



Most people can tell you their height and weight, the value and square footage of their house, the amount of gas their car can hold, their blood pressure and cholesterol levels, even their IQ. But what about human potential? Is there really a test to determine what's possible?

BY MARGARET WINCHELL MILLER

Thousands of aptitude tests and personality assessments are available on the Web and in print, and you've probably taken one without even knowing it. The well-known Scholastic Aptitude Test, or SAT, is actually a modified version of an IQ test developed in the early 1900s by French psychologists. Like your IQ, which compares your intelligence quotient with the intelligence of others, your SAT score reflects your knowledge base compared with the knowledge of your peers. Knowing whether we have a genius-level IQ is fun cocktail party trivia, but isn't it more useful to understand why we behave as we do, what we're naturally good at, and which jobs will bring us the most satisfaction?

Personality assessments and behavioral instruments like the popular Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI®), the Birkman Method, and others were created by organizational and industrial psychologists to help employers understand behavior and the way people view the behavior of others. Exploring values, needs, motivations, and reactions toward others can help us—and those we work with—understand us more fully, which can lead to a more productive workplace. Questions are simply phrased and can be answered with yes or no (such as “You are almost never late for



your appointments”) or true or false (“Most people lie sometimes”). The Web features hundreds of tests based on these principles, and many people enjoy taking them. But for the most reliable results, Birkman, Predictive Index, MBTI®, and other copyrighted tests should be taken under the supervision of a certified coach or counselor who can interpret and explain the results.

Scott Watson, a regional sales and operations manager with a national company based in Georgia, worked with career and life coach Alan Allard ([alanallard.com](http://alanallard.com)) to learn more about his leadership abilities using the Predictive Index, an assessment tool that provides a guide to how an individual will behave in the workplace. Last year, Watson was promoted from branch manager, a position he'd held for 12 years, and he wanted to understand his behaviors in order to align his efforts to lead a regional team. “Taking the test provided me with insight into behavioral patterns that I could leverage,” he says, “and provided important information in areas that I might not have considered potential blind spots.”

Allard, a former psychotherapist who regularly uses personality assessment to meet his clients' needs, from hiring and selection to employee development and con-

PERSONALITY ASSESSMENTS  
MAY HELP YOU FIND YOUR NICHE

flict resolution, finds the Predictive Index to be a popular assessment tool because “it’s easy and quick to take—10 minutes—and it gives me and my clients tons of information about their strengths and how they can shine at work and in life.”

## Determining Your Inherent Skills and Aptitudes

At age 18, Audrey had applied to colleges and was starting to hear back and make decisions about her future. “I’d listed ‘undecided’ for my major at all of the schools that I applied to except for California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, because it requires applicants to declare their major prior to admission,” she says. “I hadn’t been sure of what I wanted to do after college or what I wanted to study, so without much thought, I chose child development. After hearing about aptitude testing, my parents decided that it would be a good thing to explore.”

During the testing, Audrey began to realize she enjoyed the math and spatial visualization problems. “I seemed to perform well on them, and my results reflected that as well,” she says. “When I heard I had high scores in math, I was surprised. Since many students had outperformed me in math at school, I hadn’t really thought of it as a career path. But after learning my aptitude test results and the idea of majoring in math was proposed, it suddenly became a perfect option.”

Audrey decided to attend Cal Poly, and by her second quarter she had changed her major from child development to math. She intends to get her bachelor’s degree in mathematics and then a master’s in computer science.

Like many high school seniors, Audrey was tested at the Johnson O’Connor Research Foundation ([jocrf.org](http://jocrf.org)), one of the most recognized names in aptitude testing. Named for the man who developed a battery of innovative tests in 1922, the foundation now has testing centers in 11 U.S. cities and has helped hundreds of

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thousands of people better understand their innate skills and given them ideas for putting them to use. The tests are designed to assess dozens of aptitudes, from number memory and fine motor skills to creativity and the ability to learn a foreign language.

