

## Reducing Career Indecisiveness in Adults

Austin, R.K., Wagner, B. & Dahl, D. (2004). Reducing career indecisiveness in adults. *International Journal of Disability Community and Rehabilitation*, 3(2). Retrieved from [http://www.ijdc.ca/VOL03\\_02\\_CAN/articles/austin.shtml](http://www.ijdc.ca/VOL03_02_CAN/articles/austin.shtml).

### Abstract

Researchers sought to clarify whether a career decision-making intervention could reduce career indecisiveness of adults. Seventy-nine adults participated in a four-week career decision-making program based upon the Cognitive Information Processing model of career decision-making. Participants completed the Career Thoughts Inventory upon intake to categorize high and low negative career thought subgroups. Participants also completed the "indecisiveness" subscale of the Career Decision Profile upon intake and completion of the program. Analysis suggested that indecisiveness was significantly reduced among all groupings of adults. Implications are that career decision-making interventions may help to reduce career indecisiveness.

### Introduction

In her survey, Gordon (1998) noted themes found in career decision-making (CDM) research and proposed a taxonomy of career decidedness states. Three general categories of decided students and four general categories of undecided students were delineated. A final category described by Gordon was the "chronically indecisive" subtype. Individuals in this group were characterized by cognitive and affective problems such as excessive anxiety, lack of decision making clarity, reliance upon others for direction, negative personality characteristics and fear of commitment. In concluding her 20 year meta-analytic review, Gordon suggested that in order to clarify the nature of career decidedness subtypes more research was needed. Sampson, Reardon, Peterson, and Lenz (2004) proposed exploring the relationship between negative career thinking and indecisiveness. Austin, Wagner and Dahl (2003) also suggested that indecisiveness be researched vis-a-vis negative career thoughts. They recommended research be conducted with non-student and non-campus populations.

According to Sampson, Reardon, Peterson and Lenz (2004), the indecisive career decision maker faces a host of challenges. Gaps in self and occupational knowledge combined with decision making deficits limit the effectiveness of career choice. However, the major difference that distinguishes indecisiveness from indecision pertains to executive processing. Indecisive individuals may demonstrate excessive negative self talk, attention deficits, or confused thought processes. These cognitive information processing difficulties significantly impair the career choice process. Further research pertaining to negative career thoughts and indecisiveness may broaden the career decision-making literature.

Indecisiveness has been linked to negative cognitive factors. Two studies, one by Reed, Lenz, Reardon & Leierer (2000) and a replication by Austin, Wagner and Dahl (2003), found that negative career thoughts were significantly reduced among adult participants following a career decision-making intervention. In keeping with earlier recommendations, the present study utilized a non-campus, non student, unemployed adult population for its research.

## Method

Researchers used a quasi-experimental pre-test / post- test design with no control groups to measure the effect of a career decision-making intervention on indecisiveness.

The Career Thoughts Inventory or CTI (Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1996) and "indecisiveness" subscale of the Career Decision Profile or CDP (Jones, 1999) were administered to adult participants. After participants completed a CDM intervention, they completed the CDP subscale for a second time. Data analysis ascertained whether pre-test and post-test "indecisiveness" scores changed following the intervention and examined the relationship between negative career thoughts and indecisiveness.

## Participants

Seventy-nine study participants were identified through a community based referral network. All seventy-nine that registered for a government funded career decision-making intervention, were unemployed at the time of the study, and volunteered to participate.

Seventy-nine individuals completed the CTI and CDP pretest questionnaires and sixty-nine (27 male and 42 female) completed the post-test. Participants ranged in age from 17 years old to 59 years old. The mean age for the adult cohort was 38 years of age.

## Instruments

The CTI is a 48 item questionnaire designed to assess negative career thinking. Four answers are possible for each question: SD (strongly disagree); D (disagree); A (agree); SA (strongly agree). Participants are directed to circle the answer that best describes them. The CTI yields a total score which is used as a global indicator of dysfunctional career decision-making and three construct scale scores: Decision Making Confusion (DMC), Commitment Anxiety (CA), and External Conflict (EC). The DMC scale measures an inability to begin the decision-making process due to impairing emotions and/or a lack of knowledge about the process of decision-making. The CA scale measures an inability to commit to a specific career choice and the presence of generalized anxiety about the consequence of making a career decision. The EC scale represents a

person's negative thinking with regard to balancing one's own perceptions against the perceptions of significant others related to making career choices. Research has demonstrated a connection between CTI scales and perfectionism (Osborn, 1998), anger expression (Strausberger, 1998), and depression (Saunders, Peterson, Sampson, & Reardon, 2000). The CTI strongly correlates with career decision-making problems such as career indecision (Osborn, 1998; Saunders 1997). The CTI was administered at the onset of the CDM intervention and used to create discrete high and low negative career thought sub-groups.

The CDP is a 16 item inventory designed to assess individual's career decision status. Individuals circle statements with which they agree. Responses are scored on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 8 (strongly agree). Research has linked the Decisiveness subscale to state anxiety (Jones 1989; Wanberg & Munchinsky, 1992) and social anxiety (Wanberg & Munchinsky 1992). Jones (1998) noted that individuals demonstrating greater indecisiveness often require more involved and complex career counselling. The "indecisiveness" subscale of the CDP was used to ascertain whether changes pertaining to indecisiveness occurred following the intervention. The subscale was administered at the onset and completion of the CDM intervention.

