



# WORK Preference MATCH

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## Administrator's Guide

This brief guide was written to provide additional information for professionals using the separate assessment titled *Work Preference Match (WPM)*. *WPM* is designed to help career decision makers identify priorities and evaluate career or job choices based on those priorities.

*WPM* is not a test; it is a structured self-exploration and career exploration tool designed to assist in the career decision-making process. *WPM* contains five sections (A–E) in which the individual gathers and prioritizes information about him- or herself and his/her preferences in regard to work. In the remaining two sections (F–G), the individual identifies careers of interest and relates his/her preferences to those career choices. The *WPM* provides a structured method for career exploration that leads the individual to identify whether his/her chosen careers are compatible with his/her preferences.

The *WPM* is intended to stimulate discussion between the career decision maker and the professional working with him/her on specific career choices and the relative advantages and disadvantages of each. *WPM* provides a structured method for identifying potential conflicts, enables active planning, and facilitates an informed career choice.

### Congruence Between Self and Work

According to Holland's theory of vocational choices (1997), individuals are continually seeking ways to find congruence between themselves and their work. His theory includes the tenet, "People search for environments that will let them exercise their skills and abilities, express their attitudes and values, and take on agreeable problems and roles" (p. 4). Often this is not done consciously—an individual may leave a job or look for "a better one" without verbalizing or fully comprehending what need was unmet by that job or the reason for his/her dissatisfaction.

For people to be truly happy in their work, it must leverage their strengths and match their values. According to Seligman (2002), to maximize work satisfaction, individuals need to use their primary strengths (i.e., values) on the job on a daily basis. Although he advocates making changes within existing employment, there are also clear inferences for choosing a career.

### Career Decision Making

Career decision making is a complex process in which an individual is challenged to reach an optimal choice given a myriad of options. The best decision is one that takes into account the individual's preferences with respect to the various attributes of the careers under consideration and achieves the career decision maker's goals (Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996).

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What makes career decisions unique is that the number of alternatives is vast and there is extensive information available on each alternative. Individuals have an infinite number of careers, career specializations, education and training alternatives, and employers to consider. There are also many factors associated with each of the choices (e.g., length of training, type of work tasks, etc.) that must be weighed or evaluated as part of the decision-making process. Finally, there is uncertainty. There are no guarantees that particular opportunities (e.g., school programs, jobs with particular employers, etc.) will be available to the individual. In addition, an individual's needs and preferences can change over time and the world of work is evolving constantly.

No longer can an individual expect to prepare for a career, gain employment, and remain with the same employer throughout his/her work life. People now have many points at which career decisions must be made or remade—they must continually reinvent themselves and their careers (Campbell, 2004). Associated with each of these decision points are the innumerable alternatives that must be considered to arrive at an optimal career decision. The needs of a recent high school or college graduate seeking his/her first job are significantly different from those of a parent re-entering the workforce after raising children or those of a retiree seeking a part-time job to supplement retirement income. According to Frasier (n.d.), “intrinsic work aspects and impact on lifestyle require emphasis” in career decision making (p. 14). The work role, although very important, is one of many roles an individual plays. Finding a balance and negotiating the demands of work and personal life may pose significant challenges (Campbell, 2004).

At each stage and for each individual, there is a different set of considerations and satisfactory occupational alternatives. To be effective in making career decisions at any stage, individuals must have information about themselves, the steps in the career decision-making process, various occupation options, and ways to obtain needed information (Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996). In addition, they must successfully resolve internal conflicts regarding their career choice(s). Internal conflicts can arise when an individual has a number of equally attractive career alternatives, has identified important but incompatible preferences, or has identified an aspect of a preferred career alternative that is undesirable, or when his or her abilities are either insufficient or in excess or those required in a preferred career alternative (Gati, Krausz, & Osipow, 1996).

A way to make sense of the information regarding careers and personal preferences is needed. Gati (1986) advocates the need for “a systematic search procedure that can identify a small subset of occupational alternatives” and allow the career decision maker the opportunity to explore these alternatives in depth by collecting detailed occupational information (p. 408).

### **Overview of Work Preference Match**

*WPM* is a structured, systematic procedure for an individual in the career decision-making process to identify his or her work preferences and needs, to gather information from career resources, and to make informed decisions about career paths. It was developed and refined through use in a number of career assessment settings for more than a decade.

The term *work preferences* is used as an all-encompassing term. It includes interests, temperaments, and values, as well as practical considerations such as access to daycare or transportation. Most people have unstated preferences about work, whether it is working a particular schedule or a belief in the values of the company they work for. Many individuals have specific needs that must be addressed by their job or employer choice, such as an accessible worksite for a wheelchair user or an environment free from fumes for an individual with asthma. *WPM* information is unique to the career decision maker to ensure that all relevant aspects are considered in career decision making, so the process can be targeted and effective.

