

opp

unlocking potential

who's fooling whom?

exploring the impact
of impression
management in
the workplace



A research report by OPP®
November 2007

"All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify."

Erving Goffman

'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life'

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*“ It made me realise you should be yourself
and not project a different persona. ”*

Foreword

By Robert McHenry, CEO, OPP Ltd

This research was undertaken to explore the ways in which people deliberately change or modify the way they project their personality at work. This is known as impression management: the process whereby people seek to control the image others have of them. One of the aims was to find out what impact this has on individuals and organisations, and whether certain employer expectations are actually counter-productive to optimal performance.

We conducted the survey across six European countries, so the research has a further dimension. We wanted to determine whether differences exist between cultures in relation to how far the 'whole self' is willingly and comfortably brought to the workplace.

The findings provide an interesting comparison between the conventions and expectations governing work life in neighbouring but very different countries; and they also provide a window on those habits and structures in each country that deter diversity and stifle innovation.

As business psychologists, OPP®'s consultants take the view that impression management is neither good nor bad per se. The concern is whether, if people are investing energy in presenting a face that is not naturally their own, they are still able to engage fully in the purpose of the organisation or in their own development. We would also challenge how innovative an organisation can be if it encourages employees to be inauthentic replicas of one another.

Our experience is that growth and performance improvement come from self-knowledge and the committed deployment of strengths. Unlocking human potential is about being your best self – not behaving in a certain way because someone else has imposed it upon you – and this is why these findings are important to organisations seeking to gain their competitive edge from people.

First, though, an explanation of terms: most impression management is learnt and practised. It has a moral dimension as well as a behavioural one and both are affected by core personality. Some people refuse, on principle, to be what they are not because they believe this is dishonest.

The tendency to hold convictions about such matters is a personality trait. Refusal to change or modify behaviour is a worthy position to take if you really understand yourself – but very few people do.

Other people have no ethical dilemmas about being a chameleon. It may be part of their personality to be interested in changing or experimenting with their behaviour. Thus, how far people will feel their integrity is compromised by engaging in impression management may relate to core personality. When people do try to project a personality that is not their own, there are limits to its success.

Some psychologists use the metaphor of dieting here: "If you starve a bulldog in an attempt to create a poodle, all you end up with is a skinny mastiff." It means that if your core personality is to be kind and forgiving and you try to be nasty and brutal, you will be unlikely to pull it off. This is what made the character of Barraclough, the prison warden in the TV series *Porridge*, so comic.

There is a difference between learning to act in ways which are not necessarily strengths in order to extend one's capabilities, and hiding one's 'real self'. Most people can be coached to modify their behaviour to an extent they feel comfortable with and, in doing so, may discover sides to themselves that might otherwise have remained hidden.

At first, it is like performing a new task with your non-preferred hand. It feels awkward, slow and frustrating but, with practice, it gradually becomes easier. If you repeat the task over time, you can eventually become ambidextrous and can accelerate your learning by being coached or by imitating others.

The handedness metaphor applies neatly to behaviour modification. People can become adept at performing social roles or taking on personas that do not come naturally to them if they practise them, get coaching or adopt good role models.

However, there will be a limit both to the extent to which they can do so successfully and to the

number of roles that they can play convincingly. They will be fulfilled by experiencing the results of their development but they will often feel a pull towards doing things according to their core personality – especially under stress. They need to be able to combine the ‘learned’ behaviours with their natural style in a way that enables them to perform well, and authentically, in a broader range of situations.

One of the people who developed this position most fully is Isabel Myers, co-author of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®). Myers believed that people will be most effective when they understand their core personality (their ‘preferences’) and thus become self aware.

Next, they need to separate some of the ways they currently behave from the ways they would naturally behave if they were drawing on their core (‘out-of-preference’ behaviours versus ‘in-preference’ behaviours). Finally, they need to understand the consequences of behaving in ways that are not part of their core preferences.

These consequences can range from an underlying but unspecific feeling of psychological discomfort, to a feeling of achievement that they are doing something at which they are not naturally gifted. Myers’ approach to life exhorts us to develop outside our preferences to the greatest extent we can without becoming uncomfortable, but to acknowledge and nurture our natural preferences or ‘true self’.

She reminds us that when we first try to extend our repertoire, our behaviour will look awkward in the same way as doing a task with our non-preferred hand might do when we first attempt it.

Myers believed that with this knowledge we can accelerate our learning and maturation. She devised the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to help identify a person’s basic preferences and, through that, start their journey into a whole system of development.

Many organisations with whom we work use the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to help individuals find their preferred or ‘best-fit’ style and, then, understand some of the developmental challenges they may face if they want to behave in less-preferred ways. They coach their employees to lead, adapt to change, be creative and work effectively in teams in an authentic manner.

These organisations retain their best people (and raise the bar for the rest) by endorsing their many different ways of reaching organisational goals. Capitalising on everyone’s potential to be their ‘best self’ is probably the best way we know to create well-adjusted individuals and effective employees.

“ I think I must be a different person at home and at work. ”

Executive summary

This research presents a picture of the differing extent to which employees in Europe experience the need to change how they present themselves at work. Every aspect of a successful business, from teambuilding to talent management, from effective customer relationships to a strong supply chain, depends on being able to optimise the fit between people's talents and their work. Competitive advantage derives from a better understanding of how to achieve this.

OPP's study found that it is common among European employees, to deliberately attempt to change the way their personality is perceived at work and that the desire for approval is a powerful driver. **Half of them (50%) say they behave differently at work and at home.** This is most pronounced in the UK, where as many as two-thirds (64%) admit that they adopt a 'work face'. This compares to 58% in Germany, 38% in Belgium and just 36% in The Netherlands.

Significantly, this research suggests that this chameleon-like behaviour undermines engagement and thwarts potential. **Over a third (35%) of workers find it tiring to change personality from one situation to another, while around three in ten (28%) find it stressful to wear the 'false face'.**

In addition, **37% of employees admit to having used the 'wrong' personality with the wrong person at work** and to having suffered as a result. The pressure to conform can lead to harmful consequences for both employer and employee.

It doesn't end there. Workers reinvent themselves as they change careers. **Over a third (37%) display different behaviour at their current job from that shown in their previous role.** Younger workers are the most likely to do this, with 44% of employees in their 20s admitting to changing their persona along with their employer.

When asked why they try to adapt their personalities, **almost half (44%) say it makes them more effective at their job**, while a quarter (27%) do so to fit in with their teams and one in six (17%) to better fit in with the organisational culture.

The survey found that **one in five employees (20%) suppress their assertive side, but an almost equal number emphasise this.** This contradiction embodies the confusion many workers feel about 'who they're supposed to be' at work.

It is not just in day-to-day work where personality appears to morph – self-reinvention often begins at the interview stage. In fact, **a third of employees (33%) said that they acted a part at interview to fit in with the company culture** – no doubt picking up on the many non-verbal cues offered by potential employers.

Four out of ten workers (39%) say that they received an impression of their manager's personality at interview that is different from how they now perceive him or her. It is little wonder so many recruiters do not rely on interviews alone.

It seems recruiters are unsure of the role personality has to play in success at work. Around half (46%) admit that they prefer hiring people who fit the prevailing company culture rather than looking for those who will add something different. On the other side of the table, **six out of ten employees (59%) believe that personality was very important¹ in getting their current job.**

Significantly, the more important people considered personality to be, the more they *adapted their personality* in the interview. The fact that a mix of personalities tends to yield better results for an organisation than a more homogenous group is apparently often overlooked.

