

THE IN THING

USUALLY THOUGHT OF AS THE WEAKER LINK, INTROVERTS ACTUALLY HAVE AS MUCH TO OFFER IN THE WORKPLACE. BY REBECCA L WEBER

You're so quiet. Are you shy? Don't be shy.' A sentiment Tiffany Isaacs, a 25-year-old auditor from Cape Town, has heard time and again. Growing up, Tiffany knew she wasn't shy, just quiet. As a classic introvert who always enjoyed maths, going into accounting was a natural career choice for her, as it would let her work alone with numbers. In fact, 'accountant' routinely features on lists of recommended professions for introverts, as it suits 'thinkers' who are attentive to detail.

But Tiffany also has to interact with clients. She recently met with one who assumed she was too timid to speak. 'I'm more of a listener,' she told the client. 'I think, then I respond.' Indeed, from the outside, introversion and shyness may look the same, but as you get to know someone, this distinction is palpable.

Popular understanding of introverts has exploded recently, due in no small part to the best-selling *Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking* by Susan Cain, who writes that introverts 'may have strong social skills and enjoy parties and business meetings, but after a while, wish they were home in their pyjamas. They prefer to devote their energies to close friends, colleagues and family.'

Sound like you – sometimes? Complex beings that we are, most people fall somewhere along the spectrum, with traits associated with both introversion and extroversion.

I SEE QUIET PEOPLE

You may not be aware how many introverts there actually are around you. Many adopt extrovert-like behaviour – either consciously or unconsciously – as extrovert traits are so highly valued.

Susan coined the phrase 'extrovert ideal' to describe the value system in which an alpha type who thrives on action and risks, and loves being the centre of attention, is the most predominant. Studies show that outspoken people are perceived to be smarter, more attractive and better friends, even though, empirically, they're not. It's a case of confusing the medium with the message.

Introverts tend to seek out solitude and pursue a life of the mind. Mandela, Einstein and JK Rowling were (or for the latter, still is) all successful, using their introversion to their advantage.

'They listen more than they talk, think before they speak and often feel as though they express themselves better in writing than in conversation. They tend to dislike conflict. Many have a horror of chit-chat, instead enjoying deep one-on-one discussions,' Susan continues.

As Mandela wrote about his early days in the ANC in *Long Walk to Freedom*: 'I went in as an observer, not a participant, for I do not think that I ever spoke. I wanted to understand the issues under discussion [and] evaluate the arguments.'

OPPOSITES ATTRACT

The key is to channel your (or your employees') introversion in a productive way in the workplace.

Minette Jacobs, a 40-year-old introverted graphic designer based in Joburg, has done just that. Introverts are often drawn to creative fields where they develop ideas on paper. Minette is able to express herself through images, which allows her to communicate without having to talk much. She is also able to listen for a long time, without the drive to interrupt with her own ideas. Nothing satisfies a client quite like the feeling that they're being heard.

'I enjoy sitting down to work for hours at a time, without the need to get up and socialise,' she says. That said, she enjoys going into the office. 'It can be lonely at home. I still need some interaction.'

INTROVERT, THIS IS EXTROVERT

Corporate environments often place high value on teamwork. In a meeting or brainstorming session, one can feel the pressure to 'sell yourself'. Louder, faster talking extroverts may take over. When this happens, introverts are even less likely to contribute their ideas, especially if they must raise their voice to be heard.

Typically, introverts are excellent listeners and are also less likely to interrupt or speak over others. When extroverts show that they're ready to listen

Pick and choose

A pervasive misunderstanding is that introverts are shy. Introverts prefer less stimuli in their lives, whereas shy people may have social anxiety and/or a fear of rejection. One can even be a shy extrovert (think of a performer who routinely gets stage fright). Better understanding which type you are can help you make the right career choices.

Carl Jung saw introverts as 'educators and promoters of culture'. Introverts often thrive in jobs in which they have a solid balance between social time and solitude, such as designers, paralegals, translators and writers.

Extroverts succeed where their outgoing personalities are required, such as sales managers, administrators or in hospitality.

too, introverts are more comfortable and willing to share their thoughts. 'If you want their opinion, you have to ask for it,' says Minette. 'They're not going to offer it.'

Many introverts prefer to express their ideas on paper rather than verbally in a business meeting, or to speak one-on-one rather than in a big group. Allowing for different modes of input opens up the power of collaboration. For example, sending out an agenda ahead of the meeting will allow the introverts in your team to collect their thoughts before sharing their considered ideas.

Being more aware of – and embracing – natural tendencies allows both introverts and extroverts to play to their strengths in the workplace.

MEET AND GREET

Networking for introverts can be a real challenge, but is generally easier for those who are reticent yet not particularly shy. Instead of working the room and making small talk with just about every person there (as an extrovert may do), an introvert is more likely to focus on developing relationships by having deeper conversations.

'Introverts can learn a lot from extroverts, but the same can also be said for the other way round,' says Tiffany. ■

IN OR OUT?

Take this quiz to find out where you fit:
www.thepowerofintroverts.com/quiet-quiz-are-you-an-introvert