

Enhancing Your Career Through Self-Assessment

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by Catherine Marienau, PhD, and Morry Fiddler, PhD

Career development includes various elements, such as capitalizing on preferences, gaining competencies, deepening knowledge, pursuing opportunities, and exercising patience -- all of which lead to experiences that can form a wellspring for advancing careers and professional identity. If we don't learn from these experiences -- and know how to learn from them -- we may find career goals becoming more out of reach than within our grasp, sometimes without even knowing it is happening or having a sense of what to do about it. One challenge is to tap those experiences so that each one can prepare us for other, later experiences that are richer and more meaningful. ¹ A related challenge is to progress from the novice to the expert professional; this progression is marked by being able to turn what we experience, hear, see, and read into service for ourselves and others. ²

Two qualities are hallmarks of an actively developing career: awareness -- of the skills and knowledge deemed necessary by the profession and those that one already possesses and needs to develop; coupled with self-agency -- acting on that awareness to pursue and extract relevant learning, including from one's experiences.

Anchoring these two qualities is self-assessment, involving intentional and critical reflection on our actions and ideas. Self-assessment can be a guide to further action and the ongoing interpretation of the meaning of our experiences. The term "self-assessment" is derived from the Latin "assidere," meaning to "sit beside oneself" -- as if physically positioning oneself to recognize, judge, and justify ideas and actions. Holding such conversations provides the space and time to look deeply at specific situations in order to identify values, assumptions, and beliefs that cause us to interpret what we are doing and why and how we are doing it. As this reflection stimulates our actions, the capacity for self-agency is strengthened.

Outcomes of Self-Assessment

As adult educators in a higher education setting, we work with adults pursuing graduate education to advance their careers in hundreds of different professional realms. In this context, we hear a good deal about the role self-assessment plays in their professional development and how much they value both the process and the results. Many of these insights have been captured in a research effort by Marienau. ³ The relevance for career development becomes evident in their writings and conversations, as reflected in the following findings of Marienau's study.

Among a group of 80 professionals (adult students), nearly two-thirds attribute engagement in self-assessment to becoming more goal-oriented, i.e., establishing, executing, and evaluating their goals.

"I used self-assessment to determine what I saw as realistic goals for myself and work. Once I decided upon these goals, I worked to lessen my shortcomings and to utilize my assets."

More than half of the participants associate assuming greater responsibility for and ownership of their work with their self-assessment efforts.

"As I review my work on a monthly basis, I assess my productivity as to what I might have accomplished or what I could have done better."

These quotes illustrate how folding self-assessment into their repertoire of capabilities enhances the participants' current work practices as well as overall career development. Other outcomes of self-assessment contribute to their growing repertoire. They highlight three workplace capabilities that are improved through ongoing self-assessment: problem-solving, decision-making, and interpersonal communications. For more than 75 percent of the participants, self-assessment has had the greatest impact on their interpersonal skills, which involves the related skills of active listening and giving and receiving constructive feedback. Further, they attribute enhanced self-direction in their work lives in large measure to self-assessment.

Another major benefit of self-assessment is "personal independence," as seen in the abilities to think and act for oneself. Raising the level of awareness of one's sense of competency contributes to both self-confidence and self-acceptance. Professionals report having tied these two qualities to gains in flexibility, particularly with respect to seeing mistakes as a part of learning.

"Self-assessment is gradually giving me the sense that success doesn't mean doing everything perfectly all the time; but rather, that one can grow and improve through one's mistakes."

Acting and thinking independently, along with flexibility, are not only hallmarks of skilled professionals but also contributors to career development itself. Assuming ownership for the pursuit of career opportunities and the tasks to be undertaken and accomplished along the way are also related to another outcome of engaging in self-assessment -- a shift toward an internal frame of reference.

"Since all who judge us are not wise... the inner judge helps us to maintain our direction and self-esteem."

As careers develop, people tend to look more to themselves for standards of performance and seek outside feedback and validation as needed. Building a rich repertoire of these qualities throughout one's career can help to construct the profile of an advanced professional. These qualities, as well as professional skills and knowledge, don't need to unfold and mature in a fixed sequence. Rather, they evolve in response to the goals of the individual and the challenges of life.

Today's professionals work and live amidst a steady stream of interactions, influences, activities of varied and complex experiences. Some experiences are seen for what they can offer, some pass by hardly noticed. Self-assessment, as we've learned from adult students, enhances learning from experience. It also contributes to individuals being more aware of and willing to reflect on their experiences. It creates an awareness of the ways in which each individual learns, and it fosters the willingness to learn from mistakes as well as recognize the bases for success. It fosters dimensions of an independent self, while at the same time strengthening the base for better interpersonal relationships.