This research demonstrates why understanding personality type and preferences is so important. An awareness of "true" personality allows both employees and employers to create a working ethos and environment that encourages people to give of their best, rather than causing them to divert their energy towards adopting a persona that is alien to them. A community rich in self-insight helps people view differences positively – enabling the organisation to capitalise on individual strengths and to drive innovation and high performance.

¹ "very" represents a score of 7, 8, 9 or 10 out of 10

Rise of the office chameleon

Putting on your work face

- *Employees are 'office chameleons', who change their personality for the workplace*

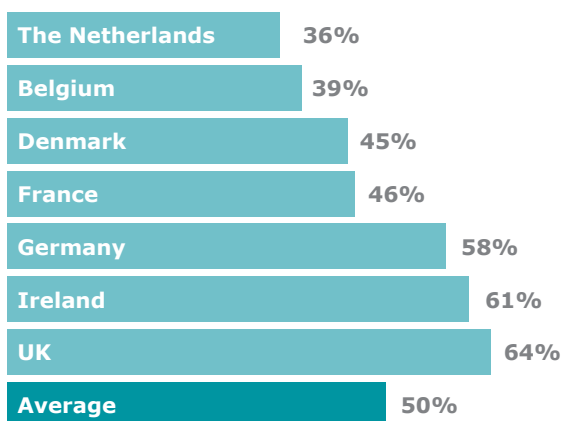
Europe is evidently the home of the 'office chameleon', where workers display different personalities depending on who they are with and what they are doing.

In fact, half (50%) of full-time employees – representing around 45 million workers across the continent – say they behave differently at home from the way they behave at work.

The extent to which they modify their personality varies, but around a quarter (27%) of those whose behaviour at work and at home is different say they change their personality radically². This covers 13% of all those surveyed, which represents approximately 12 million European workers.

The differences between individual countries are striking, with UK workers showing the most divergence between their work and home personalities: two-thirds (64%) behave differently at work, with a high proportion also in Ireland (61%) and Germany (58%). Yet in The Netherlands and Belgium, just 36% and 39% behave differently at work and home.

Proportion who behave differently at home from the way they behave at work



It seems that younger employees are most likely to adopt a different persona at work. Across Europe, three in five of those under 30 admit to behaving differently at work than at home (62%). The proportion drops steadily through the age range until, by the time workers reach 60 and above, just 30% are still not using their real personality in the workplace.

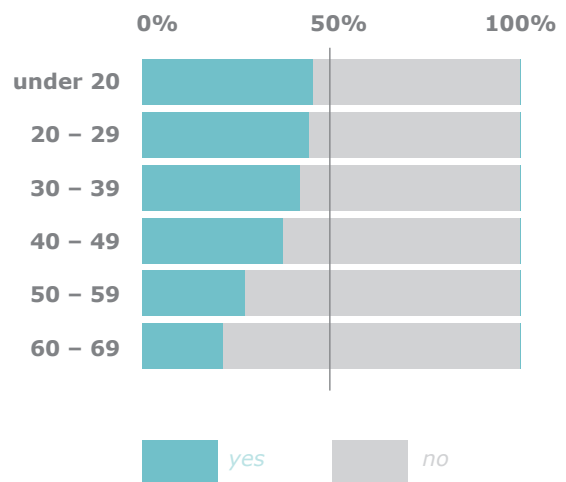
As employees grow older and attain greater seniority – or become more secure in themselves – it seems they feel less of a need to modify their behaviour. Impressionable young employees, new to a working culture, experience most short-term pressure to conform.

Reinventing yourself

- *Workers reinvent themselves from one job to the next*

Furthermore, over a third of European workers (37%) adopt a different personality at their current job to that displayed at their previous employer. Again, this trait is more prevalent among younger workers – 44% of those in their 20s admitted to changing personality as they switched organisation.

Proportion who display a different personality now to the one they displayed at their previous job, by age



² "radically" represents a score of 7, 8, 9 or 10 out of 10

Those most likely to project a different personality at work are employees in HR and training (59%), professional services (56%) and healthcare and social services (55%). Conversely, those working in manufacturing industry or transport are less likely to do so (47% of respondents), suggesting the office environment creates most pressure to manage others' impressions.

“ I was told there was no doubt about my professional skills, but it was just I didn't fit the company's style. ”

A psychologist's insight

- *The technique of impression management is used to effect personality change*

When people deliberately change or modify their behaviour to fit a given situation it is known as impression management – the process whereby people seek to control the image others have of them.

Some psychologists argue that personality change happens within the same individual all the time because people do not have a core personality. Instead, they have multiple selves of which they show different sides in different situations. The successful person is one who strategically presents these different sides to gain favour with different audiences.

This rather extreme view is not widely held because there is a lot of data to show that all of us do have a core personality, and that it remains consistent for most of our lives.

Other psychologists and sociologists see the demands of life as being like those of a theatre and thus organisational life is akin to a theatrical play with each participant playing different roles for different audiences. People have a core personality but they take on other roles and personas according to how they interpret the situation they find themselves in.

Still other psychologists describe people as 'politicians' because, like politicians, they have a diverse set of objectives in their interaction with others. These objectives are often related to power, especially at work, and people change their personalities in political ways when it will help them accomplish their goals.

And just as politicians have good and bad motives, so do those who alter their personalities. They are engaging in a process of social influence and organisational politics which is very often helpful to the work they are doing or to a work colleague's self-esteem. Behaviour that at first looks to be motivated by self-interest, often looks on closer examination to be motivated by company or department interest. The danger, of course, is that the wrong motives may be imputed to any instance of behaviour, creating mistrust and suspicion between co-workers.

Papering over the cracks

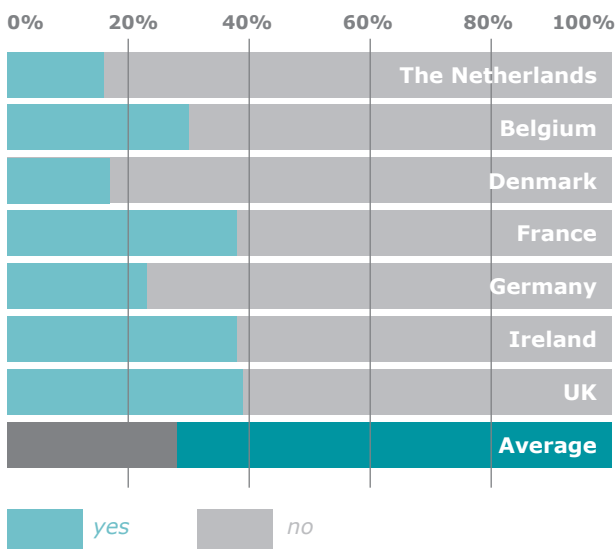
Stresses and strains of false advertising

- *Having a different workplace personality places extra stress on three in ten workers*

Over a third of European workers (35%) find that changing their personality from one environment to another is tiring. Four in ten women (39%), as opposed to three in ten men (32%), feel this weariness. Those in the charity and not-for-profit sector are the most likely to suffer, with over half (51%) admitting the strain of wearing different faces at work.

