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A Guide to Going Online For Self-Assessment Tools

By Margaret Riley Dikel

Life is too short to stay in a job you don't like. If your career has been rocked by the economic and political events of the past two years, or you just don't like your current job, perhaps you're wondering what else is possible.

Of course, friends and family may wonder what's gotten into you, but it's normal and advisable to question your path. Most of us have changed significantly since we started our careers. It's likely you have different values, interests and motivations than when you were in your 20s.

"You're constantly changing, and so are your personal values and desires," says Dottie Perlman, president of DynamicPursuits LLC, a career and life-coaching firm located in Potomac, Md. "Asking yourself if this is still where you want to be in terms of your job, your employer and even your life can help you to recenter yourself, return yourself to where you really want to be that has more meaning, and do what you really enjoy."

In college, you probably took assessment tests that indicated the type of career you'd be good at. It's never too late to try these tests again. Take time to assess yourself, determine if your interests have changed and what career directions might correspond to the "new you."

Finding these tests couldn't be easier, thanks to the Internet. They can be starting points for choosing another career you might like and be good at. At the very least, if you enjoy your present job and industry, they can confirm that you should stick with them.

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Instruments Available Online

If you were recently laid off and receiving outplacement counseling as part of your severance, it's likely that self-assessment will be among your initial activities. For the rest of us, it's time to start hunting for inexpensive self-assessment tools that can provide useful insight about careers and open our eyes to new possibilities.

Various assessment tools are available, from personality tests to skills and values inventories. Some are free. Fees for taking other tests offered online range from about \$10 to \$100, depending on the version of the test, whether telephone, e-mail or personal counseling is included and for how long, or if several tests are bundled together.

Each assessment "instrument" is designed to help you examine a particular aspect of yourself, so it's important to know which tool is right for the questions you want to address. Charles Negrea, a 33-year-old software developer, is using self-assessment tools to explore a career change within his field. He has taken a personality test – the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI) — and an interest inventory – the Strong Interest Inventory – while working with Ms. Perlman.

He expected the results to describe his talents and personality, but they were more focused than he anticipated. He's now knows his best talents and what kind of work environment fits him best.

"They really described my personality type and interests well," he says. "These are things I sort of knew about myself, but to see the clear definitions has opened my eyes and allowed me to better describe myself and see where my talents lie."

What's the Value?

Assessments aren't crystal balls and can't offer quick and easy answers. When taking them, it's best to keep their results in perspective. When writing about assessment tests on his [Web site](#), Richard Bolles, author of "What Color Is Your Parachute?" (Ten Speed Press, 2003), raises a caution flag. "Tests have one great mission and purpose: To give you ideas you hadn't thought of, and suggestions worth following up. But if you ask them to do more than that, you're asking too much."

Try several assessments, and use your intuition while reviewing the results. Don't put all of your faith in one tool, even if you've used it before. Never forget that you're unique, and in-depth honest personal examination is always your best assessment tool.

Also realize that tests with price tags aren't necessarily better than free ones. However, with many "free" tools, you get what you pay for. After making sure that a tool has been developed and validated properly, heed your "gut" impression about it. If it measures personality by asking about your favorite geometric design or provides a result that seems unbelievable, discard it.

It's possible an assessment will shed light on issues besides your career choice. Peter Schmidt, a 50-year-old architect, sought help from Ms. Perlman to reduce work stress and improve his management skills. She had him take the MBTI as part of his counseling.

"I needed to learn how to better manage my time and expectations and improve my coping skills," he says. "I also wanted to better balance my work and life and focus more

on the big picture.”

The results of the assessment have helped him to understand himself and others, how he communicates and to improve his presentation skills. “Knowing my characteristics is very helpful. I know how I deal with certain situations and have a better perspective on how I interface with others,” Mr. Schmidt says. The assessment also helped him to understand how others operate, improving his communication and presentation skills. “I feel like I’m not just out there in my own little world,” he adds.

Do-It-Yourself?

Nowadays, anyone who registers and pays a fee online can take a test and receive the results (except for the MBTI, which is the only test available online that requires the results to be reviewed with a licensed counselor). Should you assess yourself without input from a counselor?

Yes, if you approach the assessments with the right attitude, says Annette Richmond, principal of the Richmond Consulting Group, a career-management consulting firm based in Rowayton, Conn., and founder of career-intelligence.com. “These are tools, not tests,” she says. “They help you discover yourself, so there’s no right or wrong answer. And you should always remember that the results you see are guidelines, not hard and fast answers about yourself and what you should do.”

Ms. Perlman believes assessments are more helpful if you have first received some counseling. “I wait until we are several steps into the coaching process, at which point these become a validation of what the client has learned about him or herself through personal examination,” she says.

But an assessment’s results can raise more questions than they answer. Perhaps you’ve taken a particular assessment previously — with different results. Both Ms. Richmond and Ms. Perlman say your reasons for doing an assessment can affect the outcome. Changes in your personal life over the years can have an influence. In this case, talking with a professional about the results and how to use what you have learned can be helpful. At the very least, talk about your findings with a friend who will be honest with you.

— Ms. Dikel is the author of the “*The Guide to Internet Job Searching*” (VGM Career Books, 2002). Her Web site is www.rileyguide.com.