Certain that every human being was hardwired with one or more natural aptitudes, O’Connor created tests that would measure every conceivable skill. A few require pencil and paper, but the majority feel more like play than work, as they involve assembling puzzles, looking at drawings, and listening to music. Best of all, no one fails. “People leave feeling good about themselves,” says Houston director Richard Hoffman, “and they’re often surprised at how high they score in areas they didn’t consider strengths.”

## It’s Never Too Late

Aptitude testing can also be valuable for adults who find themselves frustrated with their career choice. Robert Kipp, a writer living in New Hampshire, took an aptitude test when he was 30 and found the results helpful in unexpected ways. “They gave me confidence that I could excel at certain things, and showed me which professions I should avoid.” Kipp was surprised when the testers told him that although he could be a successful writer, he probably should work for someone else, because he lacked the focus and discipline to succeed alone or in isolated circumstances. “It was true,” he admits, “I wasn’t doing a very good job on my own. But because I was determined to be my own boss, I

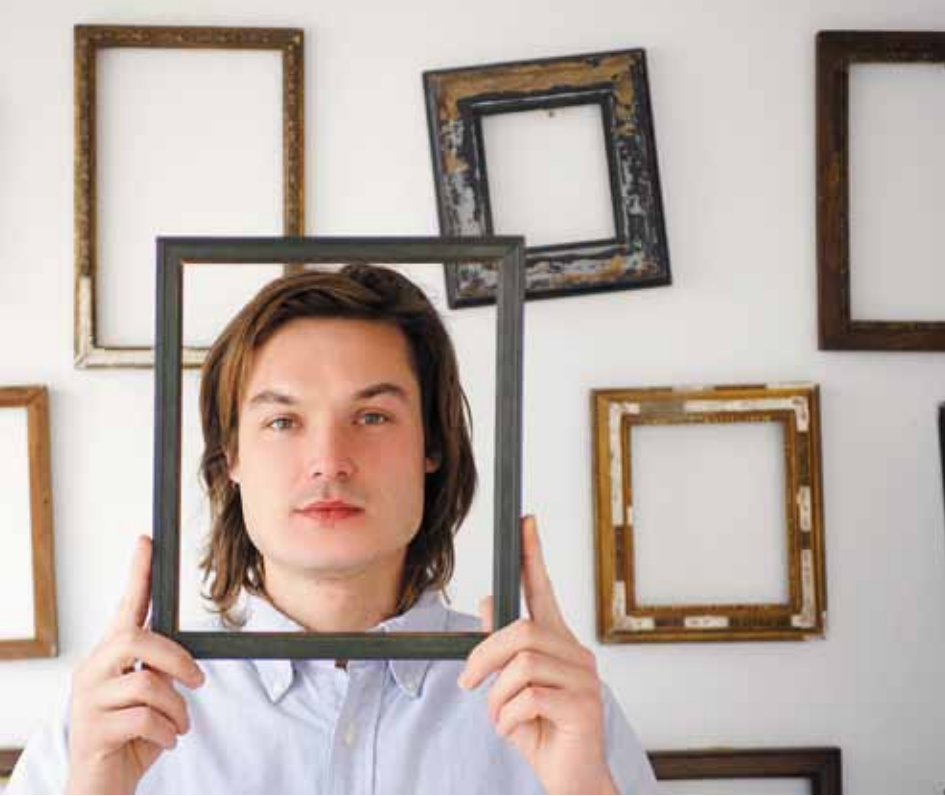
developed the discipline to work alone, delegate to others if necessary, meet deadlines, and make a living doing things my way. Thirty years later, I’m still successfully self-employed.”

Starting early can help, too. Sheri Smith, a former corporate consultant who now works with high school students in Boulder, Colorado, was inspired to repackage assessment tests for high school students because she wanted to make a large-scale impact during a period when teens are making critical life choices. High school is the ideal time for introspection, she says. It’s a time to begin designing a life that will work for you.

