

Revisiting Understanding Entrepreneurs Using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®

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At one point, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI) was used rather actively in entrepreneurship research in an effort to define and understand the entrepreneurial personality. Despite consistent findings that MBTI intuitors or Ns were dominant in type the use of the instrument faded away. Recently, intuition per se has been of interest as it relates to entrepreneurship. This paper proposes the efficacy of revisiting the use of the MBTI as a way to understand and develop entrepreneurship.

INTRODUCTION

The question is still asked “Is there an “entrepreneurial personality” in spite of years of varying research results and extensive discussions and even proffered opinions that there was no such thing as an entrepreneurial personality at all. However, we need to develop a better understanding in order to better predict and prepare future entrepreneurs. There are a number of research outcomes that point to intuition as one of the key factors in entrepreneurial personality and behavior. Intuition (N) is one of the domains assessed in the MBTI. This is when the individual moves quickly from the concrete – sensing (S) to the abstract and dwells on possibilities, patterns, and symbols. Understanding the role of intuition and perhaps its predominance in entrepreneurial personalities would be useful as we train and mentor entrepreneurs.

Intuition in entrepreneurship research has been defined as “*the dynamic process by which entrepreneurial alertness cognitions interact with domain competence (e.g., culture, industry, specific circumstances, technology, etc.) to bring to consciousness an opportunity to create new value,*” and proposed as a construct in entrepreneurship research (Mitchell, Friga et al. 2005). Individuals with intuitive cognitive styles were more confident in their ability to identify and recognize entrepreneurial opportunities (Kickul, Gundry et al. 2009). In research using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), entrepreneurs have been identified as Intuitive/thinking (NT) types (Carland 1982, Reynierse 1997). Entrepreneurs have also had risk perception linked to type (Mattare 2006). However, in much of the literature about intuition, directed at entrepreneurship or not, MBTI is not mentioned. And, because of overuse and/or misuse, the MBTI has had its reputation undermined and “created skepticism about its utility” (Gardner and Martinko 1996). Over the past several years, MBTI seems to have fallen out of use in evaluating entrepreneurial personality. There is, based on past research however, a case to revisit and use the MBTI to explore entrepreneurship.

THE MBTI AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The MBTI was developed by Katherine Briggs and Isabel Myers in response to Carl Jung's theory of personality. Jung's types: Extrovert vs. Introvert; Sensor vs. Intuitor; and Thinker vs. Feeler, were further developed by Isabel Briggs Myers and her mother, Katherine Cook Briggs. After years of research and testing, the resulting instrument -- the MBTI -- differentiates sixteen different types or preferences (Kroeger 1992). The MBTI is the most commonly used personality assessment being used today. It is considered a valid and reliable instrument and has been used extensively in research (Carlson, 1985; Honaker, 2003; Myers, McCaulley et al. 1998).

The MBTI sorts preferences into sixteen different types, constructed from eight functions: Extraversion vs. Introversion; Sensing vs. Intuiting; Thinking vs. Feeling; and Judging vs. Perceiving. These types represent dimensions that are unique areas of differentiation on a continuous scale (Myers, McCaulley et al. 1998). The dimensions are:

Extraversion vs. Introversion (E vs. I) or the source of energy of the individual; An Extraverted person finds energy and vitalization from exterior sources; other people and social occasions. The Introverted individual finds energy from within.

Sensing vs. Intuition (S vs. N) differentiates the process by which an individual utilizes their senses and perceives information. The S preference tends to deal with what may be perceived with the senses; the concrete, realistic, and practical. The N, however, although starting with the concrete, quickly moves to the abstract and dwells on possibilities, patterns, and symbols.

Thinking vs. Feeling (T vs. F) The T preference is associated with the analytical, logical, and skeptical approach rather than the F's subjective assessments and people issues.

Judging vs. Perceiving (J vs. P) Js arrive at conclusions and make decisions quickly. Ps are more inclined to keep their options open to the very last minute. Ps tend *to be more comfortable in the midst of a lot of change or rapid change.*

The MBTI Type Table is as follows:

TABLE 1
MBTI FUNCTION TYPES

| | | | |
|------|------|------|------|
| ISTJ | IFTJ | INFJ | INTJ |
| ISTP | ISFP | INFP | INTP |
| ESTP | ESFP | ENFP | ENTP |
| ESTJ | EFTJ | ENFJ | ENTJ |

The sixteen MBTI types are often sorted into four functional pairs or types: SJ, SP, NF, and NT.

