

# Conscious Careering

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**Confused about your career path? Try "reverse engineering" some new options from the ground up!**

Matthew B. Youngquist

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As a career counselor and outplacement consultant, I get calls every day from people seeking help with some facet of their career or employment situation. Interestingly, I've found that these calls divide almost perfectly into two groups. Half of the people who call in are professionals who have specific career goals in sight, and just can't seem to reach them, while the other half are best classified as "lost souls" who are unclear about what they want to do next and are looking for expert help in exploring their options.

In this column, I'm going to focus on the needs of the latter group. While the process of job hunting, per se, is certainly not without its share of challenges, it's even harder dealing with the feeling of being "stuck" and having no clarity around your occupational goals. I therefore thought it might be useful to share a few insights into how I approach this common, yet complicated, problem in my own practice. I'll walk you through the typical process I use to address this issue with clients in the hopes that some of you out there might be able to adopt these same techniques in examining your own career options and alternatives.

Before I share some of the particulars of my own approach, however, I feel the need to dispel one common perception that's gotten a little out of hand—which is that standardized testing is the most effective weapon in helping people assess their career potential and identify potential employment avenues.

While useful in a few specialized situations, such as for young adults just starting to enter the working world, I've found that most standardized tests simply don't pass muster for mid-career adults in today's market. There are too many fatal flaws that get in the way. For example, it's an inevitable fact of life that any published test will lag several years behind the current marketplace, at a minimum, in terms of the occupational titles it can include in its career profile database. The job market simply moves too fast for the research to keep up and therefore many job niches will fail to show up, or will become obsolete, by the time the test makes its way into published form.

Secondly, there's essentially a finite limit in terms of how many occupational profiles a published or on-line career assessment test is able to include in its pool of results. While there are tens of thousands of job titles and career fields in existence, any single test is at best only able to cover a tiny fraction of these available possibilities—usually limited to a few hundred of the most familiar and mainstream options such as sales, marketing, accounting, or computer programming. You won't see promising new niche careers such as Search Engine Optimization Engineer or Steganographer show up, the latter of which involves studying computer files and graphics for hidden codes.

At the end of the day, therefore, the reaction I hear from most of the people who take such tests is: "Well, I guess it sort of validated a few things I already knew about myself, but it still didn't tell me anything I didn't already know about other specific jobs and careers that would best fit my skills and interests." These ho-hum reactions are why I've decided to apply standardized tests on only a very limited basis in my own counseling practice, and even then, usually just as an initial discussion piece as we get the ball rolling and pave the way to deeper exploration.

Thankfully, I'm not alone in this perception of the testing process. Whenever I start to think that I must be missing something, since so many counselors rely on these types of tests, I remind myself of a quote I came across several years ago from Richard Nelson Bolles, author of "What Color is Your Parachute?" Given that Mr. Bolles is a practitioner with 30 years of experience in the career counseling field, and is probably the most recognized career transition expert in the world, I feel powerfully vindicated by his similar observation that: "*To date, no test or other instrument has been devised that measures what a person should do with their life, and career, as effectively as just asking them—or having them ask themselves.*"

So in keeping with this wisdom, let's forget about standardized tests for the time being and discuss a more informal, but effective approach a person can take to uncovering their ideal career path. If you ever find yourself in this situation, try asking yourself the following series of questions until you reach one where you can provide an affirmative answer:

- 1) Are you clear about the overall career path you want to pursue?
- 2) Do you have an idea of the specific job titles that you'd like to target?
- 3) Can you name a few specific job functions, tasks, and/or work responsibilities that you know you'd enjoy performing?

And if you're still drawing a blank...

- 4) Can you at least identify a few skills, abilities, passions, and/or knowledge elements you possess that you'd be excited to use on a more regular basis in your working life?

While I'm sure it seems simple, this line of questioning is actually the key to figuring out your ideal career destiny. Why? Because it represents the logical progression of how every career gets assembled. Think about this for a second. In general, the notion of a "career" is a series of progressively more responsible jobs held in succession. An individual job, on the other hand, is nothing more than a collection of defined tasks or responsibilities that an individual is paid to perform. And these tasks and responsibilities, in turn, are typically accomplished through the application of a given set of knowledge, skills, and abilities—known as "KSA's" in the human resources world—that the employee in question has under their belt.

It's a bit tricky to explain without an illustration, so perhaps a real-life example will help outline the process. Let's say that you're like one of my recent clients we'll refer to as "Ellen." When Ellen arrived in my office, she was pretty miserable. She had fallen into a job several years ago doing bookkeeping and had become bored to tears with it. While she knew that the accounting field wasn't the right one for her, however, and was clear as a bell about what she *didn't* want to do, she'd racked her brain and hadn't come up with a single alternative job possibility that excited her. She even said she felt guilty about her lack of focus and that something must be wrong with her since she was nearly 40 years old and didn't have her life and career all figured out. I assured her, of course, that a lack of career clarity didn't make her a bad person, and I also informed her—to her great surprise—that her situation was actually quite common in today's world.

At any rate, after she finished filling me in on her background, we started at the "bottom of the pyramid" and I walked her through several brainstorming exercises to determine exactly which KSA's she had to offer, since again, KSA's are the fundamental building-blocks that allow task and job performance to take place. During this process, we identified 26 separate talents and personal abilities that Ellen would potentially be able to contribute in a professional setting. I then sent her home with instructions to ponder whether she felt equally excited about using each of these talents, or whether there were a few of the items listed that she'd be most enthusiastic about incorporating into a future career opportunity.

After a few days of reflection, Ellen came back in with an exciting discovery to report. After spending some time reviewing her various skills, and talents, she said she felt particularly energized by three of the specific KSA elements we'd identified in our earlier work together—her skill at designing spreadsheets, her ability to work effectively under pressure, and her strong knowledge of retail environments. She explained that this last item, in fact, was connected to the fond memories she had of growing up working in the family grocery store.

These revelations and the energy she was displaying represented real progress from where our discussions had initially started out!

With these precious insights in hand, we therefore moved our exploration forward and began conducting research to uncover the specific work tasks in today's world that would require these three KSA attributes. We sifted, we sorted, and we ultimately uncovered a number of job titles and career choices that appeared to be closely associated to her baseline KSA's and the fundamental tasks they would allow her to perform, such as preparing budgets and handling retail inventories.

At the end of the day, Ellen came to the realization that she was already quite qualified to do a number of jobs other than being a bookkeeper. She found that she was fairly well-suited for a role as "Product Mix Coordinator" or "Advertising Analyst" for a retail organization, and that with some additional short-term training in Microsoft Project, she might also even qualify for a "Category Manager" position with a grocery wholesaler near her home. Excited to finally be pointed in the right direction, Ellen went to task and began channeling her energy into the tactical steps needed to achieve her goals. And I'm happy to report that, yes, she's working for that wholesaler even as we speak and loving every minute of it.

So if you're feeling a bit lost in your career, and out of options, slow down and think back on Ellen's journey. Don't count on standardized tests or divine inspiration to miraculously reveal the answer. Instant gratification is an almost non-existent phenomenon in the career satisfaction business. Instead, your best bet is to "reverse engineer" some fresh ideas from the ground up by asking the series of basic questions outlined earlier, then using these core qualifications to start working your way through each successive layer of the puzzle.

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MATTHEW B. YOUNGQUIST is a Bellevue-based career coach and outplacement consultant who has personally helped over 3,500 professionals address and overcome the unique challenges of employment transition. He currently owns his own consulting practice, Career Horizons, LLC, where he can be reached at (425) 450-4960 or via e-mail at [matt@career-horizons.com](mailto:matt@career-horizons.com).