

Chalk & Cheese... Normative vs Ipsative Assessments – Different Designs, Different Applications

At a glance: Most **ipsative** personality assessments (like Predictive Index, Myers-Briggs, Thomas, DiSC, McQuaig, etc.) are only suitable for applications where there is no need to compare the test results of different people, for example in coaching or team building. However, only **normative** tests (like 16PF, NEO, PeopleClues, Prevue, etc.) should be used in selection circumstances that require comparative analysis of traits, job-fit behaviours, and the prediction of job performance.

Many users of personality assessments are unaware that assessments (or tests) are constructed for different purposes. These design differences mean that they are not all alike and cannot all be used for the same applications. The inappropriate use of tests can lead to wrong people decisions, diminished performance and productivity, misdirected careers and open up any organisation to potential legal issues. So, it is critical that users understand the design intent and limitations and the suitability for purpose of whatever tests they are using or are considering using. Some tests are ipsative and some are normative and there is a fundamental design difference between them and this design affects their suitability for purpose.

A normative assessment measures proven quantifiable personality characteristics on individual scales. A person's "score" for each construct measures a specific set of **traits** against group data or patterns of normality represented on a bell curve and usually includes a social desirability (faking) scale to measure accuracy of responses. Normative testing allows people to be compared to other employees who have met with success or failure in a job – so this can predict candidates who will have the best chances of success if hired or promoted and to help avoid placing people in the wrong positions. **Normative tests are therefore well suited to recruitment and selection applications.**

An ipsative assessment presents candidates with options equal in desirability and requires them to indicate which items are 'most true' of them and which are 'least true' of them in their everyday behaviour. Unlike normative assessments which measure clearly identifiable traits, ipsative assessments indicate only orientations and the relative type of person being assessed. What it does not reveal or predict is how two people with similar patterns or types will actually perform in a job. It is generally accepted that ipsative assessments are ambiguous, because **ipsative literally means using yourself (rather than others or a defined population) as the norm against which to measure something**, for example, your present performance against your past performance (rather than the performance of others).

So, although, ipsative assessments indicate how one individual prefers to respond to problems, people, work pace and procedures, they offer no meaningful correlation to comparative strength or visibility of traits when attempting to compare one person with another. **This inability to compare people means that ipsative assessments are very limited in any application where the purpose is predicting job behaviour and job suitability.**

Ipsative assessments may be effective when used for applications like development, coaching or team building where comparisons among people are not necessary but should not be used in recruitment or selection since in these applications the fundamental purpose is the comparison of people. Using an ipsative assessment for selection is like selecting an investment fund by comparing it only to the company's other funds and without comparing the performance of the fund to other funds in the marketplace.....!

There is a general misconception about the merits of ipsative tools in selection that was initially fostered by test publishers many years ago and which today creates confusion in the marketplace. To quote from Johnson, Wood and Blinkhorn; "publishers and promoters of these (ipsative tests) are either unaware of, or do not understand, or choose to ignore their limitations".

To learn more about these design limitations and misuse of ipsative personality tools, please see the following articles:

Spuriouser and Spuriouser, The use of ipsative personality tests, Blinkhorn, S.F., Johnson, C.E., & Wood, R.F. *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, 61, 153-162, (1988).

Ipsative Personality Tests; Unsound and Unfair, Jim Closs, *Selection and Development Review*, British Psychology Society, Vol. 11(4), August 1995.