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Human Resources Surveys, Tests, and Assessments

Three Steps to Success with Career Assessments

About this Article:

This article shows where formal career tests and assessments fit in the overall process of planning a career. It provides an introduction to best practices for tests and assessments in a career counseling environment. It is based on the actual experience of Dr. Wendy Alfus-Rothman, of Wenroth Consulting, and one of her clients, David Fabricant of Stryker Spine. The article also quotes the president of the National Career Development Association, Judith Hoppin.

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Three Steps to Success with Career Assessments

Career tests and assessments can provide a bonanza of information that might take years to get any other way. Some of them measure interests, others aptitudes, and yet others measure values. They can deliver an objective message about what part of a person's behaviors or personality might get in the way of executing a plan and what he or she can do to mitigate the challenges. They may also point out strengths they can leverage more deliberately and consistently.

New York City business psychologist [Wendy Alfus-Rothman, Ph.D.](#), a PPI associate who specializes in career management for executives, says, "I see clients every day who thought they were in control of a plan and are now in various states of shock that those plans have become obsolete over night." She says some are angry and others worried, but in many cases, "the bottom line is they're short on ideas and looking for external guidance." She adds, "The field of psychological testing has evolved dramatically over the past 50 years and has much to offer anyone who needs to get their work life back on track."

"If used properly, formal career assessment is one of the fundamentals," says Alfus-Rothman. "A good assessment," she says, "gets at the barriers a person is likely to create and helps them see what can be done to overcome the tendency to block success."

But how does one use career tests and assessments properly? According to her and other experts, that means getting three things right when using career assessments: the right tests, in the right context, with the right career counselor.

The Right Context

Judith Hoppin is president of the [National Career Development Association](#) (NCDA), a Broken Arrow, Oklahoma-based group that promotes professional standards among career counselors.

"Career assessments are a tremendous resource," she says, "but they should be used in the context of a career plan." Career assessments have little more than entertainment value unless



they're placed in that broader context—and the person is ready to hear and use the feedback. Hoppin warns that during a crisis some are vulnerable to feeling that assessments can give definitive answers. “Which they can't do,” she emphasizes.

A career plan generally describes the type of work, professional development, level of responsibility, location, advancement opportunities, and compensation you desire, while simultaneously addressing the ages and stages of a lifetime. It considers your aspirations for yourself and your family. It also includes your plans for education and skills development.

“We see people go through various levels of readiness for assessment and planning,” says Hoppin, who has taught in this field for 20 years. “They often start with self-help books, such as *What Color Is Your Parachute?* It has several checklists and self-assessments. Then they may go to a course on career planning at a local school or college. Many of these programs include career assessments. When they're really ready to make some decisions, or they're faced with a complete career change, many people want to discuss their plans with an individual counselor. Reviewing assessment results can be important part of that process.”

The Right Counselor

Indeed, both experts we consulted for this article emphasize the importance of working with a competent career counselor.



“There is probably more interest today in career planning assessments because of more people in the job market,” says Judith Hoppin. “One of my concerns is that some people offering assessments are not qualified to administer, interpret or discuss them.”

Says Wendy Alfus-Rothman, “A person's ability to use feedback has a lot to do with the way it is delivered. That calls for a lot of skill on the part of the feedback provider. In fact, it's imperative. In the wrong hands or used with a person who's in the wrong state of mind, assessment and feedback can actually be dangerous.”

Indeed, the National Career Development Association's ethics statement says that test-givers must provide orientation to assessments before they're administered.

Judith Hoppin advises that if significant non-career issues are weighing on a person's mind, "it may be best to avoid using formal assessments until after they're resolved.”

Career Planning with Tests: A Real Life Example

David Fabricant, currently a Global Director of Marketing for Interbody products with [Stryker Spine](#) in Allendale, NJ, had reached that point of readiness when he decided to work with Wendy Alfus-Rothman.

“Six years ago, I was an engineer in R&D for a consumer products company,” he says. “To some people, R&D might sound like a glamorous job, but the growth was not high enough and I was disillusioned with engineering and with the company.”

He decided to undergo not just a job change but a career change. Working with Wendy Alfus-Rothman, Fabricant began working on five-year and ten-year plans. “There was even a 40-year scenario,” he says. “Location, industry, function, compensation—everything.”

He says they took several sessions to learn what really “makes me tick” before there were any tests. Only then did they start formal assessments, which included the [Hogan Personality Inventory](#), [Hogan Development Survey](#), [Hogan's Motives, Values, Preferences Inventory](#), the Strong Career Transition Report, and the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory.