Around three in ten employees (28%) go further and confess that being overtly conscious of how they 'should' act in the workplace has actually made their job more stressful. In the UK this rises to 39% of workers; and 37% in Ireland and France. Curiously, only 15% of Danes feel that playing a part has increased their workplace stress levels.

Employees finding their jobs more stressful through being conscious of how they think they should act at work



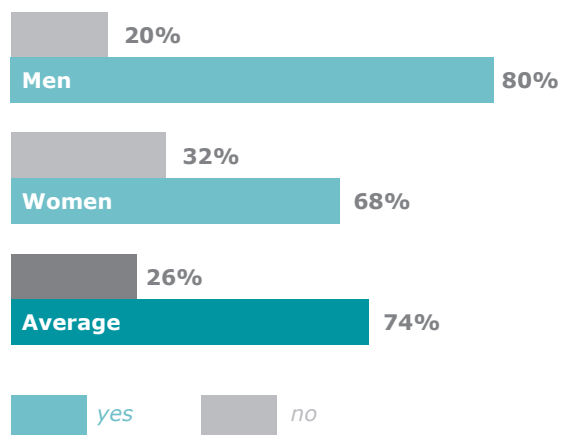
In addition, the number of employees who find personality changes stressful rises to over a third (34%) among those who have different personas at work to those they adopt at home.

Impacting performance

- *Negative triggers lead to personality change, which in turn impacts on performance*

It will therefore come as no surprise that all this stress impacts productivity and performance. Three-quarters (74%) of those who feel stress due to changes of personality admit that it has negatively affected them at work. Men are more likely to feel this way than women (80% as against 68%, respectively) – rising to almost nine out ten (87%) among males in their 40s.

Percentage claiming that the stress of impression management has impacted their performance at work



“ All the effects (of changing personality) were negative and to some degree stressful. ”

A psychologist's insight

There have been many studies on what events trigger personality change and behaviour modification at work. A surprising number of these catalyst events involve uncertainty caused through a lack of clarity. Organisations or departmental units that do not have clear objectives, or have poorly defined decision processes, unclear performance measures or strong competition for resources will foster high levels of impression management.

In such organisations, workers are consistently weighing up the costs and benefits of projecting a different personality. They simultaneously assess the benefits they may achieve through presenting one image rather than another and, at the same time, they are estimating the costs involved in portraying that image including being perceived as 'fake' and having their bluff called.

The processes of impression management are a distraction for many workers and interact with the lack of clarity around them to produce negative psychological effects.

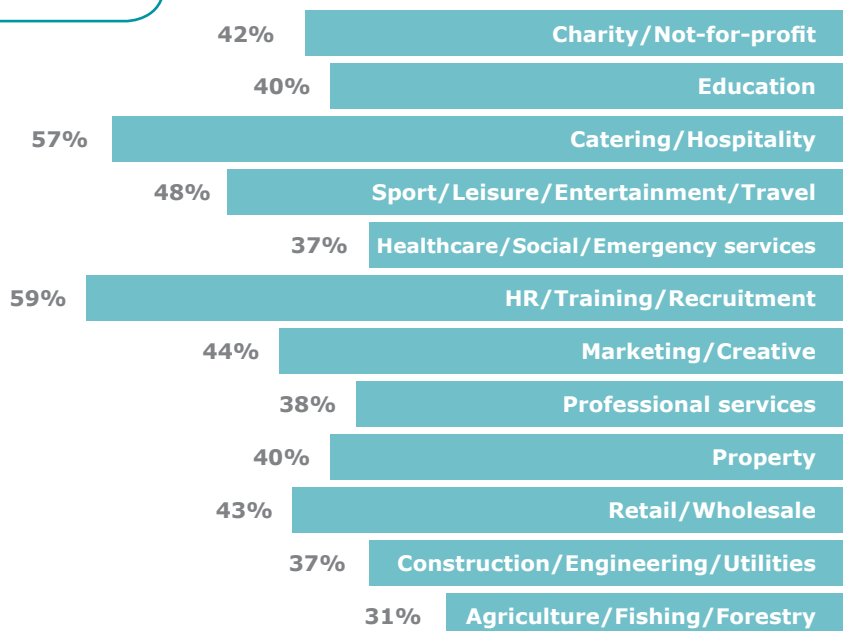
Inappropriate behaviour

- *Nearly four in ten workers have used the wrong personality with the wrong person at work*

Employees who are used to emphasising a certain side to their personality, and even showing different sides to different people, may slip up occasionally. Over a third (37%) have used an inappropriate behaviour or personality for a given situation, for example by being too pushy with a client, or too self-effacing with their manager. The proportion rises to 46% in France and falls to 20% in The Netherlands.

This issue can become even more prevalent in industries where workers deal extensively with other people: 59% of employees in the retail sector, 57% of those in catering and hospitality, and 44% of those in the marketing and creative sectors admit that they have adopted an inappropriate personality at the workplace.

Percentage that have used an inappropriate personality at the workplace



“ It took a lot of extra work to undo the damage. ”

This can lead to situations that range from simply embarrassing to financially damaging for the organisation. It seems that placing employees under too much pressure to conform or fit in can result in the wrong face at the wrong time and hence result in harmful consequences.

For better or for worse

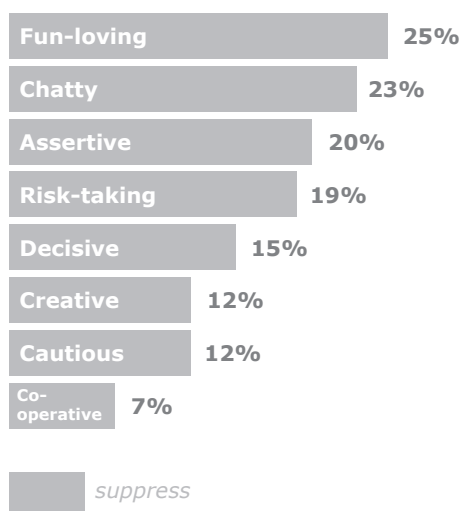
Tone it down or turn it up?

- *Employees suppress their chatty and fun-loving sides while at work*

Looking at which personality characteristics employees accentuate whilst at work, as against those they suppress, helps identify which elements are perceived as being most beneficial or damaging to career success.

Unsurprisingly, employees tend to suppress the more sociable traits at work; a quarter (25%) consciously stifle their fun-loving side and 23% their chatty side. There was a noticeable gender difference in the latter scores, with 25% of females claiming they suppress their chatty side versus 20% of males.

Aspects of personality that employees suppress at work



Less expected, however, is the fact that traits that are often viewed positively, particularly as signs of potential leaders, are being stifled by European employees. One in five (20%) suppress their assertive trait and a similar proportion (19%) tone down their risk-taking side. Again, gender comes into play: 22% of women stifle their assertiveness in the workplace, as compared to 19% of men – but when it comes to risk-taking, men are more likely to suppress their true inclinations.

Accentuate the positive?