### **Discrepancy Analysis**

*WPM* utilizes a discrepancy analysis model that mirrors the decision-making process vocational evaluators use to generate viable employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. However, this

process can be used by career counselors who work with nondisabled clients as well. Discrepancy analysis is a side-by-side comparison of individual preferences and needs to the profile of a desired career or job. It is an effective way for individuals to see where there are matches and where there are not. The use of discrepancy analysis has been included as part of a new paradigm for vocational evaluation and career assessment in the 2004 30th Institute on Rehabilitation Issues (U.S. Department of Education Rehabilitation Services Administration, n.d.).

By using discrepancy analysis, individuals begin to make the connection among their skills, interests, values, desires, and needs and the requirements of the jobs or careers in which they are interested. If discrepancies are identified, individuals can then devise a plan to resolve them. In cases where individuals discover major discrepancies, they may decide their targeted occupation is not feasible and begin to look to other options. A professional telling an individual that a particular career is not a good choice is far less effective than having the individual make that determination him- or herself. For individuals considering a number of career options, the discrepancy analysis chart can serve as a pro and con list, facilitating an informed career choice.

## Target Population and Audience

*WPM* is designed for all career decision makers but is particularly helpful for people who have to change jobs or careers due to the onset of a disability or a change in life circumstances. *WPM* has proven to be helpful to a variety of individuals who are in the process of making life decisions about their long-term career paths or more immediate job placement decisions. It has been used by members of many of the following groups and could be helpful for others.

- Individuals with disabilities
- Injured workers
- Welfare-to-work participants/social service recipients
- Displaced workers
- Individuals served by outplacement agencies
- Workforce development programs
- Veterans
- Women in career re-entry following raising a family
- Transitioning youth
- Ex-offenders
- Other individuals who may have barriers to employment

*WPM* can also be used by high school students or college students who are undecided about career paths or majors.

The reading level of *WPM* is 8th grade. It has been used successfully with individuals with poorer reading skills (5th to 6th grade) with clarification of terminology and assistance in completing the research required in Section G. For individuals with lower reading levels, using the career videos on America's Career Information Network ([www.acinet.org/acinet/videos.asp](http://www.acinet.org/acinet/videos.asp)) can be of particular benefit in the exploration process. The videos may be helpful for other career decision makers in addition to those with low reading levels, as they assist in identifying the "soft" aspects of career choices, such as what a typical day may be like or aspects of the work environment not previously considered (Gati & Asher, 2001).

*WPM* can be administered without special training or qualifications by

- Career counselors
- Guidance counselors
- Rehabilitation counselors
- Career assessment specialists
- Vocational evaluators
- Life coaches
- Human service agency workers
- Case workers
- Job placement specialists
- Teachers

*WPM* can also be used independently by individuals who are interested in exploring career options without input or guidance from a professional.

## Suggestions for Administration

The following information reviews the content of each section of *Work Preference Match* and offers tips for success.

### **Section A: Identify Your Preferences**

This section contains more than 125 preference statements that the individual will identify as either important or unimportant. These statements were originally developed around the 25 temperament and work environment factors in the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* but were greatly expanded based on the author's experience in working with individuals in a career exploration and planning process and field review by other practitioners. In addition to temperaments and environmental considerations, the list includes work tasks, types of supervision, work schedules, compensation and incentives, interpersonal factors, and work culture. The list is designed to stimulate thought about what is important to the individual in a career.

#### **Tips for Success**

- It is particularly important for this section that the individual identify only the preferences that they feel strongly about. They are likely to have a very difficult time prioritizing their preferences in Section B if they have marked each preference statement. When providing initial instruction, emphasize the need for being selective and marking only the statements that they have a strong "gut response" to—the ones that *must* or *must not* be included in any job they would consider.
- If preferences are included such as "work part-time only" or earning certain wages, individuals will need to elaborate more specifically on their expectations in the blank spaces provided.

### **Section B: Prioritize**

In this section, the individual reviews the statements he/she has marked in Section A, prioritizes them, and records them in list form.

