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Deploying Your Intuition to Find Your Ideal Career

By Katharine Hansen

Where do you turn when you're baffled about what career to choose – or what career to choose next? A natural inclination is to try assessments, which can be extremely helpful in providing food for thought about careers you might be suited to.

But most of us have, to one degree or another, a tool right between our ears for choosing a career – the intuition embodied within our minds. Call it gut feelings, call it a set of hunches or "Eureka" insights, call it "stomach art" as the Japanese do, call it what you will, but your intuition can be a powerful tool for making career choices. "Knowing something directly without going through a long analytical process," is how Lynn Robinson describes intuition on the Web site of the North Carolina Division of the International Association of Administrative Professionals.

Vanessa, a new college grad, related in a first-job story that she used just such an analytical process in choosing her first job. She chose her first job out of college based on the fact that she received an offer, the money was good, and the industry, as shown by her research, "couldn't be that bad." But it was bad because it was not a job or industry she was passionate about – not one she would have chosen if she had trusted her gut.

Think of all the careers you've considered. Which one feels right to you? Which one gives you a bad feeling in your gut? Chances are that trusting those gut instincts will lead to a satisfying career choice. "Evidence is mounting that intuition works particularly well in choice situations," writes Eugene Raudsepp in CareerJournal.com. Raudsepp describes a research study at New Jersey Institute of Technology in which hundreds of business managers were tested for intuitive ability. The study showed a strong correlation between intuitive ability and effective, superior decision-making. In a Harvard study, 80 percent of surveyed executives credited their success to intuition.

Of course, some of us rely on intuition more than others. Some people are more apt to use their senses to make decisions. To find out how naturally intuitive you are, consider taking the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) or another MBTI-based assessment. A little less than a quarter of the US population is said to measure as Intuitive on the MBTI scale.

The MBTI is administered and interpreted by qualified experts, while other MBTI variations are available in books or online. (Note that some MBTI experts question the validity and reliability of these clones and even the MBTI itself.)

Intuition vs. Sensing are among the MBTI dimensions, and are, according to Intuitive Central, "the perceiving functions." Intuitive Central goes on to explain that these types "indicate how a person prefers to receive data. These are the nonrational functions, as a person does not necessarily have control over receiving data, but only how to process it once they have it. Sensing prefers to receive data primarily from the five senses, and intuition prefers to receive data from the unconscious, or seeing relationships via insights."

If your type is Sensing rather than Intuitive, that doesn't mean you can't use your intuition to make career choices; it just means you may have to work a little harder to develop your intuition.

You can also gauge your intuition based on typical characteristics of intuitives: They are resourceful, often ingenious problem-solvers (especially when they don't have all the information to solve the problem), creative, imaginative, future-oriented and open to many possibilities, good at dealing with complexity and ambiguity, excited, and highly motivated. They also enjoy being "different."

Tips to sharpen your intuition and use it for making career choices:

- Accept your gut feelings. If you're not prone to think of yourself as intuitive, you may be inclined to ignore your gut. Instead, give your intuition a chance to guide you. Think about which choices most arouse your excitement and passions.
- Know yourself. The more you are in touch with who you are, the more intuitive you may become. It doesn't hurt to take some assessments to see what patterns pop up consistently about you. That information may spark intuitive insights.
- Journal your thoughts about career choices. Write down those gut feelings. Over the long term, you can develop a sense of which hunches have panned out and which haven't. You can also keep track of your intuitive insights so you don't forget them. You may also want to share your ideas with others because verbalizing them can add clarity. Just don't be overly influenced by those who criticize the rationality of your inclinations.
- Seek a calm, quiet place to ruminate on your intuitive thoughts. Spend time reflecting on your gut instincts. Don't rush. It's OK to wait for the insight you need to make a choice.
- Take baby steps. "Your decision may require a small step, not a huge leap," Robinson writes. "Quite often when you take a step forward more information becomes available to you. Many people report that as they make an intuitive choice toward what proves to be a correct decision, events begin flowing more easily and effortlessly. Doors to opportunity open and synchronicity and coincidence begin to occur."
- It's OK to use both intuition and rational, analytical thinking to make career choices, especially if you are not highly intuitive. Use reason to test your hunches. Once you think you've made an intuitive choice, ask yourself the logical questions

that draw on your powers of reason. You can also visualize possible outcomes of your decision.

- Be positive and assume you have the resources to make a good choice.
- Ask the right questions. Life/career coach Laura Berman Fortgang suggests asking "What" questions instead of "Why" questions. For example, instead of asking yourself, "Why do I keep making bad career decisions?" ask "What can I learn from my previous decisions?" Above all, advises Fortgang, instead of asking "What should I do?" ask "What do I want?"

"It is my experience that seven out of ten people don't really know what they want," Fortgang writes. "They think they do, but they come to discover that much of what drives them is unmet needs or the expectations of others."

In a career-choice situation, these "what" questions might include:

- What do I need to know about this career (or job or company)?
- What's right about the careers (or jobs or companies) I'm considering?
- Let your mind answer these and other questions intuitively.

Final Thoughts

In a world of overwhelming career choices – and even an overwhelming array of tools to help with those decisions – it's comforting to know that one of the best tools, intuition, is within ourselves.