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BEYOND THE IVORY TOWER

Know Thyself

Here's what a 'personality test' can tell you about your career options, and what it can't

By SANDRA YIN

Whether you're a midcareer academic grown tired of teaching or a disillusioned A.B.D. ready for something new, you have options outside the ivory tower. You just need to know where to look. Increasingly, graduate-career counselors are suggesting that the best place to start looking is within.

Campus career centers offer a number of tools -- sometimes incorrectly referred to as career tests or personality assessments -- that can help draw out what motivates you. The "tests" are designed to help people make career or education choices that match their actual interests and preferences.

Angela Wood, a career counselor at Cal Tech, recalls a female postdoc in the sciences who was thinking of leaving academe and was struggling with whether that was the right decision. She felt so out of sync with others in her lab that she had started to doubt her abilities.

Wood suggested that the scientist take the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, one of the most popular tools used for assessing personality types. The results helped the postdoc understand why she felt out of place. As an extrovert, she needed a more sociable environment than her lab, where others were not very gregarious, Wood said.

Sometimes personality and interest inventories can help suggest a change in fields. Paul Fornell, associate director of the career center at California State University at Long Beach, tells of a graduate student in pharmacy who was having trouble with the technical course work and wanted some advice. Fornell suggested the student take one of the tests. His results showed that he wanted to help people and had a strong interest in art. He ultimately decided to leave his program and go into medical illustration, where he could satisfy his artistic leanings and his need to help others, just in a different way.

Most personality and interest inventories compare a person's interests, abilities, and attitudes with those of people who enjoy their jobs. The report that's generated often lists likely occupations or career areas. The results are based on the assumption that people who share the same interests will tend to enjoy the same kinds of work.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator was initially developed during World War II to help the military classify people based upon shared characteristics or preferences. Today, the most common version of the test takes about 40 minutes to complete, and asks questions like: When making a decision, is it more important to you to (a) weigh the facts or (b) consider people's feelings and opinions? Another sample question: Which is a higher compliment for you? To be called (a) confident or (b) compassionate?

The interpretive report then gives you a four-letter code, classifying you into one of 16 personality types, which can be linked to various occupations. Each letter in the code represents a person's preferences along four different continuums (extroversion to introversion, sensing to intuiting, thinking to feeling, and judging to perceiving). Your preferences are supposed to reflect how you prefer to interact with the world around you. While "extroverts" are energized around other people and tend to act first and think later, "introverts" need time alone to recharge their batteries and prefer to think something over first, then act. "Sensors" prefer to learn about the world through concrete facts, while "intuitives" prefer symbolism and abstract ideas. "Thinkers" tend naturally to see flaws and be critical, while "feelers" naturally like to please others and show appreciation. "Judgers" are product-oriented and take deadlines seriously, while "perceivers" are more process-oriented and consider deadlines fluid.

Other instruments are a bit less intensive and take less time. The Self-Directed Search is another tool that can help you find careers that match your interests and self-reported abilities. It's based on the theory that people can be loosely classified into six different groups: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional.

The questions it asks are fairly basic: for example, "Do you like or dislike helping others deal with personal problems?" You're also asked to rate how you compare with people your age on sales skills and understanding others. Once your three-letter code is generated, you can find occupations and areas of study that match your interests and self-reported skills. The Self-Directed Search told me that I like to work with creative ideas. I am drawn to careers where I can help or teach other people, rather than engage in mechanical or technical activity. And I generally like to explore and understand things or events, rather

than persuade others or sell them things.

The Strong Interest Inventory uses the same model, but is far more comprehensive. It asks whether you like, dislike, or are indifferent to various kinds of work or workers. The resulting report is also more detailed, including occupational charts that show how similar or dissimilar your interests are with people of the same gender who are happily employed in various occupations. The results of my Strong inventory suggest that I share many likes and dislikes with female lawyers, but not as many with female architects.

Although these tools can be useful, they don't get the whole job done. They're just part of a larger process. You don't decide your career based on the suggestions of one inventory. It also doesn't hurt to take several and see where the results are inconsistent.

Every test or tool has its limitations. People often expect interest inventories to pinpoint that one career or occupation that is perfect for them, said Chrystal McArthur, associate director of career services at Rutgers University at New Brunswick. Then once they get their results back, she noted, they often become paralyzed by the range of options confronting them.

A more apt metaphor, according to Fornell, would be a funnel. Your Myers-Briggs and Strong scores are just one of the things you pour into a funnel, along with your life history, your résumé, your talks with career counselors, friends, and advisers, and your own thoughts.

Sometimes the test results are puzzling. One interest inventory seemed out of whack in suggesting that I shared interests with heating and refrigeration inspectors. Interest inventories often raise questions that are best answered by a career counselor.

Bear in mind that the tools are not aptitude assessments. They don't measure what the person would be good at, but rather self-reported interests and tendencies, said Marcia Harris, director of career services at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

It never hurts to remember that your responses are what define the profiles you receive in return. Therefore, the reports are only as good as your responses. They do not tell us anything we do not tell them first.

Don't expect too much of the tools. These instruments won't tell you what career or occupation will guarantee you lifelong satisfaction. No tool can do that. What they can do is give you ideas for occupations

you hadn't thought of, and suggestions worth following up.

Sandra Yin is an associate editor at American Demographics. *She is also, according to her Myers-Briggs scores, an INTJ (introverted, intuitive, thinking, judging) type. According to another inventory, she shares many interests and motivations in common with funeral directors. You can find an archive of previous Beyond the Ivory Tower columns here.*

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