AIMS Solves Job Puzzle

The Dallas Morning News
By Theodore Kurrus

"I have never found a highly creative man who could succeed in a dull job," offers John Gaston. You can't have talent and deny a person from using it."

Talent – more specifically "inherent natural ability" – is John Gaston's specialty. He's director of AIMS, a literal acronym for Aptitude Inventory Measurement Service. And he specializes in testing people – to ferret out their inherent natural abilities. Their talents.

The idea, of course, is to reaffirm that they are doing the right thing with their lives. And, if they are not, to indicate where they might best utilize their talents to achieve happiness and success and all those good things.

"If you have high talent," he continues, "then you need some sort of outlet. And it's the combination of talents that really decide who the top, most successful people are."

But AIMS isn't the run-of-the-mill career counseling service. And the AIMS staff stands somewhat apart from the run-of-the-mill counseling types.

AIMS' Dallas staff consists of three. Indeed, the visage smacks of a Smith Brother's family portrait. There's the bearded, affable, eminently vocal Gaston, who has been in the aptitude testing business for over 25 years. Then there's Irvin Shambaugh, also bearded, affable and eminent but not quite as vocal, who is the organization's chief scientist and director of research.

But the hirsute image pales with the introduction of Brenda Smith. Affable, yes. Pleasantly vocal, certainly. She's the person who handles the testing for AIMS. And she's been doing it for some 20 years.

What kind of people find their way to AIMS? All kinds of people. People like the business executive who has touched the top, yet is frustrated with his job and doesn't know why.

Like the high school kid who shudders at the specter of being thrust ceremoniously into a cruel and cutthroat business world. He doesn't know if and where he'll fit in. Or what to do.

Like the housewife, bored with bridge parties and banal backyard chatter. The women's movement doesn't turn her on. Yet she wants something more out of life, something rewarding to do, but doesn't know what.

Or like retired fold, still relatively young, still viable, who seek another career. But don't know whether they'd be better suited to bagpipe playing or social services.

But the majority of AIMS' clients – 75-80 per cent – are between the ages of 15 and 25. "People," explains Shambaugh, "who are interested in solving educational problems, in defining goals. Some are sent by companies," he continued, "while about 5 per cent are parents who come in and take the tests to understand their children better."

Too, there are people in mid-career. Like the man who goes through life until he reaches his 40s. "Then at 40 something goes wrong." Gaston says. "He walks out of his job. His marriage breaks up. He becomes a disc jockey, studies music, art…tries something more satisfying, something to get more out of life."

And women, women 25-50 who want to go back to work. Gaston has some rather strong opinions about such women, on the plight of the woman in today's society.

"There ought to be two times as many women executives as there are and about half as many men," he says. "Women score higher in aptitude testing than men, but society doesn't give them a chance to use their talents and this is frustrating.

"This inability to use the talents results in restlessness, disinterest in what they are doing," he explains. "And as with any multitalented individual, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep them on
the job."

What's the solution? "You just can't pay a woman more for her success," he responds. "She has to be moved to a higher position...that's one solution."

But Gaston thinks times are changing. Slowly. "We used to test four men to every woman," he said. "Today it's three men to every woman."

What is it that separates the AIMS method of career counseling from the traditional? It's the emphasis on measuring natural, inborn abilities, not learned abilities. Knowledge and interests both learned and cultivated traits are taken into consideration. But it's mostly aptitude.

IQ, for example, isn't necessarily a factor for, as Gaston says, "I don't believe in IQ. I believe in intelligences."

Vocabulary, on the other hand – a learned thing – is important. "Vocabulary is a method of measuring comprehension," he explains, "but people who use big words constantly don't necessarily have high vocabularies. Theirs is a special knowledge." Howard Cosell might disagree.

"But," he continues, anticipating the next question, "a high vocabulary will not make you successful. Although, if you are successful you will have a high vocabulary."

This, of course, raises the definition of success. Gaston admits success is different things to different people. But in the AIMS context he's speaking in terms of "money earnings" and "peer relationships." Not necessarily that which leaves one perpetually chirping over what one is doing.

AIMS' tests are broken down into six basic areas:

• Perceptual Speed – Measuring one's aptitude for paper work, the speed of doing clerical requirements. This trait is important in office work, banking, and accounting.

• Finger Dexterity – Moving pins from one little hole to another. And back again. Seems ludicrous. But it's important if one aspires to work in electronics or, oddly enough, play musical instruments.

• Frame of Reference – Word association tests, for example. Determined are such things as how someone would fit into an organization, or would be better off as a lighthouse keeper. It also separates the specialist from the generalist, the introvert from the extrovert.

• Tonal Memory – You wear earphones. Respond to pitch, rhythm, timbre, time and tonal differences listening to musical sounds. Not only does this indicate musical talent, but it has an important influence in photography.

• Structural Visualization – Back to the wiggly block. It measures the ability to visualize in three dimensions which is important if one has designs on becoming an architect or a builder.

• Convergent Thinking – Analyzing word patterns. Selecting pictures with a common thread out of a batch of illustrations. It measures the ability to piece things together, to draw general conclusions. Good for scientists, editors, and diagnosticians.

But the important consideration is that there is no "right" answer to any of the tests – except, perhaps, the vocabulary tests. Each score, high or low, indicates a certain aptitude or lack of aptitude.

And the goal, as Gaston explains, "is not to score high on all of the work samples, but to find a satisfying outlet for the unique pattern of talents which you happen to possess."

Over the years AIMS has put together a plethora of statistics drawn from thousands of test results. And some of the conclusions prove fascinating.

On vocabulary, for example. Public school teachers, says Gaston, score on the low side and high vocabulary people “don’t like to be public school teachers.”

Executives, on the other hand, have higher vocabularies than newspaper editors. A college president “generally has a higher vocabulary than any of his staff,” he said.

“There’s a lot of testing we still don’t understand,” says Gaston. “Still, we find that 50 per cent of the people we test are doing what they should do, that they have worked out their lifestyle. And they couldn’t have done better.”

But for their money they receive 10.5 hours of testing and up to 2 hours of evaluation. Also a copy of their scores and an interpretation. They also receive a tape recording of their final conference with Gaston, Shambaugh, or Smith.

“And if they’re smart,” Shambaugh suggests, “they’ll follow our recommendations. Everyone who has done very well is successful. But, unfortunately,” he adds, “it’s a fact of life that a lot of people are like youngsters…they’ll do things their way first. And when it doesn’t work out, then they’ll come back and follow our advice.”