Assessment and development of competencies

Literature Review

Report No. 4

Part of the Project
Meeting Workplace Skills: the Career Development Contribution

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Reports published under the project:
Meeting Workplace Skills: the Career Development Contribution

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Tools developed under this project

- Needs Analysis
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- Career Conversations
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Consult the site [www.crwg-gdrc.ca](http://www.crwg-gdrc.ca) to access these documents.
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Introduction

Since their inception in the mid-1980s, the different types of skills assessment (SA) approaches have grown considerably and, since 1991, skills assessment has been an official part of French legislation and an entrenched right of the French citizenry. In that country, skills assessment is viewed as the primary lifelong guidance tool (Gaudron and Croity-Belz, 2005, p. 110). Unlike France, in Canada, SA is not a legal right; however, major investments in SA approaches are made every year by governments and organizations through their employee assistance programs and by individuals who cover the costs associated with their different workplace transitions themselves (Michaud et al., 2007b; Michaud et al., 2006; Maguire and Killeen, 2003). Since governments, organizations, and some individuals invest in these types of approaches, it seems plausible that SA meets the needs of both individuals and society.

To guide the research aimed at assessing SA effects, it seemed necessary to identify the desired effects of this type of approach. This literature review therefore summarizes the needs underlying skills assessment as noted in the articles, books, and conferences on SA since the 1980s. In order to gain a better understanding of the needs to which the skills assessment approach responds, we grouped them according to the different systems in which people develop, on the basis of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; Bronfenbrenner and Crouter, 1983; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

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1 In France alone, about 200,000 SAs are carried out every year (Hardy-Bubernet, 2007).
2 This literature review looked at articles on the “portfolio process” in English-speaking countries. However, we did not select those articles for the review. This approach contextualized to the school setting mainly in English Canada and the United States differs from SA, particularly in terms of its process and its objectives.
3 In this case, we analyzed the material delivered at conferences, particularly PowerPoint presentations.
1. Needs

As part of this comprehensive review of the needs underlying SA, we inventoried all comments that indicated an intent to respond to a need of an individual or society. We were therefore able to identify the needs and expectations expressed by individuals and society with regard to the approach: the objective of the approach, its spinoffs, its effectiveness, obstacles encountered by individuals in relation to labour market entry and social and vocational guidance, labour market transformations, and socially recognized difficulties attributable to social, political, and economic transformations. In addition, certain criticisms of the SA approach sometimes made it possible to identify specific needs related to the individual or society.

1.1 Underlying needs of the individual and society

Consulting of SA literature brings to light major, explicit, and systematic concerns about the skills, career, assessment and basic learning needs of the individual: this should not be surprising since the individual is at the heart of the SA process. Needs relating to the environment are much less explicit. And yet the literature review made it possible to identify several of society’s expectations and to shed light on coexisting concepts about the relationship between individuals and their environment. For example, it is possible to recognize in the literature all of the guidance strategies presented by Riverin-Simard and Simard (2005), i.e., harmonizing, interactive, developmental, and contextualizing strategies. This model of the relationship between individuals and their environment (completely separate to very close) influences the perception of the needs underlying SA. The harmonizing strategy focuses on the importance of needs relating to information about the self and the labour market, the interactive strategy emphasizes the need to understand the reciprocal relationship between individuals and their environment, and the developmental strategy explores people’s past in order to gain a better understanding of

their present and develop a meaningful future plan. Individuals and their environments are considered open systems that need to develop vocational maturity in order to maintain stability and move towards their ideal vision. Lastly, the contextualizing strategy focuses on the individual’s need to consider these contexts as inseparable. It brings to light the need to understand the development of individuals according to their contexts and emphasizes the importance of a “global configuration” resulting from the integration of all of the biopsychosocial factors present in the life of the individual.

The literature review was organized around a model of the human development process that also views individuals and their environments as inseparable: Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; Bronfenbrenner and Crouter, 1983; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It seemed the optimal model for doing a comprehensive review at the same time making it possible to look at all SA needs in relation to the guidance strategies of Riverin-Simard and Simard (2005). Furthermore, it seemed meaningful to us from the standpoint of building SA-specific knowledge.
2. **Bioecological model of Bronfenbrenner’s human development process and needs underlying SA**

Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model of the human development process is defined by 4 systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. In our view, the typology of this model appeared to be an effective way of organizing the developmental needs to which SA is expected to respond. It has the advantage of not separating individuals from their environments, taking into account their development process according to the interaction between their personal characteristics and their different contexts over time\(^5\) (the temporal dimension is called the chronosystem). This model considers the impact of individual factors (genetic make-up, values, interests, lifestyle, etc.) and environmental ones (geographic, political, economic, and cultural) on human development.

This way of organizing the content of the literature made it possible to focus on supporting developing individuals by expanding, as needed, the systems in which they evolve, from the most intimate to the most external. Based on the systems in Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model, we grouped and categorized the identified needs in table format (Table 1).

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5 What Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) called Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT). According to this model, the research protocols should refer to these four components simultaneously.
Table 1: Needs to which a Skills Assessment Approach Attempts to Respond according to a Bioecological Model of Human Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Microsystem (active and engaged individual)</th>
<th>Mesosystem (active and engaged individual)</th>
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<th>Macrosystem (individual not directly involved)</th>
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<td>Need to consider the complexity of interactions between the systems in order to gain self-understanding and identify a plan</td>
<td>Need for the right to guidance counselling</td>
<td>Need for a society with a strong culture of work as a means of self-realization</td>
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<td>Need to identify, recognize, and develop skills</td>
<td>Need for skills recognition</td>
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<td>Need for self-knowledge and self-recognition</td>
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<td>Need to identify a career plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Need for support in the face of the complexity of the adjustment inherent in change or transition</td>
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</table>
2.1 SA needs in relation to the microsystem

In the microsystem, individuals engage in particular activities that have a direct effect on their development. