

Developing a Positive Personal Profile

by Dr. George Tilson, TransGen, Inc.

A Positive Personal Profile (PPP) is a way to “take inventory” of all the attributes of youth that will be relevant to their job search, employability, job match, retention and long-range career development. It is a mechanism for collecting information from a variety of sources, including assessments, observations, interviews, and discussions with the job seekers - and people who know them well.

How can the PPP be used?

The PPP actually has a number of practical uses. It can be a worksheet to help in the development of resumes, or to assist the youths in preparing for interviews. When the prospective employer asks the youth to “Tell me about yourself” the youth can recall the highlights from his/her profile. The PPP can form the basis for developing goals on IEPs and transition plans (or IPEs in the case of vocational rehabilitation services). Further, this profile is a means of ensuring that the employer representative and others have a clear picture of the youth’s positive attributes, as well as areas where they may need support or accommodations.

What are the components of the PPP?

1. *Dreams and Goals*

What do I really want out of life? Who am I? Who can I be? How do I picture my life in the future? Where and with whom would I like to be living? What would I like to be doing for fun? For work? What would I like to accomplish? What activities would be fulfilling to me? When it comes to dreams and goals, the sky’s the limit; however, many of us are reluctant to express these to anyone, lest they criticize our aspirations, or accuse us of being unrealistic. Unfortunately, many people, especially individuals with

disabilities and other life barriers, are discouraged from identifying and talking about their life dreams and goals, out of concern that they will be disappointed if they fail to achieve these goals. Yet dreams and goals are what propel us to take action in our lives.

Dreams and long-term goals enable us to think of the “big picture” of our lives. “Dream careers” of most people fall into six primary categories: (1) caring for others; (2) being a performer (including public speaking, singing, broadcasting); (3) leading or working for an organization that makes a difference; (4) owning a business; (5) generating ideas (planning, training/teaching, organizing, and/or writing); or (6) any job that you are competent to perform, meets your needs, and has a minimum of negative factors for you. For every person out there seeking a “dream job” - opportunities are often found by being “the right hand assistant” to someone else in that dream occupation.

Bear in mind, also, that many people want a well-balanced and complete life - which may mean they are willing to compromise somewhat on their career aspirations, as long as they are able to fulfill other life dreams and pursue their natural interests and talents.

As an employer representative you may have times when a participant expresses a career dream that seems unattainable, or even unrealistic. What do you do when a youth, for example, says “I want to play professional basketball” or “my goal is to become a doctor” or “I’d like to be a movie star”? A strategy that works well is to acknowledge the stated interest. “So one of your career dreams is to do_____.” Then turn it into a statement about a career field. “At this point in time, your goal is to work in the field of (professional sports, health care, entertainment/the arts).” At this stage, your job is not to determine whether a career goal is realistic or not, but to acknowledge the individual’s expressed interests. During their participation in the program, you will be helping them learn more about their career interests and helping them find a job that will be one of the stepping stones. Ideally, you will help the youth find a job that has some relation to their long-term career interest. Sometimes that involves helping them find work in the setting (for example, sports arena, hospital, TV studio).

2. Interests

These are things that grab and hold your attention; things that energize you physically, mentally, emotionally, and/or spiritually. Interests are frequently expressed through hobbies, leisure-time pursuits, recreation, and avocations - as well as through occupations. You can tell when someone has a particular interest, because you can observe them engaging enthusiastically in that activity, or intently focusing on an event or object. Interests are usually cultivated over time, and require that a person first be exposed to that activity or object of interest. For instance, a young child starts playing catch with her brother. Soon that activity intensifies. Every chance she gets, the girl plays ball. That early exposure leads to a lifetime passion for playing volleyball and other sports. A young boy watches his grandfather baking cakes - and finds he enjoys doing the same. A boy who uses a wheelchair, sees a show about spaceflight on TV. He delves into science and math, ultimately becoming an aerospace engineer. A woman with autism does not speak to anyone, but is able to calm and treat injured animals. She volunteers five days a week at a wild life rescue facility. A teenage boy from a disadvantaged family sees his first play and is hooked on theater from then on.

