

Self-Assessment

Self-assessment: the foundation

Whether you are trying to determine a career direction or are starting a job search, having clarity about who you are and what you have to offer is critical to your success in reaching your goals. A self-assessment can reveal your interests, values, skills, and personality preferences, all of which are critical in helping you make informed career choices that are appropriate for you. Looking for a relationship between your self-assessment results and the nature of the work you are considering is the most important step you can take before you write a résumé, begin the search for a job, or define a direction as an independent entrepreneur. In fact, when the time comes to write your résumé or prepare for a job interview, you will find – as many have found – that the task is significantly easier if you have completed the self-assessment process first. In addition, a close examination of the life experiences and influencers that have helped shape who you are can also increase your ability to solve any career challenges you encounter.

In the past, it was typical to complete a prescribed set of studies, find a job in a related field, and stay in that field until retirement. One decision and that was it! Today it is far more common for students to change majors and for workers to make several career changes in a lifetime. People change their careers for a variety of reasons. They might not have made appropriate choices initially, their interests or skills might have changed, or the careers they selected may no longer exist.

Planning for your career can be challenging in today's fast-paced, ever-changing, and complex world. Although it is not possible to predict the future with any certainty, you can successfully position yourself to capitalize on change and chance events by first understanding who you are, and then by putting yourself out there to create new life-shaping experiences. Starting with the self-assessment process can give you more choices and increase your confidence that you are heading in a positive direction.

Conduct your self-assessment

Start by examining what makes you who you are. You will then be better able to identify opportunities and make decisions regarding your career direction. The following sections will guide you in this process. Be sure you are completing a "self" assessment. Although the thoughts, ideas, and opinions of others may matter a great deal to you, it is important that you articulate your personality preferences, values, skills, and interests and how these influence your career decision-making process.

You are encouraged to engage in a variety of self-assessment activities: the more information you gather about yourself, the richer your self-knowledge. You will then be in a stronger position to generate and assess occupational options, leading ultimately to a career that is both satisfying and fulfilling.

Interests

What do I like to do, at work and outside of work?

Interests are often the first factor a person thinks of when considering an occupational direction, and can help you determine your key areas of motivation.

Likes, dislikes, and indifferences regarding various occupations and career-relevant activities are indeed important determinants of career choice. Make note of what attracts your attention: What do you enjoy learning? What conversations do you find yourself listening in on? What events do you like to attend? What news articles or issues grab your interest? Answers to these questions will help to give you a clearer sense of direction regarding potential occupations that relate to your interests.

To aid you in further expanding your awareness of your career-related interests, here are a few assessment tools available to you:

- *Strong Interest Inventory* - registration and information on cost available through the [Centre for Career Action](#) front desk
- *Choices Planner: Interest Profiler* (www.bridges.ca Userid: 1012272 Password: B3u2j5Q6)
- *Career Cruising: Explore My Interests* (www.careercruising.com Userid: uwaterloo Password: crc)
- *TypeFocus: Interests Assessment* (www.typefocus.com Access ID: uw74 – make up own password/userid)

Skills

What do I do well? What talents do I enjoy using? What do I want to improve?

A skill is a demonstrated ability to do something well. Skills can be learned and developed in a variety of ways: through academic or vocational training, self-study, hobbies, or on-the-job activities. In the labour market, skills are the currency used by workers in exchange for pay, so the more you develop your skills, the more marketable you will be.

If you were asked right now to list your skills, what would your list look like? It might be a short list, not because you do not possess many skills, but simply because you have never been asked to identify them and are not accustomed to thinking or talking about them. Each person can have up to 700 distinct skills in his or her repertoire. However, most people have trouble identifying their skills and, even when able to do so, feel uncomfortable promoting them. You cannot afford this kind of modesty. Having a realistic understanding of your skills will enable you to pursue occupations that you are qualified for and that you will enjoy.

- *SkillScan* – online or card sort versions available through [Centre for Career Action](#) front desk
- *ChoicesPlanner – Transferable Skills Checklist* (www.bridges.ca Userid: 1012272 Password: B3u2j5Q6)

Personality preferences

One of the most important factors in determining your happiness and success in a job is understanding your personality preferences. Everyone has a distinct set of personality preferences, comprised of individual traits: thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and attitudes. Are you easy going? Strong willed? Practical? What energizes you? Be honest when you assess these attributes. This will help to ensure that your results are truly reflective of you.

Available resources to further aid you in exploring your personality preferences:

- *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)*: registration and information on cost available through the [Centre for Career Action](#) front desk
- *TypeFocus: Personality Assessment* (www.typefocus.com Access ID: uw74 – make up own password/userid)

Values

What do you feel strongly about? What types of work environments would make you happy?

Have you ever wondered what causes someone to devote their life to helping others in developing countries, while another person pursues a career in the corporate world? What causes someone to become disenchanted with what he or she thought was a dream job or organization? Values are often at the root in such cases.