“I believe 95% of the assessments described me accurately,” says Fabricant. “The amount of information the reports provide can be overwhelming, but if you focus on one or two things, they can have great impact.”

In the end, between the assessments, further discussion, and research, Fabricant's search narrowed to a marketing role in a medical device company. From there, he began to implement a search that led him to Stryker and a job offer. He took the job and has enjoyed three promotions and four job titles in six years.



According to Hoppin, qualified career counselors have at least a master's degree in counseling and a specialty in career development. "They are equipped to help someone deal with the big emotional impact of job loss or the displacement of a line of work," she says. "They are familiar with the impact these have on the entire family. They are also equipped through their training to help someone create a comprehensive career plan."

Career counselors may also hold several additional designations. For instance, the NCDA has two types of special memberships: Master Career Counselors (MCC) and Master Career Development Professionals (MCDP). "In both cases, the individual has to earn the designation through submission of a portfolio and resume that proves his or her experience," she says. "Many career counselors are licensed professional counselors through their state and/or they may be a National Certified Counselor. These individuals have qualified for the National Certified Counselor standards and meet additional requirements in career counseling." (NCDA provides free consumer guidelines to choosing a career counselor on their web site.)

Several other titles are used to describe career specialists, however, and they are not all alike in their qualifications.

"People may encounter titles such as Career Coach, Career Advisor, or Employment Counselor," says Hoppin. "Someone can call themselves a career coach after only a weekend course," she says.

A Career Advisor is most often encountered in a college or school placement office. Employment counselors are generally involved with helping you find specific opportunities. "They might help you write a resume or give you interviewing practice," she says. "But their mandate is not generally to help with an extensive career plan."

The Right Career Test

If you have the context of a well developed plan and the right counselor, you're in a good position to take advantage of career assessments. When counselors choose tests for their clients, they should address two topics: the type of test being given and the quality of the test.



Types of Tests

There are four major categories of career tests: Interest Inventories, Motives and Values Inventories, Personality Tests, and Ability Tests. Each addresses a different part of the puzzle, as discussed below.

Interest Inventories: These show how closely your job interests match those of people who work successfully in various professions. Some of the better known include the Strong Interest Inventory, the Career Assessment Inventory, the Self-Directed Search (Holland) and the Kuder Interest Inventory.

Motives and Values Questionnaires: These reports provide insight into how you would like life to be. The instruments typically ask about the importance of job security, salary, the opportunity to display creativity on the job, and many other job-related preferences. Some examples of statements on these questionnaires include the following:

- “I’d like to be famous”
- “I need to work by myself”
- “I love to run things”
- “I can’t stand working in the same place every day.”

They can help you learn, for instance, whether you prefer to have more people contact or less, prefer to be in charge or in a supporting role, or whether you are more independent than other people in your field. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the Temperament and Values Inventory and the [Motives, Values, Preferences Inventory](#) from Hogan Assessments are examples.

Personality Tests: There are two major categories of personality tests: those designed for clinical use and those designed for career counseling, candidate screening or staff development. Many famous personality tests, such as Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, California Psychological Inventory, and Jackson Personality Research Form were designed for a clinical context.



Clinical instruments usually are not appropriate for career counseling or development because they detect psychopathology and are not very good at assessing work-relevant characteristics. (Having said that, however, clinical tests are useful in situations where the applicant's state of mind is critical. Pilots, military special-forces, law enforcement officers or nuclear power plant operators are examples.)

The second type of personality test looks at how we are known by others based on our observable behaviors. These instruments are often used in vocational and hiring situations, and ask respondents to check off or rate items that best describe how they would react under various circumstances. Sample statements might include these:

- “My success depends on how others see me.”
- “I am careful to consider the other person's point of view.”
- “Many of the managers I've worked for were incompetent.”
- “I like being in front of a group.”

These self-evaluations help assess whether the individual is, for instance, appearance-conscious or unaware, interpersonally sensitive or insensitive, arrogant or humble, extroverted or introverted. They often evaluate such work-related characteristics as honesty, anger management, conscientiousness, self-confidence or sociability. Examples of workplace and career personality tests are the [Hogan Personality Inventory](#) (tendencies under normal conditions) coupled with the [Hogan Development Survey](#) (tendencies under stress), the 16 Personality Factor Questionnaire, and the SHL Occupational Personality Questionnaire.

