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Scientific personalities

Ever since a high-school career-competency test suggested that I should consider a working future in something vaguely mechanical, I've been suspicious of surveys that use standardized tests to chart one's working life. This doubt might have something to do with my inability to open a bottle of wine without causing serious bodily harm, or my ineffective attempts to tame an incessantly running toilet, despite various jiggings, turning of bolts, adjustments of chains — and frequent curses.

So a recent survey that claimed to measure different scientific personalities elicited more than my usual amount of scepticism. Would the survey tell scientists not to bother; that they were in the wrong profession? But after close scrutiny, the results reported by the Science Advisory Board (www.scienceboard.net), based in Arlington, Virginia, yielded some real utility.

The survey used questions to assign scientists to one of four personality types: leader, organizer, explorer and enthusiast. Each personality type has distinct characteristics that make them more suitable for certain aspects of the scientific enterprise. Leaders are best suited to be lab managers, institute directors and chief executives. Explorers are visionaries, less inclined to organization and communication, but more inclined to pushing the frontiers of science. Organizers are basically leaders, without a management bent, methodically interested in data. And enthusiasts are the worker bees, happy to follow scientists in the other three categories.

These divisions are useful for scientists who want to know more about themselves and are keen to match up their next position with their own personality — which they could probably discern without taking the test. But the exercise has helped me to make a decision, at least about my domestic future. I plan to get a new corkscrew and to call a plumber.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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