Exposure precedes interest. Often people with disabilities and other life barriers have a narrow set of interests, or no expressed interests simply because there has never been a chance to get out in the world and see what exists. Many people have not explored the world of possibilities enough to have had an interest “sparked.” And in many cases, people have cultivated unhealthy or socially unacceptable interests because these are the areas in which they have been primarily exposed. People who have identified areas that interest them are usually highly motivated to pursue those interests. Interests are what fuel a person’s actions. Also, bear in mind that people also have things that they really have no interest in - or things they dislike. In getting to know another person, it is just as important to identify those “non-interests” as well as interests.

Often a person’s hobbies and leisure-time pursuits can give you ideas of job areas to pursue with them. Further, consider the skills that youth have in order to perform their interests and hobbies - these may often be generalizable to work settings. For example, someone who is athletic and strong may enjoy a job where physical strength and endurance are required on the job.

3. Talents, Skills, and Knowledge

Everyone has certain abilities with which they seem to have been born; sometimes these are referred to as “natural gifts.” These talents might be in the arena of athletics, music, art, creative writing, and other forms of expression. But they can also be represented by a warm smile and ability to get along with others, an aptitude for taking things apart and putting them back together again, a knack for noticing small details, curiosity, and ability to express empathy.

Skills and knowledge are acquired over time through exposure, life experience, education, and training. They include abilities in the areas of academics (example: languages, mathematics, science), mechanics, daily living, creative arts, physical activity, communication (written, oral, and gestural), use of equipment, tools, devices, and computers, and analyzing and synthesizing data. Most career resources talk about work-related skills in terms of “people, data, and things.” If you ask someone “what have you

always had the knack for?” you are likely to get at their skills and knowledge. Ask job seekers to think of times in their lives when they have been complimented. What skill were they mainly using?

4. Learning Styles

Sometimes called “multiple intelligences,” learning style refers to the manner in which an individual naturally prefers receiving, processing and expressing information. Psychologist and researcher Howard Gardner and others have identified the following learning styles: bodily kinesthetic, musical, visual-spatial, intrapersonal, interpersonal, verbal-linguistic and mathematical-logical. In his book, *Seven Kinds of Smart* (1993), Thomas Armstrong, a protégé of Gardner, refers to people with these learning styles or intelligences as being “body smart, music smart, picture smart, self smart, people smart, word smart, and logic smart.” The notion of learning style has significant implications for how we acquire and use skills, perform tasks, relate to others, and approach life. It certainly has tremendous impact on our life and career development. Not infrequently, the learning styles/intelligences of people with disabilities and other life barriers are overlooked or discounted.

5. Values

Values may be thought of as our life philosophies; our unique perspective on what is important to attain in life and in our careers. Often it is the values we hold that motivate us to take particular actions. For example, someone may have a value that says having material wealth is of utmost importance. That person then may devote a significant amount of energy in this pursuit. He would likely expect a career that would be aligned with this value, dream of winning the lottery, or hope to otherwise become independently well-off. Compare this with the person who does not value material wealth, but instead values simplicity and tranquility. Other values include such things as having many friends - or living a solitary life; wanting to apply acquired skills and knowledge; wanting to help others; making the world safer, cleaner, healthier; fame and recognition - or quiet contribution; passing on skills and knowledge to others; being conventional - or being non-conformist; and so forth. What we value in life may be reflected in what we do, say, and think. It

is closely related to our personality and temperament.

In terms of careers, values may be reflected in such things as a person’s desire for high status, a minimum annual income, an easy job, casual (or formal) dress code, wearing a uniform, a specific geographic location or working at home, short training time, making a difference, performing a variety of tasks, recognition, adrenaline rush (competition, risk-taking activities), working alone (or with people), being their own boss, being on the cutting edge, little or no supervision, working indoors (or outdoors), an aesthetically pleasing workplace, opportunities for self-expression, and so forth.

