Chapter 1

Know Thyself!

Self-Assessment

To know yourself is, of course, the task of a lifetime, but it is also an essential first step in exploring alternative careers. Self-assessment includes asking yourself: what are my most important values, goals, interests, and skills, particularly as they relate to work—the career field, the job function, the environment and people, and the lifestyle implications? This self-knowledge will not only help you to focus your exploration and job search and to narrow options, but it will also substantially increase your chances of getting a job. Employers find it hard to resist candidates who convey an understanding of and conviction about the match between themselves and the job. And once you’re in the job, you’ll perform with better results and greater pleasure.

This chapter focuses on the internal dimension: Who am I at this point in my life? and What does that suggest about my choice of work and careers? The next two chapters will consider the external dimension: How do I discover what is out there that matches me? The premise here is that people are happiest when their work is a vocation, that is, when they are doing jobs or tasks that give them a sense of purpose and meaning, and which they would choose to do even if they did not get paid. This work may be paid or unpaid and of high or low status; it may take many forms and may well change over the course of a life and career. You may need
to make compromises along the way for legitimate reasons; the trick is to hold the goal firmly in sight while compromising. Because we spend so much time in gainful employment, we might as well aim for paying jobs that fulfill us, realizing at the same time that fulfilling work is generally a necessary but not sufficient condition for a fulfilling life.

You may find the diagram below helpful for thinking about the process of self-assessment. Typically, in this process you try to ascertain your values and goals, interests and passions, and skills and capacities (especially those you most enjoy using or would like to develop). You then consider how they affect your preferences about various aspects of work. These include: (1) the work environment, i.e., the physical characteristics of the workplace, organization size, culture, the people—both clients and colleagues (their characteristics and the types of relationships you have with them); (2) the conditions and lifestyle implications of the work, e.g., stability, income and benefits, prestige, time commitments, flexibility; (3) the tasks and functions you will perform and the associated work style; and (4) the substantive content—the organizational mission or product/service, the field, or profession. Note that your skills primarily affect your choice of tasks; interests, primarily your choice of substantive area and the organization’s purpose, product, or service; and values, your preferences regarding work environment and lifestyle implications, as well as organizational mission.

Some of you may have a clear sense of your values, interests, and skills and even of purpose or vocation, but those of you who “glided” from college to graduate school may not have needed to pay them much attention. Now is the time to begin clarifying your talents, passions, motivations, goals, and values. It will help to talk to your friends, spend some time by yourself thinking, and even notice your daydreams and fantasies. Homer Hagedorn, a consultant with Arthur D. Little, Inc. whose Ph.D. is in history, recalls “with the wisdom of hindsight” the many clues he ignored as a graduate student that academia was not for him: the “torture” of graduate school, the choice of a dissertation topic on management consulting, the visceral negative reaction he had to the atmosphere at the annual American Historical Association meeting. Pay attention to your intuitive responses, he urges.¹

To Finish or Not to Finish

Before engaging in a structured self-assessment process, you may need to address the issue of whether or not to finish your Ph.D. This is a highly personal and individual decision and can be a very complex and difficult one, so it is important to remember that you are not alone. Here are a few guidelines for grappling with the issue.

- Try to separate the “shoulds” from your own true voice. The “shoulds” come from a variety of sources, including parents and other family members, significant others, professors, mentors, peers, and people who advise you on the new career. You may in the end decide to heed some of the “shoulds,” but make this a conscious choice, giving full weight to the “I want” as well.

- Think not only about the substantive reasons for finishing or not, but also about how you will feel about “quitting.” For some, it may be a source of lasting regret or a psychological burden; for others, it may be a long-overdue declaration of independence. Try to imagine how you will

¹ From a panel on Consulting Careers, held at OCS, March 18, 1992.
feel looking back at this decision ten or twenty years from now. Note, however, that you will probably rationalize your choice, whatever it is; most GSAS alumni who have shared their experiences express no regrets about their choice, whether they finished or not (the majority in the Career Advisory Service have finished). If you decide not to finish, think about how you will explain that decision to a potential employer, your spouse, your children, etc.

- Gather as much information as possible about the practical consequences of either choice for a career in the field(s) you are considering. Ask people in the field for their advice. Would they make a different decision in hindsight? Does a Ph.D. benefit you more down the line than at the beginning? Is it a negative? Even while you consider the practical consequences, don’t lose sight of the less practical and tangible ones (as noted above).

