

Characteristics of Future Careers High School Students Want to Explore

Becky L. Bobek and Joyce Z. Schnieders

As students transition between high school and college or career, many have begun to consider their future career paths or want to identify career options that will best fit them. It can be overwhelming and confusing with hundreds of options to choose from and numerous characteristics to consider when selecting careers. At the same time, there are clear benefits to making good-fit career choices where a person's characteristics (e.g., interests, skills) are similar to, or compatible with, the corresponding characteristics of an occupation or job. Meta-analyses show that fit with one's job, in terms of the characteristics of the person and those of the job or the tasks performed in the job, relates to increased work commitment and satisfaction and decreased intentions to quit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Resick et al., 2007). Further, individuals who enter jobs that better fit them have both higher job performance and greater job satisfaction (Oh et al., 2014). Interest-occupation fit is also associated with higher self-reported earnings (Neumann et al., 2009) and desirable work attitudes and outcomes (Swaney et al., 2012). These benefits reinforce the need for students to explore and evaluate relevant information that will support good-fit career choices.

Based on online U.S. research conducted by The Harris Poll on behalf of the National Career Development Association (2021), over half of adults in the labor force (53%) indicated that they would have gathered more or different career information if they could start over with planning their career. When asked about the helpfulness of job information they used in the past, a majority of adults in the labor force reported that it was very or extremely helpful to have information about the career planning process (68%); job-seeking skills such as resume writing and interviewing (63%); occupation characteristics such as salary and work tasks (60%); job postings (59%), and information about one's interests, values, or skills (58%). With the changing landscape of work (e.g., greater technological automation, COVID-19 pandemic impacts) and a median of 4.1 years that workers stayed with their current employers (unchanged from January 2020 to 2022) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022), it is to be expected that individuals in the labor force will continue to change their employment over time and career information will be essential to facilitate these changes, particularly information that allows for selecting and obtaining good-fit occupations.

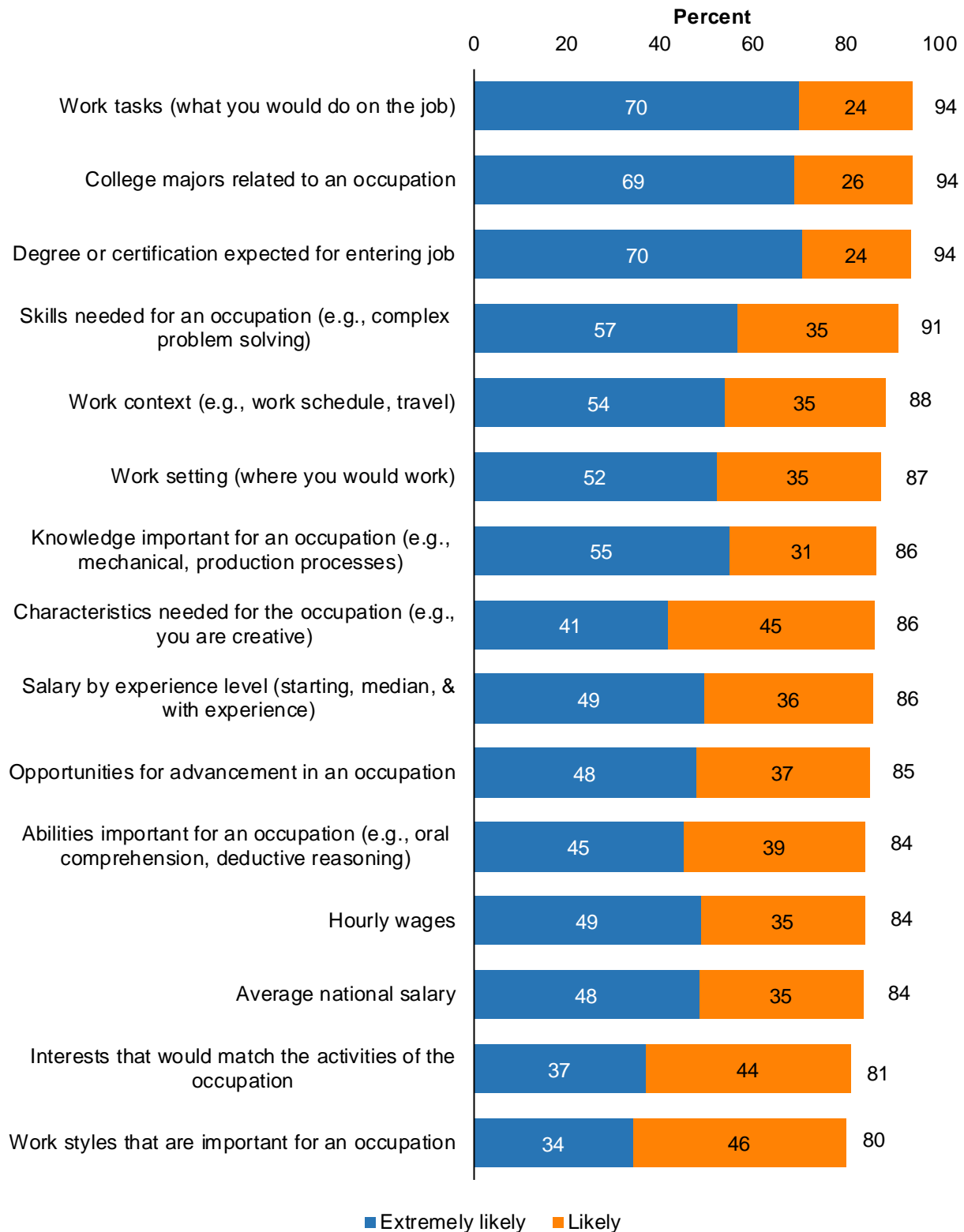
For high school students preparing to make good-fit choices early in their career paths, it is critical that they participate in career exploration activities and have access to information about their own characteristics (e.g., interests, skills) and about occupations (Storme & Celik, 2018). Gathering career-related information is an important part of students' career exploration and evaluating this information in relation to themselves shapes students' professional identities and informs their career decisions (Chin et al., 2019). Effective career exploration is associated with positive career attitudes, behaviors, and work-related outcomes such as career-related knowledge and skills and training performance (Jiang et al., 2019). Given the importance of

