



Tips for Using the *Transferable Skills Scale* in Career Decision Making and Job Search

By John J. Liptak, Ed.D. and Laurence Shatkin, Ph.D.

Introduction

Transferable skills are those portable skills that people take from one life experience to another and can be acquired through education and training, leisure-time activities, and work experiences. An awareness of transferable skills has become increasingly important for people making career choices and changes. In an economy where it is predicted that most workers will change careers six or seven times, it is important that people be aware of their transferable skills.

Transferable skills provide people with information about their learned abilities that can be used in career exploration and career decision-making. Transferable skills also allow workers to move from one job to another with a minimum amount of additional training or retraining on the job. In a job search campaign, transferable skills can help job seekers identify keywords to use on their resume, descriptors for completing application forms, and information to talk about with prospective employers in an employment interview.

Knowledge of transferable skills can especially help people who are making the transition into the workforce. Isaacson and Brown (1997) suggested many different types of people need assistance in identifying transferable skills, including displaced homemakers re-entering the workforce, offenders, students, and downsized employees. Brown and Brooks (1991, p. 265) agreed that career counselors help clients identify such skills for a variety of reasons, including:

- To determine competencies or abilities that are important in one's work
- To assess self-confidence and/or self-esteem
- To increase positive self-evaluation for clients who doubt their abilities
- To help career changers examine alternatives
- To formulate a career objective
- To serve as the first step in creating a resume that uses a skills or functional approach

This guide is designed to help counselors, educators, and administrators make the most of the *TSS*, in turn helping students and clients make the most of their transferable skills.

Using the TSS in a Group Setting

While the TSS is designed as an assessment tool to help individuals identify their strongest transferable skills, it also works well in a group environment to help clients and students learn more about their specific transferable skill strengths and weaknesses and how to use them in the career exploration and job search processes. Taking less than twenty minutes to complete and score, it provides an ideal starting point for discussing the importance of skills development, identifying critical transferable skills that group participants possess, and teaching ways to put transferable skills to work.

The TSS can be used as part of a career and job search curriculum, in career development courses, or as part of any outplacement training program. Prior to administering the TSS in a group setting, you should prepare the respondents by discussing skills in general and transferable skills in particular. The following questions can help lead group discussions:

Question 1: “What are the different types of skills?”

The group may answer in terms of specific skills such as “interpersonal” or “mechanical,” but steer the discussion toward the ways in which people *use* their skills. Discuss the Skills Triad proposed by Farr (1991), which divides skills into three major types: Adaptive, Job-Related, and Transferable. He describes these skills as follows:

- **Adaptive Skills**—skills that people use every day to survive and thrive. These skills allow you to adapt and adjust to a variety of life and career situations. These skills can be considered part of your personality and include such traits as patience, flexibility, maturity, assertiveness, and creativity.
- **Job-Related Skills**—skills that are related to a particular job or type of job. These skills are activities people need to be successful in a specific field or occupation and include such skills as repairing a car engine, word processing, grant writing, and reading blueprints.
- **Transferable Skills**—general skills that can be useful in a variety of different jobs. These skills can be transferred from one occupational setting to another and include such skills as building things, instructing people, analyzing data, leading a group, and managing money.

Question 2: “In your own words, how would you define transferable skills?”

Write down group members’ responses on the board, overhead, or flip chart. Then compare their responses to some of the following definitions of transferable skills that have been identified in the literature:

- Skills that are not job specific, but are skills that cut horizontally across all industries and vertically across all jobs from entry-level to chief executive officer (Sherer & Eadie, 1987).

- General abilities that can be used in many different work environments (Tuck, Price, & Robertson, 2000)
- Skills that you naturally develop from all aspects of life, especially from activities outside of work, and then transfer them to a job, and include things you do, such as teaching, organizing, assembling, designing, and operating. (Lock, 2005).
- Portable skills that people take from one life experience to another, and can be acquired through educational experiences, leisure-time activities, family experiences, and work experiences (Liptak, 2001).
- Skills that can improve with application and practice, enable people to make contributions and add value, and allow people to describe their value to prospective employers (Lawson, 2000).

Try to uncover what all of the definitions have in common. Then, as a group, try to formulate one overarching definition.

Question 3: “Identify some transferable skills.”

Write down group members’ responses on the board, overhead, or flip chart. Then, start to categorize these skills into the eight scales on the *TSS*: Analytical, Numerical, Interpersonal, Organizational, Physical, Informational, Communicative, and Creative. Point out that suggested skills that fail to conform to any of these categories probably are too specific to be considered transferable and are probably job-related skills. In other cases group members may suggest abilities that are not skills, such as musical talent.

Question 4: “Why do you think employers value transferable skills?”

