

CHAPTER 6

SELECTION TECHNIQUE: DISCUSS

6.1 Introduction

Discuss is a completely computerised assessment tool, designed to produce a detailed profile of a personality. It provides powerful tools for interpreting and evaluating this profile.

The explanation of the Discuss is a summary of the manual according to Brookhouse (1994).

The Discuss indicates different traits of a person:

- Strong traits are particularly evident elements within the candidate's personality. These are the kinds of behaviour that are often seen in the candidate's style.
- Weak traits are the opposite – these are personality elements that are not naturally present in the candidate's style, and they will not normally be obvious in the candidate's behaviour.
- Simulated traits are traits that candidates try to display in their style, usually because they believe that these are necessary to present the correct image in their present environment. These might be traits that are already relatively strong being further emphasised, but more commonly they are factors that are not naturally associated with the candidate's style. Because simulated traits are based on a candidate's perceptions of the environment, the levels of these traits in the personality can be expected to change as the environment changes.

The Discuss further indicates stress levels that candidates currently are experiencing. This is a generalised measure of the amount of stress present in the personality. Stress in this context is different from 'pressure' in that it will normally persist over the medium to long-term periods.

Certain more resilient personalities have a 'Stress Threshold'. Below this level, stress can actually have a positive effect, helping to motivate and challenge the person concerned.

The Discuss summarises the profile of a candidate in ten sections containing the following information:

- Considerations which point out any technical discrepancies in the candidate's profile. Certain configurations indicate that a candidate may have attempted to 'dupe' the test, or may not have understood its requirements. Other types of results may point to particular problems in the personality. In either case, Discuss will still attempt to analyse the results, but the comments in this section should be taken into account when interpreting it. The 'Considerations' section will also highlight any major shifts in the personality (that is, particularly prominent factors that the candidate is attempting to display, but which are not native to the candidate's personality). Shifts of this kind are relatively common, and you should not be surprised to see one or more referred to in a report.
- Overview is a set of general comments about the candidate's personality style, identifying the main factors of their personality.
- Advantages and disadvantages explain the relative strengths and weaknesses associated with the candidate's personality style.
- Interpersonal skills and relationship management look at the ways in which the candidate relates to other people, and where their particular skills lie in social matters. Unless otherwise stated, the term 'relationship management' relates specifically to relationships with colleagues, rather than general social interaction.

- Decision-making reflects the fact that different personality-styles approach the decision-making process in radically different ways. In the 'Decision Making' section the candidate's basic approach to this question is explained.
- Organisation and planning cover the ways in which the candidates look at planning their actions and organising their time.
- Motivation explains the motivational needs of the candidate. This is designed to be helpful to the manager who wishes to motivate his/her staff, but these motivational factors can also be used to help persuade the candidate to follow a certain course of action.
- Managing style discusses the ways in which the candidate will relate to subordinates when placed in a position of authority.
- Style of management required, contains suggestions and pointers to the candidate's manager about getting the best from the candidate, and also cites approaches to avoid.

6.2 Background

The Discuss (DISC) is based on the work of Carl Gustav Jung who defined personalities as belonging to one of four different types: sensing, intuitive, feeling and thinking according to Möller (1993:77). He was one of the first psychologists who seriously attempted to map the human personality.

It was Jung's opinion that people instinctively understand the personality in terms of a set of four elements according to Bergh & Theron (1999:514). These groups of four (technically called tetralogies) underlie a very large number of personality assessment techniques, and DISC is no exception.

6.3 Personality

Robbins (1998:50) declares that:

"when psychologists talk of personality, they mean a dynamic concept describing the growth and development of a person's whole psychological system. Rather than looking at parts of the person, personality looks at some aggregate whole that is greater than the sum of the parts."

The Discuss defines personality in terms of their profiling system and at the core of this definition lie the ideas of stimulus and response. Sets of circumstances or individual events (stimuli) cause people to act or react (respond) to them. Different people, however, have different responses to particular stimuli. In any given situation, we expect that different people will react in different ways. DISC defines a 'personality' as the sum of all a person's varying response styles to varying stimuli.

In practical terms, it is impossible to measure and evaluate every one of a person's possible responses to every possible stimulus, therefore different kinds of responses are grouped together in 'traits'. Bergh & Theron (1999:375) define a trait as a disposition or tendency to act in a certain kind of way when faced with a certain situation, and consequently people who have similar traits should behave similarly.

In common use, the word 'personality' often includes a person's skills and abilities in its definition. This is not the case as far as the DISC system is concerned. Factors such as 'intelligence', or skills such as 'driving' or 'knowledge of zoology', are not properly part of the personality in DISC terms.

6.4 The development of the Discuss

In the early 1920s, an American psychologist named William Moulton Marston postulated a theory to explain people's emotional responses. Until that time, work of this kind mainly confined itself to the mentally ill or criminally insane, and Marston wanted to extend these theories to cover the personalities of ordinary individuals.

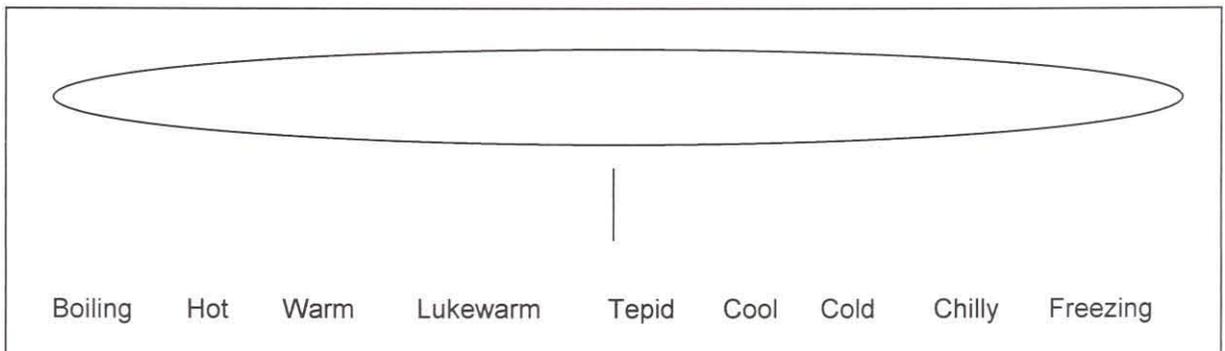
In order to test his theories, Marston needed some way of measuring the personalities he was trying to describe. His solution was to develop his own personality test to measure four important personality factors. The factors he chose were dominance, influence, steadiness, and compliance, from which the test takes its name – DISC (Marston, 1989:37).

In 1926, Marston published his findings in a book entitled "The Emotions of Normal People", which included a brief description of the personality test he had developed. From these humble beginnings, the DISC test has grown to become probably the most widely used personality assessment tool in the world according to Brookhouse (1994:62).

6.5 Two axes of the personality

This section introduces a new concept: the personality axis. An 'axis' in this sense is simply a continuum between two opposites. To illustrate, the image of an axis between the opposites 'hot' and 'cold', is used:

FIGURE 6.1: AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE DISCUSS CONTINUUM.



(Source: Brookhouse, 1994:62)

At the extremes of the axis are very hot and very cold temperatures. Moving along the axis from one extreme to the other, a variety of different temperatures exist, each blending into the next.

A personality axis is very much like this. The opposite ends of the axis refer to two opposite traits in the personality, while the axis itself represents the different shades and moods of the trait, as a person moves from one extreme to another. There are as many possible personality axes as there are potential opposites in the personality, but most assessment systems use only a select few.

This is possible because, by choosing particularly appropriate axes, a very wide-ranging picture of different personality styles is achievable. Different assessment techniques use different axes, but the basic principle remains constant.

The DISC personality axes lies between the opposites of assertiveness and passivity, and the axis between openness and control. The meanings of these terms, and the ways they are used to construct a DISC profile, are explained in the following sections with reference to Brookhouse (1994).

6.6 Assertiveness and passivity

The first point of the DISC personality axis lies between the opposites of assertiveness and passivity. This section discusses these two important elements of the personality.

The Assertiveness/Passivity axis measures the ways in which people react to their environment, and specifically whether they engender a pro-active or reactive approach.

6.6.1 Assertiveness

Assertive people are pro-active and direct. They lead rather than follow, and like to take immediate action whenever they can. They believe in grasping opportunities and making their own way. Often independent and commanding, they prefer to give orders rather than to take them, and will issue instructions rather than ask for co-operation.

6.6.2 Passivity

As the opposite of assertiveness, passivity describes people who are patient and cautious. They prefer to avoid taking risks, and rarely take definite action unless the pressure to do so is unavoidable. They dislike change or surprise, and will seek calm, predictable situations.

6.6.3 Openness

The second of the DISC personality axes extends between Openness and Control. In this section the focus is on the two extremes of this axis. Openness and Control are measures of a person's social attitudes, and describe different approaches to interaction with other people.

Extremely open people are friendly, trusting and ingenuous. They express themselves easily and value strong relationships with other people. Open individuals tend to work on an emotional level, revealing their feelings to others and being ready to sympathise with those around them.

