

Performance Programs, Inc.

Human Resources Surveys, Tests, and Assessments

Tests & Assessments for Career Direction: An Overview

Summary: Formal career assessment has become very popular and, when used judiciously, provides reliable information in a concentrated timeframe to support career changes and job searches. 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.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of tests and assessments and what some have to offer. It is intended to be informative for a general business audience, but it is not an exhaustive review of all career-related tests. Career coaches and counselors may offer it to their clients to help them understand the range of options.

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Tests & Assessments for Career Direction: An Overview

Formal career assessment has become very popular and, if you have the right career coach and you're working within the context of a career plan, it has a great deal to offer. 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. There are also some tests that cross over categories.

First, however, let's dispense with a common misnomer. Most of the instruments labeled "career tests" aren't really tests and aren't exclusively used for career planning. Rather, they're surveys of interests, likes, dislikes, values, motives, personal traits, and in the case of ability tests, aptitudes. They don't have right or wrong answers. Think of them more as enhanced photography rather than pass-fail quizzes. They picture how you respond and suggest ways of looking at the picture, and show how your picture compares to others.

Interest Inventories

These show how closely your job interests match those of people who work successfully in various professions. Interest inventories generally offer several levels of insight. They describe broad categories of interest and the general activities that are included in those categories, such as selling or performing physical labor or being outdoors. These are widely used with new entrants to the workforce and career changers.

Most interest inventories offer examples of job titles that relate to your responses. Job titles can be a bit tricky, in that it is tempting to latch onto the job title—rather than the

underlying meaning of that title. Furthermore, it is likely you will have a few surprises on your list. Many scratch their heads and wonder how “this crazy test” led to that recommendation.

[Industrial psychologist Paul M. Connolly, Ph.D.](#), president of Performance Programs, has worked with these assessments for 30 years. “Sometimes we have to ask people to use their imaginations,” he says. “You need to think about the *values* the suggested job titles represent.” He gives the example of a bus driver.

“The bus driver is in control of who enters or leaves the bus, as well as when and where they do so,” he says. “He or she follows road signs, makes adjustments based on traffic conditions, and otherwise does his or her best to arrive at a destination as planned. On board the bus, the driver is in charge. When viewed from the perspective of the job activities, it has elements of management, sociability, safety consciousness, willingness to serve others, and much more.”

Connolly has seen more than a few people unnerved by the titles included in their reports. He cites the reaction of a nurse who was in an outplacement program from a corporate medical staff.

He says, “An assessment showed that her values and interests most closely matched those of funeral directors. She was very distressed with the report. “Actually, her years as a registered nurse—handling others’ grief and illnesses—were correctly reflected by the test. And so was her strong interest in running a business—which is a major part of how funeral directors spend their time. When the conversation progressed to her interest in starting a small business, her attitude towards the report changed and we were able to put the job title aside and explore the message in a useful way.”

A number of interest inventories exist. The original and still one of the best is the Self-Directed Search (Holland). Some of the better known include the Strong Interest Inventory, the Career Assessment Inventory, and the Kuder Interest Inventory. Performance Programs uses both the Self-Directed Search and the Strong Interest Inventory.

Motives and Values Questionnaires

Because job performance relies to some extent on motives and values, questionnaires of this type can be very useful in assessing career direction. Motives and values questionnaires for career applications probe how you *would like your work life to be*. These instruments typically ask respondents to rate 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.”

“Show me the money.”

“I love to run things.”

“I can’t stand working in the same place every day.”

These assessments help clarify the relationship between motives and values and job selection. Motives and values questionnaires can help you clarify, for instance, whether you prefer people contact more than most people, prefer to be in charge or in a supporting role, or whether you are more independent than other people in your field.

These questionnaires make a significant contribution to the decision-making process when a person is confused about direction. Motives and values can be hard to articulate, even to

ourselves. Many people confuse what they want to do with what they think they should do. Sometimes, significant others “see” us in careers for which we have little motivation, yet we can’t articulate why the choice feels wrong. Some people spend years in less-than-optimal situations because of confusion about what they should do vs. what they want to do. Think, for instance, of young people who, due to family pressures or ambitions, join their family businesses or qualify for a traditional family occupation (minister, physician, and farmer). Later, they find they are not brilliant contributors—even though other family members may be! Think, too, of people who choose work that pays well but does not interest them.

The Temperament and Values Inventory, the Motives, Values, Preferences Inventory, or any of the many values checklists, such as Value in Action, are examples. Performance Programs uses the Career Compass report and the Leadership Values report based on Hogan Assessment’s Motives, Values, Preferences Inventory to complete this important part of a career assessment.

How Interest Inventories Differ from Motives and Values Inventories

Motives and values are different from interests, as they are used in the context of career tests. Interests on career inventories usually refer to job titles or work and leisure activities, which at a deeper level represent values and motives. For instance, you might have once selected “Librarian” as an example of an occupational interest. Ten years later, you might also select a title called “Database Manager” or “Knowledge Management Specialist.” These titles are related by way of activities as well as motives and values to your earlier selection of “Librarian.” The interests you express are likely to change over time, but they are always an expression of what you value.

