

ATK Aerospace Systems

The *Strong Interest Inventory*® Assessment Offers Rocket Fuel to Careers of Emerging Talent



CASE STUDY AT A GLANCE

BUSINESS OVERVIEW

ATK is an Minneapolis-based, 18,000-employee aerospace and defense industry company that recognizes that its value is determined by its ability to harness the talent, intelligence, and creativity of its workforce. ATK Aerospace Systems is the world's top producer of solid rocket propulsion systems and a leading supplier of military and commercial aircraft structures.

CHALLENGE

With rapidly evolving Defense Department initiatives, scheduled discontinuance of the Space Shuttle program, and the worst economic downturn in generations, ATK (its Aerospace Systems Group in particular) is facing a critical juncture. ATK Aerospace Systems made stabilizing its business outlook top priority and determined that focusing on its leaders was one way to energize the organization and achieve the desired outcome.

SOLUTION

The Aerospace Systems Human Resources department introduced a program with the ultimate goal of creating an agile, empowered, and accountable workforce. The HR team employed career development as a tool to attract, retain, and energize top talent, leveraging CPP's *Strong Interest Inventory*® assessment and *Work/Life Values Checklist* to enable high-performing employees to more fully align their personal interests and values with their career path and the company's strategic objectives.

RESULTS

Survey results indicate that the majority of participants are on a solid path to developing a career that more closely aligns with their interests and values, thus positioning themselves to contribute more meaningfully to ATK's bottom line and gain greater fulfillment from their work.

ATK—WHERE EMPLOYEES ARE "MISSION CRITICAL"

ATK is a Minneapolis-based defense industry company with 18,000 employees and business lanes that include aerospace systems, armament systems, missile products, and security and sporting. ATK's Aerospace Systems division is the world's top producer of solid rocket propulsion systems and a leading supplier of military and commercial aircraft structures. It has supported human and space payload missions extensively.

As a company operating at the forefront of science, engineering, and technology under the motto "Innovation... Delivered," ATK recognizes perhaps more than most organizations that its value is determined by its ability to harness the talent, intelligence, and creativity of its employees.

"Career development is critical to our success," said Jeff Brody, Vice President, Human Resources, ATK Aerospace Systems. "It's vital that employees have an opportunity to grow and contribute in new ways and are excited about future opportunities."

EVOLVING BUSINESS LANDSCAPE OFFERS CHALLENGES

Change has been a continual part of the business over the past year at ATK. With the triple onslaught of a revamped NASA budget, rapidly evolving Defense Department initiatives, and the worst economic downturn in generations, the organization is facing a critical juncture. Its Aerospace Systems Group faces a particular challenge in that a large portion of its business focuses on producing rocket boosters for the Space Shuttle. As the Shuttle program is scheduled to end, this has been a major source of uncertainty.

In consequence of turbulent times, ATK Aerospace Systems made stabilizing its business outlook top priority and determined that focusing on its leaders was the best way to energize the organization and achieve the desired outcome.

In support of this focus, Sandra Stroope, from the ATK Aerospace Systems Human Resources department, partnered with Bonnie Hagemann of Executive Development Associates (EDA) to design a program—with input and oversight from Jeff Brody, LeAnn Dickerson, Alicia Ashton, Suzette Taylor, Sharon Giles, Chad Miskin, Toni Mund, Nancy Kobel, Vicki Werling, Tom Bunn, and Jennifer

Jacobsen and feedback from interviews with company leaders—with the ultimate goal of creating an agile, empowered, and accountable workforce.

The aforementioned challenges as well as resultant workforce reductions have, understandably, strained the employee base. Therefore, ATK Aerospace Systems has made the task of retaining top talent a critical priority. To address this issue, the HR team has employed career development as a tool to attract, retain, and energize top talent.

THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP: ALIGNING INTERESTS AND VALUES TO CAREERS

The HR team's goal is to engage *emerging talent* within the organization and help these individuals understand how to align their talents and interests with the company's business directives in order to develop a highly productive, fulfilling career. The team, therefore, tailored the Career Development Workshop toward individuals identified as *high-potential* leaders.