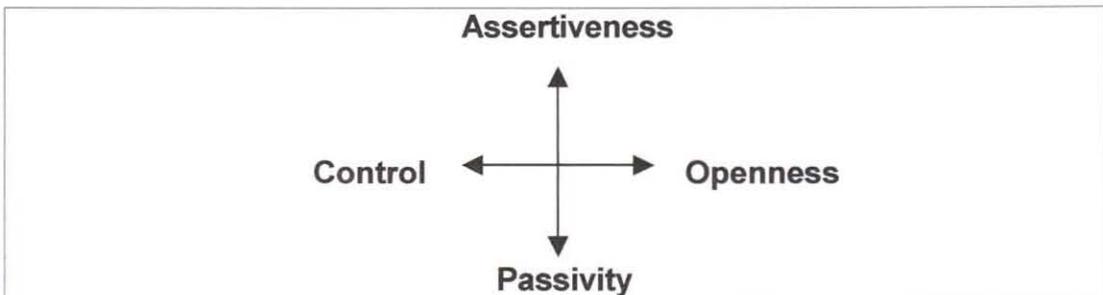
6.6.4 Control

Controlled individuals are practical and somewhat cynical in style. They value hard facts and rational argument above emotional considerations, and prefer to follow their own ideas, rather than rely on those of other people. At times, they can be distrustful or suspicious, and will rarely volunteer information about themselves to other people.

6.7 The biaxial model of DISC

The two axes of Assertiveness/Passivity and Openness/Control lie at the heart of the DISC profiling system. It might not, at first sight, be obvious how these two axes are related to the DISC profile, which contains four factors illustrated in figure 6.2.

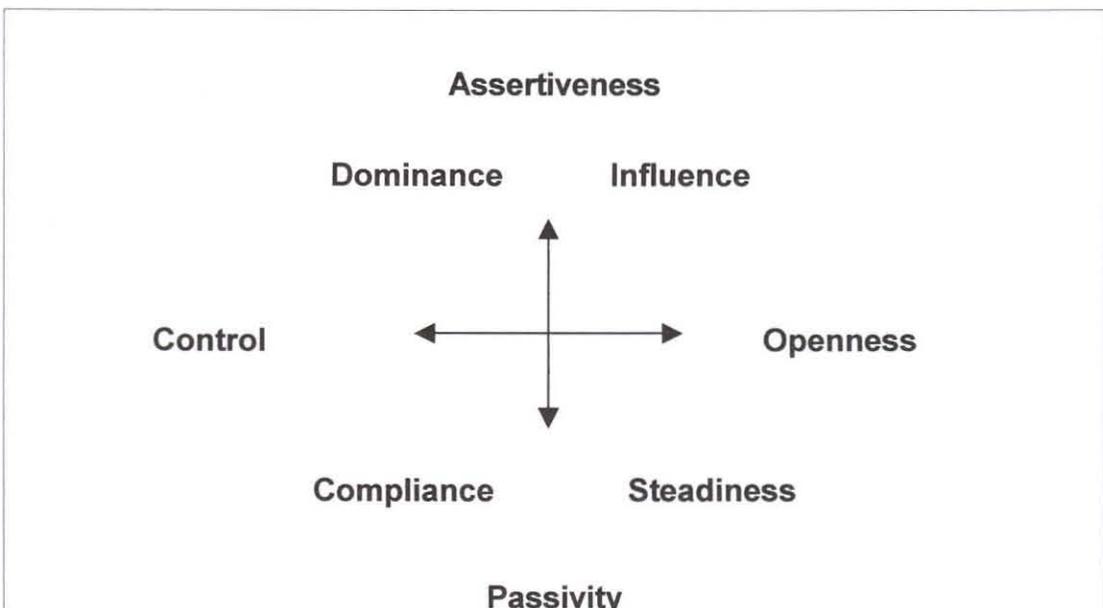
FIGURE 6.2: THE BIAXIAL MODEL OF THE DISCUSS.



(Source: Brookhouse, 1994:65)

The link between the axes and DISC is the so-called *Biaxial Model* (i.e. a model with two axes). This is formed by the two fundamental axes when placed at right angles to one another (see diagram, above). The result is a cross shape with four empty spaces between its arms. These spaces correspond to the four DISC factors, as shown below.

FIGURE 6.3: DISCUSS FACTORS.



(Source: Brookhouse, 1994:65)

Each of the four factors is defined as a meeting point between two of the axes. Dominance can be defined as Assertiveness and Control therefore Dominant individuals will show aspects of Assertiveness and Controlled behaviour in their approach to life. The four factors shown on this diagram are the same four factors that are shown on a DISC graph.

