

different strokes

*To maximise your potential, break out of the crowd
and do it your way.*

By Yvonne Eve Walus

You've been asked to conduct a survey and have spent hours designing a colourful questionnaire that's professional but light-hearted in tone. Your boss, however, insists that a sombre set of analytical questions is more appropriate. You try to comply, but despite your best efforts, the survey doesn't seem to take shape. You feel frustrated and demotivated, and begin to wonder why you even bothered coming to work.

What you've just experienced is a typical example of mismatched working styles – yours is not compatible with that of your boss. Barbara Prashnig, director of the Auckland-based Creative Learning Company and a leading New Zealand expert in this field, defines working style as the way people concentrate, perform tasks, make decisions and solve problems. "Some people are analytical in their work and perform tasks step by step," she explains. "Others prefer to approach problems holistically."

Analytics, or people with left-brain dominance, are generally sequential thinkers who like facts, details and logic. They tend to keep their work area neat and organised, have perfect filing systems, deal with one project at a time and are deadline-driven. Keeping "to do" lists is a favourite hobby and if they complete a task not on the list, they'll probably add it - just for the satisfaction of crossing it out. Analytics are the ones who know the price of eggs in the local dairy, roll up the toothpaste tube and always replace the lid. An analytic cook follows every step of a recipe and, if she doesn't have an ingredient, will drive to the shop to get it.

BORN TO IT OR BRED TO IT?

Our working styles are influenced by a mix of habit and innate factors that are impossible to change. The way you prefer to work is shaped by the following inborn elements:

- the way your brain processes information (analytic or holistic)
- the way you make decisions (impulsive or reflective)
- your preferred method of absorbing new information: auditory (through your ears), visual (through your eyes), tactile (through your hands) or kinesthetic (by action and moving your whole body)
- your physical needs (the desire to move around rather than sit still for too long, wanting to nibble constantly, the inability to concentrate early in the morning)
- your environmental needs (do you prefer silence or background noise, a brightly lit office or more subtle lighting, a warm or cool room temperature, a structured or informal work area?)

PLUS any combination of the following learned elements:

- social (working alone, in a pair, in a team or with a supervisor)
- attitudes (your level of motivation, persistence, responsibility, conformity, need for structure and variety)

Right-brained people, or holistics, are multi-processors. They aren't interested in the nitty-gritty of issues. Instead, they need to know the overall picture; the reasons behind a project rather than the deadline. Piles of paper gather dust on their desks and office floor, yet they're able to find any document at a moment's notice. Holistics tend to rely on their intuition or feelings rather than rationalise about a problem. A holistic cook never ever keeps a shopping list, doesn't stick to recipes and is happy to substitute Milo for cocoa powder in her chocolate cake.

So, which group do you fall into? Take our test (*What's Your Style?*) on page 3 to find out. But the way that your brain processes information is simply the tip of the iceberg when it comes to working style. Something as simple as a personal preference for a warm office can affect your job enjoyment and your career success. We all have quirks and habits that impact on the way we operate. For example, some people need to chew or nibble while concentrating, others fidget. Some are larks and others, night owls.

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Sandra, who is employed by a marketing company, spends her weekends reading until 2am, then sleeps in until lunchtime. That's her natural rhythm. On Monday mornings, however, she has to be out of bed before 7am to attend weekly meetings at the office. "My boss is so clearly a morning person, it hurts," she complains. "He arrives at work at 8.30 every Monday morning, fresh and energetic. My two colleagues await him, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed and full of creativity. All I can do is gulp my coffee, mug after mug and stifle my yawns." The problem is not that Sandra isn't stimulated by her *work*. "Marketing is my life," she says, her face glowing as she talks about her ideas for this year's brochures and the new cold-marketing approach that she's devising." But is it my fault that my best ideas come around midnight? Once the house is dark and quiet, and everyone is asleep, I really enjoy playing around with colour and layout. Sandra's working style isn't wrong; neither is the way her boss prefers to work. They are, however, incompatible. Research on why we all work differently is inconclusive - even siblings can display working preferences which vary from one another and from their parents. But when our natural diversity causes conflict, there is some room for flexibility. The best approach is to analyse the way you operate, then make allowances for your inborn preferences - the ones you can't change (see *Born To It Or Bred To It?*) on page 1 and try to "unlearn" the habits or learned behaviours that are causing the problem.

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Although you can't alter your inborn preferences, you can make colleagues aware of your needs. If, for example, you are a reflective decision-maker, let those around you know that being forced to make instant decisions is stressful for you and diminishes the chances of your making the right choice. If you need "intake" when you concentrate (chewing gum, snacks, drinking water), explain to your peers that you're not being sloppy or unprofessional when you're munching an apple while designing ball gowns - you simply need mouth stimulation to concentrate. Some bosses may let you work flexi-time to accommodate your preference for completing difficult tasks in the evening.

Another factor that can influence concentration is noise level. Walk into any newsroom and you'll hear several conversations and the beeping of two fax machines competing with the TV. But put Jane, a software engineer, in that kind of environment and you'll lose a valuable employee. "When my company moved offices, people at work thought I was antisocial because I didn't like the idea of an open-plan area", she says. "It's so difficult to explain that you don't have any secrets and you don't want to nap in the afternoon, you simply need peace and quiet to be able to do your job." For a while, Jane resorted to earplugs. Eventually, she was able to convince her colleagues that, for her, a separate office was not a status symbol but a necessity.

