

New and Noteworthy

The Yin and Yang of Personality Types

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Is there a “librarian personality?”

For many outside the profession, the answer is relatively straightforward. The stereotypical librarian image has been, until fairly recently, generally negative: librarians tend to be unattractive, rigid, punitive, unfriendly, or at best, timid, shy and unassuming¹.

For those of us who work in libraries and information organizations, the answer is much more nuanced. Of course, some librarians may happen to exhibit some “traditional” role-based characteristics, but more often, our colleagues represent a wide variety of different skills and personality styles. A number of recent studies in library literature shed light on the importance of personality in library and information center environments. How do we manage daily interactions with librarians and library staff who operate from a different style than our own? What implications do current personality studies have for librarians as administrators and managers? What characteristics do successful library managers generally exhibit?

Many of the popular portrayals on personalities in library settings skew towards the image of a library employee who tends to be quieter and more reflective: in short, librarian as introvert. The introvert/extrovert dichotomy was introduced by psychologist C.G. Jung in 1921, in his book *Psychological Types*. Jung thought that introverts are basically inward-centered, more oriented toward feeling and thought, whereas extroverts draw their energy from outside people and events. A popular and well-known source of personality style information, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), is based on Jung’s personality theories².

One interesting 2003 study classifies the perceived character traits of fictional librarians in 28 films, such as Evie Carnahan in *The Mummy*, Marian Paroo in *The Music Man*, and Bunny Watson in *Desk Set*, using the MBTI³. Of 16 possible type combinations (iNtroversion or Extroversion, Sensing or iNtuition, Thinking or Feeling, Judging or Perceiving), most of the librarians were classified as ISFJ, or Introverted-Sensing-Feeling-Judging. According to the MBTI, characteristics of an ISFJ individual include being:

“quiet, friendly, responsible, and conscientious. Committed and steady in meeting their obligations. Thorough, painstaking, and accurate. Loyal, considerate, notice and remember specifics about people who are important to them, concerned with how others feel. Strive to create an orderly and harmonious environment at work and at home.”

Overall, in those films in which the librarian plays a “positive” role, he or she has a personality type tending towards idealism and helpfulness; the “negative” librarian types are “manipulative, freewheeling, and highly extroverted” (p. 52).

This 2003 study compares its findings against a landmark research project conducted in 1994 by Mary Jane Scherdin under the auspices of the Association of College and Research Libraries⁴. This project investigated which personality types are actually represented among the ranks of practicing librarians. Using a revised version of the MBTI, the Strong Interest Inventory, and a demographic survey, Scherdin found that 63 percent of the study's 1,600 respondents were Introverted, 60% Intuitive, 61% Thinking, and 66% Judging. The two most frequent personality types were ISTJ (Introverted-Sensing-Thinking-Judging) at 17%, and INTJ (Introverted-Intuitive-Thinking-Judging) at 12 percent. Further, the study indicated that, at 1% of survey respondents, extroverted personality types were not as common in library fields as the introverted types. Additional areas of the study compared data with the general population, other occupations, and different disciplines within library and information science fields (technical services, adult public services, children's public services, administration and automation).

In addition to studies such as the 2003 "librarians in film" analysis, this comprehensive survey presents opportunities for further research. For example, an interesting follow-up article from Scherdin compares the prevailing personality preferences of librarians and college classroom faculty⁵. Similarities between these occupational groups are conducive to useful partnerships, in Scherdin's view. Librarians and classroom faculty have similar personality preferences as measured by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). These preferences make them natural partners in the academic world. Specific examples of librarians working together with faculty are presented, giving special emphasis to the four most common types for librarians.

In addition to the MBTI, other personality tests often used in the workplace include the Keirsey Temperament Sorter, Big-5 Inventory, DISC assessment, Strong Interest Inventory, Enneagram of Personality, and many others⁶. However, regardless of the instrument used, a key question in occupational personality studies involves the ways that manager and employee personality styles affect daily interactions with each other. Given that so many librarians seem to tend towards an introverted personality style, what are the implications for introverted librarians in leadership and management positions? Can introverts be effective leaders?

Recent literature on the topic suggests that far from being a liability, extroversion is actually a valuable leadership strength. Former corporate lawyer Susan Cain thoughtfully addresses the unique issues facing introverts in her new book, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*⁷. According to Cain, the "ideal self" in Western society is outgoing, friendly, and comfortable in social situations; public institutions such as schools, businesses and religious institutions emphasize working together in groups and social events. Thus, many people with an introverted tendency may feel as though something is wrong with them, and that they have to change their personality to be successful. This is a waste of potential and talent, in Cain's opinion. In his review of *Quiet*, William Pannacker notes that, "Cain argues for the value of introverts in a culture that has a long history of privileging extroversion—something, she argues, that has only grown more powerful, and perhaps costly, in recent decades. It's a trend that affects business, religion, education, parenting, and just about everyone's sense of self-worth in the United States"⁸.

A theme in much of the library literature on personality types involves the necessity of blending different styles in work environments. For example, Milford and Wisotzke discuss the unique strengths that introverts can bring to public service interactions in access services and reference departments⁹. "In many ways, including their reflective stance, listening skills, and strength in one-to-one interactions," state the authors, "introverts have the potential to give their extroverted

colleagues—whose people skills are certainly enviable—a run for their money in the customer service department” (p. 23). One particularly useful part of this article is an addendum on “How to Cope,” which lists five techniques for introverts who work in customer service.

Another potential problem area for introverted librarians is networking. Jill Strand, writing in the March/April 2012 issue of *Information Outlook*, shares networking tips for introverts from several Special Libraries Association members¹⁰. Networking can be an introvert's nightmare; as Strand explains, it “often involves walking up to complete strangers and finding something in common to discuss. You have to engage, listen and share. No wonder so many people find this overwhelming” (p. 28). Suggested techniques to help navigate networking events include finding another person who is alone, ask open-ended and follow-up questions, and even wear nice clothes to inspire confidence.