The program, initially delivered to 95 participants, began with a series of pre-workshop assessments—including CPP's *Strong Interest Inventory*® (*Strong*) instrument—followed by an eight-hour career development workshop that teaches individuals how to

- Take ownership of career decisions
- Align personal interests with organizational needs
- Draft an ideal job description
- Consider alternatives
- Use resources and tools available within the organization
- Conduct a conversation with a leader or mentor and set realistic goals

The program uses a career development model called "AIM," which is composed of four steps:

- A—understand **ATK**
- I—assess personal **I**nterests
- M—develop **M**ultiple career options
- Create an action plan

The beginning of the workshop focuses on the "A" in AIM—understanding ATK's business environment, the business case for the program, and how the changing environment affects the company's strategies and needs. Discussion focuses on how the workplace culture influences the individual career, and how generational differences within the company may play out in office interactions.

These higher-level discussions provide a context for the next portion of the workshop, which centers on *personal interest*—the most important indicator of job satisfaction and success, according to Stroope and Hagemann.

THE STRONG ASSESSMENT—CONNECTING THE CAREER "DOTS"

The second part of the workshop focuses on the "I" in AIM, offering participants a chance to assess their personal interests and pinpoint the specific kind of work they want to do on a day-to-day basis. To help participants understand

"The Strong portion of the workshop tends to be one of the things that participants value."

—Saundra Stroope,
ATK Aerospace Systems
Human Resources Department

how their own interests play out in various company roles, ATK relies on the *Strong* assessment, a career guidance tool from CPP, Inc., that helps people identify careers based on personal interests.

Used by more than 70% of U.S. colleges and universities,* the *Strong* assessment helps people select a career by giving them insight into their interests, preferences, and personal styles. The *Strong* enables them to identify specific jobs and activities they're likely to enjoy by comparing their results with those of like-minded people who have already found a satisfying career. It also generates a list of the top ten occupations they're most likely to find rewarding.

The Career Development Workshop leverages the *Strong* to help participants accomplish one or more of the following:

- Choose a career path or specific job
- Identify satisfying work environments
- Enrich current work
- Generate ideas for volunteer or leisure activities outside work to help achieve greater work/life balance

Participants take the *Strong* online as pre-work prior to the workshop. Before they actually review the assessment results, however, the workshop takes them through a broad discussion of occupational themes within ATK, and then specific jobs associated with each theme.

Following this discussion, the workshop offers each participant a full review of his or her *Strong* assessment results, as well as the opportunity to ruminate over them and fully digest the occupational themes the instrument generates. In fulfillment of the "M" step in AIM—develop Multiple career options—participants are given information regarding career motivators and job tasks for careers that most highly align with their interests. They are counseled to focus not on job *titles*, but on the actual tasks and phrases highlighted in their report.

INSIGHT AND REACTIONS TO THE STRONG RESULTS

Facilitators occasionally encounter participants whose *Strong* results indicate little connection between their work and interests. In some cases people have entered into a career for family or other reasons. However, it's more typical for them to find that their career and interests are closely aligned in many respects. This is not entirely surprising, as

* Source: 2008 CPP, Inc., sales data

participants are those within the company identified as top performers. As interest is a key indicator of performance, one would expect high performers to have a high degree of interest in their job.

Insights from the *Strong* are helpful not only for career choices, but also for enabling participants to adjust their work/life balance. For example, participants may realize that they need to pursue activities that address certain areas of interest. One participant found that his interest in outdoor activities kept manifesting itself in his *Strong* results. However, his job was primarily office based, and he had stopped his work as a part-time ski instructor. The *Strong* helped him realize that he might be able to achieve greater effectiveness at work if he engaged in more outdoor extracurricular activities.