- How close you are to finishing is often a key factor, so also gather practical information about that process. Find out, for instance, whether it can be accelerated or stretched out to accommodate part-time training or work. Consensus exists on one point: if you know you are leaving academia but want to get the degree, settle for an acceptable dissertation rather than a stellar one, and finish it quickly.

- Talk with people whose judgment and discretion you trust. You might make a list of pros and cons and then balance that analytical approach with listening to your “gut reactions.” As you come to a decision (which may take a long time), live with it for a while longer to see how it feels. If possible, take actions that preserve your options rather than close them off, such as requesting a leave of absence instead of withdrawing.

**Exercises**

The following exercises will help you get started; choose the ones that appeal to you most or seem most valuable, but try to do at least one each for values, skills, and interests. Several exercises give information about all of these, as well as more general clues about “vocation.” It is useful to write down your answers so that you can look back on them. If you are inclined to experiment, try drawing or symbolizing your responses in some way.

1. Make a two-column list of everything you can think of that you like and dislike about an academic career, and then assign priorities. What do you learn about your values, interests, and skills as they affect the work and workplace?

2. Think about the experiences you have had in your life—in the areas of work, leisure, or learning—and pick three to ten that have the following characteristics:
   a. you were the chief, or a significant, actor;
   b. YOU—not the world or significant others—regard it as a success: you achieved, did, or created something with concrete results, or acted to solve a problem, or gave something of yourself that you are proud of and pleased by; and
   c. you truly enjoyed yourself in the process.

   List each of them, write why you consider it a success, and write a paragraph or two detailing the experience, step by step. Extract from these stories the values and interests they reveal about you and the skills you used. In other words, what do they reveal about what you like to do and do well? (See the skills list at the end of the chapter for help in identifying skills.) This exercise works well if you also tell your stories aloud to one or two friends and ask them to reflect back to you the skills, qualities, and values they perceive.

3. Think about interest indicators: What do you do in your spare time? If you were given $500 to spend in a bookstore, what would you spend it on? Is there a cause you feel passionately about?

4. What do you daydream or fantasize about? Are there patterns in these daydreams or even your dreams that are indications of your vocation? Do you visualize yourself in certain work situations or environments? If you have a role model, what about his or her work is relevant to you?

5. If you could live five (or whatever number you want) lives simultaneously, and explore a different talent, interest, or lifestyle in each, what would you be in each of them? Let your imagination go wild and silence the practical “critic.”
6. Where do you see yourself in two years? five years? ten years? Include both your personal and professional life. Try visualizing in great detail a day or week in your life at a set time from now, e.g., five years.

7. Imagine you are writing your epitaph or obituary. What would you like to be remembered for? What would you do if you knew you could not fail? What would you do if you had only a year to live and were guaranteed success?

8. Make a two-column list of “characteristics any job I take must have” and “characteristics it must not have.” This list will be very preliminary, and you will constantly revise it throughout this process and beyond. But making the list will help you capsulize your knowledge to date and keep you focused on your central values and requirements. It can also keep you from compromising on essential things when you get a job offer.

9. Look through the following list of work-related values, changing the terminology or concepts as they apply to you, and adding any more general life values that you want to consider. Then rate the degree of importance that you would assign to each for yourself, using this scale:

1 = Not important at all  
2 = Somewhat, but not very important  
3 = Reasonably important  
4 = Very important in my choice of career

Take your ten top values (presumably all 4’s) and do the priority-setting exercise using the grids on p. 13. (For a quicker, less rigorous version, simply number the ten most important values in order of priority.)

**Work-Related Values**

- **Social service:** Do something to contribute to the betterment of my community, country, society, and/or the world.

- **Service:** Be involved in helping other people in a direct way, either individually or in small groups.

3. Adapted from various lists common in the literature.

__People contact:__ Have a lot of day-to-day contact with people—either clients or the public and/or have close working relationships with a group; working collaboratively.

__Work alone:__ Do projects by myself, without any significant amount of contact with others.

__Friendships:__ Develop close personal friendships with people as a result of my work activities or have work that permits time for close personal friendships outside of work.

__Competition:__ Engage in activities that pit my abilities against others where there are clear win-and-lose outcomes.

__Job pressure/Fast pace:__ Work in situations with high pressure to perform well and/or under time constraints; fast-paced environment.

__Power/Authority:__ Have the power to decide courses of action, policies, etc. and/or to control the work activities or affect the destinies of other people.

__Influence:__ Be in a position to change attitudes or opinions of other people.

__Knowledge:__ Engage myself in the pursuit of knowledge, truth, and understanding or work on the frontiers of knowledge, e.g., in basic research or cutting-edge technology.