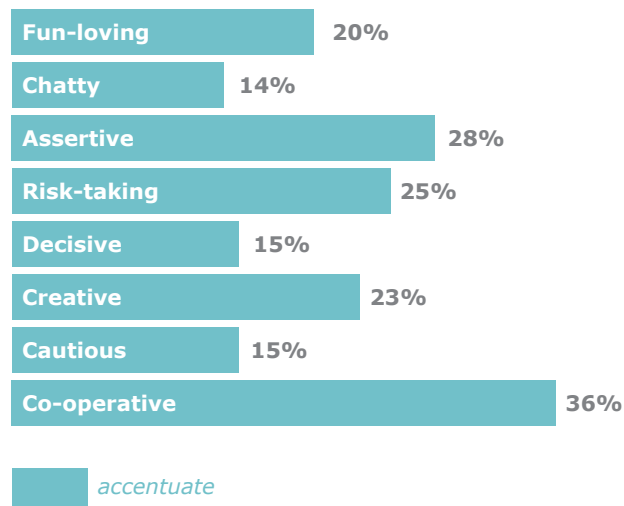
- *Cooperation and assertiveness are played up*

In contrast, over a third of employees accentuate their cooperative side. This appears to be the characteristic that needs most effort to maintain, as it is chosen by the highest margin (36%).

Other traits employees accentuate for the workplace are assertiveness and decisiveness (28% and 25%, respectively). The former is puzzling, given that many workers claim to tone down that aspect to their personality. It suggests that almost half of those surveyed are uneasy about how assertive they can and should be in their working environment and find this a constant balancing act.

This can be particularly difficult for more junior members of staff, as can be seen by the fact that 31% of workers in their 20s and 41% of those under 20 admit to playing down their assertive side.

Aspects of personality that employees accentuate at work



“ There’s no time for humour. ”

A psychologist's insight

- *Are you an ingratiation, self-promoter, exemplifier or intimidator?*

Most personality change at work is in the service of ingratiation – usually described as behaviour designed to influence another person about the attractiveness of one's personal qualities. Judiciously used, ingratiation can facilitate interpersonal relationships and increase harmony within the organisation or departmental unit.

By generating feelings of goodwill, ingratiation can counter tendencies to stigmatise and devalue other people. Personality change for the sake of ingratiation may be a form of social glue that builds cohesive work groups and ensures cooperation.

People also change their personalities to aid their self-promotion. While the ingratiation wants to be seen as likeable, the self-promoter wants to be seen as competent.

Successful self-promotion is a great deal more difficult to achieve than ingratiation. The latter can be passive (reacting to another's behaviour) but if a person wants to convince someone else of their competence, they need actively to say or do something.

The selection interview is a situation where self-promotion can pay handsomely. It is no surprise to find that over half of job applicants exaggerate their achievements and salary at their previous job. It has always been widely demonstrated that both job interviewer and interviewee consider that the interview itself demands self-promotion above anything else.

Although ingratiation and self-promotion are the major motivators for personality change at work, research has shown that other forms of personality change occur in the service of exemplification (managing the impressions of integrity, self-sacrifice and moral worthiness) and intimidation (creating an identity of being dangerous).

“ I suppress my unassertive, indecisive side – to a certain extent, my 'human' side! ”

“ There are lots of little ways I adapt to suit situations and people because I need the money. ”

“ I keep my mouth shut rather than voicing for change. ”

What makes you different?

Playing to the crowd or the gallery?

- *Employees change personality for clients and the boss*

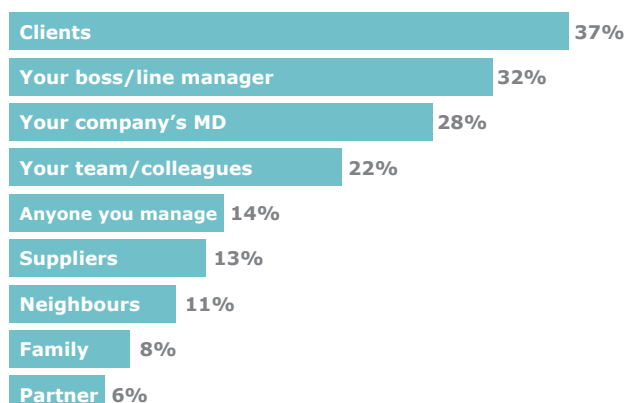
When it comes to adopting a new persona, the 'who' and the 'where' are as important as the 'what'. Just over a third (37%) of workers in Europe adapt their personality or behaviour for clients, which is often viewed as part of the selling process.

Within organisations, employees tend to adapt their personality for people of higher status than themselves. Almost a third (32%) amend their personality for their direct line manager, but fewer than half this proportion (14%) change for those that report to them. The most pressure seems to be exerted in Germany, where 42% change personality for their boss, compared to just 20% in The Netherlands.

Workers in their 30s are more likely than older employees to modify their behaviour for their boss. Two in five employees in their 30s (40%) adapt their behaviour for their line manager, but it falls steadily to 21% of employees in their 60s. Older employees seem more confident in revealing their true selves.

As a further indication that personality change in the workplace tends to be reserved for those higher up the 'food chain', just over a quarter (28%) modify their personality for their company's MD.

People for whom workers try to adapt their personality or behaviour



Situational awareness

- *Many workers change persona when on the phone or working in teams*

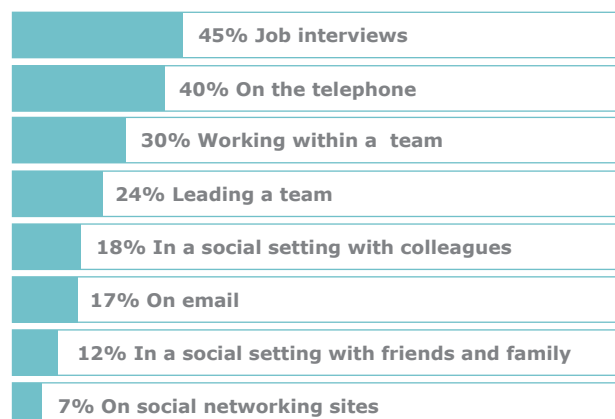
The most common driver for adapting personality, as highlighted in the previous section, is the job interview. However, the other setting where adopting a new persona comes easily is on the telephone, with 40% admitting they project a different personality on the phone.

UK and Irish employees are the most likely to change their personality while on the phone (46% for both countries), while in France the proportion is just 31%.

Email, on the other hand, seems a more straightforward method of communication than the telephone: only one in six employees (17%) project a different personality when emailing.

The presence of colleagues can have a noticeable effect on whether or not employees present their true selves. Three in ten (30%) change their personality while working in a team, and 24% do so when leading a team. Almost one in five (18%) admit that they also adapt their personality when in a social setting with co-workers.

Situations where employees attempt to change personality



Drivers for change

- *Why do workers adapt their personality? Key drivers are effectiveness and conflict avoidance*

The main reason for presenting a different personality, whether with clients, line manager, those in your team or colleagues is a belief that it makes you more effective at the job. This is the primary reason for 44% of European employees.

“ When I am more open about my views at work I think I sometimes make people feel uncomfortable. ”

This makes sense in a sales or client-focused role. However, problems occur more frequently when personality change comes about through the need to fit in with corporate culture or work teams or to please the boss or line manager. One in four employees (27%) adapt their personality to fit in with their teams, while one in six (17%) adapt to fit company culture and one in seven (14%) to please their boss.

Reasons why employees attempt to adapt their personality



Conflict can also be an issue. A quarter of workers (26%) adapt their personality because they don't want to clash with certain people in their company. Meanwhile, one in twenty (6%) are worried to show their true personality in case it holds them back.