In general, participants find value in the *Strong* and the opportunity it provides for self-reflection. “While reactions vary from surprise to affirmation, the *Strong* portion of the workshop tends to be one of the things that participants value,” said Stroope. “Often people are so busy at work that they don’t have time to reflect on the big picture of where their career is headed. This gives them information and tools to examine their career choices, path, and future in a focused, structured, and meaningful way.”

THE WORK/LIFE VALUES CHECKLIST—FINDING MEANING IN WORK

Using CPP’s *Work/Life Values Checklist*, workshop participants identify their core values and explore how their current or projected career path either supports or works against them, and how they can bring their values and their career path in line with each other. The results from the *Work/Life Values Checklist* can be very personal and serve to shed light on the kinds of changes employees might need to make. If people feel their values are not in line with the kind of work they’re doing day-to-day, the program helps them determine actions they can take to change their situation. Stroope reports that, in general, the people who are most affected by the *Work/Life Values Checklist* are those who feel their work and values are out of alignment.

TAKING “AIM”—PUTTING LEARNING INTO ACTION

Later on, participants are asked to take the information gleaned from the *Strong*, the *Work/Life Values Checklist*, and various other assessments included in the workshop and create the description of an “ideal job,” with the goal of defining the kind of work role that best suits them. They then incorporate this information into a *career action plan*, which can be compared to the role they currently have. This allows them to think about other roles at ATK, and what actions they may need to take to obtain the kind of job they’d ideally like to have.

The next step involves a briefing on how best to hold a “career conversation,” emphasizing that employees are the owners of their own career and success. During the briefing the HR team provides tools and resources designed to facilitate productive and insightful career conversations. This is followed by an actual conversation between the program

participant and his or her leader or mentor, who is available to advise and coach.

Once participants have drafted an action plan, the HR team guides them as they detail short-term goals and aspirations, as well as long-term goals, and immediate action steps to be taken within the next 90 days. The participants then enter these plans and goals into an interactive system called Total Talent @ ATK, which enables them to implement them more effectively over the coming months.

The foundation for the action plan, however, actually begins at the onset of the workshop, as participants discuss why career development is important to both the business and the individual. Included in the discussion is the impact the right career has on engagement and productivity, essentially making the business case for how attaining job satisfaction makes people more productive and creative, ultimately leading to higher levels of customer satisfaction and increased revenue.

RESULTS

While the program is still relatively new, program facilitators have observed participants taking concrete steps to define their career. Additionally, post-workshop evaluations indicate that participants have found value in the program. The average post-workshop evaluation for the first workshop, on a scale of 1 to 5, was 4.30.

Participants surveyed 90 days after the workshop to assess the status of their career plan and the impact of the program reported an increase in their ability to take ownership of, and a proactive approach to, managing their career. The most common actions reported include network building, using internal tools and resources, defining career goals, discussing career goals and their action plan with others (leaders, peers, and mentors), and gaining new development experiences at work.

CONCLUSION—ALIGNING CAREERS, INTERESTS, AND VALUES FOR THE COMMON GOOD

The Career Development Workshop was rolled out in the context of the mentoring program at ATK. However, as the response has been so positive, it now serves as a stand-alone workshop as well.

Insights gained through CPP’s *Strong Interest Inventory* assessment and *Work/Life Values Checklist* provide an opportunity for participants to think specifically about their career aspirations in very concrete ways. With the availability of more detail regarding personal interests and values, and how those may or may not relate to the day-to-day tasks of a particular position, participants are in a better position to determine, for example, whether or not they’d like to “move up,” or perhaps specialize in a technical role.

Additionally, the program tangibly illustrates that the company is invested in its employees. According to Stroope, this is recognized by participants, who comment that the program helps them feel appreciated and that the company cares about their development.

In summary, as ATK Aerospace Systems' employees develop careers that more closely align with their interests and values, they are positioning themselves to contribute more meaningfully to the company and gain greater fulfillment from their work. Consequently, ATK is well-positioned to reduce employee churn for top talent and is fine-tuning its organization to maximize the collective talents, intelligence, and creativity of its workforce, thereby preparing to successfully navigate any challenges that may come its way.

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