
Using Your Strengths in the Job Search



Senia Maymin, MBA, MAPP, is the Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of *Positive Psychology News Daily*. Senia is a PhD candidate at Stanford University and consults to *businesses and entrepreneurs and job seekers* about positive psychology. [Full bio.](#)

Senia's articles are [here](#).

You wouldn't use a paperclip to try to open a can. So why are you trying to use past skills to get a future job?

Suppose I told you that with a small change in mindset, you could turn the paperclip into a can opener. Suppose I showed you a tool that would give you leverage toward getting the kind of job you really want.

During my MBA at Stanford, I took a Human Resource class with Professor [Jeffrey Pfeffer](#), and he persuades his students to hire for character and not for skill. When I was co-running a technology startup of 20 employees and freelancers, I started acting on Pfeffer's advice. He was right. I realized that hiring for the qualities that were useful for our startup – optimism, perseverance, creativity – indeed proved more useful than hiring for specific programming skills.

A lot of employers have come to the same hiring conclusion: Company fit is more important than a perfect skills match. Some managers may not even be able to state those intangibles of company fit, but they know it when they see it, with companies often having a term for a potential employee, such as "Googly."

What Are Strengths?

To what extent would you personally agree with this statement: "*At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day?*" When Gallup asked this question, it found that only 20 percent of those surveyed said they strongly agreed with this phrase. Are you in that 20 percent, or is it maybe time for

you to re-craft your job to match what you do best?

In 1999, as president of the American Psychological Association, [Martin Seligman](#) called for a focus on the positive parts of life – such as productivity, achievement, and happiness. He called this area Positive Psychology. One of the three main pillars became the study of positive traits, and a strengths classification was born (the VIA Signature Strengths Classification was created by [Christopher Peterson](#) and Martin Seligman). As a graduate from Seligman's inaugural UPenn master's degree program in Positive Psychology, I actively use Positive Psychology tools and techniques, including strengths, in my coaching practice to draw out what people do best.

Strengths are a person's natural inclinations in life. They are a measure of values and virtues. Strengths are what a person may answer when asked, "Doing *what* gets you excited?"

How Can You Determine Your Strengths?

There are two main strengths self-assessments:

- Values-in-Action (VIA) Signature Strengths Questionnaire at <http://www.authentic happiness.org/>
- Gallup StrengthsFinder at <http://www.strengthsfinder.com/>

Both assessments take about 30 minutes to answer the questions. The VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire is free and originated in academia (about 750,000 people have taken the VIA). StrengthsFinder has a one-time fee and comes from Gallup's work with corporations (about 2 million people have taken StrengthsFinder). VIA strengths tend to be more aimed at general life use, and StrengthsFinder strengths are more aimed at work situations. Examples of VIA strengths include "curiosity," a leaning toward questioning and discovery, and "hope," a leaning toward future-mindedness and optimism about the future. Examples of Gallup strengths include "Activator," one who puts ideas into action and "Strategic," one who plans toward the big picture.

Using Your Strengths in the Job Search

Once you know your strengths based on an assessment, the best way to consciously use your strengths is to remind yourself of situations in which you have already used the strengths successfully. For example, one of my VIA strengths is “bravery.” I wouldn’t have instinctively picked that out of the list, but in hindsight I can remind myself of bravery-related examples – such as my entrepreneurial background or the fact that my sport is rock climbing.

Why Use Strengths in Your Job Search?

1. **To enjoy your new job more and be more productive at your job.**
Gallup’s Tom Rath, a classmate from the UPenn program, reports that people who use their strengths at work are **six times more likely** to be engaged in their work, and three times happier in general. Additionally, Gallup reports that because engagement at work is an inverse predictor of employee turnover, people who use their strengths tend to be more productive while at work.
2. **Because you want your future job to be more about what excites you, and less about what you’ve done (i.e. a can opener, not a paperclip, to open a can).**
Since strengths make us happier and more productive at work, I might want to use my strength of bravery in my future job. If I were interviewing for a position in a startup, I would prepare a story that demonstrates my strength of bravery. Then, in answer to a behavioral question such as, “Please describe a time when you demonstrated leadership,” I would likely tell a story that highlights the bravery strength. Why? I would do this *both* because it would likely fit with the startup company’s culture and because I want to move toward having more bravery experiences in my future work life.

On the other hand, if I were to stick to examples that demonstrate my past skills at previous jobs, what kind of position should I expect to get? More of the same. In 2006, 20 percent of Stanford GSB graduates said early responsibility or intellectual challenge was the most important criterion in choosing their accepted job. Another 23 percent said that career broadening was the most important criterion, which includes elements of challenge and responsibility.

If you focus on past skills in preparing for the interview, then you will get a job that uses your past skills rather than challenges you in broadening, new ways. But if you focus on your strengths and aspects of life that excite you, then you will get a job that excites you. If you want to open a can, describing past experiences with paperclips may not get you there.

As an executive coach to entrepreneurs and career changers, I use a three-step process: **Assessment, Targeting, and Action**. The first part – Assessment – is vitally important. This is where you can examine your strengths. This is where you can craft those stories about your background and your life that excite you. Then later in Targeting and Action, you can refer to strengths to make sure that the company fit is good from your point of view, and that the actions you take are consistent with your top strengths. All this doesn’t mean you ignore skills. It just means that you may not want to lead with them if you really want to open the can.

This article was originally published [here](#) in the Stanford Graduate School of Business *Career Pathways* newsletter in [June, 2007](#).

References:

- * Book about the VIA:
[Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification](#) by Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman
- * Books about StrengthsFinder:
[StrengthsFinder 2.0](#) by Tom Rath
[Now, Discover Your Strengths](#) by Donald Clifton and Marcus Buckingham
- * Books on using strengths more at work
[Average to A+: Realising strengths in yourself and others](#) by Alex Linley
[Go put your strengths to work](#) by Marcus Buckingham