

FORTUNE CAREERS

Finding the Job You *Should* Want

BY JAMES WALDROOP AND TIMOTHY BUTLER

Each year, students at the Harvard Business School take a quiz to help find a career in which they'll flourish and be happy. Here's a short-form version.

As business psychologists we've recently finished a 12-year study of the career paths of over 650 business professionals at all levels and in a wide variety of functions, industries, and organizational cultures. More specifically, we've analyzed how people make career decisions—and what goes into decisions that are satisfying and successful over the long term. One of the most common mistakes we've seen people make in managing their careers is basing their initial (and subsequent) career choices on their aptitudes rather than on their interests. While other personal variables (such as skills and values) and job-market forces (such as the need for Internet-savvy marketers) change over time, a person's deep interests remain highly stable from early adulthood on.

People who are unhappy with their

career directions often tell us they chose their career (engineering or financial services, say) based on what they had excelled at in school (math, science, or finance)—but never really liked. Or they made a choice based on one strong interest, only to find that the career involved a lot of work they had no interest in, or no work that satisfied another deep interest they had. The net result is analogous to wearing a pair of poorly fitting shoes: They may be better than no shoes at all, but not by much.

Having gathered extensive data—including comprehensive psychological assessments, in-depth personal interviews, and letters from friends and associates—on those 650 people, we set out to do two things. First, we wanted to determine the essential elements that make up work in business—the irreducible “building

blocks.” Second, we hoped to develop an assessment instrument that would measure people's interests in those activities. Put another way, our goal was to develop an interest inventory that was fine-tuned to business work—much as turning up the power on a microscope results in a narrower field of view, but with more detail revealed. We eventually developed a sophisticated Business Career Interest Inventory (BCII) and identified the eight core sets of activities shown below on this page as Part 1.

We've devised a brief exercise to give you a rough approximation of your interests in these eight activity sets. The BCII itself, far more analytically complex and nuanced, compares the strength of your interest in each core function to the interest level of other business professionals, assesses your overall interest in business

PART 1: All executive work is based on one or more of the following eight core activities. Read them.

Application of Technology: Taking an engineering-like approach to business problems and using technology to solve them (operations process analysis, process redesign, production planning).



Quantitative Analysis: Problem solving that relies on mathematical and financial analysis (determining the most advantageous debt/equity structure, analyzing market research).



Theory Development and Conceptual Thinking: Taking a broadly conceptual, quasi-academic approach to business problems (developing a new general economic theory or model of market behavior).



Creative Production: Highly creative activities (the generation of new business ideas such as line extensions or additional markets, the development of new marketing concepts).



Counseling and Mentoring: Developing a variety of personal relationships in the workplace and helping others in their careers (human-resources coaching, training, and mentoring).



Managing People: Accomplishing business goals through working directly with people (particularly as a frontline manager, team leader, director, or direct supervisor).



Enterprise Control: Having ultimate strategy and decision-making authority as well as resource control for an operation (as a division manager, president, CEO, partner in a professional firm, or entrepreneur).



Influence Through Language and Ideas: Exercising influence through the skillful use of persuasion (negotiating, dealmaking, sales functions, and relationship development).



PART 2: Reread the brief descriptions of the eight sets of activities on the previous page, then quickly go through each of the following pairs and indicate which one is more interesting to you by placing the bold letter for that choice in the box to the left. Don't leave any out, and don't record any ties. Mark your first intuitive response.

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Creative P roduction or I nfluence Through Language and Ideas | 19. M anaging People or T heory Development |
| 2. M anaging People or Creative P roduction | 20. A pplication of Technology or T heory Development |
| 3. E nterprise Control or A pplication of Technology | 21. E nterprise Control or C ounseling and Mentoring |
| 4. T heory Development or Creative P roduction | 22. Creative P roduction or Q uantitative Analysis |
| 5. M anaging People or C ounseling and Mentoring | 23. C ounseling and Mentoring or I nfluence Through Language and Ideas |
| 6. Q uantitative Analysis or T heory Development | 24. Q uantitative Analysis or M anaging People |
| 7. I nfluence Through Language and Ideas or E nterprise Control | 25. E nterprise Control or M anaging People |
| 8. Q uantitative Analysis or E nterprise Control | 26. A pplication of Technology or C ounseling and Mentoring |
| 9. A pplication of Technology or I nfluence Through Language and Ideas | 27. M anaging People or I nfluence Through Language and Ideas |
| 10. I nfluence Through Language and Ideas or Q uantitative Analysis | 28. A pplication of Technology or Q uantitative Analysis |
| 11. T heory Development or C ounseling and Mentoring | |
| 12. A pplication of Technology or Creative P roduction | |
| 13. A pplication of Technology or M anaging People | |
| 14. T heory Development or I nfluence Through Language and Ideas | |
| 15. Creative P roduction or C ounseling and Mentoring | |
| 16. C ounseling and Mentoring or Q uantitative Analysis | |
| 17. T heory Development or E nterprise Control | |
| 18. E nterprise Control or Creative P roduction | |

Add the bold letters for your total score on each core function and record that score below:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> A pplication of Technology | <input type="checkbox"/> T heory Development and Conceptual Thinking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> C ounseling and Mentoring | <input type="checkbox"/> E nterprise Control |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Q uantitative Analysis | <input type="checkbox"/> C reative P roduction |
| <input type="checkbox"/> M anaging People | <input type="checkbox"/> I nfluence Through Language and Ideas |

Based on the scores above, identify your most significant interests. Most people will find one to three clear leaders. What does it all mean? Turn the page to find out.

work, and adjusts for your mood at the moment. The exercise shown on these pages does, however, provide some basic clues to your proper career path. To use it, reread the brief descriptions of the eight sets of activities on the previous page, then quickly go through each of the pairs in Part 2 above and indicate which one is more interesting to you by placing the bold letter for that choice on the line to the right. Don't leave any out, and don't

mark any ties. Mark only your first intuitive response.

