



Self-knowledge: The Key to Great Career Decisions

Have you ever gone out to run errands and lost your keys? If so, you probably remember that feeling of panic as you asked yourself, “How will I ever get home?” You looked everywhere, retracing each step you took throughout the day. Still — no keys! So, you decided to call a friend for help.

Reaching for your cell phone, you discovered that you had your keys all along — right there in your own pocket. You thought to yourself, “Oh, thank goodness! I should’ve looked here in the first place.”

That same panic you felt when you lost your keys is a lot like the feelings many of us experience as we look for a fulfilling career. We search *all around* for the perfect job (asking friends and family for advice, pouring over the latest list of hot jobs, and reading job postings). Ironically, though, we sometimes overlook the *most important place* to *begin* our search for satisfying career options — *within ourselves!*

Know Yourself

To quote Howard Figler, renowned author and career services professional, “Choosing a career is giving yourself permission to be who you are... [against] competing forces.” So, whether you are a student engaged in college and career planning, a recent college grad entering the workforce, or a seasoned professional considering your next career move, self-awareness is the key to good career decisions.

Self-knowledge can be defined as having a clear and accurate perception of *who you are* — including your strengths, capabilities, character, feelings, and motivations. It’s the foundation on which development is built, both personally and professionally.

Expanding your self-awareness requires deep self-reflection. Start by asking yourself:

- “Who am I?”
- “How am I like others? How am I different?”
- “How am I special?”



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Five Keys to Self-Knowledge

To unlock the door to self-knowledge, as a basis for making good career and life choices, you need in-depth understanding of your:

- **Goals: *What do I want?***

To define your goals, use these questions as starting points:

- “What do I want out of life? What kind of life do I envision for myself?”
- “What do I want to achieve? What kind of contribution or difference do I want to make?”

The best goals are written down and follow the SMART formula: *specific, measureable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound*.

- **Aptitudes: *What are my strengths?***

Aptitudes are objectively-measured natural talents. They reveal a person’s *potential to acquire the skills* needed to perform various tasks competently. Aptitudes stabilize around the age of 15 and remain relatively stable across the lifespan.

A clear understanding of your natural talents offers insight into the types of tasks and learning or performance environments that support your success and career satisfaction. Choose a career direction for which the required education and training provides the highest payoff in terms of *skills development* while preparing you for occupations with the greatest *potential for success*.

- **Interests: *What do I like? What don’t I like?***

By discovering what you’re interested in, you become aware of what *motivates* you. Interests serve primarily to select, out of a mix of potential activities, the ones you’re most likely to engage in fully and enjoy doing. Some people are interested in practically everything, while others are attracted to more specialized areas of focus.

Identify your likes and dislikes (*i.e.*, tasks, activities, subject matter, and occupations). Knowing your interests can lead you to the careers and educational options that are most meaningful for you. Career satisfaction is highest when you’re able to perform tasks that utilize your natural strengths *and* appeal to your interests.



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- **Personality:** *How do I think, feel, and behave?*

Your unique personality is expressed through permanent traits and characteristic response patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Based on your natural temperament, some jobs, occupations, work environments, and company cultures may be a better fit for you than others. Examples of personality characteristics include: extraversion and introversion, tough-mindedness, sensitivity, independence, self-control, and openness to change.

- **Values:** *What's important to me?*

Values are the criteria by which you evaluate the things and activities that are most important to you in life and work. They serve as a compass, keeping you focused on what really matters as you set priorities and make decisions.

When the things you do and the way you behave are consistent with your values, life's good. Examples of work values include: achievement; independence; recognition; relationships; support from managers and company policies; and working conditions.

The Master Key

There's no one else just like you. All five of the key components described above make you the multifaceted and unique individual that you are. Separately, each individual key helps you unlock a door to self-knowledge. Yet, just as a master key can open many doors, it's the *combination* of your talents, interests, personality, and values that unlock a holistic understanding of your true self. Use your self-knowledge to identify jobs, careers, and work environments that fit with who you are so that you can do your best work.