General Ability Tests fall into four categories.

Cognitive ability tests typically measure mental abilities, such as verbal, mathematical and reasoning skills. The results can be helpful in predicting potential in some careers. Examples include the [Hogan Business Reasoning Inventory](#), the Watson Glazer Critical Thinking Test, the Differential Aptitude Test and the General Aptitude Test Battery.



Knowledge tests use specific questions to determine how much the individual knows about particular job tasks and responsibilities. For instance, a test of fluency in a foreign language may be easily justified in hiring or developing a person for a job in global business operations.

Specific ability tests measure specific physical and mental abilities, such as reaction time, reading comprehension and mechanical ability. For example, mechanical ability may be important for auto mechanic and engineering jobs; physical endurance may be critical for fire-fighters.

Work-sample or performance tests allow you to actually demonstrate or perform one or more job tasks, and may be used in a counseling context to help you get a realistic job preview, as well as to assess ability.

The final element of using career assessments well is to take the appropriate tests and to be sure they are high quality tests.

Test Quality

Indeed, all tests aren't created equal—a fact well known to well qualified and ethical career counselors and coaches. To judge the worthiness of a particular test, your counselor should be able to discuss why he or she selected the test. Their reasoning should be based on several considerations.

How many types of measurements do you need and why? Your counselor should be able to assess your needs based on whether you are trying to perform a career switch or are trying to return to or advance an existing career. The counselor may also take into account your past frustrations with work activities, job settings, people interactions, and levels of success in selecting a good set of assessments. He or she should be able to tell you why each assessment was selected.

What is the reference group? The reference group is the sample from which norms are created. If you're a working adult with some years of experience, the tests you take should be normed on a similar population. Again, the counselor should be able to describe this to you. How is it normed? This information tells where you stand relative to others in the reference



group. Yes, you have an interest in mathematics, but is it an unusually high level of interest? The answer depends on your basis of comparison. Is your interest unusual compared to the average high school student or the average math teacher or rocket scientist?

How reliable is the test? Reliability refers to a test's stability or consistency when it measures the same group on repeated occasions, which gives you a way of judging the amount of measurement error in the test itself. All tests have some measurement error, so test publishers should offer an indication of reliability (usually expressed as a level of confidence).

Validity refers to how well the test measures what it's intended to measure. Validity is usually expressed as a correlation between two or more factors. For instance, test publisher data may show correlation between job-related test scores and job performance.

There are many ways to establish reliability, validity and norms. Any test worth your career counselor's attention has a technical manual that explains the studies which prove that the test meets all of these standards.

Reputable tests can provide a comprehensive view of your career inclinations and possibilities in a very efficient way. So, if you have a plan, a competent counselor and an understanding of what career tests actually represent, you have some powerful allies on your career search team. Although the need to do this much work may have been unexpected and the current market is challenging, Wendy Alfus-Rothman suggests a useful way to look at the challenge.

"It's a wake-up call," she says, "to the basic fact that everyone needs to take control of their professional lives, regardless of market variations."



About Performance Programs, Inc.

Surveys, Tests and Assessments for Organizations and Individuals since 1987

PPI has helped hundreds of organizations and individuals achieve reliable, valid, actionable survey results for more than 20 years. Our clients range from the world's largest multinationals to small consulting firms, schools, hospitals, construction firms and many other organizations. We work with many career counselors and executive coaches, supporting them and their individual clients with validated personality tests and 360 feedback.

Performance Programs is a leading distributor and certification training provider for Hogan Assessment Systems. We chose Hogan instruments over the many others available in the market because they meet all the criteria of excellence in workplace assessment, including rigorous scientific standards and no adverse impact. PPI has worked with Hogan instruments for nearly 10 years, helping clients implement them for both candidate selection, career counseling and employee development. We provide prompt, personalized assistance with administration and interpretation, and also provide support for coaches and counselors with their clients.

Performance Programs' services include:

- [Hogan Personality Testing for Employee Selection and Career Development](#)
- [Hogan Personality Tests Certification Workshops](#)
- [Custom surveys to accompany business, psychology and HR books.](#)
- [360 Feedback - Clark Wilson Group Task Cycle Surveys](#) (role-specific)
- [Clark Wilson 360 Feedback Certification Workshops](#)
- [360 Feedback for Leadership - Leadership Versatility Index](#)
- [Employee Satisfaction Surveys](#)
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