



## The Future of YOUR Education: Using Positive Psychology for Career Planning

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### Abstract

*Career uncertainty has been cited as a major factor impacting academic success and persistence in post-secondary studies [1]. Traditionally, career planning has focused on uncovering personal preferences and interests, often drawing from personality indicators, interest inventories and aptitude testing. However, research has indicated that individuals who select careers that are aligned with their personal values tend to experience greater life satisfaction [2], career satisfaction [3], happiness [4] and work productivity [5]. This paper will outline several ways that Positive Psychology approaches can be used in secondary and post-secondary settings to enhance the career planning process. These approaches include using interview strategies that draw out themes of optimism, hope, love of learning, justice, enthusiasm and persistence to support students to consider their career choice within the greater context of their identity. Identification of signature strengths using the Values in Action survey (VIA-IS) [6] will be discussed and the authors will outline how this measure is being compared with results of traditional career interest inventories. Initial results from a quantitative study will be presented along with case illustrations of positive psychology career practices. Finally, recommendations for enhancing values that are correlated with academic success in the post-secondary context will be provided. It is our hope that these interventions will make significant contributions to the future success of our students.*

Career uncertainty has been cited as a major factor impacting success in university and college [7], and has been associated with dropping out, changing majors, and longer time-to-graduate rates [1]. Early on in its evolution, vocational counselling focused on the trait and factor theory [8], and emphasized matching skills with particular jobs. As economies ebbed and flowed, market research was incorporated, and focus was placed on exploring careers where employment was most probable or most needed. External economic parameters became a significant driver in the career planning process [9].

The emphasis has shifted over the past few decades to choosing careers over jobs, and on identifying transferable skills rather than training for a particular occupation. Career counselling practitioners have aimed to help students investigate their interests, preferences, and talents in order to choose a major and/or select a career goal. Interventions have included strategies to uncover career-related interests, often making use of personality inventories, career tests and measures of aptitude or ability. Savickas [9] described how career counselling has become multifaceted, linking to a career by examining external factors (e.g., market demands, employability, required skills or credentials), personal factors (e.g., lifestyle preferences, interests, abilities and talents), and embedding the occupational planning process into a developmental cycle. Modern career counselling is more about *life design* than job choice [10].

Positive Psychology (PP) naturally fits within this framework. PP is defined as the “scientific study of positive experiences and positive individual traits” [11, p. 630]. The aim is to nurture positive emotions, identify strengths and foster virtues with the goal of sustainable happiness [12]. PP’s focus on factors like understanding and exercising personal values, life satisfaction and happiness can be useful while counselling students. Employment is no longer seen as the target outcome; rather, PP aims to help clients achieve a satisfying and meaningful life which is partially expressed through fulfilling employment [13]. Job-related stress has been linked to situations where workers were motivated primarily by external factors (e.g., employment, wage), and burnout and dissatisfaction became common. Research has indicated that individuals who select careers that are aligned with their values tend to experience greater life satisfaction [2], career satisfaction [3], happiness [4] and productivity [5]. Diener [14] found that individuals who are happy have longer lives and a greater sense of life-purpose. Life is more meaningful when you are pursuing goals that are harmonious with



your values, and employment provides opportunity for such congruence. According to Fredrickson [15], 40% of one's happiness can be influenced by engagement in intentional activities, and work can certainly be categorized as such. Individuals who are mindful of aligning their work with their values will likely have more opportunity to create meaning, and thus are more likely to be productive, fulfilled and happy. Workers who experience greater job satisfaction tend to produce more work of better quality [16], report having better physical/mental health [17], and higher levels of creativity [18]. Motivation becomes intrinsically driven and thus more sustainable over time.

Based on the above, it would be efficient to help clients connect their career interests with their values, but we do not yet know how occupational clusters connect to value clusters. To investigate this, the authors are collecting data to uncover the statistical relationship between character strengths, as defined by the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths [VIA-IS, 19;20] and basic career interests, as defined by the Strong Interest Inventory [23]. If there is a relationship between these measures, it may serve to further guide the career counselling process.

