The holy grail of human resources: New selection tool to revolutionize hiring

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Just about everyone has a story about being trapped in the wrong job, flip-flopping careers in search of one that fits, or just wasting time with the guidance counsellor.

Imagine the impact of a new system that would easily and accurately identify individual strengths, point people toward occupations in demand, estimate the likelihood that they would be good at them and help determine whether they would enjoy them. It would be the human resources equivalent of speed-dating, but with a higher chance of going home happy.

"This is going to seriously improve people's ability to find jobs that they love, that they are good at, and that are in demand," says Dr. Piers Steel, an associate professor of Human Resources and Organizational Dynamics at the University of Calgary's Haskayne School of Business.

Technically known as "synthetic validity", such a system has been viewed as the holy grail of business academics for more than half a century. Earlier this year, Steel and a group of colleagues from across the United States showed working models and had the idea stress-tested at the highest level. It is the focal article in the current issue of one of the top academic journals for human resources, *Perspectives on Science and Practice*.

"The best minds from our entire field took time to look it over and as a result, synthetic validity has now been vetted and approved," says Steel.

"Every expert thought it was a great idea."

This new selection tool would also be incredibly valuable, generating worldwide benefits worth trillions of dollars per year—more than $100 billion to the Canadian economy alone—says Steel.

"Any company that's interested in hiring, from huge multinational firms to simple ma-and-pa stores, would have access to a customized selection system of the highest quality at a tiny fraction of today's costs and almost instantly. We could select people for jobs and jobs for people, similar to Monster.Com, except far better."

When it comes to Canada's flagging productivity— an issue that has recently been troubling Canadian bank economists—Steel says synthetic validity would allow us to not only catch up with the United States, but surpass them.

"The benefits will be astounding, substantively decreasing unemployment with a sizeable increase to national productivity."

Though the conceptual groundwork is completed, a working system needs to be built. The finished product will draw upon an extensive database comprised of tens of thousands of previously assessed employees from at least 300 different jobs.

This will likely require the collaboration of both public and private sectors, but Steel stresses it will be worth the effort.

"If you want a way out of our present economic problems, here it is. It maximizes the benefit from the most important capital we as a society have—human capital, ourselves."

Steel was also recently selected for a prestigious Killam Trust Emerging

Research Leader Award for his efforts. The Killam Trust is devoted to distributing the $400 million estate of Izaak Walton Killam and his wife Dorothy towards advanced education and research in Canada.

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