Now sum up the number of times each of the eight functions was ranked higher than whatever it was being compared with, and record that number. Look at your top four scores. If there is a clear "break" (a two-point or greater difference) between the second and third, or between the third and fourth, you should consider the top two (or three) as your most significant in-

terests. If not, think of all four as your leading interests. Most people will have between one and three leaders.

The next step is to match your scores with the career functions listed in Part 3 on the following page. Needless to say, if you look at your interests and see that being a CEO or president is a good fit with your interests, this doesn't mean you're qualified to get those positions tomorrow. What it does mean is that given sufficient

experience and the right kind of company, those would be positions you could aspire to and be happy pursuing. If your interests fit a particular combination, consider career paths leading to one or more of the indicated careers. Of course, the results of this exercise can't give you the full picture of your total interest pattern, which is key in making optimal career decisions, but they can give you a flavor for how the model works.

Using our database of business professionals, we have developed interest profiles for several different business careers, against which readers can map their own

interest patterns. In this way people can determine how well they match with various career paths in terms of all of their interests. Part 3 shows the level of interest in various combinations of the eight activity sets for an "average" investment banker, general manager, production and operations manager, and so forth.

For example, we see that someone whose response was dominated by interests in Enterprise Control and Managing People may be suited for the corner office as a CEO, president, or division manager. The typical Wall Streeter may prefer to combine an interest in Enterprise Control

with a strong regard for Quantitative Analysis. People inclined toward careers in entertainment or the media, meanwhile, may evince a high regard for Creative Production; those who also have a managerial bent may be interested in Enterprise Control as well. And so on.

It's important to note that it is the overall shape of all eight core functions that makes for a good or bad fit with a person's individual profile. If you have a very strong interest in an activity set that most people in a particular career are not at all interested in, chances are that it affords little opportunity to express the interest—and that you may find that you feel quite different from other people in the field. This is just as much a cause for concern as having very little interest in an activity set that most people in the career are very interested in, and that success and satisfaction in that career depends on.

It is also important to evaluate any particular work opportunity thoroughly: The everyday mix of activities of a marketing manager at Procter & Gamble is likely to be rather different from the activities of a marketing manager at Cummins Engine.

The value of this research is demonstrated by the adoption of the model and the BCII by over 40 career-services offices in MBA programs and undergraduate schools in the U.S. and Europe, and by corporate human-resources and career-development professionals involved in internal career self-management programs for their employees. It seems the change in the societal employment contract and the increased mobility of the holders of intellectual capital are combining to give companies an urgent interest in helping valued employees remain optimally engaged in their work. That means providing more help with their choices of a long-term career path.

More career profiles and more detailed interest-scale combination descriptions are available at our Website (www.careerdiscovery.com). As our database grows, we will be posting further research findings at that site. ■

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PART 3: *Now that you know which activity combinations you prefer, see what kind of successful business people share your interests.*

Enterprise Control and Managing People: CEOs, presidents, division managers, and general managers who enjoy both strategy and the operational aspects of the position—the CEO who enjoys playing the COO role as well.

Enterprise Control and Quantitative Analysis: Investment bankers, other financial professionals who enjoy dealmaking, partners in Big Six firms, top-level executives in commercial and investment banks, investment managers.

Application of Technology and Quantitative Analysis: Individual contributors who have a strong interest in engineering analysis (systems analysts, tech consultants, process consultants); production and operations managers.

Creative Production and Influence Through Language and Ideas: Advertising executives, brand managers, corporate trainers, salespeople, public relations specialists; people in the fashion, entertainment, and media industries.

Counseling and Mentoring and Managing People: Human-resources managers, managers who enjoy coaching and developing the people reporting to them, managers in nonprofit organizations with an altruistic mission.

Enterprise Control and Influence Through Language and Ideas: Executives (CEOs, presidents, general managers) whose leadership style relies on persuasion and consensus building; marketing managers, salespeople.

Application of Technology and Enterprise Control: Managers and senior executives in high technology, telecommunications, biotech, information systems (internally or consulting), and other engineering-related fields.

Theory Development and Quantitative Analysis: Economic-model builders, quantitative analysts, "knowledge base" consultants, market forecasters, business professors.

Creative Production and Enterprise Control: Solo entrepreneurs, senior executives in industries where the product or service is of a creative nature (fashion, entertainment, advertising, media).

Creative Production: Entrepreneurs who partner with a professional manager, short-term project managers, new-product developers, advertising "creatives"; individual contributors in fashion, entertainment, and media.