," High said. "I was approaching it a little more seriously than a

horoscope, but there were things there about me that I didn't even think about before."

In fact, most North Star employees had the same reaction to their results. For some, the process gave legitimacy to what others may perceive as negative qualities.

Leah Davis, vice president of client services at North Star, said she'd heard co-workers refer to her behind her back as "money hungry." While the term didn't seem very flattering at the time, her assessment showed her pri-

mary concern is the bottom line — a quality many employers would find valuable.

"I could not put my arms around the term 'money hungry,'" she said. "But I am very bottom-line oriented and now I have a justification for why I am how I am."

As a result of the assessments, Davis said North Star is rethinking employee incentives because not everyone is motivated by the bottom line.

"Some employees might rather have time off to do mission work or take a vacation," Davis said. "The assessments allow us to customize bonuses so we're meeting the needs of different employees."

But did overall results paint a recognizable picture of Davis? You bet.

"It's so right on, it's scary," she said. "Some of what (the tests) show is so subliminal, you don't see yourself in it at first. Everyone said, 'This is so us.' And now we can start to identify clients and friends and where they fall on the charts. It makes it easier to understand where they are."

North Star owner Kae Groshong hired Wolfe to administer assessments and work with employees over the next year to build teamwork and as part of the company's ongoing emphasis on professional development. Now em-

ployees banter about the results, but she said they also take them to heart when dealing with each other.

"The way the world is anymore, you can't just depend on what you learned in college to get by," Groshong said. "This gives our employees an opportunity to grow. We have a group of terrific people who have established teamwork. This is another step forward in having a common language to understand everyone's viewpoint."

While getting the results can be enlightening, utilizing them, apparently, is quite another. After all, it's fighting Mother Nature at her best. But Wolfe said with awareness and practice, some behavior can be tempered.

North Star marketing associate George Mummert said he has been through batteries of personality and psychological tests over the years when applying for various jobs. Though he maintains a respectable amount of skepticism about the results, he admits his tend to show the same personality traits over and over.

"People have told me for years that I give out negative body language," he said, leaning back in his chair, arms tightly crossed over his chest. "Now I try to be more aware of that."

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## Jaffe

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employed woman often puts inordinate pressure on herself to drop her work and be there for her family. That's the reason she's self employed, right?

If you were working in a job, you'd be comfortable saying "No" to many of the school volunteer projects that come your way, right? You'd reveal that you'd love to, but your boss won't give you the time off, and you can't make the commitment. Or, you'd explain that even though the committee only meets at night, after working a full day and then taking care of children in the evening, you're short on extra energy for committee work.

The problem you have is not that you are missing work rules, but that you feel guilty saying no to all that is asked of you. Somehow there is a perception that your work should be flexible enough to accommodate anyone who needs you.

"You're self employed, you set your own hours, and you weren't there for the PTO meeting? What kind of mother are you?"

Being self employed has come to translate for you as being constantly available to your family's needs, and putting the children's school needs first, with work taking the back seat. And yet, why are you working in your business? I'm sure there's an element of personal satisfaction in it, but I bet a good deal of your labor is to

take care of those children of yours.

Since you seem to be a woman coming from a place of guilt, I'm concerned that work rules might just exacerbate the problem. What will you tell someone who asks for your assistance? "I'm sorry, my work day does not finish until 4 p.m., and I am not allowed to take time off during the day?" It won't feel genuine.

Try setting up this kind of work rule system for yourself instead. Figure out how many billable hours you need in order to meet your monetary goals.

Now, add 10 to 15 hours to that to address the marketing, book-keeping, sales, and other activities that go into achieving those billable hours.

So, for example, let's say you need to work 20 billable hours a week to bring in the \$2,000/month your family relies on. Add to that 15 nonbillable hours of working time. That brings your work week to 35 hours. That means you're going to be in trouble keeping your income commitments if you work 30 hours and volunteer 10 hours. On the other hand, if you have 40 available hours a week, you've got five hours a week to volunteer your time. (Don't forget the time absorbed in bringing children to and from after-school activities!)

When you are asked to volun-

teer for "one more thing," if it feels like too much, answer honestly: "I am already volunteering and I'm committed to a number of business projects as well, so I've reached my quota. If a volunteer project ends and some time frees up, I'll be sure to let you know."

When you feel guilty because your child says something like, "PLEEAAZE, can you help us with our fund raiser?" you can honestly respond: "I'd love to. I wish I could take off from work every time I felt like it. But guess what. See those sneakers you are wearing? Enjoying the food in our refrigerator? I have to work, even when sometimes I'd rather be with you."

Pick and choose the volunteer activities that give you the greatest satisfaction. Keep your calendar free enough to say "Yes" to what you really want to do, but full enough so that you can easily, without regret, say "No" to what you don't really want to do.

The next time you have a guilt attack, ask yourself: "Would I be feeling this way if I worked in a job for someone else?" You are self-employed — emphasis on the word 'employed!'

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