

.Education and Training

Do You Measure Up?

By Lisa Trudel

If you are a mature student participating in a continuing education program, you probably have been measured in terms of study skills, written tests, computer literacy and English communication levels. If you are a job seeker over the age of 45, you probably have been measured in terms of your resume and cover letter, your presentation and interview skills, and, depending on your area of expertise, your actual job performance and ability level.

Almost everywhere in society, you encounter measurement. It is connected to a wide range of areas including speed, size, distance, temperature, intelligence, and aptitude. From the moment a baby is born in Canada, time, weight and length is measured. There is no getting away from the constant question of: do you measure up?

So what can you do if you suffer from performance anxiety but have to be measured or assessed in order to find employment? How do you cope with constantly having to prove yourself to employers?

How does a job seeker over the age of 45 learn to work smarter not harder, in the middle of being judged and assessed against younger and less experienced workers?

The starting place is to understand and accept that there can be a positive result in assessment or measurement, despite the bias and drawbacks of many standardized testing tools. Employers use assessments because a quick benchmark or set of criteria is needed to help confirm a candidate's ability and suitability for a job. Job seekers, especially those over the age of 45, can use assessments to benchmark their skill level in order to be screened in, not screened out, during the interview process.

Mature-aged job seekers can be employees who maintain quality and perform with adaptability and flexibility. After all, it is the person over the age of 45 who worked in the pre-Internet world so has already adapted to an abundance of technological changes in the workplace.

But it is not easy.

According to Biljana Rehak, Computer Support Specialist with the Office Workers Career Centre, computer testing anxiety is a common part of what she sees almost every day with the clients she assists. She states, “Computer testing can almost guarantee a headache or even a crying spell for some people. I have seen clients shake uncontrollably with anxiety but I have also seen clients use their fear to keep themselves under control. Sometimes it is only the terminology that frightens people. Many testing programs use a different language from what people are used to, so it is the vocabulary difference that gets people nervous. Once they learn the new terminology, usually by having it explained orally, they take the tests a little more calmly.”

Rehak supervises a self-directed computer lab to help experienced office workers develop and upgrade computer skills in a wide-range of programs including MS Office, Accounting, and Web Design. She also coordinates computer and clerical skills evaluations and detailed reports for referring employment counsellors from local Career Assessment Centres and community partners to provide benchmarks in the development of appropriate educational and career planning decisions.

“Measuring computer skills is crucial for our clients, because they will be measured again by employers” continues Rehak. “Many clients over the age of 45 are nervous about computer testing but they are often very motivated to achieve, and they understand that short-term pain can equal long-term gain. So despite their uneasiness, they jump in and complete their computer testing and then start to learn or relearn new computer programs.”

This reconfirms that no matter what your age, you don’t stop learning when you grow older; you grow older when you stop learning. Learning is widely recognized as an important factor in keeping a person’s mind active and agile. According to a 2003 research paper titled “*Informal Learning of Seniors in Canadian Society*” by M. Fisher, increasing numbers of older adults are enrolling in various forms of continuing education in Canada.

Yet age-related memory decline can affect the learning and retention of new information for older adults. For many mature job seekers, computer learning requires more time and repetition, multi-tasking can become more difficult, forgetfulness can become more

common, and the ability to maintain concentration can weaken. These cognitive challenges can cause frustration and can deter some mature job seekers from participating in new learning activities.

Solutions include understanding that no one is ever too old to learn and pursue new goals. If you are a job seeker over the age of 45, it is also important to double-check how you perceive yourself because abilities have a significant impact on your willingness to pursue learning. If you are worried about measuring up, assessments in all areas of employment preparation are essential to review in order to know where and how you can direct your career.

For example, image assessment to explore presentation styles for employability, marketplace assessment to review the labour market and occupational trends in order to discover if your skills match the demands of employers, values assessment to create a specific sector focus, learning styles assessment to examine educational decisions, interview assessment to identify self-sabotage, and career interest assessments in order to explore suitable work environments and discover your strengths and appreciate differences.

Whether it is personal style, character traits, leadership skills, team compatibility, self-worth or computer skills, measurements and assessments in the world of employment encourages the possibility of:

- Accepting responsibility for your career planning**
- Being objective when selecting employers**
- Knowing your inner resources and using a positive approach**
- Being realistic about the job market**
- Recognizing the value of sustainable employment**
- Seizing control of your career to create a work/life balance**

Most of all it is important to understand that career assessments can help to alleviate testing anxiety. Use the tactics that Biljana Rehak has seen clients use in the computer lab at the Office Workers Career Centre such as using apprehension and stress to your advantage. Instead of heading for the exit door, or reacting to stress by dreading, complaining or worrying, use your stress in a positive way. Take an active approach by practicing your skills in advance of approaching an employer, reviewing your attitude before participating in an assessment and studying in advance of taking a test.

Another method to calm performance anxiety is to reframe what you are thinking and turn negative self-doubt into positive self-talk. Become your own best friend and try to change self-defeating thoughts about assessments, tests, and measurements into powerful thoughts about moving toward your goals.

Proving yourself to employers over and over again will continue, so start to work smarter, not harder by changing your anxiety level around assessments. No matter what your age, you can measure up in order to find career success.

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