

Finding A Path To Your Passion

By Michelle Himmelberg

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Careers: Not happy in your job? The Highlands Program can help find the vocation to satisfy your soul.

Cynthia Hahn absorbed all those practical messages we hear growing up.

Her mother, an artist, always said, "You can't get paid for your talent."

Friends said work is hard, not fun. "I believed that, so I took any job given to me," said Hahn, who has had a varied career in training and marketing.

Her highest grade in high school was in algebra, "but I was a girl in the '60's, so I majored in English in college," Hahn said.

All those messages produced a dutiful employee - but a disillusioned, unfulfilled person.

"I'm 46, and I've spent my entire life trying to figure out what I want to do when I grow up," Hahn said.

The good news: Finally, she has discovered her passion. She converted her job as a manager of strategic planning to a part-time position and went back to school in multimedia design. She plans to combine her business background with her flair for design to produce visual presentations.

The even better news, Hahn said, is that dissatisfied people like her can make the same leap. She developed a plan to maximize her talents through The Highlands Program, an approach to career search that relies on ability assessment.

The program was developed in 1990 by Don Hutcheson, a disenchanting manager at a \$60 million ad agency, and Bob McDonald, a psychologist. It begins with a four-hour battery of tests that includes vocabulary, but no math formulas. Some tests are bizarre: studying a pattern of lines and trying to remember the pattern; writing down as many thoughts as you can to a hypothetical question.

A trained counselor interprets the results in a two-hour conference, and optional workshops help you apply what you discover.

The feedback goes beyond the typical "you're good in math." The tests measure often-overlooked areas such as how you learn (visually, auditorily or through experience) and your natural work style (whether you're a generalist or a specialist).

The tests have been validated in research with 700,000 people, company officials said.

William Wolanin was skeptical when he heard of Highlands. But he had become so depressed in his search for meaning, he figured it was better to investigate than spend the rest of his life "chasing the wrong bus."

Wolanin, a San Diego attorney, is now in the midst of recasting his future. He calls the Highlands experience "one of the turning points of my life."

The tales of Hahn and Wolanin are familiar to many working adults, and they're meaningful to new graduates seeking their calling. The lucky ones know what they want at a tender age, but many people roam the job field in search of something that drives them. Highlands says it is different because it examines all eight career decision factors: abilities, personality, interests, vision and goals, values, family work patterns, career development cycle, and skills and experience.

"You can't just focus on one of those, because the whole person comes to work," said Michael Foust, director of The Highlands Program in Santa Ana. The company is based in Atlanta and has 56 licensees across the nation.

Foust, a practicing psychologist, sought out The Highlands Program when his son began to struggle in high school. The boy was being labeled an underachiever. What they discovered through testing was his strong creative bent and a high capacity for idea productivity - valuable talents that don't thrive in a typical school setting.

The same confusion happens in the work force, Foust said, because many people don't know their natural abilities. They might be good at problem-solving, for example, but they take it for granted because it comes so easily.

The myth is that dissatisfaction comes from not having skills, said Florida psychologist Jeffrey F. Spar, who uses The Highlands Program. Most often "jobs don't tap into the abilities that people do have," Spar told Knight-Ridder Newspapers.

Three people shared what happened when they explored their abilities.

MAKING THE BIG SWITCH

Mark Vlach could have sung in his resignation: "take this job and shove it."

He gave notice last month, eight years after he joined View Logic Systems as a software sales technician, and much too long after he grew sick of the work.

"I was making a lot of money, which is what you do when you go to computer school," Vlach said. "But I was seriously unhappy. I hated the work. I was traveling a lot and didn't have much time with my family."

On his way out, Vlach, 39, negotiated to consult for the Massachusetts-based company a few days a week. That money - along with savings he began building a year ago - will provide income as he starts over. He's chasing a dream he had 12 years ago - to be a musician.

Vlach plays guitar and keyboard, and likes to sing. But he discovered that music is a powerful, driving force in his life through The Highlands Program.

"I felt like a rat trapped in a maze," he said. "I knew I wanted out (of my job), but I didn't know where to go. Through the program, I suddenly saw I had some options. It felt so good to make some decisions based on the knowledge I had about myself."

His test indicated he had such strong abilities in music and creativity, it could lead to depression if he didn't use them.

"That blew me away," he said "because that's exactly what happened."

Vlach plans to perform and maybe cut his own CD, while operating a music studio on the side. Vlach said he wants his children, 8 and 10, to go through the program when they're preparing for college.

Strangely, studies show that our abilities are fixed by the time we're 14. Barring major damage, they don't change, Foust said.

WORKING SMARTER

"There is nothing more empowering than coming up with the answer yourself."

That's what Kathryn McVann said after doing a lot of homework about herself and realizing she's well-suited to her job - account manager in information-technology systems for an aerospace company.

McVann, 41, entered The Highlands Program to examine her long-term career goals; she came away with a confidence boost and a stunning awareness about the lack of balance in her life. She also used the information to redesign her job, making her job more effective and enjoyable.

"I'm very extroverted, so I draw my energy from people," she said. "My role is consulting and matching the right service for the job requirements. For a year, I'd been sitting at my desk talking on the phone. When I took the test, I realized how important it is for me to go out to those people, to meet them face-to-face."

While McVann's career was stimulating, her personal life was dull, she said.

"I found out I don't listen to myself, to know my needs," she said. "But now I'm planning a couple of parties - things I love to do, but just haven't been doing."

IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Fewer than half of entering freshmen will graduate from college in four years. And 44 percent of freshmen will never get their degree, reports the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA.

DiAnna Marquez was afraid she'd be one of those freshmen. Deep down, she thought she would fail, so why try?

Her aunt, Maria Marquez, had observed DiAnna's talents and fears in the three years DiAnna had lived with her. She learned about The Highlands Program through her work as a marriage and family counselor, and urged the young woman to be tested.

The results: When DiAnna, 18, sought her first job, she looked for one with a good training program. She knows now that thorough training is critical to her success. The recent graduate of Fullerton's Troy High School started work

at Disneyland this month, working in food-service and crowd control. She plans to go to college in a year.

"I didn't really know it, but I didn't have any kind of self-esteem before I did the testing," DiAnna said. "It helped me realize there are a lot of things I can do."

"I was nervous, but it was sort of fun."

Maria said DiAnna was afraid "they'd find out she was stupid." Instead, they found out DiAnna had higher abilities in several areas than Foust, a Ph.D.. She participated in the teen seminar and learned how to apply the knowledge she had gained.

"It helped me make sense of why I do things the way I do them," DiAnna said.

For instance, she learns well through listening, but not reading. That's why she did her best in classes where the teachers were good lecturers. She also learns things slowly, over time; it's her way of taking in information, not a streak of laziness or a learning disability.

"She's also very imaginative and sometimes it takes her over," Maria said. "Knowing this will help her tap into it but not let it get the best of her. She has a better chance to succeed now because she understands what it's going to take for her."

For information about The Highlands Program call:

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