#### **Tips for Success**

- It is particularly important for Section B that the individual record the preference statement in the proper context, either positive or negative. If the individual has a negative statement, it will require rephrasing (e.g., "not work alone" or "not work under pressure or deadlines").
- Occasionally individuals will list the general section heading as their priority. For example, they may list "Tasks" as their first priority because they have marked the most statements in that section. Individuals will be unable to do the matching (i.e., discrepancy analysis) in Section G using the general section headings. Instead, they should choose one individual preference statement, e.g., "continually learn new things" rather than "Tasks" as their priority.
- Individuals may start with the "Tasks" section and find five preferences that are important to them fairly quickly, list those, and stop there. The administrator should ensure that the priorities listing includes items from several content areas and is a true prioritization of the individual's preferences.
- For some individuals, an intermediate step between Steps A ("Identify Your Preferences") and B ("Prioritize") may be required. If individuals have marked a number of statements or for any reason have difficulty making choices, it can sometimes be helpful for them to list their preference statements on another piece of paper before prioritizing them. A separate list will remove extraneous statements from their consideration, and sometimes the act of writing the preference statement down will help the individual determine the strength of the preference.
- Index cards with a different preference statement written on each could also be used. The individual would then place them in priority order, eliminating those of lesser importance.

## ***Section C: Expand Your List***

This section requires individuals to thoughtfully consider their personal situations and expand upon their lists in Section B. Individuals should think about a disability or medical condition, if present, and the related needs or restrictions. They should identify as specifically as possible what the work-related constraint would be as a result. Family considerations, transportation, legal considerations, and other personal preferences should be considered in the same way.

### **Tips for Success**

- It is particularly important that individuals be as specific as possible and record the statement in work-relevant terms. This will enable them to use the statement more effectively when performing the matching (i.e., discrepancy analysis) in Section G. For example, a statement such as “avoid standing for more than one hour at a time, 3 hours per day maximum” is more helpful than the general statement “foot problem.” “Daytime hours beginning no earlier than 7 a.m. and ending no later than 6 p.m., within a 20 mile radius of my home” is more helpful than “child care considerations.”
- Individuals may need assistance in putting their personal preferences in work-relevant terms and sometimes require assistance in identifying them in the first place. If the administrator is aware of the individual's personal considerations, he/she can assist individuals in generating and recording these if they are unable to craft them on their own.
- Some individuals may require assistance in transferring the information from Sections C and B to the proper locations on the chart.

## ***Section D: Think About Education/Training***

This section requires individuals to thoughtfully consider the duration and type of education or training they are interested in or willing to undertake, as well as the practical consideration of their income needs while preparing for a new career.

### **Tips for Success**

- It is particularly important that there is not a conflict between the type of training individuals list and the duration of training they are willing to consider. For example, if an individual states that he/she is willing to consider one year or less of training, he/she should not have marked “Associate's degree” or “Apprenticeship program” under “Education/Training Type,” as it exceeds the amount of time he/she is willing to spend in preparation for a new job or career.
- Some individuals may require assistance in transferring the information from Section D to the appropriate section of the chart.

## ***Section E: Think About Your Salary***

In this section, individuals think about what salary they need or desire. They will compare this with the average salary of the jobs they are interested in. Encourage people to be realistic.

## ***Section F: What Jobs/Careers Are You Considering?***

In this section, individuals list the top five careers that they are considering. They do not have to list them in any particular order.

### **Tips for Success**

- If the WPM is used as part of a larger career assessment/exploration process, interest assessments, such as *Self-Directed Search* or the *Strong Interest Inventory*, should be administered first. This will assist individuals by generating options to explore.

- For recent college graduates, listings of careers by college major can be of benefit in generating career ideas. This is also beneficial for more-experienced individuals with degrees/work history in a particular content area looking to utilize their transferable skills in related careers. Sites on the Internet, such as Career Services of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington's "What Can I Do With A Major In..." ([www.uncwil.edu/stuaff/career/majors/](http://www.uncwil.edu/stuaff/career/majors/)) provides a listing of careers related to particular majors.

### **Section G: Match Your Interests with Your Preferences**

In this section, individuals use occupational information resources to relate work preferences to desired jobs or careers.

#### **Tips for Success**

- The chart is purposely unstructured. Individuals can take notes in the squares or simply indicate whether or not there is a match in a certain preference area. Some individuals may want more explicit guidance with this part. Although it is important for an individual to note whether there is a discrepancy, how they do it is much less important than that they do it. Using a "+" or "-", "yes" or "no," or "agree" or "disagree" are easy ways to record the match or discrepancy.
- Sometimes individuals list a number of employer-specific preferences such as "receive health insurance and other benefits" or "work where skills/abilities are valued." These preferences usually cannot be validated using general career exploration resources such as the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. If an individual is just starting his/her career exploration, it may be beneficial for him/her to remove the employer-specific considerations from the chart, and instead, list preferences for which they can more easily find information. For individuals farther along in their career development, they may wish to do informational interviewing with local employers to gather that type of employer-specific information. For some individuals, a two-step process—first exploring general interests, then expanding on top choices using informational interviewing—can be beneficial.
- "Job Outlook" includes availability as well as the projected growth rate for the job. It is particularly important in rural areas or other geographic areas in which a broad range of employment opportunities is not available. State or local informational resources will need to be utilized to determine local job availability. Individuals can record the prevalence of openings in their locale as well as whether the occupation they are exploring is a growth occupation or is declining.
- Occasionally, individuals will require assistance in understanding what *qualifications* means in the column "Educational/Professional Qualifications." In addition to education or training, some jobs require licensing, professional certification, special qualifications, or credentials such as being able to obtain a security clearance. Individuals should list these and other similar career requirements in this column.
- Individuals can refer to the final section on how to use the *Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH)* to find the information they need about careers they are interested in.

