Today’s lawyers are a more diverse group of people, coming from a broader range of backgrounds than ever before. Yet despite this sociocultural breadth, within the realm of personality lawyers are more alike than they are different. Moreover, the most commonly found traits also happen to be those most ideally suited to the effective practice of law.

Evidence for these conclusions comes from a nationwide survey of lawyers’ personality styles I conducted last summer. For the survey, 3,014 practicing attorneys—all ABA members—were asked to complete an instrument called the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, or MBTI, a widely used measure of the different personality styles found among all individuals.

The MBTI was developed in the 1940s by Katherine Cook Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers. Building on Carl Jung’s theories about normal personality differences among people, Briggs and Myers distilled Jungian concepts into a simple series of either/or questions designed to indicate people’s preferred ways of focusing mental energy, gathering data, making decisions, and dealing with the world around them.

For lawyers, these preferences show up in communication style, research technique, brief writing, office organization and interaction with colleagues.

It is not a clinical test—that is, it does not measure whether you are mentally healthy. Rather, it is designed prima-

Larry Richard, JD, PhD, a former trial lawyer, is the principal consultant with LawyerBrain LLC, a consulting firm specializing in the legal profession. Dr. Richard, who holds a Ph.D. in psychology, is certified in the MBTI.
more about themselves, and to understand and appreciate differences between themselves and others. It is frequently used in business and professional settings where people work in groups and need to deal constructively with differences. Increasingly it is being embraced by the legal profession.

If you take the MBTI, you will receive a scoring profile that shows your preferences on four scales:
1) Extraversion (E) vs. Introversion (I);
2) Sensing (S) vs. Intuition (N);
3) Thinking (T) vs. Feeling (F); and
4) Judging (J) vs. Perceiving (P).

Each of these scales represents dichotomous ways of performing mental tasks. According to Jung, when performing such a task, each of us is more comfortable with one of the two “preferences” described in each scale. Over time, we will more often prefer to use the mental strategy that’s comfortable for us, since it takes less effort, uses less mental energy, and feels more natural. This results in habitual patterns of thinking and behaving.

**Extraversion (E) vs. Introversion (I):** This scale measures one’s comfort with the two psychological worlds we all inhabit—the world outside our own psyches, including people, places and events, and the inner world of thoughts, feelings and sensations. Extraverts prefer to focus their awareness and obtain their mental stimulation primarily from the world around them, while introverts prefer to focus their awareness and obtain their mental stimulation primarily from within. (Jungian psychologists retain the original spelling of “extraversion” to distinguish it from the more vernacular “extraversion.”)

Extraverts tend to be more gregarious, enjoy being the center of attention, and like a lot of action. They also like to think out loud, and typically have a large network of friends. Introverts, on the other hand, prefer more intimate one-on-one relationships, are typically more reserved, prefer to think through ideas alone, and usually shy away from excitement.

While most adults in the United States prefer extraversion, the majority of lawyers prefer introversion. The official user’s manual for the MBTI estimates 75 percent of all adults prefer extraversion. My research showed that only 43 percent of all lawyers prefer extraversion. See Table 1. The manual also indicates that the 75 percent proportion holds true for both men and women in the population at large. In contrast, I found that only 41 percent of male lawyers prefer extraversion, while 49 percent of female lawyers do. See Table 2.

Because extraverts so greatly outnumber introverts, they often fail to realize that such a thing as introversion even exists. They can unwittingly bring this myopia with them into daily firm life. Consider, for example, the extraverted partner who asks an associate for an off-the-cuff opinion about a legal point and then grows impatient when a glib verbal reply is not immediately forthcoming.

These preferences also have a modest influence on the kind of practice area chosen by lawyers. For example, my research showed that labor law attracted the greatest number of extraverts, while real estate law and tax work seem to draw more introverts.

Whatever your practice area, you can use the extraversion/introversion distinction to become a more effective lawyer. One way is to adapt your own style of communication to be more like that of the individual you wish to influence.

Neil Peck, managing partner of Davis, Graham & Stubbs in Denver, whose entire executive committee has taken the MBTI, says, “I find myself rehearsing in my head some of what I heard [in our firm’s Myers-Briggs workshop], namely trying to listen a little more, or maybe saying something in my head before I say it for the first time out loud.”

Peck’s natural tendency, as with many talented litigators, is to allow his ideas to develop as they are coming out of his mouth. “I have thoughts right on the spot that I didn’t know I had…and they come out as they are being formed.”

