

# Using the *Strong Interest Inventory*<sup>®</sup> Assessment to Retain a Motivated, Competent Workforce

## A Case Study of Riverside County



### CASE STUDY AT A GLANCE

#### BUSINESS OVERVIEW

Riverside County is home to one of California's major population centers and employs more than 20,000 workers in over 1,600 job classifications.

#### CHALLENGE

Riverside County has had difficulty filling many of its positions with top-quality talent. Though many employees are interested in expanding their career while remaining within the county, often the career they think they want and the career they'll enjoy and excel in are not one in the same. The challenge lies in identifying the optimum career/educational path for each county employee.

#### SOLUTION

Riverside County's Educational Support Program is designed to keep positions filled while improving overall performance by helping employees identify and chart an educational path to the county positions in which they are most likely to succeed. The program features the *Strong Interest Inventory*<sup>®</sup> assessment, which identifies careers and academic paths employees are likely to enjoy by comparing their results with those of like-minded people who have already found a satisfying career.

#### RESULTS

Notable improvement has occurred in the academic performance of program participants, with very few dropping out of school—a result directly tied to the ability of the *Strong* to identify courses of study that effectively capture students' interest. The program has also led to improved productivity, fewer sick days, and better customer service and is anticipated to dramatically improve employee retention rates in the near future.

Riverside County is home to one of California's major population centers, as well as numerous industries and educational institutions. It takes tremendous "people power" to keep a county of this size running, and Riverside employs more than 20,000 workers who manage various services that make it a desirable place to live.

Not unlike many other counties nationwide, Riverside has in the past had difficulty maintaining its workforce and filling its positions with top-quality talent. Positions that are difficult to fill include nurses, engineers, animal services workers, public defenders, and probation officers in juvenile hall. To address this problem, the county has pursued an innovative course of action designed to keep positions filled while improving productivity and quality of service.

#### THE EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT PROGRAM—BUILDING A STRONGER WORKFORCE

Shondi Lee, MEd, is Riverside County's educational support program manager and principal human resources analyst/career counselor. As such, she is tasked with implementing and managing the county's Educational Support Program, designed to assist employees returning to college. One of the program's key goals is to help staff county departments by, in essence, recruiting current county employees for other county positions—many of which are difficult to fill—and then enabling them to attain the education level required to enter those positions.

In total, the county designates 1,600 job classifications. Riverside employees for the most part enjoy working for the county, and many of them have held county positions for a considerable number of years. However, many are also interested in furthering their education and expanding their career to reach new horizons. The Educational Support Program enables them to accomplish this career development while retaining the stability, benefits, and overall desirable work environment that Riverside offers. Additionally, the program offers a variety of other benefits, ranging from loan repayment and various forms of financial assistance to 20/20 work/school splits for certain courses of study.

The program, which began in 2007, serves something of a dual purpose. By providing extra value to the employees, it makes county jobs more attractive and enables the county to fill difficult positions with quality candidates. The program also helps boost productivity and other bottom-line results for Riverside. This is primarily due to the fact

that it does not simply direct employees to available jobs. Rather, it makes a focused and concerted effort to connect employees with the positions in the county for which they will find the highest level of job satisfaction and consequently perform the highest-quality work.

### USING THE *STRONG* TO IDENTIFY OPTIMAL CAREER OPTIONS

To help pinpoint the right career direction for each individual, Lee relies heavily on the *Strong Interest Inventory*<sup>®</sup> assessment from CPP, Inc. Used for over 50 years by U.S. colleges and universities,\* the *Strong* helps individuals select a career by giving them insight into their interests, preferences, and personal styles. It enables them to identify specific careers and academic paths they're likely to enjoy by comparing their results with those of like-minded people who have already found a satisfying career.

Lee first became familiarized with the *Strong* at her previous position as an academic advisor at a community college and has been using it for this program for nearly a year. "I'm here to guide them through significant transition," said Lee. "The *Strong* offers a streamlined and easy-to-understand yet very informative format that provides a foundation for what will wind up being major life changes."

### THE PROCESS—SMALL STEPS THAT LEAD TO BIG CHANGES

"I want to make sure that the employees I work with are aware of everything and can truly envision the big picture," said Lee. "I try, therefore, to give them all the knowledge I've gained over my ten years in counseling so that they can make the absolute best decision."

