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## What Are Your Natural Talents and Abilities?

*Knowing what you do best--what your strongest natural talents and abilities are--and then finding the work that best fits those talents are fundamental to finding success and fulfillment*

***By Ann Whitaker  
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In this series, we have been taking a look at how you can create a career that brings you greater success and satisfaction. Previously, I described how to create a Personal Vision<sup>1</sup> for your career and the importance of considering the Eight Critical Success Factors (*See TCL, Volume 2 Number 1, Number 2, and Number 3*). We examined the first of these success factors in the last article--your Stage of Adult Development. In this segment we will consider the second factor--Your Natural Talents and Abilities.

### **Each Person Is Born With A Unique Set Of Talents**

Every person is born with a unique set of talents that gives them a special ability to perform certain kinds of tasks easily and yet also make other tasks seem laborious. Knowing what you do best--what your strongest natural talents and abilities are and how you are "hard-wired"--and then finding the work that best

fits those talents are fundamental to finding success and fulfillment. This is the basic groundwork of your Personal Vision, and is the information you need at each of your career Turning Points as you start to decide what you will do with your life.

### **Do You Know What Your Hard-Wired Talents And Abilities Are?**

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said it well: “The important thing in life is to have a great aim and to possess the aptitude and the perseverance to attain it.” Do you know what your hard-wired talents and abilities are? I hear many of you saying: Of course I do! Peter Drucker, whom *Fortune* magazine described as the most prescient business trend spotter of our time, said, “Most people think they know what they are good at. They are usually wrong.” I have found this to be absolutely true, at least for myself and the people I have coached over the years.

It’s not our fault. This is not something that we learn in school, and it is certainly not something that we discover in the work place. It is very hard to know what your abilities are without an objective assessment tool (we’ll talk more about that later). Furthermore, the focus in our careers is typically on education, skill-building, and training. While important, they are not your innate abilities or aptitudes. Often people confuse the concept of abilities with skills and/or intelligence but they are not the same. Intelligent, highly-motivated people can accomplish many things for which they have little or no natural talent, but they may not be happy or satisfied doing it. I have known many lawyers who have become successful in their practices through education, training and experience and yet are still very dissatisfied with their careers. The missing piece of the puzzle for them was in the abilities area; discovering what their natural abilities were gave them invaluable insight into what was and wasn’t working for them. Some realized they were in roles that did not allow them to use their strong talents, which was the root of their frustration and boredom. Others learned that they were frustrated and burned-out because their jobs loaded heavily on abilities they did not have. The further you get from fully expressing your talents and abilities, the less likely it is that you will enjoy your day at work.

### **It Is Important To Know How Your Abilities Combine And Work Together To Influence What You Are Naturally Gifted To Do**

So what are natural abilities? They are the inborn talents that are always accessible for you to use, any time and any place. By the time you are 14 or 15 years old, your natural abilities have stabilized and, barring any serious disease or physical injury that affects your brain, they will remain with you, unchanging,

for your entire life. You don't have to practice or even use them regularly to maintain them.

They often drive you into certain kinds of activities. For some people, it's a gift for music or design, or a talent for theoretical thought. Other's talents are more generalized, such as managing people, or abilities that make writing or teaching easy. There are certain abilities that are the most powerful and influential talents: The Driving Abilities. These are particularly important to know about because they influence, or drive you, whether they are high or low. In my experience working with lawyers, I have seen many people trace their dissatisfaction at work to having one or more strong Driving Abilities of which they were not aware and for which they had no outlet. It is also important to know how your abilities combine and work together to influence what you are naturally gifted to do.

### **Classification: One Of The Driving Abilities**

Let's look at one of the Driving Abilities--Classification. This ability employs your right brain to solve problems. Also called inductive reasoning, this type of problem solving consists of your right brain taking unrelated and related facts, observations, and information and arriving at a theory to connect them and explain them. It's quick, and those with high Classification love to use it--it's fun for them. On the other hand, it also makes it difficult for them to get along easily with those who have other equally valid, but different ways of solving problems.

To give you an example of how abilities affect our lives, let's take a look at Susan, a person with strong Classification ability. Susan is a junior partner at a law firm. She is described by her co-workers as quick and self-assured. Given a problem to solve, she knows the answer before anyone even has a chance to fully explain the issue. She often starts responding to what people say before they can finish their sentence, and she has an irritating habit of being right and knowing she is right. Susan also has little patience with people who are slower than she at seeing the answers. She often feels she is waiting for others to catch up and see something that is completely obvious to her already. Susan is happiest when she is fully engaged by problems coming at her fast and furiously, and is very unhappy when she has nothing new to sink her teeth into. Because she is high in Classification, she doesn't solve problems logically or in a linear fashion; she solves them with the right hemisphere of her brain--the one that doesn't put things into language form. She doesn't necessarily know how she gets to an answer, but just knows what the right answer is. Working with Susan, junior associates might notice that when they hand her a brief that they have spent days on to perfect, she scans it briefly, remarking only that "I would change the order

of the arguments.” Susan is using her strong Classification and is quickly able to spot a problem with almost anything.

Classification demands to be used--more than any other strong ability. If Susan was ever stuck in a menial job that required her to do the same thing over and over, she would be very unhappy. She might even create problems for herself, seemingly just to have the opportunity to make use of this powerful ability. On the other hand, people with other problem solving styles must go through a much more laborious process to get to the answer. Those individuals would not thrive in the same type of fast-paced, rapid-fire problem solving environment that Susan finds so exciting.