**Sensing (S) vs. Intuition (N):** Jung postulated two different ways to gather data from the world around us—sensing and intuition. Those who prefer the sensing mode pay more attention to the physical world. They tend to be more interested in facts and data with low ambiguity. Intuitives, on the other hand, are more comfortable paying attention to the abstract impressions they perceive, to the meanings behind the data, and to the relationships among the various facts.

Ask a sensor to describe the season spring and you’ll hear, “Spring: Starts on March 21st. More rainfall. Warmer temperatures. Green grass. Baseball season.” Ask an intuitive the same thing, and you’ll hear, “Oh, spring is a time of rebirth, of renewal. It’s a greening of the spirit.”

This dimension is strongly related to job choice. Sensors more often choose occupations in which they can achieve practical results with tangible things. More sensors than intuitives are found in such occupations as bookkeeper, credit analyst, chemist and insurance agent. Intuitives are more attracted to fields in which they can use their creativity, generate ideas, or operate at a more abstract level. Intuitives are found much more frequently among psychotherapists, strategic planners, philosophy professors—and lawyers.

About 70 percent of the U.S. population prefers sensing. By contrast, my research found that
57 percent of all lawyers prefer intuition. The proportion of female and male lawyers is approximately the same—55 percent of males and 57 percent of females prefer intuition.

More lawyers with a sensor preference choose real estate, tax and general practice, while a greater number of intuitives choose criminal, litigation and labor law.

The sensing vs. intuition dichotomy is quite helpful in understanding communication problems within a law firm. Meetings, for example, often bog down because of a failure to understand the different needs of sensors and intuitives. Those with a sensing preference strive to gather as much detailed factual information as possible in order to make a decision.

The attorneys who prefer intuition, on the other hand, may find this concentration on facts to be tedious, and prefer instead to deal with the issue at a more conceptual level. The sensors, in turn, find this approach to be too vague. All too soon an impasse is reached.

This scenario could be avoided if both sensors and intuitives were recognized for the valuable contribution they have to make, and if the meeting were structured to allow for both factual input and conceptual discussion, labeled as such.

How can you use the sensing/intuition distinction to improve your lawyering abilities? If you have a strong sensing preference, find a lawyer with a strong intuition preference and utilize that individual as a consultant. The reverse strategy applies equally well.

**Thinking (T) vs. Feeling (F):** The third scale on the MBTI is perhaps the most important in understanding communication within a law firm. Designated the Thinking vs. Feeling scale, it measures two different ways of making decisions. In using the word “feeling,” it’s important to realize that Jung did not mean emotionality. Rather, it should probably have been translated as “valuing” in the sense of “liking or disliking.”

Thinkers make decisions in a detached, objective and logical manner. They employ syllogistic thinking, and make a conscious effort not to let their personal preferences get in the way of making a “right” decision. Feelers, on the other hand, prefer to make decisions by using a more personal, subjective and values-based approach.

Because of their objectivity, thinkers tend not to take conflict personally. Really strong thinkers actually look forward to a good argument. Feelers, on the other hand, typically are uncomfortable with conflict, take conflict personally, and seek to promote harmony. Thinkers tend to be attracted to the law for its intellectual challenge, whereas feelers often enjoy the law because of the opportunities to help people.

The largest gender differences show up on the Thinking vs. Feeling scale. Studies show that approximately 60 percent of all men in this country prefer thinking over feeling, while only 35 percent of women do. Among lawyers, however, the figures tell a different story. In my study, fully 81 percent of male lawyers preferred thinking, as did 66 percent of female lawyers. Averaged together, these thinkers represent 78 percent of all lawyers.

In short, the law is a thinker’s profession.

Feelers have a rough time of it. Even if they enjoy their work, they are often swimming against the current. At a meeting, when they express concern for how other lawyers in the firm will feel about a decision, they are often criticized for being overly sentimental and wasting precious time on trivia. The constant adversarial mentality wears on thefeeler, while for the thinker it can represent one of the most stimulating parts of practice.

A key feature of the Thinking vs. Feeling scale is its egocentricity. A thinker, for example, does not commonly say, “Oh, I see. My colleague (or client or spouse) is using a different decision strategy from me and prefers to evaluate things on the basis of personal preference.” Instead, the thinker is likely to assume that logic applies to everyone, and that the colleague is simply using logic poorly. Feelers may do the same thing, concluding that thinkers are insensitive and out of touch.