A psychologist's insight

People will avoid conflict for a variety of reasons that serve their personal needs in some way, including maintaining perceived control, or as a result of insecurity about their own authority. Managers can suppress conflict to the point that people are unwilling to voice differing views. They may also use sarcasm or be overly critical, thinking that they are helping to 'toughen up' their reports.

The reality is, however, that the organisation will miss out on good ideas as team members will find it hard to put them forward. Individuals may be happy to withhold suggestions, waiting for the manager to be proved wrong. The most talented will seek opportunities elsewhere where they feel listened to. Team members may suffer classic stress reactions to such situations over time.

A second common reason for conflict suppression is that a manager finds conflict situations uncomfortable and therefore avoids them. This creates surface-level harmony, but underlying tensions and divisions remain unaddressed. The manager desires a 'happy family' and may believe this is the case, but their avoidance of even small disagreements will mean that it is difficult to achieve deep relationships with peers, managers and reports. They may engage in some passive-aggressive behaviour such as using guilt to alter others' behaviour.

In this scenario, the tendency to 'paper over the cracks' may mean fundamental issues are not be addressed until too late. Most importantly, high performance relies upon deep working relationships. The polite distance such 'papering' creates will reduce the quality of these relationships and also affect trust accordingly, and the organisation may miss out on alternative or challenging ideas because employees become reluctant to suggest them.

Smoke and mirrors

The candidate's many faces

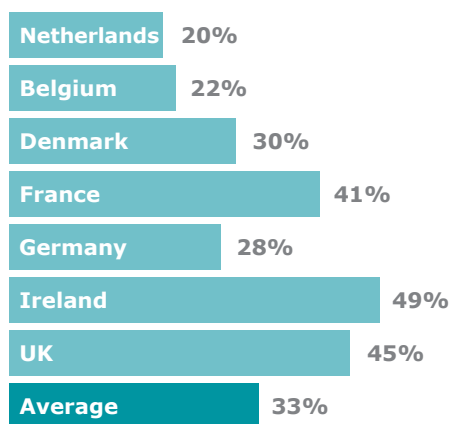
- *Personality matters at the interview stage – so a third of candidates change theirs*

Given that so many European workers view a new job as an opportunity to reinvent themselves, it comes as no surprise that it begins at the interview stage and that six out of ten (59%) believe that personality was very important³ in getting their current job.

So the reinvention often means taking on a new guise: a third of employees (33%) adapted their personality at the interview stage to try and 'fit in' with what they saw as the company culture. This rises to 41% among workers in their 20s, suggesting younger candidates feel under the most pressure to conform, while the UK and Ireland are the hotspots of European interviewee persona change with 45% and 49% respectively.

Significantly, the more important people considered personality to be, the more they adapted their personality in the interview.

Employees attempting to change personality to fit in at the interview



3 "very" represents a score of 7, 8, 9 or 10 out of 10

A psychologist's insight

As to how this happens, psychologists believe that candidates are presented with a wide range of non-verbal cues to the company culture as they arrive for an interview, ranging from the corporate logo to the demeanour of the receptionist. This allows them to tailor their own interview persona accordingly.

Furthermore, of the third of employees who changed their personality at interview, three out of ten (31%) did so radically⁴. It then comes as little surprise that around one in seven employees (14%) are feeling stress because they have continued to put up the false front they first employed at the interview stage.

This is why so many businesses are supplementing job interviews with psychometric tests of personality and other forms of assessment. If candidates are 'faking it' to try and fit in, it is likely to lead to problems down the line as the true self emerges. Either the organisation will feel dissatisfied with the individual, or vice versa, and neither is conducive to high performance or retention.

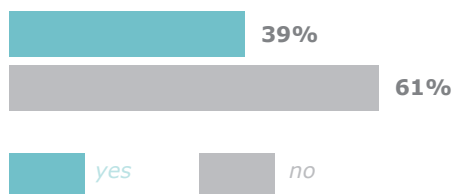
Interviewers in masks

- *Four out of ten employees have a different view of their boss's personality now to the one they saw at interview*

But the interviewee is only half of the recruitment interview process. And the survey found that interviewers are equally quick to adopt a false persona. In fact, four out of ten employees (39%) received an impression of their line manager or boss's personality during the interview process that is different from what they now perceive that personality to be.

4 "radically" represents a score of 7, 8, 9 or 10 out of 10

Employees having a different impression of manager's personality now compared to interview



There are a number of factors that could lead to this phenomenon, including insecurity on the interviewers' part of where they fit into the organisation.

So, on the one hand, a third of all interview candidates are pretending to be someone they might not actually be. On the other, four out of ten interviewers are equally hiding their real personalities. It's no wonder that most recruitment and selection practitioners recommend not relying on interviews alone.

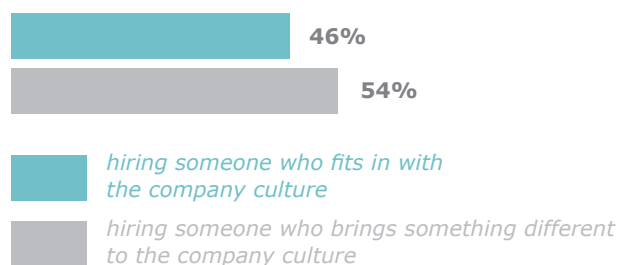
“ I do the minimum required and simply follow instructions – innovation and fresh ideas are not welcomed. ”

Choosing corporate clones

- *Recruiters are split almost fifty-fifty on whether to hire corporate clones or breaths of fresh air*

And yet, it doesn't help that recruiters also seem to struggle when it comes to deciding what personality types to go for. The survey found that 46% favour hiring people whose personalities fit the prevailing company culture, while 54% would choose to hire someone whose personality brings something different to the mix.

Preferences of recruiters for “culture fit”



A psychologist's insight

This split, nearly half and half, demonstrates the lack of clarity among recruiters as to what personality represents and how people best fit into an organisation. Critically, it points to the necessity of using multiple assessment techniques in order to assess a candidate's long term suitability for a role and fit with an organisation. The expertise psychologists can bring to the process can be decisive, particularly for senior roles. Psychometric instruments, behavioural assessment and good interview technique along with careful preparation provide line managers with all the tools they need to hire for performance and longevity.

BELGIUM

– taking a straightforward view

Belgians are among the least likely of the nationalities surveyed to lead a double work life. They are second only to the Dutch in terms of the straightforward approach, as just 39% behave differently at work and at home.

Proportion who behave differently at home from the way they behave at work



In addition, only 22% adapted their personality when interviewing for their current role, again below the European average of 33%. However, two-thirds of them (64%) ranked personality as 'very important'⁵ when it came to landing that position.

And those that have adapted their personality at interview are now particularly likely to be performing well and succeeding in their role.

However, the detrimental effects of impression management are apparent for Belgians as much as for all other nationalities: 43% find it tiring trying to change the way they present their personality – the most in Europe – while 30% find their job is made more stressful as a result of having to adapt in this way at work. In fact, Belgians are the most likely to view the stress thus caused as a constant problem.

In his book *Mind Your Manners*⁶, in which he researches, analyses and explores inter-cultural differences across European nations, John Mole describes the conduct of meetings and organisational debate amongst the Belgians thus: "There is greater concern to find a solution than to win an argument. The process is gradualist, pragmatic [although] the end result can be surprisingly creative".

