

Career Assessment Key Criteria for Consideration | 2014 for the Teen / Young Adult Population

Career assessment has advanced significantly with internet based technology at the same time that the global landscape has shifted making the career decisions facing the youth of today complex and more difficult than for previous generations. The future of our world at this time literally depends upon the life decisions of youth and young adults. Sound choices made early in one's working life help shape the future of the country and our society. Career assessment systems can make all the difference to the quality of these life choices for this generation. This paper seeks to help educators, career counselors, government and other agencies grappling with career assessment system selection by outlining the most important considerations in adopting a highly effective career assessment tool that will propel the youth of today into jobs that they both enjoy and will also contribute positively to our way of life over the next 30-40 years.

OVERVIEW: CAREER ASSESSMENT

Career Assessment Tools: What are they?

Career assessment tools seek to help individuals understand how a variety of personal attributes (i.e., interests, values, preferences, motivations, aptitudes and skills) impact their potential success and satisfaction with different career options and work environments. Career assessment results are useful in helping candidates to choose a career that is in tune with their goals and talents. Career assessments have been used since World War II and have become more sophisticated with time and the advent of technology (i.e. the internet). Further, career assessment, in the form of tests and other structured and unstructured tools, can be very useful for those who are uncertain about the vast array of career possibilities that exist in today's world.

General Types of Career Assessments

The early career assessments were interest-focused. That is, these paper-and-pencil checklists asked the test taker to consider the extent to which they were interested in different tasks, jobs and career types. If a test taker had high interest in animals, for example, the test results might recommend veterinary science as a possible career match. Interest inventories are still around and have gone online but are not very sophisticated or deep in terms of looking at other aspects of the work environment that are crucial to explore other than straight interests.

Later, career assessments became more psychologically-based and many are derivative of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). These tests produce the 4-letter type formula according to Carl Jung's and Isabel Briggs Myers' typology, along with the strengths of preferences and the description of one's personality type. The test taker then could learn about careers and occupations most suitable for their personality type. The problem with using psychological type as the basis for career matching is that all of the 16 types can and do perform a wide variety of jobs, often with equal success. Different types might go about the job different ways but all are entirely capable of being successful so this kind of testing is not predictive of success.

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More sophisticated and predictive career assessments have appeared over the past 15 years that have sophisticated algorithms made possible by computer-assisted data analysis and online administration. These assessments often include many facets of career suitability including interests, personality characteristics, work environment preferences, social skills and other nuanced aspects related to success in the world of work.

Inborn vs. Learned Behavioral Preferences

Personality-based assessments (i.e. Jungian) tend to see personality as a fixed behavioral profile, or “hard-wiring” that is unchangeable. Using a career assessment based on this model is troubling because the underlying assumption is that the test taker, in this case, perhaps a teen, is “stuck” with whatever personality they have and cannot change much, if at all. For this reason, assessments that go beyond the classic psychological model (i.e. MBTI-derived) may be preferable because the young person has the power to change over time with significant effort. The career assessment should offer insight into behavioral preferences and tendencies, but should also point to areas in need of attention if the person wants to improve their overall suitability for a goal-driven job, career or profession. Optimally, the test taker should be able to see how they match up with a specific job or career including areas that would benefit from more time and attention. For example, a result such as this is helpful for the young person’s present and future:

Yes, you are a good match for Dental Assistant in these 9 out of 10 areas. You can improve your overall match for this job by investing time and attention in building your interpersonal skills even further.

Performance-Enjoyment Theory

Career Assessments that are based on the test taker’s enjoyment of various job-related elements tend to yield the most accurate and positive results at this time. Performance-Enjoyment theory is positively correlated with high performance on the job, work satisfaction and retention. Research shows that people are motivated by performing work that they truly enjoy and they will perform at higher levels if assigned roles and responsibilities that give them the highest degree of work satisfaction.

BENCHMARKS

The following represent factors that professional evaluators in the vocational / career community consider as global benchmarks that are critical to consider when evaluating any career assessment for implementation.

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Based on Performance Research / Validation

Many career assessments were developed by university professors using college students as the sample group. This approach may result in a quality result, but is not sufficient for adoption on a large-scale unless the assessment has been used extensively in the business community. A solid Career Assessment should be based on performance research in industry (not only the education world) that focuses on understanding the differences between high and low performers. At least a decade of such research should provide the foundation for a well-respected test. Test validity should be available along with actual case studies of how the test has been used in large-scale, real-world examples.