__Expertise/Competence:__ Being a pro, an authority, exercising special competence or talents in a field, with or without recognition.

__Creativity:__ Create new ideas, programs, organizations, forms of artistic expression, or anything else not following a previously developed format. (Specify type of creativity.)

__Aesthetics:__ Be involved in studying or contributing to truth, beauty, culture.
Change and Variety: Have work responsibilities that frequently change in content and setting; avoidance of routine.

Job stability and/or security: Have a predictable work routine over a long period and/or be assured of keeping my job and a reasonable salary.

Recognition/Prestige/Status: Be recognized for the quality of my work in some visible or public way; be accorded respect for my work by friends, family, and/or community.

Challenging problems: Have challenging and significant problems to solve.

Career advancement: Have the opportunity to work hard and make rapid career advancement.

Physical challenge: Have a job that makes physical demands that I would find rewarding.

Excitement/Adventure: Experience a high degree of (or frequent) excitement in course of my work; have work duties that involve frequent risk taking.

Wealth or Profit: Have a strong likelihood of accumulating large amounts of money or other material gain.

Independence: Be able to work/think/act largely in accordance with my own priorities.

Moral fulfillment: Feel that my work contributes significantly to, and/or is in accordance with, a set of moral standards important to me.

Location: Find a place to live that is conducive to my lifestyle and affords me the opportunity to do the things I enjoy most or provides a community where I can get involved.

Self-Realization/Enjoyment: Do work that allows realizing the full potential of my talents and/or gives high personal satisfaction and enjoyment.

List here the values (titles only) receiving a rating of "4" (do not prioritize). Leave the "score" column blank at this point.

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Now compare each value, in turn, with each of the others, circling on the grid below the number of the most important value in each comparison. So, for example, to compare value #1 with the others, move from left to right across the first double row.

To find your scores, count the number of "1's" circled, the number of "2's," and so on. This will give you the score for each value, which can be placed in the "score" column above. If two numbers have the same score, break the tie by looking at the grid to see how you compared those two numbers. On the basis of these scores, construct a final list of values prioritized in this way.

FINAL PRIORITIZED LISTING

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Beyond the foregoing exercises, think specifically and broadly about the skills you have developed as a student and teacher/researcher. Go beyond the obvious ones—the analytical, research, investigative, communication, teaching, and discipline-related skills (such as computer, lab, languages, arts, and substantive expertise). Include abilities such as the following, which were "brainstormed" by a group of graduate students considering nonacademic careers: learning quickly; synthesizing information; problem solving; dealing with complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty; leadership/managerial or administrative/planning/budgeting skills; people skills, including the ability to motivate and counsel students, persuasion, tact, and political savvy; evaluation skills; and personal qualities such as self-motivation, self-discipline, initiative, creativity, focus, meticulousness, stamina, independence, and humor.

Think also in terms of underlying or "tacit" skills. To take one example, a host of implicit capacities undergirds teaching: translating and explaining difficult concepts; defining objectives of a course or lecture; formulating a strategy for achieving the objectives; locating, retrieving, and evaluating potential materials; abstracting, summarizing, and organizing those materials into an effective written and/or oral presentation; time management; "psyching out," motivating, and nurturing students; evaluating performance; collaborating and cooperating.

The bottom line is that you want to think in terms of transferable skills—i.e., skills that can be generalized and hence are valuable in many jobs and settings. In her new position as a fundraiser for an Ivy League university, Donna Consolini has discovered the transferability of the skills she gained as a graduate student: "Running a business meeting in Cincinnati is not unlike teaching a discussion section; writing reports and letters is easy because I like to write; researching financial and business information reminds me of how I felt beginning to research in a foreign language when I started in German years ago." 

Similarly, Michael Yogg, Ph.D., now Senior Vice-President at State Street Research, found his graduate training in history to be highly relevant to his new career:

Four qualities distinguish every successful investment professional: intellectual honesty, diligence, intelligence, and creativity. Among these honesty is paramount. Scholarly training develops all of these traits; it is the best way, to my mind, of developing a passion for intellectual honesty...[E]ncountering evidence in the world of scholarship and facing the facts of the investment world are very similar intellectual and emotional experiences. The games are different but the rules are the same. Like the scholar, the investor seeks to discover value that others have missed, either by unearthing new facts or by rethinking old scenarios.

