

A Career Assessment Programme used in private practice.

What sort of people do you work with

I am an occupational psychologist who specializes in career development. My clients are mainly young graduates who have still to find the right career path for them, and career changers who after working in a profession for a number of years, realize that it is not the right one for them. Whichever group they are from, as they make their enquiries, they seek reassurance that they are not the only people to feel this way, and what can I do to help.

The younger people have often not given much thought to a future career when taking a degree, and been influenced by family and friends. Those that have followed a profession have often chosen one that follows a family tradition, or is seen as a well-paid and/or safe route to take. It has never been based on any personal assessment of what will be the right fit for them.

Recent clients have included a software engineer who was influenced to take a degree in this area as his father said it would lead to well paid work, despite his interest in the arts. Another example being a solicitor who was jaded with his work, and at 18 had chosen law, as he didn't get into medical school. A third was a perpetual student who already had three degrees, studying at Oxford and Harvard and was set to do a PhD, but something made him want to take stock.

In the introductory session, I explain about my service and ask questions to find out if the person has any ideas of their future career. If they do, I suggest a one off session to explore this with them. In most cases, however, they are open to finding out about possible career paths and follow this career assessment programme.

Tell me about the career assessment programme

The career assessment programme comprises 3 separate assessments and a number of inventories and exercises. The main assessment I use is the Highlands Ability Battery. It is an assessment of abilities that can be completed "on line" or via a CD-rom and which leads to specific suggestions for careers. I also include the Myers Briggs Type Indicator and the Strong Interest Inventory.

The Highlands Ability Battery

The Highlands Ability Battery™ is a set of 18 tests, which measure strengths, and weaknesses of certain abilities as well as other characteristics important for career and life decision-making. The Highlands Ability Battery results in clients knowing their natural abilities - the talents that make some things easy and others more difficult.

Each ability is measured through a work sample. The work sample is specially constructed so that only one ability is being assessed. Being timed eliminates the possibility of substituting another ability or extra time to accomplish the task. No prior education, training, or experience gives anyone an advantage.

The highlands battery is based on over 75 years research, beginning with Johnson O'Connor. It is psychometrically valid and reliable. The information and suggestions that it makes are highly accurate. The minimum reliability standard for the 19 tests that make up

the Highland Ability Battery is $r = .80$. It has been described as the equivalent of getting a catscan for a painful injury instead of a traditional X-ray.

Whilst we measure abilities individually, we then look at them in combination. One combination of aptitudes makes the accomplished salesperson, another combination describes a person who enjoys network administration, and another combination explains why a person enjoys one part of management but not the rest.

The Highlands Ability Battery assessment includes 18 work samples, which include:

Classification: assesses the ability to see relationships among seemingly unrelated events, situations, or information. The relative ability to move from the specific to the more general, to detect a common thread that joins individual objects into a pattern.

Idea Productivity: measures the number of ideas that spring to a person's mind over a particular period in response to a set of new facts. The quantity of ideas, not the quality. This ability may be evidenced by the relative contributions of individuals who participate in a brainstorming session.

Spatial Relations Visualization: measures the ability to "see" and follow in three dimensions an object that is represented in two dimensions. The ability is related to the relative preference for hands-on work and experience and the satisfaction in achieving tangible results.

Observation: the ability to focus on and remember visual details and to detect changes and irregularities as they occur.

The Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)

Personality is a significant factor in career decision-making. For example, ability testing may indicate a career in engineering, but the personality testing could indicate the need to work with people in a helping capacity. The MBTI can help clients determine personal preferences and strengths based on four dimensions that describe a specific personality type:

- Focus of energy (internal vs. external);
- Information gathering methods (concrete facts vs. meanings and possibilities);
- Decision-making preferences (logical vs. feelings and values); and
- Lifestyle preferences (planned and orderly vs. spontaneous and less structured).

Once a client knows their Myers Briggs "type", they can assess how well a particular career will match their personality style.

The Strong Interest Inventory (The Strong)

The Strong Interest Inventory works by measuring interests. Responses are compared to a representative sample of occupations followed by people who enjoy their work, have worked in that area for at least three years, and who do typical work for the field. People tend to search out those environments that match their interests, and an environment attracts people who share similar interests.

The Strong is a quick way to get a snapshot of career interests, but the highest interests may not be the most appropriate career for a client. That's why I use it in conjunction with other assessments.

The process

A client will complete these assessments at home, thus freeing up time that was previously spent in test administration. A discussion is supported by written instructions, and are accompanied by an audio file, as not everyone remembers best through reading. Once all the tests are ready, they then come for a feedback session.

The feedback session

This can be quite an intense time, so some clients prefer to split this into two sessions. I usually can identify who will prefer this from their personality type. We begin the session by talking through the results of the Highlands Ability Battery, this can take up to 2 hours. The results are presented in the form of a bar chart where their score is compared to a database of over 5,000 people. A high score is not necessarily better than a low score. For example while a high score on classification is needed for success in quick problem solving (such as needed by a surgeon), a low score is better for someone who needs patience to work with people at their own pace, such as a career counsellor. Whilst the client will already have read a report, downloadable on completion of the assessment, my objective is to bring it to life and to make it meaningful, answering any questions they have. The MBTI and Strong Interest Inventory are also discussed in depth, each supported by written reports.

Now time to bring the output from all the assessments together. This is where my high score of idea productivity really comes to the fore (I am at the 90th percentile). We will look at the results from all the assessments, with possible careers identified from each one individually. Some are obviously of no interest, but for the careers that have some merit, there is a need to compare them against the Highlands Ability Battery. How likely is it to match up with the particular set of abilities? I would never tell someone not to do a particular job, but would want him or her to be aware of the reasons why it is going to be difficult. (E.g. to get through law school you need high scores in classification and verbal memory to deal with the volume of material to read and to make quick decisions in new areas). Specific patterns of abilities may strongly suggest working in an area that has never been considered, such as a "hands on" practical role where there is a clear product produced rather than a purely abstract role.

Clients will leave me with a "medium list" of perhaps 5 – 8 jobs that are likely to offer career satisfaction. They then need to be proactive to find out about them – would they be willing to make sacrifices for the training? Would the money be sufficient to meet their financial needs? At this point, many clients are ready to start their job search unaided. Recently I had an email from John, a few weeks after completing this programme; he was getting ready to move to Australia to pursue training to be a nurse, one of the ideas he left with.

I have now offered this programme to well over 100 individual clients. What they tell me they like about the career assessments is that it is structured, logical and non judgmental. One client said that learning about his abilities has helped him to understand the choices he has made in studying and jobs, e.g. why he left studying philosophy to do a more hands on activity as a chef. Several solicitors and a doctor have used the assessment to clarify why they are in the wrong profession. Many clients have been introduced to a number of jobs they never considered previously.

Conclusion

Since developing this programme I have significantly increased the number of clients who work with me and have high levels of client satisfaction. Clients mainly like a set programme with clearly defined outcomes, I also know where I am with clients; a logical process suits my ability pattern.

About the author

Denise Taylor is the principal of **Amazing People** a chartered occupational psychologist and an associate fellow of the British Psychological Society. Her specialism is in career development and she has published extensively in this area. Her specialist knowledge is backed up with coaching and counselling qualifications and a Masters degree in business administration (MBA).

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