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# EMPOWERING TALENTS: THE PATH TO FLOW AND ENGAGEMENT FROM POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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## Abstract

This article explores the relationship between talent development and people's well-being in the context of positive psychology, analyzing the impact of the concepts of Flow and Engagement on the school and professional success of undergraduate students. From a mixed research approach, strategies based on the diagnosis of talents for vocational guidance implemented in the users of the services offered by CIDDET are analyzed. Through case studies and recommendations, we seek to show how the alignment between strengths and career choices can improve personal satisfaction with life, academic performance and sustainable job success.

Keywords: Flow, Engagement, positive psychology, career counseling, talent development.

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## Introduction

In the current context, where labor and educational demands are increasingly demanding, it is essential to adopt vocational (career) guidance approaches that, in addition to considering the contextual conditions, promote not only professional success, but also the personal fulfillment and well-being of students and future professionals. Positive psychology, a discipline that seeks to enhance the strengths and virtues of people, offers valuable tools for vocational guidance and talent development.

## Objectives

The general objective was to identify the profile of the student's outstanding natural talents in order to use it as a basis for vocational orientation and the choice of a university career according to his or her potential. The achievement of the same was guided by the following specific objectives: a) To analyze the individual characteristics of the natural talents that stand out in students; b) To determine how the recognition of such talents can influence vocational decision making; and c) To establish a relationship between the identified talents and the most compatible professional or academic areas.

## Development

The purpose of vocational or career guidance is to help students make informed and supported decisions about their academic and professional future. It is vitally important that this process is carried out from a more comprehensive approach, considering both the inherent characteristics of the individual and the economic, political, social, cultural, educational and labor context offered by their development environment, fostering the retention rate and boosting terminal efficiency in universities, impacting on professional success by considering the factors of personal fulfillment and well-being of students and future professionals in this intricate process. The present study focuses on the latter two factors.

Counseling students should include, in the first instance, the exploration of strengths such as aptitudes, gifts, skills or talents, interests and motivations of the student, followed

by the analysis of the available information on the different careers and professions that their development context offers, to align them with the available options according to their physical, mental, cognitive, and economic possibilities that allow them to access one of them that is more aligned with their capabilities and possibilities, in search of happiness and subjective well-being that the exercise of the chosen profession will produce.

Happiness and subjective well-being are fields of study of Positive Psychology, a branch of Psychology that studies the positive aspects of human experience such as: strengths and virtues, positive emotions, and everything that makes people's lives valuable (Seligman, 1999). This science inquires about how people thrive and how they can reach their maximum development potential by understanding and promoting people's well-being and happiness.

Positive psychology has highlighted concepts such as Flow and Engagement, these constructs are key to foster talent development and vocational guidance, human talent management and education to enhance people's well-being, life satisfaction and professional success.

According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his Flow theory, Flow is a state of absolute concentration that a person experiences when performing an activity when he/she is deeply immersed to such a degree that he/she loses track of time while carrying it out, and that rewards him/her with high levels of personal satisfaction and performance in the execution of the task (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990, 1998, 1999).

When a person is engaged in doing something he/she is passionate about and feels that it "flows" when performing it, it means that he/she is completely involved and focused on the task without being distracted, that he/she really enjoys what he/she is doing because it is within his/her area of mastery and control, even if it is a bit challenging, where he/she does not realize how time passes, and when he/she notices it, he/she feels that it passed quickly. In this state of mind the person feels connected and in harmony with what he is doing, always looking for the best way to perform the activity, and thus achieving the long-awaited *optimal performance*.

On the other hand, Csikszentmihalyi considers that talent is not only an innate capacity of the human being to understand or execute a certain activity with mastery, but that it is the result of the interaction between the genetic factor (biological predispositions), and the contextual component formed by the learning opportunities presented to an individual and an environment that values and cultivates his or her capacities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990, 1998, 1999).

Studies in genetics suggest that when a person inherits from his or her parents gene versions (alleles) with alterations in the DNA sequence or with certain dominant traits, he or she is more likely to develop and express (manifest) a disease more easily (Jorde et al., 2021). Likewise, genetics is responsible for transmitting information from genes to offspring in the inheritance of physical traits such as skin color, eye color, height, complexion, among many others.