And Karen Lech, whose technical expertise in molecular biology was a prerequisite for being hired as a patent agent at the Boston law firm Fish & Richardson, stresses the additional importance of the writing and teaching skills she developed in graduate school. She constantly applies these to writing patent applications and educating inventors and patent examiners.

A final word on skills: do not sell yourself short in this area. As one GSAS student put it, "Harvard is the academic equivalent of Parris Island. The fact that Harvard Boot Camp demoralizes you does not mean you are not capable."

You may want to use the following skills list to help you identify and prioritize your skills. Circle all the skills that you have used in past and present jobs or hobbies, in school or extracurricular activities, or at home. Look for patterns, especially whether these skills tend to relate to people, data, or things. Then select the ones you most enjoy using or want to develop further, and list your top five to ten in order of importance.


6. The Regents of the University of the State of New York, Teaching and Beyond: Nonacademic Career Programs for Ph.D.'s (Regents of the University of the State of New York, New York, NY, 1984), 21-22.
Skills

Administering
- a department of people, programs
- a specific activity

Analyzing and Classifying
- quantitative, statistical, physical, and/or scientific data
- human/social situations
- classifying information into categories or people into programs

Anticipating
- staying one step ahead of public moods
- able to sense what will be fashionable in consumer goods
- expecting a problem before it develops, seeing the first signs

Auditing/Accounting
- assessing the financial status of an organization

Calculating and/or Risk Management
- performing mathematical computations
- assessing risks of a contemplated activity

Collaborating/Teamwork
- attaining objectives through group/team/committee processes

Conceptualizing/Abstracting
- parts of a system into a whole
- ideas from surface events
- new spacial relationships
- non-observable physical phenomena
- concepts, interpretations

Constructing and/or Repairing
- mechanical apparatus, electronic equipment
- physical objects, furniture, etc.
- houses/buildings

Coordinating (see also organizing)
- numerous events involving different people
- great quantities of information
- activities in different physical locations
- events in time sequence

Counseling/Advising/Group Facilitating
- helping or advising people individually, in groups, in various organizations with personal/emotional concerns, life development concerns (career, finances, education), and/or family matters

Creating
- artistically (visual arts, performing arts, crafts, music, writing)
- new ideas for an organization
- new ways of solving mechanical problems
- ways of inventing new equipment, processes, materials

Dealing with Pressure
- risks toward self, physical or otherwise, and/or risks toward others
- time pressure, deadlines
- complaints, abuse from others

Dealing with Unknowns
- making decisions based on severely limited information
- making hypotheses about virtually unknown phenomena

Decision Making
- about the use of money
- about alternative courses of action
- involving physical safety of others

Delegating
- distributing tasks to others; giving responsibility to others

Designing and/or Drawing
- layouts for printed media, public displays, or other commercial purposes
- advertisements
- physical interiors of rooms
- buildings of all kinds
- clothing
- exhibits
- commercial drawing/photography

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8 Adapted from a list from Radcliffe Career Services, based on Howard Figler’s The Complete Job Search Handbook, with input from various standard sources, which are listed in the Bibliography.
Developing Mathematical/Statistical Models
for scientific, economic, other behavioral phenomena

Displaying
ideas in artistic form
products in store windows
equipment, mechanical devices

Editing/Revising
newspaper, magazine pieces
book and other manuscripts

Enduring/Persisting
long hours of work, physical danger or hardship, periods of solitude,
or “difficult” people
failures/obstacles

Evaluating/Appraising/Comparing
evaluating the performance of individuals
evaluating programs or services in terms of objectives
judging the value of property
judging similarity or divergence of data, people, or things from
obvious standards

Fundraising/Soliciting—for variety of causes
on person-to-person basis or from large foundations and organizations
through advertising or sale of products or fundraising events
for political candidates

Handling Complaints
from customers, stockholders, citizens, clients

Handling Detail or Precision Work
doing numerous small tasks efficiently; attending to small details
working on physical materials or with data with little margin for error
working with small motor dexterity

Initiating
new ideas, approaches, ways of doing things
new projects
contacts with people, strangers

Interpreting/Translating
other languages, cultures
obscure phrases or passages
meanings associated with statistical data
highly technical, abstract, sophisticated concepts/language to simpler
terms

Interviewing/Questioning
evaluating applicants to an organization
obtaining information from others
obtaining evidence in legal situations
asking creative questions in fluid situations

Investigating/Finding
seeking hard-to-find or withheld information
seeking underlying causes for a problem
finding information in obscure, remote, or varied sources
locating potentially helpful people

Listening
to one person or extended conversations between others in order to
help
to recording devices or other monotonous listening situations