Answers to this question will vary, though the cumulative group response should include some of the following:

- Having transferable skills cuts down on the amount of training necessary for new employees.
- Having transferable skills means a worker can adapt to new job responsibilities.
- Many transferable skills are concerned with working with people, whether they are customers, clients, or fellow employees.
- A person with many transferable skills is often viewed as a fast and eager learner.
- Employees with many transferable skills bring added value to the job.
- Having transferable skills allows people to work effectively as part of a team.

Before Administering the TSS

Prior to administering the *TSS*, instructors and administrators should thoroughly read the *Transferable Skills Scale Administrator's Guide*. This manual provides information about the theory on which the *TSS* was based, as well as information related to the development of the assessment and reliability and validity data. The technical information included will provide administrators with means and standard deviations of sample populations similar to the students or clients with whom they are working. It is also important that anyone administering the assessment complete the *TSS* beforehand in order to become familiar with the process of taking the assessment, scoring it, and interpreting the results.

Administering the TSS

Following are some of the questions that you might have about administering, scoring, and interpreting the *TSS*:

When should I administer the TSS?

The *TSS* can be administered individually or in a group setting. If you have only a limited time with clients, you can have them complete the *TSS* ahead of time. The problem with this approach is that you will not be able to help respondents complete the assessment or answer questions related to administration or scoring. If you use this approach, make sure that the respondents understand how to properly complete the *TSS* ahead of time.

Another strategy would be to administer the assessment at the start of a group session. This method is probably most effective when you have plenty of group time or are using the *TSS* over a period of time. This allows you to be present to answer questions that students or clients may have as they complete, score, and interpret the instrument. Regardless of which way you choose, much of the group time should be spent discussing the results and helping respondents identify and explore occupations related to their transferable skills.

Begin administering the *TSS* by having students read the front cover of the assessment. You should emphasize that the *TSS* is not a test and that there are no right or wrong answers. Stress that respondents can easily take, score, and interpret the *TSS* themselves. For more instructions on administering the *TSS*, please see the administrator's guide.

What are the five steps on the TSS?

Steps are included to guide students through the administration, scoring, and interpretation of the *TSS*. These steps include:

- Step 1:** Step 1 involves completing the *TSS*. Tell respondents that the *TSS* is divided into eight transferable skills sections, each with twelve task statements. Suggest that respondents read each statement and decide how skilled they

are at that task. Then, they should circle the corresponding number next to the task statement.

- Step 2:** Step 2 involves scoring the *TSS*. Tell respondents that the items in the scales are grouped so that students may more easily identify their strongest and weakest transferable skills sets. Tell them to add up the scores they circled in each of the eight skills sections in Step 1. They should write each total on the Total line at the end of the section.
- Step 3:** Step 3 involves interpreting the scores. Tell respondents to copy each scale's total to its corresponding description. They should then interpret their scores using the scoring guide. Scores from 12-19 are low, scores from 20-28 are average, and scores from 29-36 are high. Then have respondents explore their strongest transferable skills sets by reading the descriptions and completing the steps that follow.
- Step 4:** Step 4 of the *TSS* provides sample occupations related to each of the eight transferable skills scales. Respondents should be encouraged to identify occupations listed for their highest skills sets. Be sure to make clear that the lists of occupations in Step 4 are not exhaustive; there was not enough space to list all occupations that use each skills set. The occupations listed are also representative of a wide range of education and training requirements.
- Step 5:** Step 5 of the *TSS* provides a structure to guide respondents as they explore occupations that use their transferable skills. Encourage respondents to gather information related to occupations that they are skilled at and that interest them. Have them use a variety of occupational information sources to learn more about the necessary skills, job duties, pay, and typical work day for people in occupations of interest.

Encourage respondents taking the assessment not to focus solely on the scale for which they had the highest score, but to explore occupations for any of the scales they scored above-average in. See the administrator's guide for additional information on how to interpret *TSS* scores, including an illustrative case and means and standard deviations for a more comprehensive comparison study.

Exercises and Activities for Use with the *TSS*

As mentioned previously, the *TSS* provides an ideal starting point for introspection and group discussions. The following set of exercises and activities have been designed to help respondents learn more about themselves and how their skills can transfer from occupation to occupation. Knowing what your skills are is essential in your career decision making and search for employment. Knowledge gained from the *TSS* can help you with each of the following job search related activities.

Track Your Skills Usage

Knowing your strongest transferable skills can help you in all phases of the job search. In addition, being able to articulate where, when, and how you have used these skills is crucial for successful interviewing.

Use the table that follows to mark your answers. In the first column (Major Achievements), think about your top achievements in school, on the job, at home, and in your leisure activities. After you have written an achievement in the left column, go to the middle column (Specific Tasks Involved). In this column, name the specific tasks you performed to accomplish the achievement. Then go to the right column (Skills I Demonstrated) and think about the transferable skills that were required for each of the tasks you listed in the middle column. The skills that appear most frequently in the right column should be roughly equivalent to the highest skills sets you identified using the *TSS*.

