Personal Construct Theory

A Self-help Tool

Introduction

When you are trying to decide which careers are best for you, what do you look for? We might know what sort of holidays we like (somewhere hot or cold, on the beach, city break, etc), but what differences matter for us when it comes to careers?

Personal Construct Theory (or PCT for short) is a complex sounding name for doing something which is actually quite simple, but very important: working out what matters to you about jobs.

It is based upon the idea that we each have our own unique view of the world.

When you hear the word 'accountant', it will mean something different for you than it will for me. But what are those differences, that really matter to you?

PCT uses a simple way to help us realise how we 'see' the world. Do you see the world in terms of desk-based jobs versus physically active jobs; or perhaps ethical versus unethical occupations; or high-paid and low-paid jobs? Or to put it another way, what are the categories you use to make sense of the world of careers?

PCT is based on the work of the famous American psychologist Kelly (1955), and is a recognised way of thinking about careers (Yates 2019, p42). It is a really effective way of comparing careers and seeing them in a fresh light.

This tool is designed to…

- Help you understand how you 'see' careers and the differences between them that matter to you.

- Dig under the surface of a career so you aren't just going by the 'image' of what a career is.

- Help you make choices between careers based upon a good understanding of what matters to you in a career.

Consider using this tool if you…

- Want to get a better understanding of what careers are really like and what matters to you in a career.

- Want to get a fresh perspective on the career options you are looking at.

- Want to compare a basket of careers to discover the hidden similarities or differences.

How to use this tool

1 **First, list the careers you want to compare.**

You need a minimum of three but can have as many as you like, though in practice it is easier to do this with no more than nine options.

2 Second, pick any three to begin with and put them into a table.

The one below is interactive, so you can write in it.

First set of three careers		
Career	Career	Career
Next set of three careers		
Career	Career	Career

3 **Next, think of something that two of them have in common and one does not, and write this into the table.**

You can see an example below for three chocolate bars, which we have populated with some illustrative content. For each one, we have highlighted the odd one out (the factor that one doesn't have but the other two do). What factors would be important to you? Importantly, the odd one out isn't necessarily negative – it may be the thing you most like.

First set of three chocolate bars		
Twix	**KitKat**	**Snickers**
Biscuit-based	Biscuit-based	Non-biscuit
Chewy	Not chewy	Chewy
Comes in two pieces	Comes in two pieces	One piece
Next set of three chocolate bars		
Twix	**Topic**	**Snickers**
Light snack	Light snack	More filling
Biscuit-based	Non-biscuit	Non-biscuit
Not nutty	Nutty	Nutty

Keep picking different combinations of three things, either until you have gone through all the possible combinations, or have run out of significant features that you can use to distinguish between them.

Then, pick another set of three careers, and compare those in the same way.

4 **Four, Review.**

- In this stage, you will want to identify which things are positives for you.
- Do you tend to prefer chewy or non-chewy bars, for instance? Do you prefer careers where you help people, or careers where you don't help people, for instance?
- Put the things you prefer on one side of a new table, and the things you do not prefer on the opposite side.
- List the careers across the top.
- Mark the table to show how each career compares in terms of the preferred or non-preferred factors that it has.
- Clearly, something may combine both preferred and non-preferred features (Burr, 2012). In this example, Twix and KitKat offer the person the greatest number of preferred features.

Preferred	Twix	KitKat	Snickers	Mars bar	Topic	Picnic	Less preferred
Biscuit-based	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	Non-biscuit
Not chewy	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	Chewy
Comes in two pieces	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	One piece
Light snack	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	More filling
Nutty	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	Not nutty

Going forward, your preferred factors gives you a set of criteria you can use to assess other careers for suitability.

Pause, Reflect, Act

- What were the key factors that stood out for you as being most important, when choosing a career?

- What are the key insights you have taken from this Self-help Tool?

- What actions do you need to take now, to build on this exercise?

- Who could help you with this?

- Are there other related Self-help Tools you'd like to use as well?

NB: Because everyone is different, this tool may not work for you, so please also look at our other Self-help Tools as well.

Other decision-making tools which build on this one include:

- Find the Fit (where you use your key choice criteria to score or weight several careers, to find the best fit for you).

- Must Have Decision Making (a way to sort through a number of career options, narrowing down on those that meet your 'must-have' criteria, by progressively rejecting any that don't make the grade).

References and Resources

If you'd like to know more about PCT, you might like to watch this 7 minute video here:
hud.ac/q29

GCFLearnFree.org

Decision-Making Strategies:
hud.ac/q3a

Burr, V. (2012). Personal Construct Theory: HMB1000, University of Huddersfield:
hud.ac/q3b

Yates, J. (2019). The Career Coaching Toolkit. Routledge, London.

Dave Stanbury, Feb, 2023

Decide