The DISC test does not measure the underlying axes of the personality, and then extrapolates the DISC factors but rather measures Dominance, Influence, Steadiness and Compliance directly. In these cases, the Biaxial Model provides a theoretical underpinning of the system, but this is not used directly to derive the results.

6.8 The basics of DISC graphs

Having collected an individual's responses to a DISC questionnaire, collated and calculated the results, the final outcome is a set of three graphs. Each of these three graphs (or 'profiles') describes a particular side to the candidate's personality. In combination, the set of three is known as a DISC 'profile series'.

6.8.1 The internal profile

This graph describes a person's 'inner' personality style, the type of behaviour that can be expected when the person feels completely at ease. Conversely, this style can also sometimes be seen when people are placed under severe pressure, because such pressure limits their capacity to adapt their personality style. The Internal Profile tends to remain more constant over time than the other two graphs. Other names sometimes used for the Internal Profile include the 'Pressure' Profile and the 'Underlying' Profile.



6.8.2 The external profile

Very few people maintain the same personality regardless of circumstance; instead, they adapt to situations and others' requirements. The purpose of the External Profile is to describe the style of personality that an individual feels is appropriate in their current circumstances. The External Profile can change considerably over time, as a person's situation and environment change – such modifications often accompany major life-style changes, such as starting a new job or moving house. The External profile is also known as the 'Work' Profile or the 'Mask' Profile.

6.8.3 The summary profile

The Internal and External Profiles provide valuable information about a person's attitudes and perceptions. In reality, however, a person's behaviour is rarely based completely on one or other of these styles. The Summary Profile combines information from the other two to present a view of a person's actual behaviour. Among the many variant titles of this profile are the 'Basic' Profile, the 'Composite' Profile and the 'Snapshot' Profile which can be described as follows:

6.8.3.1 *D for Dominance*

The first of the four DISC factors is Dominance, or simply 'D'. The colour red is often used to represent this factor and its associated type on the Style Card, the Driver. This is appropriate because, as its name suggests, Dominance is the factor indicating directness, assertiveness and control. The Greeks would have associated Dominance with blood and fire, a fitting combination for this tempestuous personality factor.

Dominance is the factor shown on the extreme left of a DISC graph. Like all the factors, D is a blend of positive and negative traits. On the positive side, highly Dominant individuals are independently-minded, motivated to succeed, and generally very effective at getting their own way. They can,

however, also be hot-tempered and even aggressive under certain conditions.

Dominance can be summarised as the factor of control. People with this factor prominent in their DISC profiles focus on the need to achieve and maintain a measure of authority and power over other people and, more generally, the environment in which they live and work. Competitiveness and ambition are also associated with the D factor, and people showing this element in their personality will strive to achieve their aims in life against great odds. Indeed, they seem to enjoy challenge, and rarely retreat from a difficult or risky situation.

6.8.3.2 I for Influence

Dominant individuals are not naturally trusting of others – they will seek to attain success on their own merits, without asking for or expecting help or support from those around them. Should a situation arise where the assistance of others is an unavoidable necessity, they tend to issue orders directly, rather than asking for co-operation. After Dominance, the next DISC factor is Influence, also known simply as I. Influence is associated with a sunny, friendly and extrovert personality, warm and open towards other people, sociable and gregarious. Influence connects with the Style Card type described as a Communicator. As might be expected from this, personalities with a high Influence score (called 'High-Is') are gregarious and sociable, and often possess well-developed social skills and an urge to meet and talk with other people.

Influence is the second factor described by a DISC graph, reading from the left. The communicative and socially confident style of those with high Influence tends to be balanced by a rather impulsive and sometimes irrational approach to life. The urge to relate to and impress those around them can lead such a person to act in ways that other less socially oriented personalities find very difficult to understand.

The hardest thing for a High-I to accept is rejection. They need to interact positively with those around them, and their friendly, open style usually helps them to maintain relations of this kind. The socially active nature of the highly Influential personality is often an important factor in bringing other less gregarious personality styles together.

By their nature, High-Is are extremely trusting and ingenuous. Their desire to be open with other people can lead them at times to reveal information or express feelings that more staid personality types might prefer to conceal. For this reason, they are sometimes viewed as being tactless. Nonetheless, their natural communicative abilities often permit them to talk themselves out of any difficult situation brought about by their lack of diplomacy.

6.8.3.3 S for Steadiness

Third of the four factors is Steadiness, abbreviated to 'S'. As its name suggests, personalities showing a high level of Steadiness adopt a measured, steady approach to life. They are patient and undemanding, often showing sympathy for and loyalty to those around them. In Style Card terms, Steadiness corresponds to the 'Planner' personality type.

