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Career Decisions: Self Assessment – Part 1: Values & Interests

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The most common question I'm asked is this one: "I don't know what I want to do. Is there a test or something that can tell me what career is right for me?" The answer is no. You can't take a test that will, as if by magic, tell you what to do with the rest of your life. You can however use a combination of self assessment tools that will aid you in your decision. This article will demystify the self assessment phase of the career planning process. First I will tell you what self assessment is and then I will give you an overview of the various tools used to help you learn about yourself.

Self assessment is the first step of the career planning process. During a self assessment you gather information about yourself in order to make an informed career decision. A self assessment should include a look at the following: values, interests, personality, and skills.

- **Values:** the things that are important to you, like achievement, status, and autonomy
- **Interests:** what you enjoy doing, i.e. playing golf, taking long walks, hanging out with friends
- **Personality:** a person's individual traits, motivational drives, needs, and attitudes
- **Skills:** the activities you are good at, such as writing, computer programming, teaching

Many people choose to hire a career counselor who will administer a variety of self assessment inventories. What follows is a discussion of the different types of tools you may encounter, as well as some other things to consider when pursuing a career change.



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Value Inventories

Your values are possibly the most important thing to consider when you're choosing an occupation. If you don't take your values into account when planning your career, there's a good chance you'll dislike your work and therefore not succeed in it. For example, someone who needs to have autonomy in his work would not be happy in a job where every action is decided by someone else.

There are two types of values: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic values are related to the work itself and what it contributes to society. Extrinsic values include external features, such as physical setting and earning potential. Value inventories will ask you to answer questions like the following:

- Is a high salary important to you?
- Is it important for your work to involve interacting with people?
- Is it important for your work to make a contribution to society?
- Is having a prestigious job important for you?

During a self assessment, a career counselor may administer one of the following value inventories: *Minnesota Importance Questionnaire (MIQ)*, *Survey of Interpersonal Values (SIV)*, or *Temperament and Values Inventory (TVI)*. If you want to get a feel for what you'll be asked, take a look at the Work-Related Values Assessment, which is a printable list of work related values, with a definition of each one.

Interest Inventories

Interest inventories are also frequently used in career planning. When you complete an interest inventory you are asked to answer a series of questions regarding your (**surprise**) interests. E.K. Strong, Jr. pioneered the development of interest inventories. He found, through data he gathered about people's likes and dislikes of a variety of activities, objects, and types of persons, that people in the same career (and satisfied in that career) had similar interests. Dr. John Holland and others provided a system of matching interests with one or more of six types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. He then matched these types with occupations. The results of your interest inventory are compared against the results of this study to see where you fit in — are your interests similar to those of a police officer or to those of an accountant?



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A very popular interest inventory is the *Strong Interest Inventory* (SII), formerly known as the *Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory*. The SII is administered by a career development professional, who also scores it, and interprets the results.

If you want to try using an interest inventory on your own, a low cost option is the Self-Directed Search (SDS), by John Holland. You can take it online for a small fee. After completing the assessment, you will receive a printable report containing a list of occupations that most closely match your interests.

Personality Inventories

Many personality inventories used in career planning are based on a theory by psychologist Carl Jung. Jung divided people into eight personality types — extroverts, introverts, thinking, feeling, sensing, intuitive, judging, and perceptive. Career counselors often use results from tests based on Jungian Personality Theory to help clients choose careers. Career counselors contend that those of a particular personality type are better suited to certain careers. An obvious example would be that an introvert would not do well in a career that requires public speaking. However, a personality inventory alone shouldn't be used to predict whether you would succeed in a particular career. It should be used in conjunction with other inventories, such as those that look at interests and values.

Career development practitioners frequently administer the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) for the assessment of personality. It measures differences in traits between individuals. It looks at how one energizes (**E**xtraversion vs. **I**ntroversion), perceives information (**S**ensing vs. **i**Ntuition), makes decisions (**T**hinking vs. **F**eeling), and demonstrates his or her lifestyle (**J**udging vs. **P**erceiving). When the test is scored, the individual is given a four letter code, i.e. ENFJ (Extroversion Intuitive Feeling Judging), indicating his or her preferences. Each preference is also assigned a number to show how strong that preference is.



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Skills Assessment

When deciding what field to enter, you need to determine what skills you have. You should look at what you're good at, as well as what you enjoy doing. You may be very adept at a particular skill, but despise every second you spend using it. Generally speaking, though, you usually enjoy what you do well.

While you're assessing your skills, you should also consider the time you are willing to spend on acquiring more advanced or new skills. A question you could ask yourself is this — if a career holds all the qualities I find appealing but it takes X years to prepare for it, would I be willing and able to make this time commitment?

Computer-Assisted Career Guidance Assessments

There are several computer programs that can help you with self assessment. Programs like SIGI 3 (System of Interactive Guidance and Information) and Discover require users to answer a variety of questions about interests, skills, and values. Based on those answers, the software comes up with a list of career the user may be interested in. There's a component that allows users to gather information about these careers. Computer-Assisted Career Guidance programs are often found in career centers at high schools or colleges. Some job and career centers at public libraries also make these programs available.

Additional Considerations

When going through the self assessment process it's important to take into account other considerations that will influence your career choice. For example, you should consider your family responsibilities and your ability to pay for education or training. You also have to remember that self assessment is the first step in the career planning process, not the last. After completing this phase, you have to go on to the next one, which entails exploring the options you have before you. With your self assessment results in mind, you will have to next evaluate a variety of occupations to see if there's a match. Just because your self assessment indicates that a particular occupation is suitable for someone with your interests, skills, and values, it doesn't mean it is best for you. Similarly, just because your self assessment doesn't indicate that a particular occupation is appropriate for you, it doesn't mean you should discount it entirely. You just need to do some research to learn more about it.