Values reflect what is worthwhile and important to you in the way you live and work. They give purpose to what you do. Having a clear sense of your values is one of the best ways of knowing whether you will enjoy a career or not. Studies show that successful, satisfied, and motivated employees are almost always involved in careers in which their values are respected and reinforced. When values are not satisfied or respected, burnout occurs, often very quickly.

It is important not only to identify, or label, your values, but also to prioritize them, since satisfaction of your core (most important) values will factor greatly into your overall career satisfaction. Identify your deal breakers, as these will often make the difference between job satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

- *Values Card Sort* – available through the [Centre for Career Action](#) front desk
- *Choices Planner: Career Values Sorter* (www.bridges.ca Userid: 1012272 Password: B3u2j5Q6)
- *TypeFocus: Values Assessment* (www.typefocus.com Access ID: uw74 – make up own password/userid)

Interests/skills/values/personality references

You can also derive important information about yourself through more holistic activities:

Pride experiences

Considering your previous experience in all life roles (e.g., worker, volunteer, student, parent or caregiver) is a great way to uncover your skills, interests, personality preferences, and values. Basing your self-assessment on real experience is much more valid than simply selecting items from a list. In the latter case, it is far too tempting and easy to select those characteristics that you wish described you rather than those that actually do.

List 3-5 experiences from your past that are positive for you. These are experiences that you are proud of and that make you feel energized as you recall them. They can be anything from building a house to drawing a picture or running a race. It only matters how you feel about them. The standard to use in choosing items for this list is your own pride in feeling "I did that!"

Describe these experiences with words associated with all of your senses: what you saw, heard, felt, smelled, and tasted. It is also helpful to describe your experiences from the perspectives of how you felt at the time and how you feel now as you recall them.

Remember to provide details. For example, rather than write "I was an excellent telephone customer service representative," write "In a typical day, I responded to more than 150 customer phone inquiries. This volume was almost double what other representatives handled. Based on satisfaction surveys, my customer service skills were consistently rated in the top 3 of the 40 representatives. Because of my high ratings, our manager asked me to participate in the training of new recruits. I then trained more than 20 new staff members."

Examine each accomplishment for interests, skills, values, and personal attributes. Are there any themes?

Examining my past

If you look over your past paid and unpaid work experiences you can often see a pattern emerge: themes and threads appear. You can use those themes and patterns to propel yourself to your next experience. What are the themes in your career so far? What are the talents you have consistently used in all your jobs regardless of your job title? What threads tend to run through your life? Because those threads and themes will help catapult you to your next job or career.

Situational factors

Beyond your personality preferences, values, skills, and interests there are a variety of situational factors that will likely influence your career planning process. Consider what impact gender, culture, family and significant others, sexual orientation, and disability might have.

Print and online resources are available on many of these topics, and Centre for Career Action staff are available to help you work through any challenges associated with these criteria.

Culture

Cultural values have been identified as important influences in career decision making. Although perspectives on work and making a career choice vary from culture to culture, members of some minority cultures experience greater difficulty with career planning. Perceived, as well as actual, barriers may result in lower levels of confidence in attaining various career goals.

Those who come from cultures where career decision making is a family or group process may experience more internal and external conflict. The decision maker is influenced by both family expectations and the individual decision-making approach prevalent in the dominant North American culture. When a decision maker has personal desires that are in conflict with those of the family, he or she may put off making the decision. The decision maker may also be uncomfortable or unhappy with a prospective career choice, depending on whose needs are not being met through this choice.

Gender

Everyone is influenced by gender and gender expectations and, as a result, may experience internal and external barriers in career decision making. Barriers for women may include difficulty in pursuing both career and family goals; male domination in traditionally male-dominated school subjects and career fields (e.g., math and science), even if decision makers possess the skills and abilities to be successful in such fields; anticipating a low level of success in a male-dominated work world; or being confronted by discrimination in selection and promotion practices.

Men are also affected by gender expectations and barriers. They are expected to achieve and to be ambitious and to pursue certain types of careers (often those involving much competition). Men are also often encouraged to avoid a long list of female-dominated career areas (e.g., day care services, nursing, clerical work) and to support the family financially, rather than through personal presence and involvement.

It is important to be aware of these potential influences and to assess your personal situation carefully. Are there occupations you are drawn to but feel unsure of because of gender-related factors? It would be unfortunate to forego a satisfying career for reasons that might well be overcome with a little self-exploration and planning.

Family and significant others

Significant others should generally be involved in the entire career planning and job search process. People who know you well can offer insight (e.g., skills they have seen you demonstrate), advice, feedback, and encouragement. They also know your personal style and have witnessed your accomplishments.

Depending on your family, parental over- or under-involvement can be problematic. Is your family open to an expression of your career views that may be different from theirs? Pressure to meet expectations regarding career choice can often be overwhelming and can result in a premature or delayed career decision.