Being the third of the DISC factors, Steadiness is shown third from the left on a DISC graph. At least in Western countries, Steadiness is relatively rare in comparison with the other three factors. While Dominance, Influence and Compliance are evenly spread throughout the population, Steadiness tends to feature less frequently. This is perhaps because the unassuming, amiable type of personality associated with this factor tends to be less valued by society than those representing the other three DISC factors. When Steadiness does appear in a profile, it is more commonly found accompanied by high Compliance.

Despite this, there are a number of strengths linked to the Steadiness factor. People of this kind are patient and sympathetic listeners, with a real interest in the problems and feelings of others, and are particularly capable of fulfilling support roles. They also have a persistent approach, with powers of concentration that allows them to keep on working steadily at an assignment. While other profile types might become bored or distracted, the High-S (i.e. personality with high Steadiness) will continue to work until they have completed an assignment.

High-S personalities are resistant to change, and prefer to settle into a predictable and constant environment. They have an intrinsically passive approach, and work best when given clear instructions and a high level of support. Because of this, they avoid conflict or confrontation if at all possible, and will instead seek to adopt the role of peacemaker if a dispute should break out.

6.8.3.4 C for Compliance

The final DISC factor is compliance, or simply 'C'. This is perhaps the most complex of the four factors. Traditionally, High-Cs (people showing a high level of Compliance) were categorised simply as 'rule-oriented'. Recent investigation, however, has shown that this is only part of the story, and that the factor represents a far more sophisticated element of the personality. As the root of this complexity lies in the combination of Control and Passivity, the Compliance factor is associated with the Style- Card 'Analyst' type.

Compliance is the factor shown on the extreme right of a DISC profile. It is the factor of structure, detail and fact, and personalities displaying high levels are interested in precision and accuracy. Because they are naturally passive and reticent to speak out unless called on by others, it is often imagined that High-Cs lack ambition. In fact, this is not the case. In this specific sense, they are similar to highly Dominant individuals in their desire to control their environment. Because of their passive style, however, they



will try to obtain this control through the use of structure and procedure, insisting on rules and defined codes of conduct to achieve their ends. This is the root of the 'rule-oriented' style mentioned above.

Individuals with high levels of Compliance dislike pressure and tend to adopt an evasive style when confronted with difficult circumstances. In extremely difficult situations, they are apt to disregard problems or to delay actions until these become completely unavoidable. The rule-oriented aspect of the High-C personality often encompasses wider aspects of life than simply corporate rule-structures or established procedures. Personalities of this kind usually have personal codes of behaviour, and tend to regard etiquette and tradition as important. Because of their inherent desire for fact and detail, it is also common to find that Compliant styles have a relatively broad general knowledge, or specific knowledge or skills. This interest in the way things work means that Compliant personalities are often drawn to technical work, or jobs involving the organisation of information, specific situations in which their personal talents can come to the fore.

6.9 Stress

Stress is a very broad and complex issue, and a detailed examination of all its aspects lies beyond the limits of the DISC system. Nonetheless, by closely examining an individual's personality profile, and especially the variations between the External and Internal Profiles, it is possible to glean some information about the amount of stress a person is currently experiencing, and the likely reactions. An assessment can also be made of the source of this stress.

In terms of the DISC system, this term has a meaning different from, but related to, 'pressure'. While pressure results from a short-term problem, stress is considered to be related to longer term problems, persisting over weeks, months or even years. Examples of sources of stress might be a

personality conflict in the workplace, difficulties at home, or ongoing financial commitments.

6.10 Validity and reliability

The Discuss manual does not refer to the validity or reliability of the instrument. Research conducted by Roodt and Robert (1996) reports as follows:

➤ Criterion-related Validity

Seven factors from Cattell's 16-PF were used to correlate with the four Discus dimensions. The Bravais Pearson product-moment correlation reported that two dimensions indicate a significant correlation namely dominance and influence with factors E (dominant) and A (outgoing). No correlation was reported with regard to 16-PF factor G (expedient) L (trusting), Q1 (conservative) and C (emotional stability) with steadiness and compliance.

➤ Reliability

The Bravais Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient indicated correlation scores of 0,728 (dominance), 0,645 (influence), 0,730 (steadiness) and 0,550 (compliance). These correlations conclude that the Discus instrument is reliable.

6.11 Conclusion

Research on the Discuss is not freely available although it is used widely in South Africa as a selection technique. The Discuss was examined as part of this study in order to investigate the possibility of including it in the design of a differential selection model for technikon students.