## Intervention

According to Peterson, Sampson, and Reardon (1991), the Cognitive Information Processing (CIP) model of career decision-making consists of three distinct layers. Foundational to good career choice is accurate knowledge of ones self and the occupational landscape. Based upon this "self" and "occupational" information, the CIP model posits a recursive decision-making framework which consists of communication, analysis, synthesis, valuation and execution (CASVE). Finally, the apex of the CDM model posits that executive processing (self talk, monitoring and control) either facilitates or impairs the career decision process.

The CDM intervention examined in this study is based upon the CIP model and has been utilized since 1996. The intervention is comprised of integrated modular instruction, comprehensive lifework assessment, opportunity for career research, and individual vocational counselling. Modular instruction included discussing personal assessment results, vocational family mapping, vision casting, career research methods, labour market information, decision-making, and barrier analysis.

The comprehensive lifework assessment included problem-solving, emotional intelligence, aptitude, skills and personality tests. Tests of work values and interest inventories were also completed. Each test was followed by a psycho-educational component and personal application exercise.

Career and occupational research opportunities were available to all study participants. A career library (government and private resources) was augmented with dedicated databases, on-line databases, internet search engines and selected career favorites. Access and navigation of these resources was supported by a facilitator.

Individual counselling was provided to all participants in order to integrate met with clinical counsellors who have been trained in career counseling in order to clarify assessment results, discuss occupational preferences and address personal barriers. Participants were assisted in researching and coordinating resources aimed at solidifying the individual's career goal including next steps through an individual action plan.

## Results

Researchers sought to answer three questions:

- What is the relationship between negative career thoughts and indecisiveness? In particular, how do the CTI subscales (Decision Making Confusion, Commitment Anxiety and External Conflict) relate to indecisiveness?
- Is there a change in indecisiveness following a CDM intervention program?
- Is there a change in indecisiveness following a CDM intervention, based on the level of negative career thoughts?

Regarding the first question, it was anticipated that there would be a positive relationship between indecisiveness and negative career thoughts. A Pearson-product moment correlation confirmed that there was a significant positive correlation. See Table 1.

Table 1: Correlation Between Negative Career Thoughts Scales and Indecisiveness (n=77)

	CTI Global	DMC	CA	EC
CDP Pretest	.594**	.554**	.492**	.354**

\* $p < .001$

The second question sought to clarify whether a change would occur in levels of indecisiveness following a CDM program. In order to assess this question the Wilcoxin signed ranks test was applied to pre-test and post-test CDP scores. A significant decrease in levels of indecisiveness was observed after the intervention ( $p = .001$ , 1-tailed,  $n = 69$ ).

The third question sought to clarify whether changes in indecisiveness, as a function of levels of negative career thoughts, would occur following a CDM intervention. To assess this question, global CTI scores were used to determine discrete groups. High and low negative career thought groups were formed. Using the Wilcoxin signed ranks test, each group's pre-test and post-test CDP scores were compared to determine if the degree of negative career thinking was related to the change in indecisiveness. Table 2 illustrates that participants with low levels of initial negative career thinking did not significantly change with respect to indecisiveness following the CDM intervention. Participants in the high negative career thought group's indecisiveness levels were found to change significantly following the CDM intervention.

Table 2: Relationship of Indecisiveness to levels of Negative Career Thinking

	Pretest <i>M</i>	Post-test <i>M</i>	<i>Z</i>
Low CTI (n=35)	8.12	7.31	-1.62
High CTI (n=33)	12.70	9.67	-2.94*

\* $p < .01$

## Discussion

Researchers found a significant and positive relationship existed between negative career thoughts and indecisiveness. Compared to all subscales of the CTI, indecisiveness demonstrated positive relationships with decision making confusion, commitment anxiety and external conflict. In essence, the more dysfunctional an individual's career thoughts are, the more indecisive the individual is. These factors are believed to impair the career choice process. The current research findings lend support to Sampson, Reardon, Peterson, and Lenz's (2004) supposition that indecisive individuals tend toward confusion, anxiety and negative thinking.

Results of the data analysis indicated that individuals in the high negative career thought group demonstrated significantly lower indecisiveness scores following the CDM. Individuals in the low group did not significantly change. Implications of this data are that individuals demonstrating strong levels of indecisiveness may benefit from CDM interventions. Similarly, individuals with greater levels of indecisiveness may reduce their indecisiveness following a CDM intervention more effectively than individuals with low indecisiveness. A further implication is that CDM interventions may help to reduce cognitive difficulties that impair effective CDM by providing self and occupational knowledge and decision-making strategies.

The research had several areas of weakness. The total number of participants remained relatively low (pre-test n=79; post-test n=69) and therefore, generalizations may be inaccurate.

The CDM Intervention included assessments, research and counselling. It is unclear which component(s) of the CDM intervention contributed to reported changes.

A final weakness of the study is that test effect could have contributed to the reduction of indecisiveness. Since the CDP indecisiveness scale was comprised of three questions, it is possible that participants could have remembered their previous scores and altered them following the CDM intervention.

Future indecisiveness studies should incorporate larger samples. To clarify which aspects of a CDM intervention are most significant, control groups should be utilized. Research models further isolating the role of CDM intervention components (assessment, research, counselling) should also be employed.

More research should be conducted regarding the nature of career indecisiveness. This study found that levels of indecisiveness fluctuated as a result of a CDM intervention. These findings suggest that indecisiveness acts more as a function of the individual's state rather than as a personal trait. Further research should examine the nature of indecisiveness as it relates to other personality characteristics. Such research would clarify suggestions by Gordon (1998) that indecisiveness is associated with negative personality characteristics. New research should continue to sample non-student adult populations in non-campus settings. This broadens the literature by enhancing the developmental representation within adult based research.

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