Job Titles / Career Families

The results from the assessment (i.e. output) needs to be anchored in a specific, recognizable body of work with credibility. That is, the job titles / career families should not be created by the test author but should anchor back to a government database of jobs, such as the O*net in the United States (Department of Labor, formerly the Dictionary of Occupational Titles. Ideally, the job titles themselves should match those of the O*net and be cross-referenced against other databases and resources so that the job seeker can easily find additional information about a specific job online, such as educational requirements for that job, economic outlook, salary information, etc.

Number of Factors / Traits Measured

Career assessments vary considerably in the number of traits or factors measured. The more traits/factors measured, the more specifically and accurately the results can be mapped to specific jobs and career clusters. The number of traits measured varies considerably, from four types up to 200 traits in common use today. Specificity is critical to success in matching people to jobs.

“Face” Valid

A career assessment should be face valid. Face validity is the extent to which a test is subjectively viewed as covering the concept it purports to measure; in this case, the world of work. Face validity refers to the transparency or relevance of a test as it appears to test participants. In other words, a test can be said to have face validity if it "looks like" it is going to measure what it is supposed to measure; that is, career and job expectations. If the statements or questions within the test focus too much on personal or personality factors, then it is weaker than if it focuses on task and work environment factors. The test takers will “buy in” to a career assessment that “feels right” as they take it.

Thorough and Useful Reports (output)

Any career assessment is only as good as the information it produces that guides and informs the test taker. Best-in-class assessments produce multiple reports that show the individual their best matches against job titles, specific information relative to a specific job type showing where the person is a good

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vs. a poor match at the trait level, self-esteem building information related specifically to that person's unique strengths, and a narrative description overall of the person's work profile that is in-depth and includes potential development areas that can be pursued.

User-friendly, quick and easy

A good career assessment must be easy to access for the test taker, take less than 30 minutes to complete and produce quick results. It should be attractive and appeal to the youth of today.

Support

A good test publisher will have infrastructure in place to handle inquiries, deal with problems, help with customization, provide training to professional staff and generally be a partner in the exercise. Make sure that your partners are flexible, responsive and care about your outcomes as you will be working together for years to come.

ESSENTIAL TO CONSIDER

The following list of key points represent some of the most critical elements to consider when selecting a career assessment system for wide-scale adoption.

Mapping to Real Jobs in Industry

Many career assessments are used globally so they are more generic in nature and job titles and career descriptions may not be geared toward the U.S. system. Career Assessments results that are specific to the U.S. system have a distinct advantage to our population as they can immediately recognize the job titles, specific apprenticeships, and degreed careers that exist in their world.

Reliability (test/retest)

Test reliability refers to the stability of the test result over time. A well-constructed test should have reliability coefficients of at least .7 to show that test results stand-up over time and are stable. If a test is reliable, then the test takers' results should not vary significantly if taken one week and then a week or a month later. The "mood" or disposition of the test taker should not skew the results over a short period of time.

Consistency (Lie) Detection

A sophisticated, modern career assessment should have a consistency, or lie detector mechanism built-in that is triggered by attempts to deceive or trick the test through extensive cross-referencing. Make

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sure that the lie detector mechanism is set to redirect anyone who fails to meet this standard and give them a second try to achieve strong consistency guaranteeing a quality result.

Neutral test items

It is critical that the test questions, or statements (also called “items”), be phrased neutrally so that test takers answer honestly out of their own experience rather than reacting to what is perceived to be “good” or “bad” by society, or others (i.e. peer group or parents). For example, consider reacting to this question: *Do you prefer to help a friend in need or read a book quietly by yourself?* Most people would answer *help a friend in need* because this response is “good” behavior, rather than reflective of that person’s true preferences. The test should phrase all alternatives in equally acceptable, positive language. Further, the test items should be work-related as much as possible, rather than personal or hypothetical.

Traits-to-Avoid

A good career assessment should identify essential and desirable traits needed for job success and also flag negative trait combinations, or traits-to-avoid that can derail successful performance. For example, if a test taker views her results against the career of Library Assistant, she may see her scores on traits such as Writing/Language interest, preference for a quiet work environment, etc. She should also see if she triggers negative traits for the job such as blunt communication style, or harshness toward others that could interfere with customer service delivery. Test takers need to see where they fit and where they might experience problems on the job or in an apprenticeship program.

Trait-specific

Better career assessments will provide results that are quite detailed and job-specific. The test taker should be able to see quite clearly where he or she lines up well with a particular job or career type along a dozen or more traits or factors related to job success. A single score or handful of scores is not as meaningful as a more extensive listing. When a test taker sees where they are strong as well as weaker areas, they are more motivated to pursue development in the weaker area(s) because their confidence and self-esteem have been bolstered by seeing where their strengths lie.