6. Positive Personality Traits

What are the things about a person’s character that are genuinely recognized and appreciated by others? Beautiful smile? Ability to stay focused on a detailed task? Willingness to learn new things? Triumph over hardship? Frankness? Talent for listening to others? Sense of humor? There are people who believe that the gift of a sense of humor usually indicates the ability to keep things in perspective, even in the face of adversity - a leadership trait valued in many organizations. True, each of us has certain personality traits that are less than ideal. Maybe we are hyper-critical of certain people, or we get tired and grumpy in the afternoon, or we talk too much. These are examples of normal human behavior; but they are certainly not traits that will win us points in the working world. Part of getting to know someone is discovering the positive aspects of their personality.

7. Environmental Preferences

These go hand-in-hand with temperament, values and personality. To use an earlier example, suppose you are the unflappable type. You are more likely than your flustered friend to be well-suited to life activities, career areas and jobs that are high-pressure in nature; that demand clear-headed thinking in emergencies and perhaps dangerous situations, such as firefighting or child protective services. If you are the type who thrives in being outside most of the time, an indoor job with no windows would probably not be a good setting for you. If you do your best work in a quiet

setting, alone - being employed in a factory would likely be a poor environmental match for you. If you have a strong need to make a lot of money, you are unlikely to find satisfaction over the long haul in a low-paying occupation. Think about the implications for the person who craves routine, schedules, and predictable tasks, landing a job in a setting where the duties shift daily if not hourly. Or vice versa, the worker whose temperament is one characterized by high energy, love of risks, and a fear of boredom - working hours on end in a routine position. Of course, people can have a combination of preferences.

Consider the attorney for a very formal, conservative law firm who does stand-up comedy in her spare time. Or the highway construction worker who likes to read classic novels, the dentist that drives a dirt bike, the statistician who likes to throw a good party. Some people derive tremendous satisfaction when they can spend significant amounts of time using tools and equipment, using their hands. Others prefer to use their intellectual skills to conduct investigative tasks. Imagine an individual who thrives in an open, unstructured and free-flowing environment in which to express her artistic temperament - working on an assembly line. Or vice versa, the person who feels most at home in settings that require structure and systematic processes - in a job where he is expected to come up with spontaneous solutions to problems. What about the social worker who lives to interact with people and see the direct impact his work has on the well-being of others - being assigned primarily to administrative tasks. Some people can concentrate on tasks with hip hop music blaring, others only when it's classical music - and still others who can only concentrate in totally quiet settings.

When people get to spend a good portion of their lives in settings that match their temperaments, they feel energized. The opposite is also true: if they find themselves spending too much time in environments that are contrary to their natural temperaments, they are likely to feel drained, stressed out, and beaten down.

Another aspect of personality is called "temperament." Temperament might be thought of as a person's unique rhythm for responding to different environments, people, and events. Think

about people you know who are unflappable - they seem to exude a sense of calm in even the most dire of circumstances. Compare them to others who are easily flustered at the merest suggestion of a problem situation. Of course there are people that fall into many spots on this continuum. Some of us express our feelings openly; others of us prefer to keep our feelings private. Some are always serious when focusing on a particular task; others seem to work best when they can express their sense of humor. Perhaps you are a person who has a perennial optimistic perspective on life, while your best friend tends towards a more cynical view. Some people are extremely detail-oriented and have a difficult time stepping back and looking at the bigger picture - and the big picture person has a hard time with the nitty-gritty. Consider those who are natural risk-takers and adventurers, and those who take a very cautious approach to most activities in their lives. There are "charge ahead people" and reticent people; fact-driven folks and emotion-driven folks. Some people are perpetual motion machines, while others prefer a leisure pace to most of their activities. Some of us are contemplative and thrive when we can deliberate and process information, while our counterparts love nothing better than to be thrust in situations that require quick decisions.

Temperament is more than simple mood; rather it is an outlook or attitude, or even philosophy about life. Often a person's temperament is an outward expression of his or her self concept; and self concept is considered to play a major role in one's career development. Can a person's temperament change over time? Her self concept? Some will argue that temperament is as fixed as the DNA that comprises a person, while others take the stand that often new life experiences (both positive and negative) can in fact alter a person's self concept. Consider temperament to be our energy type, energy level, and the manner in which each of us uses our store of personal energy.

