

# IS CAREER PROGRESSION AN EXERCISE IN SERENDIPITY? (... AND IF SO, CAN PSYCHOMETRICS HELP?)



**ROY CHILD  
INVESTIGATES  
PSYCHOMETRIC  
TESTS AND HOW  
TO CHOOSE AND  
ACCESS THE RIGHT  
ONES**



## The path to success is paved with pot holes, boulders and wrong turns

**B**ill Gates, a Harvard drop-out, had no idea that he would become the richest man in the world when he developed some relatively simple software. Steve Jobs abandoned his studies before forging a path that led to Apple and the iPhone revolution. One of my coachees became a FTSE 100 Board Director before realising that his heart wasn't in it and that he really wanted to work in the charity sector.

Most people I meet say that where they have ended up involved a good deal of luck and serendipity. Now there is nothing wrong with taking a wrong path. In fact such 'mistakes' can be valuable learning – the crucible out of which resilience and success are forged. We should never strive to take chance out of career choice and progression but we need to ask ourselves whether the process is often too haphazard. How many people

expend their time energy and talent and never find their path?

## Everyone needs a guide to nudge them along the way

There are times in everyone's life when the right kind of guidance or advice can be invaluable. Most people get some help from parents, friends or mentors and some are lucky enough to have some professional career guidance (at school, work or as part of an outplacement package). This is often where people discover the value of using psychometrics to stimulate ideas and accelerate the process. However, ultimately we need to find our own path – and this is where psychometrics can be misunderstood. The term 'psychometrics' can sound grand and leads people to assume precise measurement and accurate prediction. In this article I aim to reposition the role of psychometrics in career guidance because if it is not prediction then what is it?

## Types of psychometrics

There are three main types of psychometrics generally used:

### 1. Career interest inventories and values

**questionnaires** – help people identify themes that can be linked to jobs and careers.

### 2. Personality indicators

– identify people's typical style and preferences which can suggest environments and situations that a person is more likely to be suited to or enjoy.

### 3. Capability tests

– measure how well people can do things such as thinking logically, thinking laterally, seeing patterns, processing information etc.

The three test types enable a person to examine their potential career direction from three different angles. There is no point in pursuing a career in astrophysics if numerical reasoning is not someone's natural strength. However, if they have a high level of numerical reasoning, they still need to have an interest in intellectual and theoretical concepts. And even if they have both of these in place their personality may suggest that they prefer more interactive work environment than is generally associated with astrophysics.

## Career interest inventories and values questionnaires

Career guidance has relied too much on these – and especially interest inventories. These typically ask people about their level of interest in specific jobs or job elements (working with your hands, persuading people etc.). These can be useful if they have unclear or idealised views of the world of work. A young person who says 'I want to be a doctor' or 'I don't want an office job' may have little idea of what is actually involved.

The better interest inventories take job elements and classify them into themes which can then be associated with whole families of jobs – many of which the person may never have considered. Examples include *The Career Interest Inventory* and *Kudos/Adult Directions*.

When dealing with more mature people, career interest inventories are not as useful as going deeper into a person's value system – this is like finding the fuel that drives the car. It is extraordinary how helping people to articulate their fundamental values can transform their perception of the path they wish to take. Examples of value questionnaires include *The Values-based Indicator of Motivation (VbIM)* and *the Motives and Values Preference Indicator (MVPI)*.

## Personality questionnaires

Since interest inventories can be relatively superficial it is useful to challenge a person's apparent interests (such as emerge from an interest inventory) with something more fundamental. This is where a personality questionnaire can help because it bypasses people's stereotypes about jobs and work activities and clarifies what makes them tick.

Results can point to themes related to work that would

really suit and energise them. A person's choice of career can be transformed by this kind of challenge. Examples include the *Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)* and the *Type Dynamics Indicator (TDI)*.

## Capability tests

Clearly there is no point in suggesting a direction that is clearly unrealistic. Many people like the idea of becoming a doctor but unless they can achieve good exam results the door is barred.

However, capability tests take a step back from what people are currently achieving and explore current abilities and future potential. Such tests are less dependent on how a person has engaged or reacted to school and learning. In this way they can identify people with unrealised potential for learning – and provide some suggestions for broad areas of work rather than specific job families. Examples include *Verbal, Numerical and Abstract Reasoning* and *specialist tests such as the Memory and Attention Test or Spatial Reasoning*.

## What to look for in a good psychometric for career guidance

These are the questions to be asking about psychometrics before deciding if they are appropriate.

### A. The quality of the 'input'

1. Do they cover a broad range of domains? Check whether the report is based on a broad or a narrow range of tests (i.e. just interests or capability) or whether it also includes personality.
2. Are they carefully developed? Check that there is a technical manual available with details of how they were constructed. This should include a good rationale, a clear process for developing and trialling the items, details of the statistical analyses, details of any norms that provide a comparison group and evidence of a link to careers.

### B. Accessibility and usability

1. How easy are they to access/administer? Are they only available in printed format or are they online? Check which tests are better completed under supervision and what the issues are if they are completed remotely online.
2. The online option. If a test is not online you could question whether it is up-to-date either in what it is trying to measure or in the norms (benchmarking samples for comparison) it is offering.

