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## Get good at sifting out bad career advice

**By Penelope Trunk, Globe Correspondent, 5/1/05**

When it comes to career advice, it seems that everyone has some. The trouble is figuring out who to listen to. Most people field advice from friends, parents, teachers, and significant others. John Clark, a music producer and sound engineer in Jamaica Plain even found information technology consultants tossing advice his way.

Before you tell everyone to shut up, consider the idea that there is no bad advice, just people who are bad at sifting advice. Which means if you want to figure out the career that's right for you, get good at sifting.

Rosalind Hoffa, director of the Amherst College Career Center says, "Approach many people and gather all sorts of information. No one has the absolute answer. So the best way to proceed is to explore and experiment." When it comes to finding the right career, "Everyone has the answer inside them and unlocking it is the question."

Clark says, "The best advice I ever got was from my parents. They told me to follow my heart. They also showed me where my talents are by recognizing a love for music and giving me piano lessons early."

When sorting through input, remember each person has their own perspective. Someone who values power gives advice that leans toward the acquisition of power, and someone who values work-life balance steers people toward that. You need to know your own values to figure out how each person's input applies to your situation. The advice Clark received in college was about performance, because he says at Tufts University in Medford, that's what studying music is all about. Clark tuned out the advice and took pre-med courses with a big paycheck in mind. But sometimes career advice comes in odd packages, and for Clark, it was an award. The first piece of music he produced received national honors, and he realized he had talent for advising musicians artistically and arranging music.

If you know yourself very well, sorting through career advice will be a breeze. The problem is, how can you know yourself that well before you are 70 and your career is over? Even people like Clark, who were raised to focus on their inherent skills, still have trouble figuring out their true calling: After college he took a job creating PowerPoint presentations.

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For some, especially those with patience to spare and money to burn, trial and error will work. And even if you are surrounded by friends who are as lost as you are, you still might find them useful. Hoffa says, "Friends can be a great resource. Sometimes just hearing yourself talk it out with friends is helpful." Eventually, Clark's friend told him to take an internship at a music studio.

A faster way down the difficult path of career self-knowledge is to take an aptitude test. (Deirdre McEachern,) of VIP Coaching in Kittery, Maine, says that a career aptitude test can tell you where your strengths lay. She gives her clients the Highlands Ability Battery, which takes three hours to complete and generates 30 pages of information. Other popular tests are the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and Strong Interest and Skills Confidence Inventory.

McEachern's clients are generally people in their 40s who wish they had come to her in their 20s, but some clients are as young as 18. "These people come to me to get help picking a college major," she says. "Highlands test results don't change after age 14. Interests and motivations shift, but one's natural abilities are the same throughout life."

But McEachern cautions that aptitude tests recommend a wide range of professions. So you also need to understand "your core beliefs and values." To do this, McEachern asks questions such as: If you could solve one world problem what would it be? What are the most proud moments of your life? What makes you angry in the world? What are traits you admire in other people? And she doesn't just write down your answer. She also listens for intangible things like tone of voice and rate of speech. From this process she recommends a career you'd be good at and that would satisfy your soul.

For those who cringe at the thought of hiring a coach or even sitting down for a test, trial and error might be right for you. The more experience you have making career decisions - good and bad - the better you'll get at making them quickly, effectively and on your own. New York-based Clinical psychologist Jason Greenberg advises people to go with their instincts more often.

"People don't listen to their gut. They listen to their head and other peoples' advice. The greater impact a decision has on one's life, the less likely the person is to trust their instinct," Greenberg says.

But the advice never stops, really. And you need to learn to take it. Because the biggest factor in career success, after education, is how effective your network of advisers is. And here's a piece of advice - about taking advice - from Clark, who now has a thriving business in a career he loves: "Have some humility."

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