

Lawyers and Their Psychological Types

by [Joseph Shaub](#)

About ten years ago Larry Richard conducted a study of lawyers and psychological type, with the active support of the American Bar Association. Richard was a lapsed lawyer in the process of shifting careers to psychology and the study was the basis for his doctoral dissertation. A condensed version of his conclusions was the cover article in the July 1993 issue of the ABA Journal. Last year, the entire dissertation was published in the Capital University Law Review¹ and the numbers are a cruncher's dream—especially those who are interested in what makes lawyers tick.

By Way of Background

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is a psychological instrument that has been around for a long time. Its first appearance dates from 1942. Its intention was to explore individuals' personality preferences as described by Carl Jung in his 1921 tome, *Personality Types*.

Unlike such instruments as the MMPI-2 or other psychodiagnostic tests, the Myers-Briggs doesn't reach deep inside our brains and draw out (consciously or unconsciously) hidden traits, fears, weaknesses, etc. Its popularity over the years is based, in part, on the fact that it doesn't pathologize.

Rather, the MBTI indicates (as its title implies) individuals' preferences in how they take in information from the world, make decisions about this information, interact with others and direct (and conserve) their energy.

The notion of preference is really another way of describing which manner of functioning is easiest for us; is second nature to us or we tend to naturally flow into. The instrument itself, consists of about 110 forced choice items in which we're asked to choose which statement is most attractive to us, or sounds most like us.

In their simplest sense, the four scales are described as follows:

The Extraversion-Introversion Preference: Where do we get our energy—externally from the world around us consisting of people and objects—or internally from our own resources? Do we enjoy broad interests or fewer interests that we pursue with greater depth and intensity? The same question applies to our social sphere. Do we count our friends in large numbers or in terms of two or three people with whom we feel a particular security and intimacy? Are we able to tolerate distractions in our work and then return to task without difficulty or do we abhor these distractions and prefer quiet and time to fully explore and complete a task? Do our inner batteries get "charged" by alone time or by interaction with others? Some people will leave a party buzzing—others will feel positively drained.

As with the following explanatory paragraphs, this is only the barest description of the numerous factors characterizing this continuum of preference.²

The Sensing-Intuitive (S-I) Preference: How do we take in information? Does the world make sense to us primarily as we process it through our five senses, or do we naturally tend to understand this sensory input by the patterns and relationships we naturally construct?

The first tendency results in a sequential and detailed process while the latter is characterized by a global process. Intuitive types prefer the theoretical and expend energy in consideration of possibilities—what has not yet existed or been done. A sensing type of individual is most comfortable dealing with what is present. History and experience—what is useful, rather than what is intriguing or different—are the hallmarks of value for a sensing individual.

The Thinking-Feeling (T-F) Preference: This continuum relates to how we make decisions about the information we have just processed. Generally speaking, the thinking individual makes decisions impersonally, based upon logic, while the feeling individual relies on personal values and the impact a decision will have upon others. Interpersonal harmony is important to a feeling type. What makes things hang together and work is part of the thinker's value system.

As with each of these continua, someone who has a strong preference on one end will have difficulty with the individual bearing a strong preference on the polar end. So, for example, the strong thinker will judge the strong feeler as wishy-washy and soft-hearted, while the feeler will see the thinker as rather cold blooded.

Our understandable (and often lamentable) tendency to vilify those with incomprehensible differences is one of the reasons I like the theory and practice of psychological type. It tends to lessen polarization.

The Judging-Perceiving (J-P) Preference: Judging types, essentially like their worlds organized and ambiguities resolved. They want the decision made and the project completed. The perceiving type, by contrast, is uncomfortable with decisions made and options closed. As the title suggests, perceivers like to take in information. They are quite good at starting projects, but not so good at completing them. People who are judging types like to describe themselves as "organized," while perceivers will call themselves "flexible."

The Combinations: There are a number of ways to combine these preferences-the two most frequent approaches being the four preference model and the two-preference "temperament" approach promoted by David Keirsey. The former, of course, entails 16 different "personality types" which attempt to blend the basic characteristics of the four preferences.[3](#)

The temperament approach of Keirsey posits the following combinations: SJ; SP; NT and NF. In brief, the SJ's core needs are for group membership and responsibility. SJ's value stability, security and a sense of community. They tend to trust hierarchy and authority. I call these people the "pillars of the community." Keirsey calls this the "Guardian" temperament.