Kaczorowski and Pinto's 2009 *AALL Spectrum* article provides a brief and to-the-point primer for how introverted law librarians might most effectively deal with reference interviews, budget meetings, elevator conversations, and vendors. According to the authors, most librarians tend to be either the ISTJ or INTJ personality type: thinkers and judgers, sensing and intuitive, and predominantly introverted. Thus, many law librarians share a tendency towards thinking and judging with their primary clientele, attorneys and judges. However, given that that people in these professions tend towards extraversion, law librarians need to tailor their interactions with them accordingly¹¹.

Each personality style has its own strengths and weaknesses; the key is balance. A recent research study published in the *Academy of Management Journal* finds that extroverted leaders are not always the most effective at moving their organizations forwards, in particular if they are leading other extroverts. Drawing on dominance complementarity theory, the study examines the popular assumption that extroverted people make better leaders because of their outgoing natures and high charisma. However, extroverts do not always focus on the needs and opinions of their team members, which can result in poor performance and morale. By the same token, an introverted leader may be more likely to consider the ideas of his or her team members, but if most of them are introverts as well, then the team may not be efficient at making decisions and moving forward¹².

Current research and commentary on personality styles in the workplace indicate the necessity of blending and balancing individual strengths for the betterment of the organization. There is no one “right” personality style for library managers, no more than for librarians and library staff. Each style serves as yin to the other's yang. As Mary Jane Scherdin and Anne K. Beaubien observe:

“The survival of our profession depends on diversity. The field needs those who are accurate and detail-minded (Sensing preference), as well as those with vision (Intuitive), those who get things done on schedule (Judging), and those who are open to new possibilities (Perceiving), those who plunge quickly into new opportunities (Extrovert), and those with a more cautious and questioning approach (Introvert). All approaches are valuable and complement one another.”¹³

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¹ The issue of public perception, whether positive or negative, continues to be an area of professional interest. The magazine of the American Library Association, *American Libraries*, features a monthly opinion column, "How the World Sees Us," consisting of library-related comments from the media.

² For an overview of MBTI basics, an extensive bibliography and more, see The Myers Briggs Foundation website at <http://www.myersbriggs.org>. A brief explanation of each of the 16 MBTI categories may be found at <http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/the-16-mbti-types.asp>.

³ Jeanine Williamson, "Jungian/Myers-Briggs Personality Types of Librarians in Films," *The Reference Librarian* 37 (2003): 47-59. For other interesting compilations of librarians in film and television, see Martin Raish's "Librarians in the Movies: An Annotated Filmography" (no longer updated) at <http://emp.byui.edu/RAISHM/films/introduction.html>; and "Movie Librarians: Notable Librarians & Libraries in Films" at <http://home.earthlink.net/~movielibrarians/>.

⁴ Mary Jane Scherdin, "Vive la Différence: Exploring Librarian Personality Types Using the MBTI[®]," in *Discovering Librarians: Profiles of a Profession*, ed. Mary Jane Scherdin (Chicago: ACRL, 1994), 125-156.

⁵ M.J. Scherdin, "How Well Do We Fit? Librarians and Faculty in the Academic Setting," *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 2 (2002): 237-253.

⁶ One additional, entertaining (albeit unscientific) assessment geared toward libraries is a Harry Potter-themed personality assessment introduced by Connie J. Bennett in "'Librarians and Harry Potter: An Introduction of the SHHH! Personality Assessment Instrument,'" *OLA Quarterly* 14 (Spring 2008): 9-13. Based on Stephen Wille's Tough Teams, the Keirsey Temperament Sorter, a comparison of four preference personality types, and an analysis of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, this assessment takes standard personality test results as the basis for "sorting" librarians into the four Hogwarts houses. According to this construct, most librarians (34.6%) would be sorted into Hufflepuff, closely followed by Slytherin at 34.4%.

⁷ Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (New York: Crown, 2012). Other recommended books on introversion are Marti Olson Laney, *The Introvert Advantage: How to Thrive in an Extrovert World* (New York: Workman, 2002); Erika B. Hilliard, *Living Fully with Shyness and Social Anxiety: A Comprehensive Guide to Gaining Social Confidence* (New York: Marlowe, 2005); Lisa Petrilli, *The Introvert's Guide to Success in Business and Leadership* (Chicago: C-Level Strategies, 2011); and Jennifer B. Kahnweiler, *The Introverted Leader: Building on Your Quiet Strength* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009).

⁸ William Pannapacker, "Screening Out the Introverts," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 15, 2012), <http://chronicle.com/article/Screening-Out-the-Introverts/131520/>.

⁹ Robin Milford and Tania Wisotzke, "Introverts and Customer Service in the Library: An Unexpected Fit," *OLA Quarterly* 17 (Fall 2011): 22-26.

¹⁰ Jill Strand, "Networking for Introverts," *Information Outlook* 16 (March/April 2012): 28-9.

¹¹ Monice M. Kaczorowski and Holly Pinto, "Getting Personal: Understanding Personality Types for Better Communication," *AALL Spectrum* 13 (Feb. 2009): 18-19, 33.

¹² Adam M. Grant, Francesca Gino, and David A. Hofmann, "Reversing the Extraverted Leadership Advantage: The Role of Employee Proactivity," *Academy of Management Journal* 54 (2011): 528-550.

¹³ Mary Jane Scherdin and Anne K. Beaubien, "Shattering Our Stereotype: Librarians' New Image," *Library Journal* (July 1995): 35-38.