However, there is another type of genetic inheritance that is not physical but just as important as the previous ones, the inheritance of cognitive aptitudes, which works like the software (programs or instructions) of a computer so that it works as the user wants or needs it to. Similarly, genes are like an instruction manual that provides the potential and instructions for building and maintaining the human body, including the brain.

Within that manual, there are specific areas that contain information on how neurons (brain cells) develop and function, and how synapses (the process of transmitting electrical signals from one neuron to another) occur to carry out the functions of thinking, feeling and acting, and of course, the development of strengths such as talents. Likewise, with the constant practice and development of a specific talent, the group of neurons involved are connected in the development process, allowing the configuration of neural circuits for each skill or talent, as well as, the improvement of the efficiency in the communication within and outside of them.

Therefore, the inheritance of cognitive aptitudes or strengths from parents to children, are abilities, gifts and talents encoded in the genetic information of the person as predispositions or inclinations towards some vocation, which are waiting to be discovered, awakened, activated or trained through stimuli directed according to their nature to promote their development and empowerment.

When gene expression motivated by stimulation guides the development and maturation of the neural circuits that make up each aptitude, that ability can manifest, become visible and perceptible to others either as a single talent or a cluster of strengths, which the individual can deliberately use to benefit from them, achieve their professional and personal goals based on their talents, as well as bring happiness and well-being by aligning their goals with their gifts, finding their true purpose in life. By doing what you love, you generate greater commitment to the execution of the task that is in your area of interest, ability, mastery and control; and transcend by putting your talents at the service of others through the choice of a profession that is based on your genetically inherited abilities.

Among the personality traits that can be inherited are temperament (characteristics, emotional style and way of reacting to situations), extroversion (high orientation towards social interaction with others), neuroticism (tendency to experience negative emotions such as anxiety, sadness, anger or guilt with high intensity), or openness to experience (willingness of the person to try new things, be curious, imaginative, and accept new ideas). Cognitive traits include intelligence, memory, processing capacity, willingness to learn, talents such as mathematics, creativity, sports or music, among many others.

However, it is of utmost importance to understand that all heritable traits, including cognitive traits such as talent, have a genetic basis that is influenced by the context (developmental environment), and the experiential factor of the person in that environment, because the manifestation of genes predisposed to become a vocation, depends on or is influenced by environmental and experiential factors.

According to the GRIT theory proposed by Angela Duckwoth, it requires passion for what you do, perseverance, courage, focus and dedication to achieve long-term goals, even if you have innate talents, these must be developed considering all the ingredients mentioned above (Duckworth, 2022). It is necessary to stimulate them to enliven and train them to develop, understanding that, *talent that is not practiced is not developed, and is lost*. Therefore, an adequate and favorable environment is required to activate them, enhance them and make them mature and flourish.

As Csikszentmihalyi was able to prove, for a person to be deeply satisfied and happy with what he or she does, he found that there must be a relationship between the complexity of a task and the individual's level of ability. If there is a balance between these two dimensions, that is where Flow occurs (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990, 1998, 1999).

To characterize Flow, in CIDDET it has been found that the person begins to flow when he/she feels motivated to take on the challenge and faces it with a positive attitude, committed, always trusting in his/her cognitive abilities and previous experiences, the difficulty involved in the development of the task does not stop him/her, he/she knows he/she can achieve it, he/she gets deeply involved and committed to the activity, He enjoys doing it from start to finish, even if at first he has doubts, as time goes by he tests his cognitive abilities, successfully solving each part of the challenge, these small successes make him gain confidence in himself, if something stops him a little, he immediately puts his creative talent into play to come out on top.