A moderate number of research studies have used the MBTI to look at entrepreneurial characteristics. Caird reviewed research about psychological and personality testing of entrepreneurs. Of particular interest is her discussion of studies conducted with the MBTI®. The MBTI® was used in a study by Hoy and Carland in 1983 to differentiate entrepreneurs from managers. They found that "entrepreneurs were

more intuitive, thinking, and perceptive than managers” (Caird 1993). No significant difference was found on the extraversion-introversion measures.

Other research with entrepreneurship that used the MBTI found that successful entrepreneurs were more intuitive than their non-entrepreneur counterparts and that the MBTI was an effective discriminator of entrepreneurs who were more likely to be intuitive-thinking-perceptive types dominating (Carland 1982, Allinson, Chell et al. 2000, Chell 2008). In fact, in Carland et al’s study, the question was posed, “Can intuition be the key to understanding entrepreneurial vision?” (Carland, Carland et al. 1997). In their view, the intuitive entrepreneur was more able to carry an abstract vision for something not yet there or not yet created. Hoy and Vaught (1981) found that 61% of the entrepreneurs in their study of problem-solving skills were intuitive types. (Allinson, Chell et al. 2000) found that successful entrepreneurs were more intuitive in their cognitive style than the general population of managers.

Heffner, Hunt, and Robinson conducted a study that looked at four possible scales that, together or separately, might predict entrepreneurship: the Entrepreneurial Quotient, developed by an insurance company for agent hiring/screening purposes; the Entrepreneurial Attitude Orientation, developed for entrepreneurial research; the MBTI, previously mentioned; and the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument, developed to categorize left brain/right brain dominance. The Entrepreneurial Quotient was the best indicator; the Entrepreneurial Attitude Orientation was second best; and the MBTI was third. The combination of the three instruments was the “best overall indicator” (Huefner, Hunt et al. 1996).

Mattare (2006) looked at the relationship of MBTI to entrepreneurial strategies, using MBTI, the Miles and Snow strategy typology, and narrated drawings to evaluate how entrepreneurs viewed strategies in terms of innovation and risk. In this study, 80% of the participants turned out to be Ns. When participants are asked to relate experiences via a drawing of peaks and valleys of those experiences, risk- and innovation-oriented strategies were different for Ss and Ns. The Ss see more peaks and valleys in their experiences and visualized those peak experiences as times that risk-oriented strategies were in play. On the other hand, the MBTI N saw less peaks and valleys in their timeline of entrepreneurial experiences, but visualized innovation-oriented strategies in play at the peak.

Throughout the research in entrepreneurship using MBTI, intuition has consistently been shown to be present and prevalent in some way or another.

More recently, the use of MBTI as a tool used to understand entrepreneurship has decreased and few follow up studies have been conducted on those prior research projects of great promise, although intuition as a key factor in entrepreneurial research still seems of interest.

THE MBTI AS A TOOL FOR ENTREPRENEURIAL EDUCATION, LEADERSHIP, AND ORGANIZATION MANAGEMENT

The MBTI has been used as a tool to understand many aspects of human behavior in terms of performance in educational settings, team building, leadership, and organizational behavior and management. In educational settings, we know that “sensing and intuition play a key role in learning” (Lawrence, 1997). Lawrence (1997) finds that sensors do their best work with organized, paced, concrete, hands-on learning opportunities while intuitors need to find their own way through assignments that are less structured with leave opportunities for discovery, self-instruction, complexities, and multiple possible outcomes. Use of the MBTI as a tool in the entrepreneurial classroom would allow the student to fully understand and capitalize on their learning styles.