8. Dislikes

To one extent or another, all of us have dislikes - things in which we have no interest, or would prefer to avoid if possible, or things that make us uncomfortable for a variety of reasons. As an effective career specialist, the employer representative must help Bridges youth identify

those dislikes. A good question to ask each youth is “What is a job, or a job setting, or type of work task that you know you do NOT want to do?” If someone has had previous work experience and tell you they didn’t like the job, ask them “What was it about the job you didn’t like?” Too often people are encouraged to take jobs that really go against their core dislikes - and this is usually a recipe for failure, when it comes to job performance and retention.

9. Life and work experience.

This is one of the most overlooked areas in getting to know job seekers, particularly those individuals who may have had very limited, or no, previous job experiences. Employers want to know that a candidate has specific skills to accomplish specific company goals. How the individual job seeker acquired certain skills may be less important than the fact that he or she has them - and can demonstrate them. People acquire skills in many ways: primarily through formal education and training; previous volunteer or paid jobs, and community service. However, we must also recognize the skill acquisition that comes from informal training (example, a neighbor who teaches a teenager to repair a car engine; a teenager showing a senior citizen how to use the internet); and self-training (the inmate who studies for the law school entrance examination; the young man with quadriplegia who teaches himself to cook using adaptive equipment; the youngster who learns how to play tennis by watching it on television).

Further skill acquisition occurs through hands-on experiences. Consider all of the skills you may have attained and developed through trial and error (negotiating an on-ramp on the freeway for the first time; taking public transportation in a strange city; making a cake in too-small a pan; writing grant-proposals; giving a customer correct change). Some of us are fortunate to have learned many skills through on-the-job experiences (preparing budgets; selling products; detailing cars; bagging groceries; taking blood samples). Does this mean that those without job experience cannot acquire skills? No. This is where other life experiences come into play (entertaining young children; building a model airplane; sorting laundry; cleaning up a campsite; learning how to use a computerized speaking device; rescuing an

animal; raising children; composing music; organizing parties; surfing the internet; manipulating a motorized wheelchair; and so forth).

Often it is through our hobbies and recreational activities that we acquire specific skills. When getting to know job seekers, try to ascertain what they --and/or people who know them well - have accomplished in their lives. What are they proud of? Have they received any special recognitions or awards? Even people with the most significant disabilities have achieved specific milestones in their lives. The degree of complexity of those achievements varies from person to person; what matters most is that, for the individual, it represents a life accomplishment. And this bit of information may prove very valuable as you assist this person in finding a satisfying job.

10. Support System

This refers to the unique “circle of support” each of us has around us. For some of us this support system might be quite extensive while for others the circle may be very small - or even non-existent. Who might be in our circle of support? It might include family members, significant others, friends, acquaintances, neighbors, co-workers, and classmates. We may even consider ourselves to be in that circle. These are all people who are not paid to provide support to us. Then there are supporters who may receive payment for being in our support circle, such as teachers, counselors, therapists, medical personnel, personal assistants, social workers, job coaches, human service organization personnel, government agency representatives, and so forth.

For many people with disabilities and other significant life barriers, their support systems tend to be overly represented by “paid supporters” and underrepresented by volunteer supporters. This may primarily be due to society’s tendency to shelter, protect, “take care of” - and intentionally or inadvertently isolate people with disabilities. The challenge to those who advocate for and support people with disabilities, then, is to help individuals build their social networks, hence their network of supporters.

11. Specific Challenges

The word “challenge” may be synonymous with the words barrier, limitation, deficit, weakness, idiosyncrasy, pet peeve, shortcoming, roadblock, hindrance, problem, barricade, difficulty, or obstacle - but it can also refer to risk and adventure. In fact, life may be thought of as a series of opportunities and challenges. We can be born with certain challenges (for example, with a physical or cognitive disability, a medical condition, a propensity for behaviors that go against the norm, or anomalies in physical appearance), or into challenging life circumstances (such as poverty, membership in an ostracized religious, ethnic group, or other demographic group). And certainly, we will encounter numerous and diverse challenges as we progress through life. Some of us are better equipped, or have adequate support systems to handle these challenges; others of us seem to collapse under the pressure of the challenges we face.