### **Career Planning Using Work Preference Match**

*WPM* concludes with the completion of the chart, which shows career and preference matches and discrepancies. It does not include a structured section on planning or "what to do next."

By completing *WPM*, individuals have participated in a self-discovery process. They will have gathered information about themselves and their careers of interest; (hopefully) learned something new; and clearly identified the discrepancies, if any, between their preferences and their career choices. Career targets may become immediately apparent after the chart is completed. If not immediately apparent, the individual may have narrowed the range of choices. The individual may then wish to gather more

information through informational interviewing or job shadowing or participate in career counseling to assist with his/her decision making or to come to a conclusive choice.

Career counseling can assist the individual in a number of ways. First, a professional can aid the individual in determining the relative probability of actualization (i.e., achieving the desired choice) or in finding ways to increase the prospect of actualization. A professional may also be able to counsel the individual on the future ramifications of choices made at the present time. Simultaneous pursuit of two paths, if feasible, may also be explored. For individuals who lack confidence in their choices, a counselor can help them locate the source of their lack of confidence and aid in confirming their decisions or reaching different ones in which they will feel more confident (Gati, 2001). Counselors may also assist individuals in finding ways to address a strongly desired preference through avocational pursuits while taking their career path in another direction. Compromises or trade-offs of one choice versus another choice can be discussed in relation to the career decision maker's preferences.

In cases where discrepancies are identified, individuals can develop a plan to resolve them. The assistance of a professional can be particularly effective in assisting the individual in identifying internal conflicts or external conflicts (i.e., differing views of a significant other) (Gati & Krausz, 1996). For example, an individual who is self-supporting and initially states an interest in spending two years or less in training/education for employment has an internal conflict with pursuing a bachelor's degree in a chosen field of engineering. He/she may try to resolve this conflict by exploring grants/loans, a higher paying part-time job, alternative housing arrangements, or other cost-cutting alternatives to enable him- or herself to spend a longer time in pursuing the needed education.

## Observations from *Work Preference Match*

As with any assessment tool, there is the opportunity to make a number of observations. If used in the context of a vocational evaluation or career assessment process, some of the relevant observations may include the following:

- Individuals can spend several hours completing this tool or spend less than 15 minutes—it says a lot about their commitment to making a good career choice.
- Sometimes individuals will have difficulty identifying personal considerations when required to expand their lists in Section C. If, through interview or review of records, there are numerous factors for an individual to consider, this may reflect an overall lack of awareness of their personal situation, disability, or health concerns. This may have an impact on employment as the individual may not seek needed accommodations or they may seek employment for which they are not able to fully meet the demands.
- Occasionally, individuals will not identify discrepancies where they are clearly present. They instead stand up for their own views about their career choices in defiance of the objective career information (Campbell, 2004). "The emotional involvement in the career decision-making process augments these cognitive biases" (Gati, 1986). In these situations, ongoing career or personal counseling may be needed.
- Equally problematic is when an individual identifies significant discrepancies with all of his/her chosen careers (e.g., an interest in only law enforcement/security work with a history of criminal convictions) and does not wish to explore other career options that would be feasible given his/her objective constraints. Again, ongoing career or personal counseling may be needed.
- Because *WPM* involves following detailed written instructions, this may serve as an opportunity to assess those abilities or as an opportunity to determine the individual's willingness to seek clarification.

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## About the Author

Lynn Dowd is a career assessment specialist in private practice. Through her company, Careerworks, she provides career assessment and planning services to individuals with disabilities. Ms. Dowd is a Certified Vocational Evaluator with more than 20 years of experience in the field. She also teaches distance learning classes in career assessment for The George Washington University's Collaborative Vocational Evaluation Training Program where she previously achieved both her Master's and her Education Specialist degrees. Ms. Dowd served as President of the International Vocational Evaluation and Career Assessment Professionals Association, coauthored the organization's Blueprint for the Future, and is very active in chapter activity on a local level. Ms. Dowd has authored numerous papers in her field and has provided training at state, regional, and national conferences.

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