### **Performing In A Way That Works With Your Abilities Will Create More Energy And Leverage Your Talents**

Why is it important to know what your abilities are? First, natural abilities affect the ease or difficulty that you experience with certain types of work activities. When a particular task requires a set of abilities that are natural for you, you can perform it in less time, with less effort, and use less energy. On the other hand, when a task requires talents that are not in your make up, you spend more time, put forth more effort, and exert more energy to achieve a similar level of performance. That explains why certain sets of work activities are relatively easy for one person but not another. For Susan, her strong Classification ability does not predict how well she will perform as a lawyer necessarily but it gives her critical information. Of course she needs to know what her other abilities are and how they interact with one another to get a more complete picture. But she now understands why she enjoys and really needs rapid-fire, fast-paced problem solving and, alternatively, feels drained and frustrated by situations that are more mundane and process-driven.

This does not mean that you should only pursue tasks for which you are naturally gifted. There are other personal factors--the other 6 Critical Success Factors we haven't touched on yet--that also cause people to undertake work activities for which they don't have truly natural talent. Your values, goals, family influence, interests, and skills also play an important part. That being said, knowing your talents will help you better manage how you work. There is more than one way to do a job or accomplish a task, and performing in a way that works with your abilities will create more energy and leverage your talents.

Second, you need to know what your abilities are so you can find activity outlets for them. Creating outlets, both on and off the job, can make you feel much better about the work that you do. If Susan was also strong in Idea Productivity--which is a drive to generate a lot of ideas--and she did not get an opportunity to

use that at work, she would need to create ways that she could do so outside of the office or she would feel stifled and frustrated.

Lastly, knowing your talents allows you to communicate your preferences to those with whom you work and live. You are clearer about what is easier and harder for you and you can also appreciate what does and does not come naturally for others. Susan can now understand why she always feels like she is having to wait for others to “catch up” with her and can develop an appreciation for the fact that others arrive at solutions and decisions in a different but equally valid way.

### **Frank Was Dissatisfied And Ready For A Change**

It should be clear by now that knowing your natural abilities allows you to readjust your career so that you can work with rather than against your hard-wiring. For an example of this, let’s visit again with Frank, the lawyer we met in the last article. Remember that at 41, Frank was dissatisfied and ready for a change. A success by all standards, he was not only a senior partner at a major law firm with a great book of business, but for several years he had been managing partner of the firm. He was working most weekends and many nights during the week. He was generally considered an excellent manager, but felt great stress because he did not enjoy his work anymore. It took him away from his family even more than his practice ever had, but he didn’t know what he could do about it. His firm needed him in the managing partner role and his family depended on him to work hard and provide for them. After taking some time to examine what was important to him, Frank remembered that he had enjoyed practicing law for a long time after joining the firm but that for the last few years he hadn’t enjoyed his work at all.

As we saw last time, Frank’s first step in developing a Personal Vision was to understand his Stage of Adult Development and that he was at the Midlife Turning Point. Instead of making a drastic change in his life because he was so unhappy, Frank slowed down and started searching for his own answers to what would make him happy. In the process of seeking new information about himself, Frank ran across some material about abilities assessments. On a whim he signed up and went through a battery of tests. For him, one of the most interesting pieces of objective information he learned was that his pattern of natural abilities was very poorly suited for management. His talent fitted him superbly for law, but management duties went completely against his grain.

I should note that understanding your natural talents does not equate to whether you can or cannot perform any role. Because he is intelligent and highly motivated, Frank performed the role of managing partner extremely well. The

problem was that it fell so far outside his pattern of talents that he had to work twice as hard to achieve a result much less satisfying to him personally.

### **Frank's Practice Group Became More Productive And He Brought In More New Business Than Ever. He Was Also Much Happier**

Even though the role was dissatisfying and made him work against himself, Frank could have continued on as managing partner. His firm certainly wanted him to. But when he realized it was a large part of the reason he was so unhappy with his career, he decided to step down from that role--over the protests of the other senior partners. Frank insisted on the change because he knew objectively he was right. He also set priorities for his time and set limits on the amount of time he dedicated to his work. He stopped working late into the evening and every weekend. He found this was easier to do when he concentrated on the kind of work he loved and for which he was best suited.

At first, Frank's partners were not wild about this change. However, Frank's practice group became more productive over the next several months and he brought in more new business than ever. Also, he was happier and his practice group was happier. The firm found another manager better suited to the role.

Of course, Frank's decisions were more complex and involved more issues than just abilities. Personality, interests, and family of origin all strongly influenced his actions. But getting objective information about how he was hard-wired was a first big step.

Whether you are mid-career like Frank or making a first-time choice about a career, it is critical to be absolutely clear about your natural talents when making a career decision. How do you discover what your natural abilities are? It is practically impossible to do on your own, and requires an objective assessment that will give you a more complete picture about areas of high, low and intermediate abilities. Tests for innate abilities are very different from those given for personality and interests. Those assessments are subjective and based on self-reporting measures. I know of only one objective, carefully validated measurement tool for natural abilities--the Highlands Ability Battery. For more information, see Resources below. The test is available in CD format or online, and you can also arrange to have an individual two-hour feedback session from a specially-trained consultant, which I recommend you do. This assessment can give you critically valuable information about your talents and is the ideal foundation upon which to build your Personal Vision.

Once you have that information, you will be ready to look at the third and fourth Critical Success Factors that form your Personal Vision: your skills and

interests. We will tackle these two important areas next time but for now, check out how you are hard-wired. You may be surprised!

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## **RESOURCES**

### **BOOKS**

1. McDonald, Bob, Ph.D., and Hutcheson, Don, E., *Don't Waste Your Talent: The 8 Critical Steps to Discovering What You Do Best*, The Highlands Company, 2005.

### **ASSESSMENTS**

The Highlands Ability Battery--By means of objective, hands-on work samples, this assessment helps individuals to understand their natural talents and abilities.

This article can be found online at:

<http://atlanta.thecompletelawyer.com/volume2/issue4/article.php?ppaid=231>