Ranking vs. Rating

Career assessment formats generally fall into one of two kinds. A rating format presents the test taker with a statement as well as a scale (i.e. Likert scale). When responding to a Likert questionnaire item, respondents specify their level of agreement or disagreement on a symmetric agree-disagree scale for a series of statements. Likert-style tests are easier for respondents to respond to, but are inferior to ranking-style formats in statistical and mathematical calculations that are enabled. Ranking test design is more powerful because they “force-choice” the test-taker into making judgments and tough choices that reduce the time needed to produce quality results and provide significant help in overcoming self-deception.

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Questionnaire Format / Time to Take the Test

Advanced cross-referencing technologies are available now that make thousands of comparisons behind-the-scenes and enable results that are deep and detailed in less than 30 minutes. A test that takes more than 30 minutes is not necessary and rater fatigue will ensue.

OTHER IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

Translations / Languages

Career assessment should be conducted in the test taker's mother tongue even if the results are produced in English or another language that parents, the schools, or business prefers. The best results are obtained when the test taker is completely comfortable and fluent in the language of the test. Even slight misinterpretations can skew test results rendering the results useless, or even worse – destructive. Look for a test that is available in at least 25 different languages.

Reading Level

Some career assessments are pitched at too low or high an education level for the test taker. Make sure that the concepts and vocabulary used in the test questions is appropriate for the target population. Be sure to “test the test” with a sample first to make sure it is appropriate and fits the age group.

Online vs. Paper-and-pencil Administration and Scoring

Most career assessments are online today for ease of administration, scoring and viewing results. This generation is fully comfortable taking an online questionnaire. The administration of the test (i.e. sending out links to take it, running reports, etc.) should be streamlined and user-friendly. The best online tests offer the test taker his or her own account or site through which to view their results, run different reports, and go to over time for no additional charge or obligation. The account should just “sit there” for the student to use flexibly over time, over and over again.

Scoring: Overall and by Trait

Better career assessments reveal both an overall score against a job type as well as individual scores on each trait, or factor assessed. For example, an overall score of say, 80% against a specific job, and then the scores of each factor should be visible so that the test taker can see their strengths relative to that job as well as their weaker areas. Then, the test taker can undertake learning and development activities relative to weaker areas so as to boost their overall chances of success in that job by developing further.

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Cost

Look for a simple cost structure. Some tests have add-on costs for materials, explanatory booklets, facilitator materials, cue card sets, posters, annual license fees, number of users, etc. One person – one cost for the entire experience is usually the best option.

Ongoing research/refinement of the test.

The test publisher should indicate when the test was developed and when the test was last updated. Better test publishers are continually engaged in R&D and invest earnings back into enhancements to the system.

Education level

The better career assessments can offer results to the test taker based on level of education. That is, the student test-taker should be able to view job matches at all education levels: minimal education, High School diploma, A.A. degree, Bachelors' degree, and advanced degrees. This enables the student to set his/her sights on strong matches at the level of education he or she prefers, or are realistic given their unique circumstances.

Paradox Technology

Best-in-class career assessments effectively identify exceptional strengths and negative traits based on the principle that each trait has the potential to be either productive or counter-productive, depending upon other balancing traits. Paradox theory provides deep insight into the test taker's stress responses and can be invaluable to understanding how over and under-used traits are likely to play out in the workplace.

Preparation in Advance of the Test

Teens and even young adults, particularly, may lack some of the real-world experience that working adults have when taking a career assessment. It can be very useful to prepare them in advance of their sitting down to take the assessment. For example, viewing a quick video, set of instructions, or coaching / "hand-holding" before they begin the exercise that informs or orients them can be very helpful and result in a better experience. Look for a vendor who is willing to work with you to create supplemental materials to accomplish this pre-work.

Focus on Strengths

A key element to successful take-up and real-world application of career assessment is that the experience is based on individual talents and strengths rather than focusing on gaps or weaknesses. The focal point should be on building self-esteem and confidence in this first attempt at job matching

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and career development. Recent research conducted by the Gallup organization and espoused by business leaders such as Marcus Buckingham called the “strengths movement” continue to support that notion that individual strengths and preferences are key to career success. Any career assessment considered should support this concept that one should fully appreciate and build on strengths. Some systems even have individual reports that can be produced that focus exclusively on the individual’s exceptional strengths or talents that the job seeker can use in resume writing and interview preparation to accentuate their strengths.

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