The Belgians appear to be a nation of diplomats, valuing compromise above all. It seems that the shared, genuine desire to achieve consensus generally removes any pressure to be anything other than themselves. But when that pressure remains, it can be a tiring and stressful experience.

“ Being too over assertive caused friction in the workplace. ”

⁵ "very" represents a score of 7, 8, 9 or 10 out of 10

⁶ *Mind Your Manners: Managing business culture in a global Europe.* John Mole, 2003

DENMARK

– *conformity without stress*

The Danes are close to the European average when it comes to adopting different personas, but they seem to suffer less from stress and negative outcomes. The research found that 45% behave differently at home and at work, close to the survey average of 50%.

The Danes are able to re-invent themselves freely, as 39% admit they are projecting a different persona in their current job than in their previous position (compared with the average of 37%). In addition, three out of ten adapted their personality at interview to fit in (30%), again close to the average of 33%

However, it seems that the Danes largely do not keep up the deception after interview, as 57% of those who did adapt their personality now say they are showing their true personality and succeeding in the organisation (versus a European average of 45%). And in fact, only 4% are suffering stress as a result.

“ I try to fulfil job description requirements and no more. ”

It appears that the Danes are under less pressure from managers or employers to play a part than some of the other countries surveyed. This is confirmed by the finding that only 15% of Danes find it stressful at work to behave in a certain way; this is half the survey average of 28%.

The Danes also feel the need to accentuate the outgoing side of their personality at work; four out of ten (41%) say they accentuate their fun-loving side, versus just 20% of the total.

Proportion who find their job more stressful through being conscious of how they think they should act



The Danish respondents in our survey stand out as being far less likely to experience a negative outcome from adopting a different personality at work. Of the one in three people who admit to trying to 'fit in' at interview, barely one in twenty say it is now causing them strain or that they are failing to fit in.

They are also the least likely of all countries surveyed to say that their impression of their boss's personality has changed since working for him or her. This may be due to the boss being seen as a coach or team leader to the group, and a valuing of competence and professionalism over considerations of hierarchy in Denmark.

John Mole explains: "There is an emphasis on open communication and consultation at all levels and sharing of objectives and goals. If something goes wrong, the priority is to bring it out into the open and take steps to make sure that it does not happen again."

In a workplace where collaboration and shared accountability are rewarded, and the role of the manager is focused on providing support, people naturally feel freer to be themselves without fear of failure or reprisal.

GERMANY

– cooperative hierarchy

The Germans tend to compartmentalise their lives, with a different personality for home and social life, and a professional persona for work. They are significantly more likely than average (58% as against 50%) to behave differently at home than at the workplace.

However, they are noticeably less likely than average to project a different personality at their current job compared with their previous position (34% versus 37%). In addition, they are less likely than average to adapt their personality at interview to fit in (28% versus 33%)

However, those that do adapt their personality at interview are less likely than average to show their real personality when in the job; 34% do so, versus the survey total of 45%.

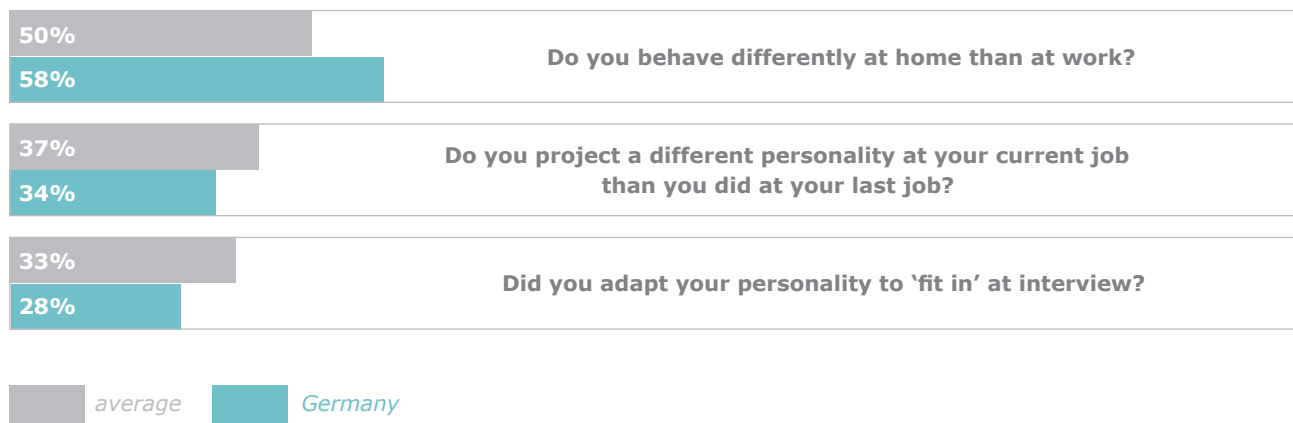
The Germans are the most likely of the nationalities surveyed to accentuate their co-operative side (50% versus 36% on average) and their creative side (33% versus 23%) in the workplace.

The survey found that 23% of Germans who adapted their personality to fit in at interview are feeling the strain. These moderately high figures reflect the hierarchically-based, formal working environment in Germany that John Mole describes as “logical, methodical and compartmentalised...there is a universal deference to people in authority”.

A fish out of water in such a culture has little choice but to try and learn to swim convincingly, and this is evidently not without its painful consequences.

“ There are lots of little ways I adapt to suit situations and people. ”

Comparison of Germans vs. European averages in impression management



FRANCE

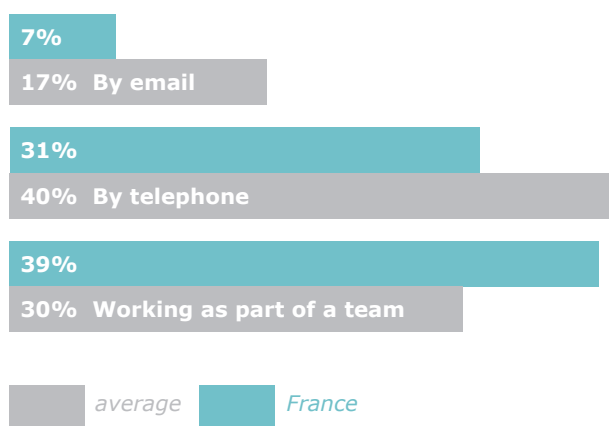
– playing a role

The French may not be chameleons, morphing from one situation to the next, but they are no strangers to playing a part at work, particularly when it comes to interview. Although just under half (46%) behave differently at home and at work, similar to the survey average of 50%, only a third (32%) project a different identity in their current role than in their previous job – the lowest of the countries surveyed.

Four in ten (41%) adapted their personality to fit in at interview, noticeably higher than the survey average of 33% across the UK, France, Denmark, Germany, Belgium and The Netherlands.

When the French adapt their behaviour at work, they are most likely to do it when working in a team (39% versus 30% on average across Europe). They are noticeably less likely than other nationalities to play a role while on the phone or on email.

Situations in which the French attempt to adapt their personality



However, the stress of playing a part at work takes its toll on the French, as they are particularly likely to find their job stressful through being conscious of the way they 'should' act at work (37% agree, versus 28% of the average). These figures are indicative of a working environment driven by competition

In *Mind Your Manners*, John Mole says: "People [in France] find it disconcerting when others do not compete. Professional relationships are founded more on rivalry than collaboration."