Sexual orientation

Career needs and challenges vary in nature, timing, and magnitude for everyone; additional complications frequently exist for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and intersex students. Although the coming-out process can begin at any age, it usually occurs in late adolescence and early adulthood – which often coincides with a person’s university years. The stress and emotional energy associated with that process can have different effects. In addition to a potentially significant impact on academics, an LGBTQ student’s career development can be compromised by both internal and external factors. Internal issues may include feelings of guilt, a belief that s/he doesn’t deserve a satisfying career, fear of others’ attitudes, home and career conflict, and self-stereotyping out of some occupations or into others based on perceptions of these occupations as being or not being ‘safe’ or ‘gay-friendly’. External issues may include stereotyping; lack of role models; lack of support from family, significant others, co-workers and employers; and homophobia.

Resources and services offered by both Counseling Services and the Centre for Career Action can help students overcome these self-defeating thoughts and perceptions. Occupational and employer research is also important. [Centre for Career Action](#) has a number of print and electronic resources on this topic. At the University of Waterloo, [The Glow Centre for Sexual and Gender Diversity](#) can provide additional support and assistance.

Disability

People with physical, sensory, or learning disabilities or chronic medical conditions are advised, like all career decision makers, to focus on personality preferences, values, skills, and interests when engaging in the career development process. Examine your strengths as well as your perceived weaknesses. Although it is important to consider how your situation may impact your ability to succeed in the occupations you are considering, are you limiting yourself unnecessarily? You may find that the disability has minimal or no impact at all on your choice of career.

After conducting your self-assessment, thoroughly research the occupations of interest to you. This should address all aspects of a job, such as the tasks involved as well as the nature of the typical work conditions or environment. Determine what, if any, challenges could present themselves if you chose to pursue work in that field. If possible, locate people with a disability similar to yours who are successful in this type of work, and ask them questions regarding the nature of the work and challenges they have encountered. Even if you are unable to locate someone with a similar disability, interviewing anyone working in the field can be a very helpful way to obtain an in-depth view of an occupation (guidance for such informational interviewing is offered in the Occupational research section). If potential challenges are revealed, how might you be able to overcome or compensate for these?

In the work search process, the topic of disclosure may arise. Be prepared to share your assessment of your disability and how it can be accommodated in the workplace. Employers may not understand what your disability involves and may believe it to be more of a barrier than it actually is.

However, the need to disclose may not arise. Perhaps you have implemented a personal strategy for compensating for your disability or, through research into the tasks and conditions involved, determined that your disability will not impact your ability to perform in that setting. In other situations, an accommodation may be required. Ultimately, the choice of whether and when to disclose rests with you. Evaluate each situation. Helpful questions to ask yourself are:

- What are the consequences of not disclosing?
- If I choose to disclose, when is the best time to do so?

- How much should I disclose?

Regardless of what you decide, you may want to identify what you will say in a variety of work search and interview circumstances. If you would like to talk through your options with a career advisor, consider booking a work search or mock interview appointment to discuss all the disclosure options available and their respective pros and cons.

At the University of Waterloo, [AccessAbility Services](#) provides information, academic accommodations, and support.

Summarize your self-assessment for the decision-making process

This worksheet is intended to help you summarize the information you have gathered so far, in preparation for assessing the appropriateness of your occupational options.

Based on all of the information you have gathered about yourself, draft a summary that captures those aspects/characteristics that are the most salient for you and that will help to define your personal career direction. Use the following prompts to list these aspects/characteristics:

Create a vision statement

Once you have summarized your self-information, it is time to build a vision of what you want your personal and professional life to look like. It involves brainstorming future possibilities that will then give you the clues for translating your vision into career goals that energize and excite you. Although it is important to be realistic in what you envision yourself doing, it is more helpful at this point in the process not to limit yourself to what you consider to be reality; instead, let your vision or dream grow. Your goal for now is to take an honest look at yourself and your desires for the future. This activity may also yield additional self-information that will further aid in gaining clarity of your self-concept.

It may be helpful to begin by asking yourself the following questions:

- If you were guaranteed to be successful and to earn a good living, what type of work tasks/activities would you like to engage in?
- What kind of work environment would you want?
- Where would you live?
- What would your work and personal relationships be like?
- What kind of lifestyle would you have?

When you have completed your vision exercise, you can then allow your realistic self to help you assess what you have envisioned. What aspects of this dream might actually be possible? And what information about you has been revealed?

Now write your vision statement. Use powerful language that inspires you. Include as much material as you can from your self-assessment summary: your statement should include what brings you happiness, what you enjoy doing. Take as much space as you need. You may feel your vision statement is too lofty, or idealistic. In a sense, it is. However, it is also realistic in that it incorporates all that is important to you and about you for your desired future. When you develop self-clarity through this process, and use this self-understanding to envision possible future scenarios, you will be well-prepared to identify specific and appropriate goals for your life.

You are now ready for the next step: what careers might satisfy this vision? The goal here is to generate a list of career options that is as expansive as possible. The focus is on quantity, not quality. No idea is a bad one: for you to have thought of it, suggests that there is at least some aspect of it that is important to you. Record all these options.