

Introduction

“Cheshire Puss,” she began, rather timidly, as she did not know whether it would like the name; however, it only grinned a little wider. “Come, it’s pleased so far,” thought Alice, and she went on. “Would you please tell me, please, which way I ought to walk from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where,” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you walk,” said the Cat.

“—so long as I get somewhere,” Alice added as an explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if only you walk long enough!”

—*Alice in Wonderland*

A sign beside a freeway in the middle of a large desert in southeastern Idaho reads

ARE YOU LOST?

Keep on going. You’re making good
time!

These two notes reflect, unfortunately, the kind of thinking that goes into career planning for many of us. Given the press of time and economic circumstance, we often plunge ahead into a job or a “career” without giving much thought to whether or not it is right for us or where it will lead us. We fail to anticipate where our career decisions, both small and great, will take us. And worried by the uncertainty of knowing ourselves and the future, we forge on—hoping that if we just keep going we will get somewhere, and the sooner the better.

Later, many of us find ourselves in jobs, places, and careers that we did not imagine. In some cases, that is good—we are happy with the result. In other cases, the realization is accompanied by remorse and the wish for a chance to do it over again. What we needed—what we still need—is a systematic way to think about the career decisions we make so that in both the short and the long runs, the result will be what we more or less anticipated and worked toward. Furthermore, this systematic way should not preclude flexibility in the face of changing circumstances. If the opportunities of the future change, our method of thinking about our career decisions should help us compare who we were, who we are, and who we are becoming in the midst of those environmental changes; and help us make decisions that will be appropriate for us and the times.

This book has been written for people who, for whatever reason, wish consciously and explicitly to manage their careers. Our experience has been that people who have already decided on a career (or a job), as well as people who are uncertain about what to do next, have benefited greatly from the process outlined here. The self-assessment process will leave you with a very specific and detailed profile of the things that matter most to you in life and in work. The career development process will help you generate skill at using that profile not only to make reasonable job- and career-related decisions, but also to know what facets of the decision present potential danger areas and what facets will fit you naturally. The process will also help you develop

skill in assessing job and career opportunities in dimensions that are specifically relevant to you. Your career planning and activities will be based on information that will help you to develop a greater sense of direction and purpose and alert you to what to look for along the way.

The purpose of the book is to help you develop concrete skills for managing your career—skills at assessing yourself, assessing opportunities, making career- and job-related choices, and managing this process in both the short and long run. The examples and the situations we rely on to present and discuss our approach come primarily from the business world, but the approach is as useful for someone considering a nonbusiness career as it is for someone in business. The book is intended for use in formal courses, but if you are serious about wanting to make a career or job decision that is appropriate for you, and if you have the self-discipline to work on your decision carefully, then this book can help you a great deal.

When we speak of job- and career-related decision making, we are talking about a wide range of important choices that people make during the course of a lifetime. Such decisions include:

1. The selection of type of career
2. The selection of what job to seek next
3. The selection of a strategy for getting a particular type of job
4. The selection of a job offer from alternatives
5. The selection of assignments, locations, and so on within a job when options are offered
6. The selection of an approach to a job
7. The selection of career goals or a sequence of desired promotions
8. The selection of a life style that surrounds and influences a career
9. The relationship between one's partner and all these choices

It is our observation that people often make these decisions with considerably less care and expertise than they use in the selection of a television or a vacation. Even people who have professional training in analysis and decision making often spend a great deal of time making decisions that, in the context of their lives, may be of little significance, while slipping semiconsciously into major life decisions whose implications are not at all clear to them. Compared to less important decisions, their data-collection methods tend to be less thorough, their analyses more superficial, and their choice processes more random.

There are undoubtedly many reasons why people behave in this way. For most people, assessing something “outside” themselves is a great deal easier, psychologically, than assessing themselves. The latter creates discomfort, which people often deal with by avoiding. At the same time, our educational institutions have historically provided courses for helping us learn how to make “good” management decisions, legal decisions, engineering decisions, financial decisions, medical decisions—but not career and job decisions.

Some people, of course, manage to go through life quite happily without ever seriously assessing themselves or their opportunities, or making explicit job and career choices. Whether because of luck or very good intuitive decision-making capabilities, they do very well. Many other people behave that way but find the results highly unsatisfying. They often slip into boring or frustrating careers. They sometimes find themselves faced with conflicting job and family demands that are unreasonable. Many discover, to their horror, that they will never achieve the position or professional reputation they had been seeking for years. Some go through the trauma of being fired. Others find themselves securely locked into a job and life style that is no longer satisfying, but from which escape seems impossible. In the words of one forty-nine-year-old: “I woke up one day and just sat in bed thinking, how in the hell did I ever get myself into this mess?”

Although this book offers no easy answers, it does try to bring to bear the best technology and insight that exists today on the subject. Like any management task in which the manager does not have absolute control of all the relevant variables, success is not guaranteed. Nevertheless, our experience over the past fifteen years with the materials and approach presented in this book has convinced us that they are effective, and that they can be of significant help to most people in a variety of ways. The comments of some who have worked through the process may help you anticipate what you can expect to get out of the effort:

This has been the most valuable course I've taken. I maintain that the lack of skills/abilities taught by this course is more often the cause for lack of success than any other subject or skill.

I do know that I will take with me (from this course) a set of tools and a level of self-awareness and sensitivity that will undoubtedly have a profound impact upon my life.

Understanding now that everyone has strengths and weaknesses due to cognitive style, value systems, etc., I've become less judgmental of myself and others in

areas of intelligence, and put more emphasis on what a person would be good at doing because of the person's (or own) cognitive style, values, etc.

I gained a fantastic understanding of the *criteria* upon which I will make my job decision. I learned a great deal about what I *really* want out of a job. I learned a great deal about the potential pitfalls of the job hunt and later career development.