In addition to the formal completion of an inventory of strengths such as the VIA-IS [19;20], informal assessment strategies can also help clients to identify personal strengths to thicken their understanding of what they might be looking for in a work environment (not just in a job). Informal strategies may include (a) acknowledging compliments received (b) analyzing them for trends; (c) asking for feedback from family/friends; and (d) recognizing traits admired in others. Using the lens of PP, counsellors can work to promote a career plan that is congruent with the client's life scheme and values, while also increasing skills in thinking with positivity. Research has shown that this approach enhances the happiness of our clients, which in turn enhances work productivity and life satisfaction [21]. Such intrinsic satisfaction feeds back into happiness, and creates an upward spiral [15].

This approach also produces elevated levels of creativity, which can be a useful skill during times of unemployment or job uncertainty. When we have creativity we can be more resilient to change and develop career adaptability [22]. Our views on possibilities expand. Given the economic climate of today's world, it is inevitable that career stress and strain will be experienced. Creative workers are more likely to see how skills can be transferable between jobs and across sectors, are less likely to define themselves by their career, and see themselves as a product of experiences, talents, and abilities that reside within them (not within their current job). A job loss is therefore less likely to be devastating, for the loss is limited to one's employment, not identity.

What brings us meaning is, of course, very personal, and warrants exploration. The authors encourage practitioners to explore the strengths of their clients, and discuss themes such as optimism, hope, love of learning, and persistence. The ability to identify and communicate character strengths is a sophisticated skill that can be developed through the career counselling process. The following case study serves to demonstrate how this might be accomplished.

*In a recent career counselling session, one of the authors asked their client to talk about how optimistic they felt about their future. This led to a discussion about hope, and revealed opportunities to foster positivity. When asked to talk about a time when they felt highly enthusiastic, the client talked about a passion and preference for working with complex, hands-on problems to find solutions that could benefit others. Emphasis was placed on discovering the solution, not putting it into practice. Through the exploration of the client's love of discovery, the joy of problem solving and the fostering of curiosity, this client was able to develop insight into their personal sources of motivation, gain awareness into what they could offer an employer, and had more of an understanding of how they could articulate these values.*

For the aforementioned client, it would not matter if they were working in manufacturing or health care, in the oil and gas industry or in human services. Of importance to this client was their ability to transfer their enthusiasm for discovering solutions to complex problems in their work. Through the career counselling process this character strength was placed in the greater context of the client's identity, and was linked with happiness, job satisfaction and career productivity.

## Conclusion

Happiness and productivity are generally believed to go hand in hand, and we believe that character strengths significantly impact both of these constructs. We suggest that adding a PP emphasis to our career counselling practices both in secondary and post-secondary educational settings will have a positive impact on happiness, which in turn will lead to greater productivity. A byproduct is an enhancement of creativity, which will help individuals to think of themselves less like workers-trained-



for-a-particular-job and more like masters-of-their-own-career-plan. Resiliency means that our clients will be more able to weather the changing climate of today's economy [22]. The authors encourage career practitioners to incorporate the tenets of PP into their practice by investigating sources of happiness and meaning in the lives of our clients. Counselling interventions can reveal intrinsic sources of motivation, help clients to identify core strengths, and frame these as transferable to a number of settings. More formal ways of identifying and "diagnosing" character strengths exist, and counsellors are encouraged to make use these resources [19;20]. In time, we hope that we will add to the literature by providing some understanding of how character strengths align with career interests, which may be of support to the career counselling process. Rather than choosing an occupation, and then finding a way to help our clients to be happy with that choice, we are encouraging the identification of happiness, and then advocating to help clients find occupations that fit with those intrinsic sources of motivation. This internal motivation is the foundation for happiness, but also the foundation of a successful, productive and satisfying career.

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