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS USAGE EXERCISE

Major Achievements	Specific Tasks Involved	Skills I Demonstrated
In School		
On the Job		
At Home		
In Leisure Activities		

Write a Resume/Complete an Employment Application

Now that you know what your transferable skills are and specific ways you have used them, you can incorporate these skills and accomplishments into your resume or on an employment application. Because computers are increasingly being used in the employment screening process, people are being asked to write resumes containing skills as keywords.

You can build a skills-based resume in much the same way as a traditional resume, except that you use nouns that identify skills sets and action verbs that describe your achievements with these skill sets. Use the following worksheet as a guide in developing a skills-based resume.

NAME
ADDRESS
PHONE NUMBERS
E-MAIL ADDRESS

PROFILE/AREAS OF EXPERTISE (Use your outstanding transferable skills from the TSS to describe your areas of expertise):

PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT (Identify your job titles at all of your places of employment, the skills you used at each job, and the length of time you were there):

EDUCATION (List your educational experiences and the skills you gained while going to school):

OTHER SKILLS (This is a “catch-all” category to talk about any skills you gained from nonwork activities, such as community service and leisure-time activities):

Answer Interview Questions

As mentioned previously, knowing your skills and being able to articulate when and where you have used them is one of the keys to successful interviewing. Think about the skills that are required for the job you are interviewing for or would *like* to interview for, and then answer the following questions using your results from the *TSS* as guidance.

Job title: _____

What kinds of work tasks would this position require? (For example, for teaching positions these words might include coaching, mentoring, interacting, grading papers, assigning homework, and creating activities. Hint: Look at the tasks listed for the related skills set in the assessment.)

Answer the following types of questions that you may be asked by an interviewer. Even when a question does not mention skills, try to focus your answer on your skills sets:

What skills have you developed?

Tell me about yourself.

Describe your ideal job.

What are your strengths?

What motivates you most in a job?

Give an example of a situation in which you provided a solution for an employer.

What did you enjoy most about your last job?

What do you like to do in your spare time?

Group Activities

Following are some group activities that can also be used to initiate a discussion after students have completed and scored the *TSS*:

- Have each student or client identify their strongest set of transferable skills and five occupations related to this skills set. Then have them gather occupational information related to these occupations from sources such as the Internet, the O*NET, and the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (see step 5 of the assessment for assistance). Have each member present their findings to the entire group. If there is time, collect all of this information into a book or database of job descriptions organized by skills sets.
- Break the class into smaller groups. Ask each smaller group to choose one of the eight scales on the *TSS*. Have the members of the group identify occupations for which the transferable skills on their scale are particularly important. Then have pairs of groups get together and identify occupations for which *both* skills sets are important. Finally, have groups present their results to the whole class.
- Ask group members to think about and then share with the group their strongest transferable skills set. Have group members talk about the types of activities that helped them to develop those transferable skills. Encourage group members not to focus solely on work activities, but to explore how they developed their skills in all aspects of their life.
- Ask students to review their *TSS* scores and identify skills sets in which they reported low scores. Have them choose one such skills set that they would like to improve, and then divide the class into smaller groups based on their primary skill deficiency. Have the members of the smaller groups brainstorm ways in which they might work to enhance their skills in that area.
- From magazines, cut out pictures of people working at various types of occupations. Then have group members create lists of transferable skills that the people in the pictures use in their occupation.
- Break the class into smaller groups. Ask each group to list some celebrity who is famous for mastery of each of the eight skills sets. Require that they cite examples of accomplishments that demonstrate each celebrity's mastery. Then bring the class together, and for each skills set have the groups read the candidates they propose, together with the examples that demonstrate mastery. Have the whole class vote for which celebrity shows the greatest mastery.

These are just some suggestions for how the *TSS* might be used in a group or classroom setting. For how it can be used more specifically as a counseling or assessment tool, please read the administrator's guide that comes free with each package of assessments or can be downloaded for free from www.jist.com.

References

- Brown, D., & Brooks, L. (1991). Career counseling techniques. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Farr, M. (1991). The very quick job search. Indianapolis, IN: JIST Publishing.
- Isaacson, L.E., & Brown, D. (1997). Career information, career counseling, and career development. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Lawson, K. (2000). K-I-S-S guide to managing your career. New York, NY: Dorling-Kindersley.
- Liptak, J.J. (2001). Treatment planning in career counseling. Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole.
- Lock, R.D. (2005). Taking charge of your career direction. Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole.
- Sherer, M., & Eadie, R. (1987). Employability skills: Keys to success. Thrust, 19 (2), 16-17.
- Tuck, L.H., Price, A., & Robertson, M. Career patterns: A kaleidoscope of possibilities. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.