This explains so much in law firm miscommunication. In these days of downsizing, one common example can be seen in the dialogue surrounding termination decisions in law firms. Many thinkers advocate a quick, decisive and businesslike termination, while many feelers urge a more gradual, individualized and personal approach. The feelers may be criticized for being inefficient, impractical and unrealistic; the thinkers for being hard and insensitive. An easier consensus might be reached on these difficult decisions if the differing personality preferences were acknowledged in the course of the debate.

How can you use the thinking/feeling distinction to advantage? Thinkers can learn to recognize which of their colleagues or clients are feelers, and make a concerted ef-
fort to be more liberal with praise, more judicious with criticism.

Feelers can learn to develop a thicker skin and can come to realize that their more prevalent thinker colleagues mean no harm in offering criticism. In fact, the criticism is usually intended to be helpful.

**Judging (J) vs. Perceiving (P):** The final scale of the MBTI measures how we prefer to deal with people and information. Those who prefer the judging attitude are planned, decisive and orderly. Those who prefer the perceiving attitude are flexible, open and spontaneous. (Note that the term "judging" has nothing to do with the idea of being judgmental. It is actually derived from the Jungian notion of coming to a conclusion.)

Judgers like to have a sense of control over their environment, and so tend to be methodical. They make contingency plans "just in case." Their desk is neat and orderly; they arrive on time, and they have a strong sense of closure. These are the "cut to the chase" people. They manage their cases in a systematic way and make lists of things to do. They actually use their lists as agendas for action, checking off items when done.

Perceivers make lists, too, but instead of containing a few do-able items, often contain dozens of items that "one day" will hopefully get done. Perceivers are more flexible. They roll with the punches and try not to make decisions until the last possible moment. They like to keep their options open. This makes them playful, spontaneous and informal. Perceivers also tend to procrastinate. Felix and Oscar, the protagonists in Neil Simon's classic play "The Odd Couple," are a well known example of extremes on the J/P scale.

In the general population, 55 percent of people have a judging preference and 45 percent prefer perceiving. For lawyers, the breakdown is 63 percent judging and 37 percent perceiving.

How can you use the judging/perceiving distinction to become a more effective lawyer? It is easy to see how disorganized attorneys can drive methodical attorneys crazy, and vice versa. Understanding the underlying needs, however—a need for control (judgers) and a need to keep one's options open (perceivers)—can provide guidance in dealing with others different from ourselves. For example, be sure to give judg-

ers advance notice of events and respect their filing system. Don't assign perceivers tasks that demand meticulous organization and do give them deadlines. (They do better with externally imposed deadlines than self-imposed ones.)

Susan Hoffman, an environmental law partner in the Lawrenceville, N.J., office of Philadelphia's Cohen, Shapiro, Polisher, Shiekmman and Cohen, says she has a strong preference for judging. "If I have a big document to draft, I tend to outline it first," she says. "I gave [an associate with a strong perceiving preference] an assignment to do, and I suggested she outline it first, and I wasn't getting the work back. Well, what it came down to was she never learned how to outline and she didn't function that way. I think that when I realized that and acknowledged, 'Okay, you do it the way you feel that's best for you,' then the product started to come out."

When one's preferences on each of the four MBTI scales are combined, the result is a set of four letters that, taken together, is called one's psychological type. Mine, for example, is ENFP—Extravert-iNtuitive-Feeler-Perceiver. (The letter "N" is used to designate "iNtuition" instead of "I" to distinguish it from "Introversion," which already uses the "I.") By combining two possible choices on four scales, we arrive at a total of 16 possible type combinations. These types, of course, do not occur with equal frequency.

The legal profession is strongly concentrated among fewer than half of the types. And more than half of all lawyers are represented by just four types:

- ISTJ: Introvert-Sensor-Thinker-Judger,
- ESTJ: Extravert-Sensor-Thinker-Judger,
- INTJ: Introvert-iNtuitive-Thinker-Judger, and
- ENTP: Extravert-iNtuitive-Thinker-Perceiver.

Notice that three of the four are Thinker-Judger (TJ) combinations. The TJ characteristics combined result in a no-nonsense, logical, bottom-line approach. See Table 3.

Sensing and feeling preferences in combination represent less than 10 percent of all lawyers. Other professions, like pharmacy, tend to attract a great many individuals with the SF (Sensor-Feeler) preference combination. Law attracts relatively few because the "meat-and-potatoes" of law practice is analytical thinking about broad legal principles, which is the domain of the NT (iNtuitive-Thinker), whereas the individual with an SF preference enjoys mastering facts and details in the service of helping individuals.

