

Career Development on a Three-Legged Stool

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Psychologists have grown fond in recent years of uncovering the basic components of some concept and then naming them, like the “Big Five” (personality types) or the “Big Six” (interests). A recent article by a pair of our best vocational psychology theorists, Steven Brown and Robert Lent, discusses what they called the “Big Three” assessments (not “tests”) essential for informed vocational planning: interests, skills and work values. They are, we are pleased to note, the three assessments used in the *Kuder Career Planning System*.

But I think it is more useful to think of their Big Three as a three-legged stool on which effective career planning stands. Like a stool, all three need to work together to identify stable and satisfying career goals. One, say skills, alone is not enough: people may develop skills – for instance, driving – out of necessity. They do it, but don’t wish to support a career choice with it. Or interests may link to careers that involve attractive tasks like art or the outdoors, but which do not satisfy what is wanted in a job, such as security or a good income. Let’s talk more about these three legs.

Interests: Of the many human attributes that have been studied, interests have been among the most “measurable” and relatively stable of human attributes. And they have shown the best, although not perfect, relationship to eventual career choice. Many people say they most want a job that engages their interests. As well, some people do not trust their “felt interests,” and prefer the results of a standardized, normalized inventory of their interests to inform their career plans.

The *Kuder Career Planning System* assessment that represents the interest leg of the stool, *Kuder Career Search*, has two key features: instead of asking whether you are interested in this or that occupation or school subject, it compares your preferences for an assortment of activities (“run and finish a marathon”) with those of people in several career fields or occupational clusters. And, while it gives percentile figures, the real information is the rank order: who has interests most similar to yours? Is it, for instance, people employed in helping occupations, in transportation industry occupations, or what? This is powerful information.

Additionally, the *Kuder Career Search* has an added feature that no other interest assessment has – it gives short “job sketches” of the individuals whose interests most closely resemble yours, called Person Match. From this, you learn what these people who are like you actually do for a living.

Skills: A stool with only one leg doesn't help very much. The second leg of the stool is generally thought of as "aptitudes or abilities," a person's inherent capacity to learn an occupational skill set faster and better than others. Aptitude tests were originally developed to aid employee selection. In this application they are very helpful when there is a large number of applicants and only a few vacancies to fill. But when it is turned around, when one person is trying to select an occupation from a large number of possibilities, differential aptitude tests don't work very well. Research has shown that aptitudes have very weak relationships with what occupations people actually enter, and practically none at all with success.

In recent years, the assessment of developed skills has replaced the idea of searching for (sometimes hidden) abilities. The *Kuder* system has adopted this perspective with the *Kuder Skill Assessments*. They are age-appropriately phrased—that is, the middle and high school version includes tasks that this age group likely has encountered -- for instance, "run for class president." The college and adult version (to be released, fall of 2006) is phrased in terms of tasks available to master in college or beyond such as "run for city council." Research has shown that skills measured in high school or college correlate with people's eventual occupations. Skills are necessary for success in an occupation, although success is not exclusively dependent on skills. And skill levels need not be regarded as fixed. Some take longer than others, but most skills can be learned.

Work Values: Still, you had better not try to stand on a stool that has only two legs. You need another. Brown and Lent say it is "work values." What are these? Values, in general, are those things that people believe are good, true, or beautiful. Ask anyone what he or she likes about their career or job, and you will likely hear some feature like "the variety in what I do," or "good people to work with." Those preferences for aspects of jobs and occupations are work values. Research has revealed that they predict job satisfaction better than interests or skills do, and to some extent, job performance.

Many work values have been identified. The *Kuder* system uses a set of twelve, originally named by Dr. Donald Super, who is generally acknowledged to be the premier career development theorist. Another leading theorist names only six work values, all of which share variance with Super's.

Occupations have been linked to interests and skills, so you can find occupations that need your particular set. Work values are more loosely associated with careers. Some are associated rather strongly with occupational clusters – the opportunity for "creativity," for instance, linking to selected occupations in art, music, and writing. Other values may be associated with specific jobs in many interest-skill clusters, like "good supervision." The best source of linkages from work values to a list of selected occupations at five skill levels is the Work Importance Locator *O*NET* Occupations Master List.

Now that we have the Big Three legs attached to the career exploration stool of the *Kuder Career Planning System*, we can stand on it and see possibilities in the future with greater confidence, facilitating choices and plans to attain career goals that promise satisfaction and success.