However, when the task is too challenging in relation to the skills and knowledge of the person, he starts to get stressed, panic, his mind is clouded and his cognitive abilities are blocked, he becomes paralyzed, he does not know what to do, he enters a very high state of anxiety, the high level of stress dries his mouth, he remains silent, some report having the sensation of a slight metallic taste in the mouth, they feel intense emotions such as: anger, shame, frustration and fear. These characteristics correspond to a state of Suffering which is the complete opposite of Flow, as mentioned by Csikszentmihalyi. Prolonged exposure to this state can lead the individual to extreme exhaustion and a loss of motivation for the work being done (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990, 1998, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

There is another scenario in the study of Flow, if the individual's skills far exceed the demands of the task, he will feel it too easy, uninteresting and challenging, he will fall into "boredom" and disinterest in performing the activity, he may feel lazy or perform the activity with too much laxity, with low energy because it does not challenge him or demand the use of greater cognitive resources, feel too relaxed with desire to slow down or abandon the task, act with carelessness and negligence that translates into low level of performance and quality in the execution of their work. This condition leads to demotivation and disconnection from the task because it does not provide sufficient stimulation.

The optimal state, according to Csikszentmihalyi, is the flow state, where the challenge of the task matches his or her skill level. In this state, the person is fully engaged, motivated

and happy because the task pushes the individual to grow without becoming overwhelmed (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990).

At the Centro de Diagnóstico, Investigación y Desarrollo de Talentos (CIDDET) in Mexico it has been proven through its Talent Diagnostic Model that, if an individual is presented with appropriate learning opportunities aligned with those genetic predispositions of cognitive attributes such as talents, in a positive and favorable developmental environment that deliberately values and nurtures his or her abilities, it is easier for the set of genes predisposed to emerge and flourish as a complex cognitive aptitude trait, such as intelligence, talent, ability or strength of character to develop and manifest because they are all mostly polygenic, i.e., influenced by the interaction of very many genes.

Her Vocational Guidance Model based on diagnosed talents, whose foundation is found in several theories of Positive Psychology such as Flow and Engagement taken from the PERMA model of psychological well-being proposed by Martin Seligman, focuses on identifying activities that generate *Flow* in the person (e.g. art, sports, public speaking, science, mathematics, leadership, etc.) can reveal their natural talents and vocational preferences aligned with the diagnosed strengths. Work or study environments are then designed to favor development and empowerment with activities that are within the level of capability (challenges balanced with the individual's abilities).

This paper explains how CIDDET, under the direction of the author of this text, implements talent-based vocational guidance strategies to guide young people in their professional decisions based on the diagnosis of the physical and cognitive traits genetically inherited from their parents and those developed in their environment during their lifetime. In this model of diagnosis, development, empowerment and maturation of talents whose conceptual theoretical support is based on the paradigm of positive psychology, where a valuable contribution is found in the concepts of Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1999) and Engagement of Seligman's PERMA model of psychological well-being (Schaufeli, Bakker & Salanova, 2006; Bakker & Salanova, 2006; Schaufeli, Bakker & Salanova, 2006). Salanova, 2006; Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern, & Seligman, 2011), and are presented as fundamental pillars for fostering successful and meaningful career paths.

## Problem Statement

In Mexico, as in many other Latin American countries, the choice of a university career is often based on superficial interests or pressures external to the student, leaving aside the strengths and capabilities inherent to the individual. This discrepancy between vocational choices and the individual's talents leads to unfavorable results in academic achievement and performance, career changes due to lack of ability or incompetence, incompatibility of strengths, loss of interest, dropping out of school, dissatisfaction with life, and unhappiness.

In case of being forced to finish their studies and exercise the trade or profession without feeling a genuine passion for what they do, it becomes a permanent frustration towards their professional, generating a negative perception towards work, and a feeling of dissatisfaction and personal disappointment that translates into unhappiness and subjective discomfort, therefore, they experience dissatisfaction with life because they have many negative thoughts, feelings and emotions, and few positive ones. In addition to low job performance and lack of commitment to their employer, among others. Against this background, there is a need for a positive vocational guidance approach focused on the development of outstanding talents to ensure that young people find their Flow and Engagement in their future profession.