To find satisfaction within the profession, therefore, it is important that such individuals wisely choose their practice area and setting. Individuals with an SF preference may find their niche in estate planning, pension and ERISA advising, or education law, for example.

Because lawyers are concentrated in just a few of the types, it's quite easy to mistakenly assume that others think just like we do. When talking with a client, or marketing your services to a prospective client, it can help to step back, understand how the client's type preferences appear to differ from your own, and adjust your communication accordingly.

The same advice holds true for communication within the firm in those cases where an individual's type is one of the less frequent ones.

Knowledge of type preferences can enable any attorney to increase his or her effectiveness, says Susan J. Bell, a litigator at Cohen & White in Washington, D.C., who has not only taken the MBTI but has become certified to ad-
minister it. She finds that a knowledge of type has helped her in several ways. By giving her greater knowledge about herself, it has enabled her to plan her work more efficiently by accommodating her own personality preferences.

Also, Bell notes, “even though it’s not possible to give the MBTI to everybody I work with, I’ve worked with type enough now to be able to recognize types in other people. And that helps me work more effectively with them.”

Lawyers who have learned the MBTI and used it to understand law firm life speak highly of it. John Herbers, a partner with Reinhart, Boerner, Van Deuren, Norris & Rieselbach in Milwaukee, says that since his firm learned the MBTI, “it’s interesting to see how other people think and act differently. It enables you to filter out your own assumptions so you can hear the other guy better.”

For some lawyers, it has meant the key to a career change. Michael Kahn, formerly a deputy attorney general in New Jersey with ESFJ type preferences, left the practice of law in 1991 and became assistant director of the Office of Career Services at Tulane Law School. He recently left this position to begin a full-time degree program in counseling, an excellent match for his Seeler preference. Says Kahn, “[The MBTI] confirmed what I thought my personality was. But the most important part is that it taught me to focus on something I never really thought of focusing on before. I never thought in terms of distinct personality types.”

The MBTI has been put to creative use by retired Judge Homer Thompson of the San Francisco Bay area. Judge Thompson has been working with the MBTI since 1985 and is certified to administer it by the test’s publisher. He has given it to approximately 800 judges and their spouses, and has used it as a teaching tool to assist judges in learning techniques of mediation. “I observed that they [the judges] found it tremendously valuable in better understanding themselves, their associates and the public they serve,” says Thompson.

Legal outplacement counselors also have employed the MBTI with great success. Many of the counselors at White Svikhart & Associates, a prominent Washington, D.C. outplacement firm, use the instrument with their clients. Says Chris White, a principal with the firm, “Specifically, the MBTI gives them a different vocabulary to describe their strengths, instead of the usual lawyering strengths of ‘negotiating,’ ‘analyzing’ and ‘drafting.’ For more senior lawyers in particular, it is reassuring for them to finally have a way to determine how a new work environment may or may not be compatible with their strengths.”

Finally, an increasing number of law schools are incorporating the MBTI into their repertoire of tools used in assisting students to make occupational decisions. Tom Grexa, director of career planning and placement at the Dickinson School of Law in Carlisle, PA, has been using the MBTI with many of the students he sees.

“Not everyone is well-suited or prepared for law school when they arrive,” Grexa says. “I have found the Myers-Briggs to be helpful because what it allows people to do is to understand more about their own personality and values. It helps them to clarify their own strengths so that they can then approach the job search in a more enlightened way.”

Jean French, director of career services at Boston College Law School, has given the MBTI to the law faculty at her school, and has frequently spoken to bar groups about her findings. She stresses that “no profession is complete unless all types are represented...This message is particularly important to those students whose types are not in the majority in law school. These students may need to work harder to find their special niche.”

French also reports that the faculty at her school has used Myers-Briggs theory to “teach to type,” making adjustments to teaching styles to make them more accessible to all students.

There is a natural human tendency to try to understand and relate to others as if their inner world were like your own. Unfortunately, this is not often the case. It is important to be able to understand the natural differences in the way human beings think and act.

Even a small dose of this broader perspective can significantly empower attorneys to achieve greater communication and productivity.

For more information on the use of MBTI testing in law firms, MBTI seminars, and consulting services regarding managing diverse personality types in a law firm, please contact Dr. Richard at www.lawyerbrain.com.