The SP's core needs are to have the freedom to act without hindrance and to see a marked result from action. SP's highly value aesthetics, whether in nature or in art. Their learning style is often concrete, random and experiential. (These are Keirsey's "Artisans.")

The NF's core needs are for meaning and significance that comes from having a sense of purpose and working toward some greater good. Keirsey calls NF's "Idealists." They value unity, self-actualization and authenticity, preferring cooperative interactions with a focus on ethics and morality.

Finally, the NT temperament (Keirsey's "Rational") has a core need for mastery of concepts, knowledge and competence. NT's value expertise, logical consistency, concepts and ideas and they seek progress. They trust logic above all else, tend to be skeptical and highly value precision in language.[4](#)

Larry Richard's Conclusions

While far too detailed and comprehensive to include in this column, some of the highlights of Richard's work are very interesting. In the field described as corporate/business/commercial, the SJ Guardian temperament is the most numerous. The Rational temperament (NT) dominates the litigation practice area. While higher in the legal profession than in the general population, its preponderance in the legal sub-specialty of litigation is striking.

Yet there is a marked gender difference, as NF Idealists comprise 31.4 % of the female litigation sample (as contrasted to only 13.3% of the males). Richard notes that this finding corresponds with other studies that reflect "altruism" as a significant motivation for women to enter law school.

In the practice of law, generally, the NT temperament comprises 41.2 % of the total. When combined with the SJ Guardian, these two temperaments account for 76.2% of the total (NF's are at 14.7% and SP's are at 9.7%). Bear in mind that completely random distribution would find each temperament accounting for 25% of the total. Clearly the practice of law draws, and nurtures, a high percentage of people who prefer order over spontaneity; intellectual challenge over sensuality; maintenance of institutions over change and pure logic over diplomacy.

Richard and earlier studies of law students show that NT's are happier both in law school and in later practice by a vast percentage. It might also suggest the frustration which, often female, NF Idealists experience, having been drawn into the practice of law for altruistic reasons, only to experience domination of the field by the logical, expedient and markedly impersonal NT temperamental type.

Those of us who gravitate toward the global-theoretical challenges of the law⁵ may also find considerable frustration in a practice which emphasizes the extreme attention to detail which might satisfy the SJ temperament. Obviously, finding your niche is critical to a satisfying practice experience.

A final note-and one of those soap box opportunities I can never pass up-the practice of law is dominated by logical, competent, task-oriented thinking types. With the exception of the fairly recent additions to law school curricula of classes emphasizing interpersonal skills, such as interviewing and counseling, it remains rather disheartening that this wonderful and powerful personal service profession gives such scant attention to the critical values of productive and skillful interpersonal interaction.

Somewhere in that gap, I would presume, may be found many answers to why so many lawyers fail to enjoy deep satisfaction from their work and work environments and why our clients frequently complain of frustrations in their relations with us. n

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1 Richard, Lawrence, Psychological Type and Job Satisfaction Among Practicing Lawyers, 29 Capital U.L.Rev. 979 (2002).

2 For more comprehensive descriptions, I recommend any one of the books: Gifts Differing by Isabel Briggs Myers (co-developer of the MBTI); Life Types by Sandra Hirsh & Jean Kummerow; Please Understand Me II, by David Keirsey and Type Talk by Otto Kroeger and Janet Thuesen.

3 These 16 types are (The Intuitive preference is denoted with an "N" because the "I" denotes Introversion): ISTJ; INTJ; ESTJ; ENTJ; ISFJ; ESFJ; ISFJ; INFJ; ISTP; INTP; ESTP; ENTP; ISFP; ESFP; ISFP; INFP.

4 Lest we succumb to the tendency to dismiss all of this as sounding like a breed of astrology, we should bear in mind: 1) these combinations derive from a self-description instrument; and 2) the correlations of type and temperament to certain kinds of occupations and legal specialties tend to support the validity of these descriptions.

5 Bear in mind that in virtually every study of why people are drawn toward law the predominate reason is "intellectual challenge."