All participants are required to take the *Strong* prior to their first meeting. Lee then meets with them for approximately one hour to review the results, explaining what they mean in terms of possible career direction. Additionally, she reviews their resume and discusses their current career aspirations. The conversation always includes discussion of experience, transferable skills, and college transcripts.

Upon reviewing individual participants' *Strong* assessment results along with their background, Lee works with them to identify potential careers and then narrow down the list to three or four focus areas. Once those areas have been identified, Lee provides them with informational resources such as Web sites and printed literature.

Once a few career options have been identified, Lee helps participants identify and understand the academic requirements of those professions. She also helps them factor in the cost of a career change and figure out how they can accomplish their goals within their budget requirements.

Following participants' individual research, Lee works with them to narrow down the list to two careers. They then explore several questions together, such as:

- What will it take to get the necessary college degree?
- Are the educational demands feasible for someone with a full-time job?

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*"People who are unfamiliar with the Strong are typically surprised at how accurately it identifies their own interests. Often it identifies fields of work that they had thought about but never really considered."*

—*Shondi Lee, Educational Support Program Manager, Principal Human Resources Analyst/Career Counselor*

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She then works with them to identify volunteer, internship, and job shadow opportunities, as well as other activities, to provide a hands-on feel for the day-to-day work in which they'll be involved. Additionally, she works with them to view their educational path from the perspective of future employers.

"The goal is not just to go to school for a piece of paper but to actually become qualified to do the job," said Lee. "Whether justified or not, there exists the perception of 'diploma mills' versus true educational institutions. If you go to a school perceived as a diploma mill, you may have to step up and *prove* what you know to a potential employer."

### CORRECTING PERCEPTIONS

The goals of the employees she works with range from a desire to enhance their current profession to a total career shift. Lee's goal and directive, however, is not simply to help people connect with the career they *think* they want. Rather, it is to create a path to a career that will enable them to derive true satisfaction and add maximum value to the county through their energy, enthusiasm, and talents. Often the career that people want and the career they'll enjoy and excel in are not one and the same.

"A lot of people come in and say, 'I want to be a nurse' because of job stability and a desire to help people," said Lee. "However, the reality of the kind of work that nurses do, and the school curriculum required, means that nursing is not necessarily something that everyone will enjoy or excel at. The *Strong* helps open their mind to other options that are more in line with their interests."

Understanding that people's notions of careers often do not measure up to reality, Lee is attuned to certain signs that indicate when an employee's perception of a profession is skewed. "When individuals have *nursing* on their form, I always dig a little deeper and often find that they are not necessarily in tune with the job itself and its demands," said Lee. "The *Strong* helps us pinpoint those interests and desires that led them initially to nursing and identify other professions that fulfill those interests for which they will be much more suited and likely to find success working in."

\*Source: 2009 CPP, Inc., sales.

Social worker is another job that Lee identifies as a frequent source of confusion, with people often citing an interest in sociology coursework or their love of children as their motive for wanting to enter that field.

Helping people, Lee says, is something that can be accomplished in a variety of careers, and the kind of help that nurses and social workers provide is not necessarily the kind of help that everyone is going to enjoy providing. Furthermore, the science-heavy curriculum required by nursing in particular is not something for which everyone possesses the aptitude or inclination.

Lee also points to popular media as a source of misinformation regarding careers. “Careers as they are depicted on TV—particularly those within the medical and law enforcement professions—are often quite different from reality,” said Lee. “Unfortunately, TV often shapes people’s opinions, and we have to work to bring perception in line with reality.”

### THE *STRONG* AND THE “AHA!” MOMENT

Of course, there wouldn’t be much benefit in helping people discover what they don’t want to do for a living if it weren’t followed by concrete insight into the kinds of careers that they might actually enjoy. This is where the *Strong* becomes particularly useful.

According to Lee, reactions to the *Strong* results are typically very positive, ranging from pleasant surprise to feelings of affirmation. “People who are unfamiliar with the *Strong* are typically very surprised at how accurately it identifies their own interests,” said Lee. “Often it identifies fields of work that they had thought about but never really considered.”

This, she says, is because most people don’t associate their own interests with a career. More often they are looking at outcomes rather than the kinds of daily activities involved in the work. Rather than having them focus on the end result, however, Lee tries to get them to think about the process—from the education required to the actual carrying out of the work. Many people, she asserts, have a great deal of difficulty separating willingness or ability from preference. When choosing a career, she says, it’s important for people to be honest and say, “I don’t want to do that, but I do want to do this.”