Leadership development has long used the MBTI as a development tool. There is great power for executives or others in leadership positions to understand type; theirs and others. In Pearman’s book, *Enhancing Leadership Effectiveness through Psychological Type* (Pearman, 1999), he makes the argument that understanding psychological type “enables ... to identify basic interpersonal qualities and allows a fluid use of mental functions.” Type lets us see the patterns in perceiving and making decisions. It also provides a model for explaining “habits of mind” each person may use to utilize perceiving and judging functions. Leadership is critical to the entrepreneur who must inspire and persuade others as a key activity.

In the organization, type again is a powerful tool in understanding the drivers and motivations of others. The organization may utilize their human resources and leverage strengths, improve teamwork, accommodate differences in leadership styles, resolve conflict, coach, design training programs, and, overall, significantly improve organizational performance (Hirsh & Kummerow, 1998).

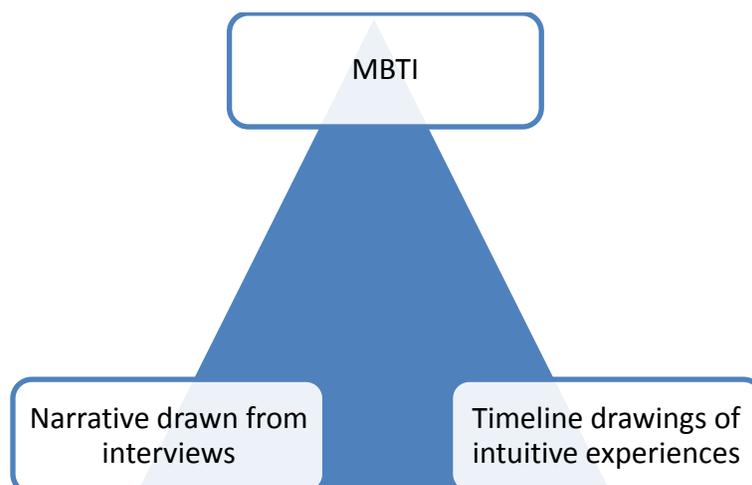
RESEARCH MOVING FORWARD

In terms of the N attitude, studies that found evidence of intuitors as a key part of entrepreneurial activities would include: Allinson et al. (2000), Carland (1982), Hoy and Vaught (1981), Reyneise (1997a, b, c), and Roberts (1988), and Spencer (1996) who found in their research that entrepreneurs tend to be Ns. Allinson et al. (2000), Carland (1982), and Spencer (1996) found their Ns to also be TPs and Carland (1982) thought that intuition might be the key to understanding entrepreneurial vision. Hoy and Vaught (1981) and Spencer (1996) found up to 61% of participants in their research were intuitives and Mattare (2006) found 80% of participants were Ns. Although the sample was small, it must be noted that many were NFs which is much higher than other studies have found.

Moving forward, I would propose a larger mixed methods study of practicing entrepreneurs that would combine the use of MBTI to determine type coupled with a qualitative study that explores the role of intuition in the entrepreneurial process through interviews and drawings representing intuitive experiences.

The methodological approach that could be taken in this proposed study would be to conduct a series or set of individual case studies using intuitive experiences as the focal point of the cases. According to Robson in *Real World Research*, case studies may be “virtually anything,” but where there is a set of case studies, the focus is on a small number of individuals “with some features in common” (Robson, 2002; Yin, 2003). As defined by Robert Yin (1981; 1994 in Robson, 2002): a case study is a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence (Robson, 2002 p. 178). Yin (2003) defined case further as follows: A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2003). These conditions would be evident in this study. Using this definition as a guide, the phenomena of intuition, as it relates to MBTI would be empirically investigated and will use a pre-existing test, interviews, and drawings as sources of evidence.

**FIGURE 1
RESEARCH APPROACH**



CONCLUSION

The MBTI is a valid instrument used worldwide and, in the hands of qualified administrators, yields valid and supportable results. Based on findings from a number of studies over the years, there is strong evidence that intuition plays a key role in the entrepreneurial process. The MBTI can be a useful tool in further researching this. It can also be a tool in evaluating and mentoring young entrepreneurs as a process of self-discovery and self-knowledge. It may be possible to actually illuminate entrepreneurial tendencies early on and assist in developing strengths and shoring up weaknesses for the future entrepreneur. And, certainly, understanding MBTI type empowers the leader to more effectively manage the organization.

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