These are powerful assets not only for daily work, but also for personal and career development. These assets all augment career and professional development through an activity -- self-assessment -- that is rarely taught or encouraged in educational programs at any level. Indeed, self-assessment is a skill that requires practice and guidance; it should not be taken for granted as a capability that can be used effectively simply on demand or desire.

Learning to Engage in Self-Assessment

Adults have the capacity to engage in constructive and genuine self-assessment; and most, if not all, adults need both practice and coaching in this activity. Essentially, what needs to be practiced and learned is the intentional and critical reflection on actions and ideas.^{4,5} While this article emphasizes work and career development, the process and act of self-assessment certainly transfers to actions and ideas in one's life outside of work.

There is no formula for developing self-assessment into a habit. As with many other areas of learning and skill formation, a three-stage process can be helpful:

- a period of getting familiar with just doing self-assessment
- a period of working at more complex aspects of self-assessment
- an ongoing period of "owning" the ability and putting one's own "spin" on it

These are not cleanly defined stages, and any individual will consciously embark on reflective activities with greater or lesser facility than the next person. The following suggestions, offered via various questions, can act as triggers for progressively developing self-assessment skills.

The intentional aspect of engaging in self-assessment requires consciously setting aside time and a mental space to devote to recalling, recounting, and reinterpreting the meaning of recent events. At one level, it's a nudge to "just do it"; but it also calls on the creation of conscious strategies and processes that are within the individual's control. These strategies and processes make the bridge from being intentional about just doing self-assessment to reflecting critically on one's experiences.

The word "critical" in the context of reflection does not carry with it a negative tone, as in finding fault. Instead, "critical" means questioning and searching for connections, influences, and meanings among events and actions that may not be obvious. At times, it means looking outside one's current knowledge and bank of ideas to actively find new ways of understanding. It almost always means pushing boundaries of how we see and understand the various layers of what we do and think, an ongoing aspect of professional development.⁶

The very act of describing things to ourselves is an important component of self-assessing; the "getting familiar" stage is really one of practicing self-description:

- What did I do well (today/the last couple of days/week)?
- How do I know I did well?
- What problems did I run into this week?
- What did I do -- or have I done--in responding to the problem(s)?
- Am I stuck? What are the possibilities for getting myself unstuck?
- How do I/did I feel about encountering the problem?
- What have I done today/this week that I wasn't so hot at?
- How am I reacting to this? What am I specifically reacting to?

Telling stories about oneself, to oneself, is a wonderful place for self-assessment to start. As with any good story, the more detail, the more vivid the picture, the more interesting and engaging it becomes and the more there is to examine closely and learn from.

In addition to exploring the stories that come from the above questions, the next layer of self-assessment strategies starts to draw on criteria regarding how we make judgements, evaluate ourselves, figure out what's in good shape, and start to see what's missing. Raising awareness of the criteria we use and consciously drawing on criteria that we think are worthwhile are cornerstones of the self-agency that marks the active pursuit of a chosen career path.

- Did I set any goals in the past couple of days? How do I monitor progress toward my goals?
- How have I experienced interpersonal encounters recently? Which ones were the most satisfying? What particular skills did I draw on? What do I think constitutes a good interpersonal connection?
- Have I been faced with a recent decision that required me to make a moral judgement? What did I choose to value? What was the other person involved valuing? How did I experience the difference? What did it feel like? Why did I feel that way?
- Did I communicate my thoughts clearly in each encounter I've had recently with others? How do I know?

From this layer of self-assessment can come both an awareness and a curiosity about just how it is one makes decisions, what the influences on what one knows and does really are, what other sources of input might be, and some areas that one has mastered.

Developing the ability to engage in self-assessment without help can become short-circuited if one has trouble looking beneath the surface of events and interactions on one's own--and most of us do. This limitation can come from several sources, including a lack of knowledge to help interpret experiences as well as reluctance to confront realities about one's self and the career demands that may lie ahead. The following may help: a colleague to listen and probe with nonjudgmental questions; a kind mental voice that asks, "Is there still something missing from my thinking?"; keeping a log or journal to trace the evolution of your thoughts and interpretations; and better yet, a work environment that encourages self-assessment. These are not, however, necessary prerequisites to engaging in self-assessment.

The act of routinely engaging in self-assessment is itself an act of self-agency. The outcome is an expanding awareness of the dimensions of our work lives that prompts all kinds of development. While self-assessment alone will not move a career forward, it is increasingly difficult to move a career forward actively without self-assessment.

Notes

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