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Just because I'm good at it, doesn't mean I like it: beyond psychometric testing

Author: Rachel Edelstein

Psychometric testing is the best known and most highly regarded method for measuring individuals' mental capabilities and behavioral styles. Most commonly, psychometrics are used for career guidance and the evaluation of job suitability for a particular role based on personality characteristics and cognitive abilities.

In most of these tests, from the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to Emotional Intelligence tests, candidates are encouraged to focus on their strengths. These strengths are defined, typically, by looking at one's intelligence quotient, emotional intelligence, aptitude and personality traits. As such, one will be best suited in specific fields – a high emotional intelligence score would direct an individual to work alongside others, while quantitative ability would indicate that an individual should work in a mathematical or scientific discipline. The enterprises in which an individual can achieve with minimal effort – those that come naturally – are typically defined as strengths.

On the face of it, this seems like a relatively sound measure by which to assess how one should spend the majority of one's working life. The problem with following this accepted wisdom, though, is what we understand by the very term 'strength'. Austin-based Career Counsellor Janet Scaborough Civiletti warns us against mistaking genetic blessing as a sign that one has a particular path mapped out.

The 2001 book by Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton, Now Discover Your Strengths, was pioneering for its emphasis on boosting strengths rather than focusing on improving areas of weakness. The latter was a common practice for individuals and firms prior to the book's publication. Combined with decades of research into excellence by The Gallup Organization, their work became the foundation for strength-based careers and organisations. Intuition would tell us that 'boosting strengths' involves honing the skills one already possesses. However, it is critical to interrogate how Buckingham himself defines strengths.

The definition of 'strengths', he explains, must not be simplified to the areas in which we naturally succeed and are comfortable. Similarly, weaknesses are not merely the areas in which we lack. Rather, strengths are those ventures that energise us and contribute to us, in general, as individuals. The pursuits that stimulate and stretch, as opposed to those that may come naturally, are more accurately defined as strengths. It also follows that weaknesses are those areas that drain us and detract from our growth and success. It may be that these activities are those that are difficult to grasp, but even those fields in which one may excel might act as weaknesses too. Therefore, to develop one's strengths, an individual should seek to hone the skills that stimulate them. This is distinct from practising those skills already mastered, whereby one can become passive and stunt personal growth.

Furthermore, in focusing solely on our strengths, we tend to overlook other significant characteristics which poise an individual for success. Creativity, resilience in the face of adversity, the ability and drive to struggle with difficult problems and the patience to learn the skills that come with them are largely undeveloped virtues in pursuing existing skills. After all, although these problems might create frustration, we gain enormous satisfaction upon solving them. This also enables one to expand those traits that are often sidelined in personal development conversations. It is important to look deeper into what strengths actually are, in order to allow onesself to feel comfortable with being driven by such strengths.
Barbara Oakley, Professor or Engineering at Oakland University, is a good example of someone who followed a complex career trajectory to interrogate where her own strengths lay. Co-author of A Mind For Numbers: How to Excel at Math and Science (Even If You Flunked Algebra), Oakley completed a Bachelor of Arts in Slavic Languages and Literature before joining the Army.

Once her Army duties had ended, Oakley decided to challenge herself and see if her brain, more used to the study of languages, could be 'retooled' to study mathematical subjects. She chose to study engineering in order to better understand the communications equipment she had been working with in the Army. Her studies continued and she eventually received a doctorate in Systems Engineering in 1998.

This kind of career swap is a pertinent example of pursuing one's strengths. It is also particularly relevant in attracting more young girls into the STEM fields. Across the globe, girls suffer from insecurity about their abilities to succeed in mathematics and science. Research indicates that much of this insecurity stems from low expectations from both the girls' parents and teachers, coupled with a lack of self confidence in their own abilities to solve problems scientifically. This fear of failure needs to be confronted. It is necessary for human development to identify our own 'strengths' and 'weaknesses' by confronting ourselves with the activities that both deplete and invigorate us. In doing so, we break down mental blocks regarding what we initially thought possible, and develop a wide skillset including such traits as resilience, creativity and problem solving.

Typically, psychometrics will focus on one's interest versus one's aptitude. Although this means of assessment is widely regarded as standard, it is in our interest to look beyond these limited estimates. If we look to our own abilities, interests, and margins for error, we make space for exponential growth. Our strengths lie in being confident enough to confront the areas in which we lack. True growth is often found in allowing ourselves to fail, and in those ventures that stimulate and excite us.