Further, almost one in five (18%) of those admitting to self-disguise at interview complain of the strain of adapting their personality at work, and express a desire to change jobs to escape it. This is unsurprising given the exacting and somewhat rigid expectations held of French managers.

Mole notes: "A high degree of analysis, control and technical knowledge...is required of line managers...in dealing with subordinates it is better to err on the side of the directive...there is little of a collegiate atmosphere."

It is not difficult to imagine that those of a more creative, emergent disposition, and less inclined to a structured way of working, experience pressure to change under a highly directive management style.

“ I tried to be quiet and submissive but just got walked over. It wasn't the answer. ”

IRELAND

– *hiding “the real you”*

The Irish are among the most likely of the nationalities surveyed to lead a double life and may suffer stress as a result. They are significantly more likely than average to behave differently at work than they do at home (61% versus 50%).

They are also the European chameleons, most likely to project a different personality in their current position than in their previous job (44% versus 37% across Europe). Equally, they are the most likely of the nations to have adapted their personality to fit in at interview (49% versus 33% on average).

This takes its toll, with 37% reporting they find their job more stressful because they are aware of having to behave in a certain way (compared with 28% on average). The stress has impacted on job performance for 86% of those affected (versus 76% of the total).

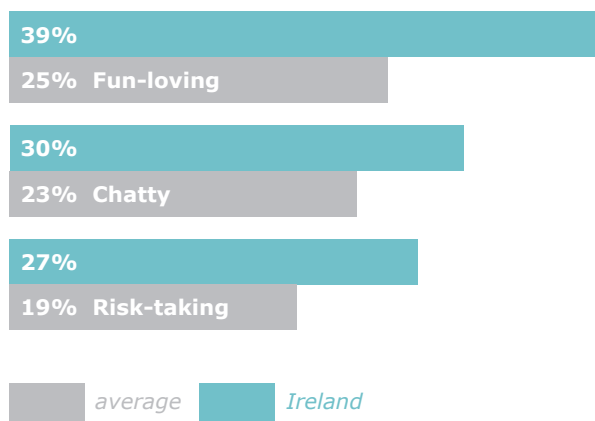
The main personality change Irish employees have to make is to suppress their fun-loving side. Four in ten (39%) suppress this side of their personality at work, compared with just 25% of the total. In contrast, they accentuate their decisive side (43% versus 25%).

The Irish, then, lead European respondents in the two-way dance of dissembling to fit in with expectations, whether as interviewee or interviewer. A curious mixture exists in Irish respondents of substantial behaviour adaptation yet with minimal professed personal impact.

John Mole’s research found “a pervasive informality and an antipathy toward pretence and pretension”. It is as if the Irish accept that the interview process is something of a game, after which relationships will be built which dictate the terms of interactions.

Yet Mole warns of assuming this is straightforward. He says: “[In our research] Irish respondents were unusual in not listing personal contacts as the main success factor in an individual’s career” and “[informality] can be misleading...amiable frankness is combined with astuteness and often stubbornness”.

Comparison of key traits accentuated/suppressed in the workplace



“ It stressed me out that I was not more professional. ”

THE NETHERLANDS

– *what you see is what you get*

The Dutch, like the Belgians, seem to feel less need to change their personality to fit in with company culture or expectations. They are least likely of the countries surveyed to behave differently at home than at work (36% versus 50% across Europe).

Just one in five (20%) adopted a different personality at interview to fit in with the company culture, compared with the 33% average, while the same proportion feel the need to adapt their behaviour for their boss/line manager, compared with 32% of the total.

Percentage trying to adapt personality at interview to fit the company culture



Even those employees who did adopt a different persona at interview now seem to be showing their real personality at work and succeeding as a result (56%, versus 45% on average).

“ It led me to question myself. ”

Again, John Mole’s research offers some insights into doing business in The Netherlands: “In discussion there is a sense that ideas are objective and independent of the people uttering them...relationships at all levels are generally natural and highly tolerant. Communication is open and transparent.”

Due to the fact that the Dutch are far less likely than average to adopt a different persona in all work circumstances, they are also significantly less likely than average to suffer stress through being conscious of the way they should act (15% compared with 28% across Europe).

As John Mole explains: “The Dutch are not good at keeping secrets and are uncomfortable with deviousness...people will not assent to a position unless they are convinced that it is right...it treads on individual’s rights to hold a different opinion.”

In a prevailing climate where forthrightness is valued, donning a mask so as to fit in is regarded as tantamount to lying – as well as counter-productive to a good outcome.

– living a double life

In the UK, there is a clear dichotomy between home and work personality and workers are suffering as a result. They are particularly likely to feel pressure to fit in, which adds to their stress.

Two-thirds (64%) behave differently at home and at work, the highest of the countries surveyed. Also, UK employees are able to change identities freely between jobs, with 43% admitting they are projecting a different personality at their present job compared with their previous one, notably higher than the survey average of 37%.

Employees trying to change personality at work from previous to current job



At interview, 45% of UK workers adapted their personality to fit in, again much higher than the European average of 33%. A high proportion of those surveyed in the UK admit they are suffering strain as a result of the need to continue to adapt their personality (20% versus 14% on average).

The need to role-play causes stress among UK employees: four out of ten (39%) find their job more stressful through being conscious of having to act in a certain way – the highest proportion of the countries surveyed.

John Mole suggests that “[In British organisations] fairness in relationships is more important than closeness”. He adds: “Passive consensus is important. A concern to avoid disharmony among the group and disloyalty to the boss will smooth over all but the most fundamental disagreement.”

This would help account for why 25% of Brits suppress their assertive side at work, and a startling 42% accentuate their cooperative side. A further 26% try to conceal the side of their personality that leads them to take risks.

These figures paint the picture of a workforce bent on getting along and avoiding blame of any kind. John Mole describes the relationship between managers and employees thus: “Instructions should be disguised as polite requests...combined with an inbred awkwardness in personal contact, this creates an arm’s length relationship in which both sides are on their guard...it is important to be a ‘nice person’, meaning courteous, unassuming and unabrasive”.

“ People think I am a much harder person than I am. ”

Afterword:

unlocking potential in the workplace

How do organisations help people achieve or accelerate self-awareness and play to their strengths?

‘Successful development in the natural direction yields not only effectiveness but emotional satisfaction and stability as well, whereas the thwarting of the natural development strikes at both ability and happiness’.

– Isabel Briggs Myers, *Gifts Differing*⁷

This research suggests that there are many people in Europe who are neither happy in their work, nor making their best contribution to their organisations. It seems that some parts of their personalities that one might assume European workers regard as assets in their personal lives are actually being suppressed or abandoned as they open the office door in the morning. How can organisations better harness these attributes as sources of energy and innovation in the workplace?

Most organisations, not unreasonably, assume when they hire adults that the process of maturation is largely complete. But the truth is that many people work for years without achieving knowledge of their best natural style, unable to be authentic as employees and leaders, their personal and professional growth stunted by expectations, environment and ingrained ‘safe’ patterns of behaviour.

In the following section, we look at the value of using a psychological model – in this case, the theory of type as embodied in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®) – as the basis for developing and deploying organisational talent and unleashing individual potential.

⁷ *Gifts Differing: Understanding personality types*, Isabel Briggs Myers with Peter B. Myers

1. How many people ask themselves these basic questions when reviewing their career options:

What’s the most important feature of my ideal job?