Smith found that her years of experience in the workplace were an asset when she began coaching teenagers. “From working with executives, I recognized that certain soft skills are essential for certain jobs,” she says. “These skills seem to be better predictors of success than grades are and, in some cases, even than experience. Many executives get stuck because they haven’t developed a key skill (communication is a common one) and they can’t move to the next level.”

Smith’s new company integrates several cutting-edge assessment technologies with a new proprietary technology that she is co-creating with students to give a multi-dimensional report on many aspects of each student—behavior, communication style, thinking style, values, learning style, and native genius.

“Most of the students I work with feel they have to change themselves in order to succeed,” says Smith. “Our company says the opposite: Figure out



who you are, and then find a college and career that work for you.”

Smith envisions a world in which each person knows his or her “native genius” and purpose in life and finds fulfilling work doing just that. “That’s a world I want to live in,” she says.

### Think Outside the Box

Not everyone is cut out for the traditional educational path, either. Some people learn at an early age what they’re good at, and nothing can stop them. Luke Abell was only six years old when he started his first business: buying school supplies at the school store and reselling them to classmates for a profit. At age eight, he was selling candy at the neighborhood pool and subcontracting friends to work when he couldn’t be there himself. By 13, he was the CEO of his own website development business. The company was so profitable that he hired his brother to manage his finances.

Despite being quarterback of his high school football team, Abell wanted nothing more than to be at home, coding, designing, and building

websites. So his parents weren’t surprised when he told them that instead of attending high school, he wanted to take classes at the local community college so he could spend more time on his business.

As part of what his dad calls “the discovery process,” Abell took an aptitude test. When they reviewed the results, everything supported his choice to follow his instincts. “‘Enterprising’ was the word the counselor used,” recalls Abell’s dad. “Sales was one of his strengths. He worked better alone than in a group. His creativity was off the chart.”

Abell’s parents admit that allowing him to drop out of high school was difficult, but they credit the aptitude test results with affirming his inherent ability as an entrepreneur. Now 17, Abell devotes 100 percent of his time to his development and consulting business, which netted \$50,000 in the first six months. “Studying ancient history didn’t make sense to me,” Abell says. “What excites me is solving problems, proving my abilities.” (For more about Abell’s company, watch a video at [abelltech.com](http://abelltech.com).) 📺

**Margaret Miller** was tested at Johnson O’Connor Research Foundation in 1970, and scored high in “ideaphoria,” indicating an immeasurable flow of ideas. Careers suitable for individuals with this aptitude include teaching and journalism. Miller is a writer and editor at the LBJ Presidential Library and an English professor at Austin Community College.

## READY FOR AN UPGRADE?

We may be able to trade in our smartphone for the newest version, but when it comes to self-improvement, we’re on our own. Here are some easy ways to “upgrade your operating system.”

### TRAIN YOUR BRAIN

Log in at [lumosity.com](http://lumosity.com) to watch your Brain Performance Index grow as you play simple games scientifically designed to improve your memory, attention span, and cognitive skills. Download the app to play on the go.

### EXPAND YOUR LEXICON

Experts agree that a strong vocabulary is an advantage in the workplace, but it’s a bonus no one is born with. You can improve your vocabulary while helping the hungry on [freerice.com](http://freerice.com). There’s no cost, and each time you define a word correctly, 10 grains of rice are donated to the non-profit World Food Programme.

### EVALUATE YOUR STRENGTHS

Oprah was so impressed with the Johnson O’Connor Research Foundation that she asked the center to adapt five aptitude tests so they could be taken at home. You’ll find them at [oprah.com/money/Aptitude-Tests-Career-Assessment](http://oprah.com/money/Aptitude-Tests-Career-Assessment). Print them, follow the instructions, and find out what the results mean in just a few minutes. Who knows? A new career opportunity might be waiting for you around the corner!