“Using the *Strong*, I help them factor in those often overlooked aspects of their individuality, such as how they process information, relate to other people, and other items that have much more to do with job satisfaction than a title or paycheck,” said Lee.

### SUCCESS STORIES

As everyone who enters her office wants to continue to work within the county, Lee often has to help them identify county jobs that involve activities and work environments similar to those found in careers identified by the *Strong*. “I try to make them aware of all the options available within

the various county departments,” said Lee. “With 1,600 job classifications within the county there are usually excellent options to choose from.”

For example, Lee worked with one employee who was pursuing a degree in an IT-related field. His *Strong* results, however, indicated a clear preference for the medical field. Since he had already invested time and money in his IT degree, he insisted on staying the course but later found himself unhappy in his position. Lee helped him find a career path that utilizes his background in a more fruitful way. He is now pursuing a nursing license that will enable him to use his IT bachelor’s degree.

Lee also points to how working with people with similar interests tends to completely change employees’ perceptions of their job. Another employee Lee worked with was dissatisfied with her job in an engineering department. The *Strong* assessment confirmed that her interests were quite different from those of people who typically work in engineering. Her interests did, however, strongly correlate with those of people in the social services field. Consequently, Lee helped her make the move to the social services department and begin pursuing a degree in clinical therapy.

### BOTTOM-LINE BENEFITS

Aligning people with their ideal career has bottom-line benefits beyond the abstract. Having happier workers, Lee says, equals higher productivity and less sick time. This, of course, carries over into areas such as customer service, which is directly tied to whether or not individuals enjoy their job.

“When people are in a profession that is the right fit for them, they’re more willing to go above and beyond,” said Lee. “It should come as no surprise that if someone enjoys their work, they’re willing to do more of it.”

The notion that employees who enjoy their work are more likely to produce quality results is supported by numerous studies, as well as the work of Kenneth W. Thomas, PhD, author of *Intrinsic Motivation at Work: What Really Drives Employee Engagement* and coauthor of the *Work Engagement Profile* (CPP, Inc., 2009). According to Thomas in his recent article in *Human Resources Executive*,\*\* intrinsic rewards—those positive emotional charges that are derived from enjoyment of the work itself—are among the most powerful indicators of workplace engagement and, therefore, success.

Additionally, Lee has observed notable improvement in the academic performance of program participants as they pursue the degrees/certificates required for their new career. The retention rate, she says, has been rising, with very few dropping out of school. This, she believes, is directly tied to the ability of the *Strong* to identify courses of study that effectively capture students’ interest—a major factor in academic success—and will ultimately lead to a more educated and competent workforce.

\*\* Kenneth W. Thomas, “The Right Kind of Retention: Using Intrinsic Rewards to Keep Employees Who Are Engaged,” *Human Resources Executive*, January 25, 2010.

## CONCLUSION

For Lee, the process of implementing and managing the program continues to be a very rewarding endeavor. “I’ve met with more than 1,200 employees since I started at this position,” she said. “This is something that truly changes people’s outlook, and it starts with using the *Strong* to open their eyes to all their options. It’s very gratifying to be involved in a program that directly improves both the lives of the employees and the overall health of the organization.”

The Educational Support Program and its use of the *Strong Interest Inventory* assessment is helping improve quality of life in Riverside County by ensuring that department positions—many of which are critical to maintaining the county’s infrastructure—are filled by candidates who are not only qualified but also passionate about their work. The program, according to Lee, provides bottom-line benefits to the county such as improved productivity, fewer sick days, and better customer service. Additionally, the program is anticipated to dramatically improve employee retention rates in the near future. Riverside County is investing in its most important asset: the people who keep its cities running and make it a place where people want to build their life.

## About CPP, Inc.

Since its founding in 1956, CPP, Inc., has been a leading publisher and provider of innovative products and services for individual and organizational development. CPP has been supplying reliable training solutions to businesses of all sizes, including the Fortune 500, for more than 50 years. The company’s hundreds of unique offerings have been used by millions of individuals in more than 100 countries, in more than 20 languages, to help people and organizations grow and develop by improving performance and increasing understanding. Among CPP’s world-renowned brands are the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*® (MBTI®), *Strong Interest Inventory*®, *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (TKI), *FIRO-B*®, *CPI 260*®, and *California Psychological Inventory*™ (CPI™) assessments.

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