- *It gives me the chance to use my special abilities and talents?*
- *It enables me to be creative and original?*
- *It allows me to look forward to a stable and secure future?*
- *It gives me the chance to earn well?*
- *It provides the opportunity for me to be of service to others?*

Research and anecdotal evidence demonstrates that these different drivers would naturally lead people to be successful in different careers. Even mid-career, each answer dictates a different psychological contract between employer and employee.

Whilst it’s often too late – and inappropriate – to advocate career change, managers who observe their people constantly struggling to ‘fit’ need to help their people explore these questions, and use the insight obtained to motivate them anew or guide them toward more fulfilling paths within the organisation.

2. ‘When people understand and admire someone whose type is close to theirs they are...appreciating their own best qualities...’

– Isabel Briggs Myers, *Gifts Differing*

Psychometric instruments not only provide insight into variations in personality but also a positive language for discussing them. Imagine a team in which everyone is data-driven, task-focused and outgoing. How will the team member who sees the big picture, puts people first and is more apt to keep to himself thrive and maintain his own identity with pride?

But provide a vocabulary for describing each attribute and preference in a positive way and everyone begins to benefit from gaining new perspectives on the world. With genuine understanding of difference comes acceptance and appreciation.

The more such differences (and their visible consequences as behaviour) surface and are discussed, the greater the chances of changing the 'I know you're not like me – but you should try harder to be' mentality which pervades some groups and indeed, whole organisational cultures.

3. 'An obvious hindrance to development is a simple lack of opportunity to exercise the favoured processes or attitudes. [Certain personality types] will not trust and exercise their preferences, which, accordingly, will not be developed enough to be successful.'

– Isabel Briggs Myers, Gifts Differing

As talent management and its ethos of maximising potential become business-as-usual for many (large) organisations, there's a danger that development happens by rote, rather than in a way that best fits personality type and learning style.

If one starts from the assumption that more fully realised personalities make for better leaders, successful personal growth must depend on self-insight and exploration – preferably as the foundation of the development process. It's tempting to focus on competency-based approaches that up the ante on 'what I can do' when what really generates a shift in performance of the level required for major career transitions is a more conscious and comfortable 'who I am'.

It's important to remember that development assignments not only enable the acquisition of new skills but should also be set up to provide the opportunity for greater self-knowledge and honesty about personal strengths and current limitations. 'What have you learned about you?' is every bit as important to review as 'what have you learned about the job and the organisation?'

Equally, where there is an unexpected case of under-performance against expectations, the 'fish out of water' syndrome may be to blame. Exploring some of the earth-shaking personal challenges associated with 'needing to be different' in a new role can unlock hidden reasons for apparent failure post promotion and rescue promising talent from wasting away.

4. 'If nothing [children] ever do is right or successful or applauded, they may take refuge in doing as little as possible.'

– Isabel Briggs Myers, Gifts Differing

Studies on child development reveal that children's coping skills are best developed when they're presented with problems and dissatisfactions and helped to deal with them responsibly. The more accountability they accept successfully, the more autonomy they should be rewarded with, and the virtuous circle evolves.

Understanding and paying real attention to personality in the workplace is a similar process, with the intention of promoting empowerment in a workforce who are willing to own and deal with day-to-day job challenges.

Once managers are armed with insight into type, they can provide feedback and support that is resonant and makes a real difference to performance because it taps into an individual's world view. It can be summed up as: 'Speak to me in my language and speak to me of my strengths, so that I can be stronger'.

5. 'Growth is a stretching process and [people] do not stretch their perception or their judgement until they try to do something well.'

– Isabel Briggs Myers, Gifts Differing

Managers can use an understanding of type to help engage seasoned employees in the idea of continuous professional and personal growth. Their known strengths will likely be tried and tested, even where they are not always fully called upon. But they will have seen glimpses in themselves over the years of other styles of working, and it's these that they should be encouraged to draw on now.

For example, those who've spent twenty years in a sales function will be used to making decisions, influencing and planning in ways which have proven effective for them. Their manager's job is not to undermine these practices but to keep challenging the individuals to think differently about opportunities; approaching the relationship with the client and their own organisation with fresh insight; remaining open to learning and new ideas.

It need not be as dramatic as, say, involving someone who has always used logic and analysis in their work in mentoring a younger employee. It could simply be suggesting a different approach to problem-solving; collaboration rather than a solo effort; a practical role in a project rather than a hand in the policy, perhaps. Managers need only use their imagination to re-activate the aspirations of the many 'steady hands' that surround them.

6. 'For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body...and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing...'

– Romans ch12 v4-8

Our experience is that teams in which members understand and accept each other – and truly respect other people's different ways of thinking – are stronger than the sum of their parts.

This synergy is born out of a more in-depth and multi-perspectival understanding of a given project or topic. Because the team collectively is more aware of how different orientations might colour how something is received, the members are able to produce a solution that will appeal to the maximum number of customers or audiences.

Further, if people are to be engaged in their work, they deserve 'a spot of firm ground to stand on and a place in which to be themselves'. (Isabel Briggs Myers). Sustained teambuilding activity – in short bursts at team meetings, in one-to-ones, in more structured learning events – generates continual change and true respect for difference. When a manager shows appreciation of all types and preferences and elicits complementary contributions from each individual member of the team, strength in diversity is realised.

“ I felt happy and true to myself. ”

“ I realised afterwards that I could have 'been myself' and produced the same results. ”

Impression management – Q & A

Q:	Why do we use impression management?
A:	It serves a number of purposes. It often boosts our self-confidence and self-esteem when we pretend to be something or someone else. For example, if we claim to be an expert at something and other people accept this, it makes us feel good. When we get a reputation it helps us influence others and increases our chances of getting choice job assignments and even promotion opportunities.
Q:	Is impression management good or bad?
A:	Often impression management is linked to self-interest, but self-interest is only one of many motives for changing one's personality. Whether impression management is good or bad, ethical or unethical, it really depends on why it is used and what it does. If a manager shows consideration so that her employees become a more effective and productive work group, few would call this bad behaviour. However if the same manager used the trust that she had gained in order to get her employees to do something that was not in their best interest, that would be a different story. Of course, where impression management is used for political gain, it can be destructive of trust and relationships, creating a culture where point-scoring and blame-dodging are endemic.
Q:	Does impression management imply we are constantly changing our identities?
A:	The answer is sometimes yes and sometimes no. There are limits to the extent that we can change and too much inconsistency can lead others to doubt our integrity and sincerity. Over time, actions speak louder than words and in general people are more impressed by actions.
Q:	Does everyone use impression management?
A:	Studies of different cultures suggest that impression management is a universal phenomenon. Within cultures it is clear that certain people are more likely to try than others and certain people are likely to be better at it than others.
Q:	Does impression management really work?
A:	There is abundant research to say that, judiciously used, impression management can work to make people view us more positively. However, relationships in business are built over time, and where impression management becomes a substitute for building an authentic leadership style, it impacts on consistency and credibility and can be damaging.
Q:	Does impression management affect the impression manager?
A:	It affects the way we think about ourselves. It can produce self-fulfilling prophecies when people are impressed by our behaviour. However, there is also research to suggest that people find it stressful to maintain a consistent impression of themselves over a long period.
Q:	What are the most common forms of impression management?
A:	Ingratiation and self-promotion are widely used in all cultures. In many work situations, impression management is used to support excuses, justifications and damage control.



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