exploring career information prior to making career choices, we designed a survey to identify the types of information that high school students want to know when exploring career options.

To better understand the types of career characteristics that students want to explore, we surveyed a random sample of 11th- and 12th-grade students who registered for the June 2022 ACT National test. Students were presented a comprehensive list of career characteristics (identified using relevant literature and sources of career information such as the Occupational Information Network or O*NET for short) and asked to rate how likely they were to look at each type of characteristic when searching for future career options. Students assigned ratings using a 5-point scale (extremely unlikely, unlikely, neutral, likely, and extremely likely). A random sample of 50,000 students were invited to participate in the survey. While a total of 5,989 students responded to the survey, students who answered more than 50% of the required survey items were included in the final sample (n=2,885), resulting in a response rate of approximately 6%. These respondents were 69% female, 29% male, 1% another gender, and 1% did not report their gender. There were 7% of students who identified as Black/African American, 8% Hispanic/Latino, 69% White, 8% Asian, 1% American Indian, Hawaiian Native, Alaska Native, 5% two or more races/ethnicities, and 3% did not report race/ethnicity. In addition, 93% of respondents were in Grade 11 and 7% in Grade 12.

Figure 1 shows the top 15 career characteristics students reported they were extremely likely or likely to explore. Overall, high school students want to be informed about careers and are interested in a wide range of characteristics. Most students wanted to know about the details of occupations. Nearly all students (94%) indicated they were extremely likely or likely to explore what would be done on the job in terms of work tasks. In addition, high percentages of students wanted to know about the context in which work would be done (88%), such as the need for travel, the setting in which work would be done (87%), and opportunities for advancement (85%). These results highlight that students focus on the occupation details that will help them consider which career options they may want to pursue.

Figure 1. Top Career Characteristics High School Students Reported Wanting to Explore (by Percentage)



Interestingly, students reported that they intend to explore occupational earnings in different ways. A majority (86%) wanted to learn about occupation salaries by experience level, including the starting salary, median salary, and salary with experience. A similar percentage of students (84%) indicated that they were extremely likely or likely to explore hourly wages and average national salaries for occupations. These results suggest that students not only consider earnings important as they explore occupations, but also want to understand different levels of earnings related to occupations.

A prominent feature of multiple characteristics that students want to explore involves what it takes to prepare for or be successful in a career. An overwhelming percentage of students (94%) intended to learn about the college majors that relate to occupations and the associated degrees or certificates expected for entering these occupations. Further, a large majority of students (91%) were extremely likely or likely to explore the skills needed for occupations, followed by the knowledge (86%) and abilities (84%) considered important for occupations. Students also go beyond wanting to know about what may be considered more customary characteristics of occupations. A substantial percentage of students (86%) wanted to explore characteristics that reflect personal qualities needed for occupations, such as creativity. Many students (81%) wanted to know the interests that would match occupations. Similarly, 80% of students intended to explore work style characteristics, like dependability and persistence, that are important for occupations. The fact that these students want to explore multiple characteristics important for career success suggests they recognize the importance of preparation when considering and choosing good-fit careers.

Through the career exploration intentions of high school students, findings from the survey underscore that students want to be savvy consumers of career information. They want to explore characteristics (e.g., occupation salary, work tasks, interests, skills) that many adults in the labor force found helpful. Students understand that occupation details are needed to establish their own preferences, that characteristics such as earnings offer different yet valuable ways to view occupations, and that characteristics important for career success will help them recognize what it takes to prepare for occupations. Taken together, these findings indicate that students want to explore relevant information that can support good-fit career choices.

Survey findings point to practices that can support high school students' career exploration. These include practices such as the following:

- Provide students with concrete ways to gather career information that emphasize details such as interviewing real-life professionals about their work tasks or watching videos of professionals describing a day in the life on the job.
- Offer opportunities for students to learn about how to succeed in careers by linking the knowledge and skills they are developing in classes to those important for occupations, or by making connections between education plans (majors and degrees) and what is needed for occupations as students prepare to transition between high school and college.

- Provide opportunities for students to obtain information on both career and personal characteristics (e.g., interests, abilities, work styles) and allow for and encourage students to compare themselves with them. This can further students' understanding of what can help them be successful as they consider which options may be a good fit for them.

These supports can facilitate students' exploration of careers and better prepare them to make career choices that lead to satisfying and successful futures.

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