In a study conducted worldwide during the last decade of this century, the Gallup Institute of the United States released the list of countries in the Latin American region that have workers completely happy with what they do, and it was found that in Mexico only 12% of employees are really happy with their jobs, and 60% live frustrated and dissatisfied, and 28% hate their jobs. For its part, Brazil has the happiest workers in the region represented with 27 %, although it is still a very worrying figure, it has 62 % of frustration and dissatisfaction, and 12 % hate what they do negatively impacting the productivity of companies (Forbes, 2013; Ibarra and Dominguez, 2022).

Vocational guidance in Mexico, is carried out as part of the services offered by higher education institutions (secondary and high school) by traditional methods, however, some parents choose to hire private career counseling services to ensure that their children choose their college career properly, and in other cases, when the student has tried to study in two or three careers and is not convinced of his or her choice of profession. These are the cases that commonly come to request the services of CIDDET, which since its inception has guided 426 young people in the importance of talent diagnosis as a basis for choosing their university studies, and entrepreneurship based on their talents.

## Methodology

CIDDET employs a mixed research approach, elaborating different types of experimental and quasi-experimental studies, exploratory and descriptive, cross-sectional and longitudinal, prospective and retrospective, and case studies, with the aim of obtaining a comprehensive result in the diagnosis of talent profile for the choice of university career, vocational guidance based on talent diagnosis, and evaluation of performance and professional success, as well as the experimentation of happiness and psychological well-being in the professions. It uses a variety of instruments for data collection, which may include standardized psychometric assessments, in-depth interviews, life histories, surveys, self-completed forms, field diaries, content analysis, and generation of information required for each process.

The following are some examples of specific instruments that can be applied in the talent profile diagnostic processes for the identification of strengths: Assessments based on theories such as Clifton Strengths, Gallup Talents, VIA Institute Character Strengths, among others, to highlight the areas where the individual naturally excels.

The present research report is part of a broader research that has been ongoing since 2012, it is of experimental type, with diagnostic intervention and talent development, the study is exploratory and longitudinal in scope. By way of example, 3 research units have been extracted from the 12 that make up the first group with which CIDDET began its research. The behavior of this study population has been observed and analyzed over time, since they were children, their age ranged between 11 and 14 years, (students studying at two levels of basic education, primary and secondary) in 2012. At that time, the diagnosis of talents and the first intervention in the deployment of their strengths were carried out. Some number over the total number of registered cases and consequently, 3 are taken as an example.

At the end of the educational intervention by CIDDET, a recommendation was made to the parents so that they could give continuity to the development of their children from that moment on according to their possibilities. Data were collected repeatedly from the same individuals every 4 years, to observe and analyze the natural behavior of the parents and children who participated in the research, which allowed the researcher to study the changes, trends and causal relationships as they occurred until they completed their university studies in 2024, the results of which are presented below.

## Research Question

What profile of outstanding natural talents does the student have that serves as a basis for vocational orientation and college career choice?

## Analysis and explanation

### *Case studies*

- Summary of Case 1: Elementary school student who began his diagnosis at age 11, after discovering his profile of talents and strengths in areas of exact sciences such as mathematics and physics, with scientific talent, leadership, entrepreneurship, complex problem solving, creativity, business administration and simulation, and built environments. The recommendation made by CIDDET in terms of career options to study, was in first place the career of Civil Engineering or areas related to construction,

in second place, the degree in Physics - Mathematics, and third place, the degree in Business Administration.

At the time of choosing his professional career he thought about studying the second option, Physics and Mathematics, after evaluating the field of work and the opportunities they represented, he changed his mind and decided on Civil Engineering where his greatest talent was diagnosed, and mentioned that he would study Physics as a second university career at the same time or later. However, by aligning his talents with his ideal career choice, he mentioned feeling a significant commitment to his career, he was deeply involved in his activities to the extent that sometimes he did not sleep enough, not only to meet his schoolwork deadlines but also because he said he had enough energy and motivation to finish them.

His high level of leadership during his studies, allowed him to actively participate in the university community, being part of the executive committee of his university whose function was to make proposals for the improvement of study conditions of the academic community. His high skills in research and innovation allowed him to develop research in his professional field to innovate in construction processes, his contribution improves the conditions of future generations of his career.