### C. The quality of the 'output'

1. Is the report clear and useful? Check that the information is clear and the language appropriate for the target audience.
2. Does the report integrate the different tests or are they reported separately? Check that apparent contradictions are discussed (such as an interest in entrepreneurial type jobs but a personality that is shy and retiring). Also, does the report show different job suggestions for the different kinds of psychometric but also summarise the best job suggestions by

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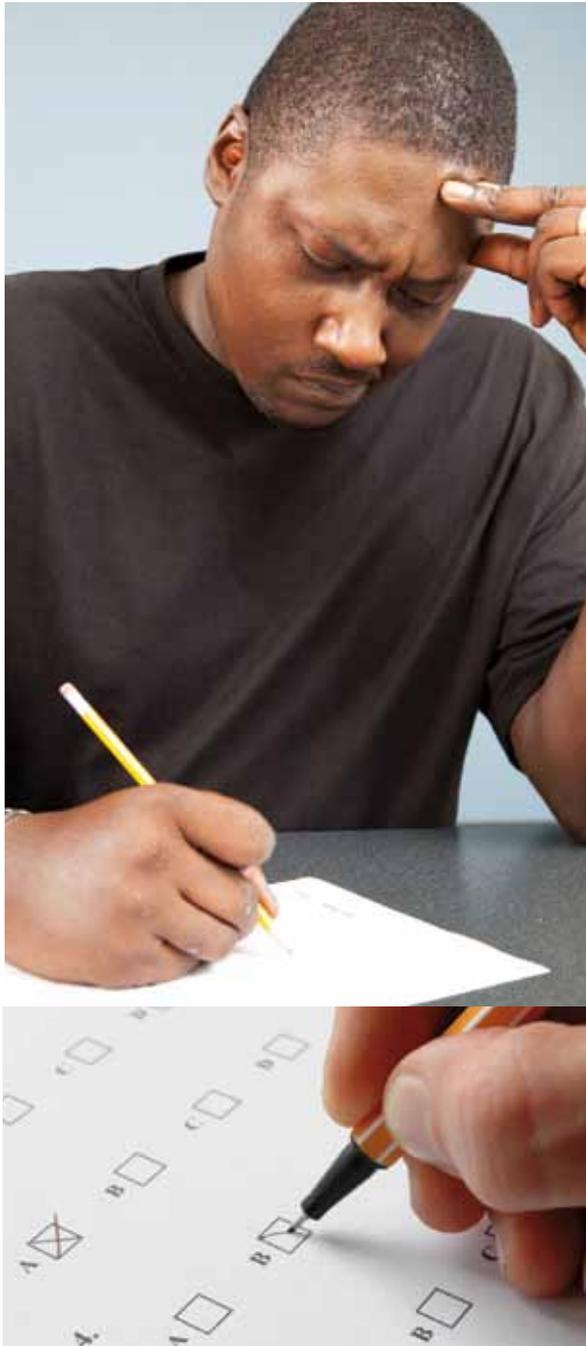
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Roy Childs is Managing Director of Team Focus Limited and a Chartered Occupational Psychologist.



integrating the themes from them all?

3. Consider the usefulness of the job suggestions. Check that the jobs suggested have a sufficient breadth and do not come from a specific area (e.g. just engineering or construction).
4. Ask about further resources and support. Does the report and/or the testing process lead to books and websites that have up-to-date job databases to explore jobs in details? Is a professional guidance interview available as part of the package?

#### How can I access good psychometrics for career guidance?

There are numerous tests on the internet and finding out

which are worth your time is a bit of a minefield – but many will be sub-standard. The checklist above should help but, unless you have training in psychometrics, the crucial questions about how the tests were constructed (and understanding the technical manuals) should be a pre-requisite.

The BPS has a list of individuals and organisations who can train you but many do not have a specific orientation to careers so you will need to investigate further.

#### So what is the role of psychometrics in the career guidance process?

They can provide one of the most efficient ways of capturing people’s ideas about who they are and what they enjoy. The feedback can be structured and linked to the world of work (and produce career suggestions) in a way that is not obvious and hence provide insights thus changing a person’s ideas about work and careers.

They can provide perspectives from different angles highlighting elements of a person’s make-up that they have not fully appreciated. These can be converted into previously unconsidered career ideas to help people onto a more fruitful career track earlier in their lives.

They cannot prevent all of the false starts that many of us make but if a person is asking ‘what shall I do with (the rest of) my life?’ then psychometrics can either confirm or even transform their chosen path. This process is made all the more powerful when the psychometrics produce a truly integrated report with credible career suggestions which can be explored through an up-to-date jobs database providing real information about what the career involves. This is something that we should encourage for everybody – but for young people who are just starting out, is this not something they thoroughly deserve?

#### References:

##### BPS training providers

[www.psychtesting.org.uk/directories/dtcp.cfm](http://www.psychtesting.org.uk/directories/dtcp.cfm)

##### British Psychological Society

[www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)

##### Futurewise New Generation

[www.inspiringfutures.org.uk](http://www.inspiringfutures.org.uk)

##### Kudos/Adult Directions

[www.cascaid.co.uk](http://www.cascaid.co.uk)

##### Morrisby

[www.morrisby.com](http://www.morrisby.com)

##### Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)

[www.opp.com](http://www.opp.com)

##### Preview

[www.coa.co.uk](http://www.coa.co.uk)

##### Spatial Reasoning

[www.shldirect.com](http://www.shldirect.com)

##### The Career Interest Inventory, Type Dynamics Indicator (TDI), Memory and Attention Test – MAT

[www.teamfocus.co.uk](http://www.teamfocus.co.uk)