Sometimes the environmental factors that affect our performance are so subtle we don't stop to think about them. Lighting, for example. Do you prefer working in a darkish room or one filled with bright electric light? Do you think better when your bare arms tingle from the cold, or when you're wrapped up in a big woollen jersey? Is your desk tidy and your paperwork in neatly labelled files, or do you use your in-tray to store your lunch while you litter the floor with piles of work that needs doing?

Learned preferences, however, are habits and attitudes you've acquired and which can be unlearned if necessary. But because there's no right or wrong when it comes to working styles, you should consider altering them only if they interfere with your job. And try to change only one element of your working style at a time - it makes it easier, if you'd like to learn to work in teams, for example, select a project you'll enjoy and a peer you like. But don't try to work on your motivation at the same time.

Time management is another area everyone copes with in a unique manner — those with a strong left-hemisphere dominance tend to be organised, punctual, almost compulsive planners who find routine reassuring. In contrast, those with a strong right-hemisphere dominance prefer a seemingly chaotic environment with no deadlines, limits, diaries or appointments to keep; they're spontaneous and find routine stifling. But it is possible to "learn" a different style of time management.

Bhavini, a 24-year-old public relations officer at a corporate organisation, is a typical right-hemisphere processor, but in her job she is required to be organised. Aware of her preferred working conditions, she realised that being informal was her style, not a character flaw, but accepted that she had to make a change.

"So I bought a large leather-bound notebook and a set 44 coloured pens — not just red and green, but gold and Silver too," she says. "I drew caricatures of people I had to meet and cartoons of to-do things, suddenly, I was actually looking forward to opening my diary!"

Subtle differences in the way people operate are inevitable and quite natural. Some people enjoy straight-backed chairs, others have to put their feet up on the desk to think. The problem, however, arises when your superiors don't see it that way. Some are autocratic and believe THEIR recipe for success is the only one that will work. That's when a calm manner and patient approach pays off.

different strokes cont'd

Bhavini, who is also an impulsive decision-maker, needs light, warmth and the absence of supervision to reach her full potential. To satisfy her environmental needs, a sunny office would have been ideal, but she manages using a desk lamp with a strong light bulb, and by keeping an extra-thick jersey stored in her cupboard.

"But convincing my boss to let me work on my own was difficult," she says. "It took months. I started by taking the initiative. Instead of waiting for him to tell me it was time for another press release, I'd show him the finished product, together with a list of potential recipients."

"At first, he moaned about my not having consulted him, but once I explained the situation, making sure I did it in a non-challenging way, he accepted my need for personal growth. Now, I'm allowed to send off work that my boss hasn't even seen. But he still likes having progress meetings about larger projects, and while I value his input, my next goal is to be able to work according to my own deadlines and objectives."

Once you've examined your own working preferences, observe how those around you like to work. A better understanding of the people you deal with on a daily basis can help improve your communications, resolve conflict and build better teams. Accepting and respecting people's diversity creates a better workplace.

WHAT'S YOUR STYLE?

Are you analytic (left-brain dominant) or holistic (right-brain dominant)? Here's a quick questionnaire to help you decide. Score each statement on a scale of one to 10 where one = no way, five = sometimes, and 10 = absolutely.

1. I base decisions on objective facts rather than feelings.
2. I am psychic.
3. I like using symbols or images in solving problems.
4. I am artistically or musically creative.
5. I am logical.
6. I am good at solving crossword puzzles.
7. I can read quickly.
8. My daydreams are vivid.
9. I can think of synonyms for words easily.
10. I can remember dreams.
11. I like to talk a lot.
12. I am fluent in using words.
13. I am good at using hinges in remembering and thinking.
14. I use a playful approach to problem solving.
15. I use a serious, all business approach to problem solving.
16. I like to keep experiences planned and structured.
17. I like to read and think while sitting upright.
18. My thinking consists of words.
19. My thinking consists of mental imagery.
20. I like to explain something using a visual presentation.

SCORING

The statements in questions 1, 5, 6, 7, 9, 12, 16, 16, 17 and 18 indicate a left-brain preference.

Add up your answers to these questions. TOTAL: ____

Now add up your answers to the right-brain preference questions: 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 19 and 20. TOTAL: ____

If the left-brain preference figure is larger, you tend to be analytical; if the right-brain preference figure is larger, you're holistic. If the difference between the two figures is less than seven, it indicates that you're comfortable processing information with both sides of your brain.

SO, YOU THINK YOU HATE YOUR JOB...

It might not be the actual work that's the problem. If you find it hard to concentrate or feel stressed on entering your office, it's possible that one of your biological needs is not being satisfied. Ask yourself:

- Do you prefer sitting in one place or moving about?
- Do you have a constant urge to smoke, chew, or nibble?
- Is your best time of day early in the morning, in the late morning, after lunch or in the evening?
- Do you need silence or sound when concentrating?
- Should the light be bright or dim?
- Do you prefer the temperature to be cool or warm?
- Do you prefer a tidy desk or are you happier in a mess (creative chaos)?