I have been forced to formalize a previously semiconscious awareness of myself. This has forced me to acknowledge certain characteristics as important enough to choose a career around. Before taking this course I was boxed into a narrow idea of what were acceptable courses, and viewed incompatible characteristics as sources of tension and discontent that I would just have to live with. Now I've reassessed my priorities, and am taking a much more imaginative approach to finding a job.

I feel like I've gained a whole lot from the course. I was very confused and worried about the job-hunting process at the beginning of this year. Now, I feel I have a good focus and a lot more *self-confidence* in dealing with the whole career selection process.

This course was a lot of work but it was worth three times the work it demanded.

Who Can Use the Book

This book was written primarily for graduate students of business administration, so many of the examples and cases are set in circumstances relevant to that group. The process of self-assessment and career development outlined and developed here, however, is applicable to a much broader audience. In fact, you will probably find these exercises and readings useful regardless of the career area you have decided to pursue or of the point in your career—early, middle, or late.

UNDERGRADUATES: Undergraduates will be able to use the self-assessment exercises in virtually the same way that MBA students do. The details of the job search process may be somewhat different, but the ways in which undergraduates can use self-assessment materials to guide their job search and decision-making activities are not different from those described here. If you have not worked full time before, you may not be able to draw on your work experiences as much as older people, but if you take into account the career stage theories and the tasks associated with them as outlined in Chapter 38, you will be able to get a perspective on how your own goals, values, and career inclinations will evolve over the next few years. An introduction to this material now will better prepare you to make sense of your first experiences.

Again, the process will be helpful even if you are

not interested in a career in business. Students considering any career area who work through the book carefully will gain greater insight into the kinds of work, work settings, colleagues, and organizations that would suit them best.

PEOPLE MAKING CAREER CHANGES: If you have been working for some time and are considering a major career change, the process outlined here can be of enormous help. We have found that many people leave one job because they are somehow dissatisfied with the work, the people, or the organization, but, *lacking a sufficiently clear and detailed self-assessment*, often put themselves in new situations no better suited to their interests, skills, and desires. In a sense this is like trying to find what one wants by knowing what one doesn't want. That takes a lot of trial and error. It is much more efficient to begin with a vision of the kind of work you *should* be seeking, given who you are, and to avoid getting sidetracked by "interesting" opportunities that do not really fit you. This book will help you to do that. We will not spend any time discussing the significant emotional issues of leaving a job in which you may have invested a great deal of time and energy. If you are in this category, you may be interested in the work of Meryl Louis. See, for instance, "Career Transitions: The Missing Link in Career Development," published in the Spring 1982 issue of *Organizational Dynamics*.

DUAL CAREER COUPLES: If you are trying to make career decisions in tandem, this book can be a great help. We have found that many of our students ask for copies of the materials and work through them with their spouses or close friends. The process can be even more exciting when you work through it with someone and can talk at leisure about the things you will be learning and doing. The book is organized primarily as a self-assessment exercise for individuals, but there are a few explicitly couple-oriented exercises. In addition to these, we encourage couples to compare their findings on each of the instruments and the implications of those findings for work and to discuss the meanings for their joint relationship, job search, and career development activities.

One of the basic premises of this book is that people are multidimensional and that the various dimensions are closely connected. If working through the exercises with another person will help you to keep in mind the other, noncareer aspects of your life and to make decisions that will balance those aspects in a way that is most appealing to you, then working together can be very beneficial.

One word of caution: Sometimes in discussing very personal data with other people, even those we have known for a long time and with whom we feel very comfortable, we may try to be to those people what we have come to know that they expect. In other words, we may distort our own data or our interpretations of those data for the sake of the relationship and the roles we play within it. This is a manageable danger if you are aware of it and are willing to look at yourself and your relationship openly and honestly. If you plan to work through the book with another person, we advise you to analyze each instrument and exercise alone first, perhaps making notes that you can keep in reserve and do not feel compelled to share with the other person. Then you can compare your private notes with the feedback you get from the other person and note any differences. If there are differences, you may want to think about how, if at all, and in what ways you would like to address those differences in your relationship.

Organization of the Book

The first part of this book deals with the process of self-assessment. It is designed to help you learn how to assess yourself effectively for career and job decision-making purposes, and to help you produce a usable self-assessment. The second part focuses on career development. It is designed to help you assess job and career opportunities, get a job, and deal with the challenges and problems encountered in different stages of a career.

The book was intended primarily for use in a classroom setting, but has been organized to help individuals who want to attack the self-assessment process on their own. This process will require a great deal of discipline and time, so whether you are

approaching it in a class or alone, you should plan to spend ample time and energy. Self-assessment should not be rushed. The quick answers are often neither the most valid nor the most useful.

The self-assessment portion of the book will help you to generate a great deal of data. We encourage you to purchase a 2-inch three-ring binder and a set of colored index tabs with which to organize your data. The pages of this book are perforated so that you can tear them out and put them in your notebook.

Since our approach is one of self-assessment, we've asked *you* to manage the data-generation process. We will guide you through that process, but at this point we advise you to *not skip ahead* in the book. Proceed sequentially. The next chapter will outline the self-assessment process we will use more carefully and help you prepare to begin.

Your Expectations

Before you begin, however, we ask you to pause for a moment and write down your expectations for this self-assessment and career development project/course. This brief exercise will help you to clarify your goals and also provide an interesting means of reviewing your progress later on. Please be as explicit and specific as you can as you consider the following questions:

- Why did you select this course/book?
- What do you want to get out of the course/book?
- What do you think we will be doing in this course/book?
- What do you expect from the faculty/authors?
- How does this course fit into your present and future plans?
- Any other expectations, feelings?