For a second example, you might have once enjoyed an extreme sport such as mountain biking (an interest). Over time you may have become bored with this activity, and turned your attention to rock climbing (another interest). The core values that tie both of these interests together, and which have not shifted, are love of physical activity, the freedom of the outdoors, and more than a hint of physical risk. Your interests have shifted; your motives have not.

Interest inventories and values questionnaires overlap to some extent when they ask for your preferences among work activities, which often transcend particular situations or occupations. These include broader factors such as “working with children,” “working with data,” “mechanical activities,” “mathematics,” or “outdoor activities.”

At the deepest level, values questionnaires examine the common denominators that define what we would like to have in our lives and how we would like life to be—fast-paced, quiet, friendly, helpful to others, full of visible accomplishment, well remunerated, and so on.

Research has shown that good choices at each level of this hierarchy are important to career satisfaction and success. It has also been shown that interests, motives and values are very durable over time—so the results of these tests should be useful to the test-taker for many years.

Personality Tests

The name “personality test” is used loosely, covering everything from fun questionnaires on the Internet to serious tests that detect mental pathology or, in the case of job personality tests, how well suited a person is to a particular job. So, it is important to make some distinctions.

Many famous personality tests, such as Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and the California Psychological Inventory (CPI) were designed for a clinical context. Clinical instruments usually are not appropriate for career counseling or development because they detect psychopathology, and many ask questions that are not appropriate to a business situation. (However, clinical tests are used when the applicant's state of mind is important. 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 ask respondents to check off or rate items that best describe themselves as 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.”

Though the questionnaire asks how the person would respond to these items, the reports talk about how others would be likely to describe the respondent. For example, a person may describe themselves as fun-loving and spontaneous, but the report they receive will include the research-based observation that people who think that about themselves are also often perceived as disorganized or disruptive.

These self-evaluations describe the speaker's social personality characteristics to assess whether they are, 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. Performance Programs uses the Hogan assessments.

Where Does the MBTI Fit?

Some people think of the famous Myers-Briggs Type Indicator as a values questionnaire, and others think of it as a personality test. It is used in many contexts and, as an assessment, actually crosses several categories.

The MBTI is a “type” or style indicator and, from an assessment perspective, a hybrid. It measures personality tendencies but also reflects learning history. While personality tendencies remain essentially the same over time, style can shift as we learn from experience. In personality terms, someone who is low in sociability is likely to be an Introvert on their MBTI report. If that same person works in a very sociable sales group, for example, and takes both the MBTI and a personality test again four years later, their personality tendency would still be low on sociability, but their MBTI style would probably have shifted toward extraversion.

True personality tests measure personality factors—those tendencies that contribute to the way a person lives within society and lives with him or herself. These tendencies are very stable over time (although brain disorders and extreme trauma can alter personality). Learning and life experience do not, in themselves, provide measureable changes on personality tests.

General Ability Tests

These exist in four categories.

Cognitive ability tests typically measure mental abilities, such as verbal, mathematical and reasoning skills. Some might be tempted to call all tests in this category “intelligence tests,” but this is not technically true. The results of various cognitive ability tests can be helpful in predicting potential in some careers, particular those requiring certain types of mental functioning such as spatial relations in the case of an architect, or mathematics in the case of an engineer.

The Hogan Business Reasoning Inventory, for instance, focuses on strategic reasoning—a critical skill for managers and leaders. Performance Programs uses this when cognitive ability testing is needed.

Other examples of general cognitive ability tests (i.e. intelligence tests) include the Wonderlic, Differential Aptitude Test, and the General Aptitude Test Battery. Watson Glazer Critical Thinking Test is another example, although it is aimed at differentiating among levels of intelligence, as are the Stanford Binet and Wechsler tests.

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.

Taking tests in all four categories will provide the most comprehensive view of your career inclinations and possibilities.

If you have a plan, a competent counselor and an understanding of what career tests actually represent, you're almost all the way home—but it's important to consider the issues of appropriateness and quality. There are so many kinds of tests. The final element of using career assessments well is to be assured that you're taking the right, high quality tests.

Test Quality

Indeed, all tests aren't created equal—a fact well known to qualified, 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.

If you have the right counselor, the context of a career plan, and the right tests for your situation, you have some powerful allies on your career search team.

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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.

Other Performance Programs' services include:

- [Employee Satisfaction Surveys](#)
- [Employee Satisfaction Benchmarks and Norms](#)
- [Hogan Personality Testing for Employee Selection and Development](#)
- [Hogan Personality Tests Certification Workshops](#)
- [360 Feedback - Clark Wilson Group Task Cycle Surveys](#) (role-specific)
- [Clark Wilson 360 Feedback Certification Workshops](#)
- [360 Feedback for Leadership - Leadership Versatility Index](#)
- [Culture](#)
- [Power of Full Engagement Self Profile](#)
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