The student showed a high level of Engagement, evidenced by his significant commitment to his career, reflected in his total immersion in his activities, his willingness to invest time and effort in academic tasks, even sacrificing hours of sleep, not out of obligation but out of passion. His leadership and active participation in the university community, both in the executive committee and in the improvement of study conditions for future generations.

- Summary of Case 2: Student who started her talent diagnosis at the age of 12, pressured to study industrial engineering by tradition and faced academic challenges, her dad wanted her to study industrial engineering career, however, according to her diagnosed talent profile, her greatest abilities were oriented to civil engineering career, However, her father convinced her to study industrial engineering, which is the career he studied, even though his daughter had her talent diagnosis requested to CIDDET by her own father, he insisted her to study industrial engineering because it represented greater labor and economic advantages in the future, and he managed to convince her.

  She commented that when she was studying industrial engineering she was getting a little frustrated because some subjects were difficult for her, and at that time she was about to drop out of college because of the high level of stress and anxiety it generated, however, her academic talent, innovation, resilience and perseverance, discipline, responsibility, productivity, autonomous learning, and adaptation to change, autonomous learning, and adaptation to change, allowed her to successfully face

and resist the demands of the career, and although it represented a greater challenge to her abilities and strengths, with a little more effort, commitment and dedication she was able to successfully achieve her dream of becoming a professional although within the industrial engineering field.

Resilience is the ability to face adversity and recover from difficult situations (Luthans et al., 2007). In this case, the student showed resilience by not dropping out of college despite the stress and anxiety that her career generated. She faced her difficulties and found ways to move forward with effort, commitment and dedication.

Engagement is the state of commitment and energy in work or study, characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption as mentioned above. In this case, despite the fact that the career was not her initial choice, the student developed Engagement by committing to her education and striving for professional success.

The state of Flow occurs when a person is fully immersed in a challenging but manageable activity, experiencing concentration and enjoyment. Although the student had moments of extreme challenge, her ability to adapt allowed her to find a certain level of fluency in learning, overcoming obstacles and achieving academic success.

- Summary of Case 3: A student who, due to her parents' interests, was studying medicine, after two semesters of having started and realizing that her career was not aligned with her previously diagnosed strengths, she decided to leave the career and begin to study a degree in Literature, which was aligned with her talents, she managed to successfully complete her career, participate in contests and literary projects where she stood out for her literary skills.

- The bachelor's degree in literature is a career that combines critical analysis, creativity and aesthetic sensibility for the study of literary texts, their historical contexts and their impact on society. To be successful in this career, it requires diverse talents that encompass linguistic, analytical and communicative skills, strengths that she had developed.

  As in the previous case, her resilience allowed her to face adversity and recover from the difficult situations she experienced during her two semesters of medical school, and to venture out to start her university studies anew. The student overcame the fear of change and the reactions of her family environment about the change of decision, demonstrating psychological strength to adapt to a new situation.

  The state of Flow and Engagement she experienced when changing careers was completely different, she demonstrated passion, commitment, with a high degree of immersion in the activities that were aligned with her talents, and although they often

represented a significant but manageable challenge in the Bachelor of Arts degree, she experienced energy, concentration and enjoyment of what she was learning.

These cases demonstrate how a talent-based approach can enhance academic and career satisfaction, increasing intrinsic motivation and engagement.

## Conclusions

Some conclusions: The talent-based vocational guidance model is not the panacea that will solve the problem of school dropout, academic achievement, nor the happiness and well-being of people in the educational and work environment, but it does contribute to student retention, subjective and group happiness and well-being in the work field.

Parents who have seen their children complete a university degree feel proud of their academic achievements, because they found Flow and Engagement that contributes to their happiness, which is what every parent wants for their children.

The students and now professionals participating in this longitudinal study have successfully entered the labor market in a dignified and satisfying job, and/or have started their own businesses, are productive and are beginning to become independent.

They experienced Flow and Engagement during their training, and now during the exercise of their professions, they mention feeling happy and satisfied doing what they love the most.

Lower middle class young people often prioritize careers with high economic remuneration to ensure stability, but this often leads to school and professional failure due to the disenchantment they face when they see that their abilities are not enough to successfully navigate their careers from start to finish.

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