Managing
being responsible for the work of others
organizing, coordinating, and developing human, informational, and
material resources to effect greater productivity or otherwise meet
the objectives of an organization or department
guiding the activities of a team (athletic or otherwise)

Meeting the Public
being a public representative of an agency or organization
being a tour guide, park ranger
selling products in a public place
dealing with the public in a service capacity
acquiring information (survey taker)

Motivating or Leading
persuading others to help or follow you
motivating others for peak physical or psychological performances
Moving with Dexterity, Speed, Grace
- can involve large and/or small muscle coordination
- athletic ability

Negotiating/Mediating
- negotiating contracts or other deals
- mediating between individuals or groups in conflict
- facilitating positive interaction of members of a group

Observing and Inspecting
- physical phenomena with great accuracy
- behavior of human beings or social/historical changes
- inspecting physical objects to meet standards, or observing people to determine criteria or detect information

Organizing
- bringing people together for certain ends, creating new groupings for a common purpose
- gathering information and arranging it in clear, interpretable form
- arranging political activity, rousing the public to action
- organizing time efficiently

Performing and/or Entertaining
- performing in dramatic or musical or artistic productions
- entertaining people with stories, actions, jokes in small informal settings or in front of an audience
- news anchor, talk show host
- social entertaining

Planning
- anticipating future needs of a company/organization
- scheduling a sequence of events or itinerary

Politicking
- generating support for one’s ideas within an organization or from the public
- influencing policy within an organization/firm
- generating financial support from another agency/organization

Programming
- computers
- developing and arranging a sequence of events

Reading
- large amounts of material quickly
- written materials with great care
- numbers or symbols

Record Keeping/Collating
- orderly keeping of numerical data or financial records
- creating and maintaining files (computer, paper)

Rehabilitating
- helping people to resume use of physical limbs
- working with patients through media such as art and music

Remembering
- large quantities of information for immediate recall
- names, faces, places, etc.
- long sequences of events or instructions

Researching and Compiling
- extracting information from libraries, people, physical data
- locating information in obscure, remote, or varied sources
- gathering statistical data or facts on a given topic
- critically investigating or experimenting with aim of revising accepted conclusions in light of newly discovered facts

Selling/Persuading/Influencing
- selling ideas to others in person or in writing or images
- selling products to individual households or companies
- selling government policies to the public
- persuading others to help or follow you, or see your point of view

Speaking
- speaking publicly to an audience or individually to many people
- speaking on media

Supervising/Monitoring
- directly overseeing the work of others in various settings, e.g., white-collar workers, laborers
- following the progress of another person or of equipment
- overseeing a physical plant, building, etc.

Synthesizing
- combining items of information into a coherent whole
Teaching and/or Coaching
- teaching in the school or college classroom
- tutoring individuals in certain subjects
- training individuals to perform certain tasks
- guiding the activities of an athletic team

Toleration
- of misbehavior or mistakes of people you are responsible for
- of lack of support or understanding of the work you are doing
- of anonymity or lack of recognition for your work

Troubleshooting/Problem Solving
- finding sources of difficulty in human relations or physical systems
- conceiving solutions to problems

Using Instruments
- assembling technical apparatus
- using scientific, medical, or technical instruments
- obtaining accurate scientific measurements

Working Outdoors
- involvement with the land and its resources, and/or animal and plant life
- testing oneself against physical challenges
- collecting scientific data

Writing (see also editing)
- copywriting for sales/advertising
- technical and scientific writing
- creative writing, prose, poetry
- report/memo writing, correspondence
- proposal/grant writing
- expository writing, essays
- popular writing/journalism

As you look back over your responses to the exercises you have chosen, try to find common themes. List your values, interests, and skills in order of priority. Also list the top few characteristics of the work environment, conditions, people, and tasks or work style. As you go on to the next phase of the process, be prepared to alter your priorities as you discover more about what particular careers and jobs are like. And go back to the self-assessment process from time to time, to discover and respond to how you have changed in the meantime.

The above exercises represent a fraction of the possibilities for self-assessment, some of which are listed in the Bibliography. In addition, you can take vocational interest tests such as the Strong Interest Inventory and the Jackson Vocational Interest Survey, which are offered at the Office of Career Services (OCS). These tests suggest career fields that fit your expressed interests, work styles and roles, and other preferences, based on profiles of people already in those careers. 9

9. The Myers-Briggs Trait Inventory has been popular as an indicator of work predilections and styles and can be taken at Radcliffe Career Services, among other places.