Sometimes people face challenges because of opportunities they have never had, such as when people cannot read because they have never been taught how to read; or individuals who cannot articulate the kinds of jobs they would like because they have had little exposure to the work world. And some people encounter a lifetime of challenges because of poor choices they have made (for example people with criminal records, or those who are in abusive relationships). People with disabilities face a unique situation: often their disabilities are considered their primary challenges, when in fact, each person is affected by his/her disability in different ways. The disability itself is not the challenge, rather it is the specific effects of the disability. For example, mental retardation is not a specific challenge, but not being able to read is. Having severe cerebral palsy is not a specific barrier; however, having unintelligible speech is a definite challenge. Not having access to public transportation might be the specific barrier for one blind person; while her counterpart has access to transportation but is not permitted by her family to use the bus, out of fear for her safety. The challenge of learning disabilities may be, for one person, the inability to write a coherent sentence - for another it might be difficulty in picking up social cues and building friendships. A critical part of developing a positive personal profile is to identify those specific

challenges that may get in the way of a person’s pursuit of his/her life dreams and goals.

12. Creative Solutions and Accommodations

Once we have identified the specific challenges in our lives can we begin to think of creative solutions and accommodations. An accommodation may be thought of as any strategy that effectively alleviates, or lessens the impact, of a specific challenge. Here are some examples. Suppose you have been born into a family that lives in a high crime, high poverty neighborhood. One of your siblings dropped out of school, joined a gang, and was incarcerated for selling drugs. You developed a relationship with a mentor through Boys and Girls Club and went on to college and a successful career. Both siblings faced challenges; yet you found an accommodation: in this case, a mentor who had a positive influence on you. Here’s a common scenario: one person can read a book, but cannot clearly see the signs on the highway. Common accommodation: glasses for nearsightedness. A tall person grabs a book from a high shelf; his wife needs the accommodation of a step stool. A college student studies with music blaring; her roommate needs the accommodation of total quiet. An elderly man falls and breaks both his arms. His neighbor provides an accommodation – by writing his checks for him. Consider the young blind man whose family would not let him ride the city bus for fear of his safety. What might happen if a mobility specialist took his family with him on the bus, to demonstrate the young man’s skill at getting around? This is another example of an accommodation.

Accommodations are creative solutions to specific challenges or barriers. They range from the commonsense to the highly technological. They fall into three primary categories: (1) physical accommodations, such as equipment, devices, and modified spaces and buildings; (2) special services, such as those provided by interpreters, translators, personal assistants, job coaches, medical personnel, therapists, parole officers, and so forth; and (3) creative thinking and common sense problem-solving (by far, the most frequently needed and used category of accommodation!).

13. Creative Possibilities and Ideas

Have you ever been doing something mundane and ordinary, like the laundry or walking down the street - when suddenly an idea pops into your head? Possibly you get a spark of insight into a solution for a problem with which you have been grappling. Or you come up with an activity or project you would like to take on. As you assist Bridges youth develop their own Positive Personal Profile, you are likely to find yourself thinking of all kinds of ideas, such as job possibilities, things to explore, actions to take, people to meet -- and other "What-ifs." Rather than waiting to brainstorm these ideas at a later time, we would encourage you to record all thoughts and ideas, regardless of how random or unrealistic they might seem, at the time you think of them. There will be plenty of opportunity to sift through all the ideas later (and to generate additional ones); however, these initial thoughts are often gems to be polished. Therefore, we have included "possibilities and ideas" as a component of the Positive Personal Profile.

Fact: For every human being there are an infinite number of possibilities and ideas for living a meaningful life and meeting life's challenges - to be discovered through imagination, creativity, and determination.

An important note: For every one of these components of the positive personal profile, it is important to recognize and be sensitive to diverse cultural, familial, ethnic, and religious traditions of the individuals you are getting to know. Factors such as personality, values, temperament, dreams and goals, and interests are likely to be influenced by these diverse traditions; and characteristics, behaviors and rituals valued by one culture/society may in fact be the antithesis of those valued by other cultural sub-populations.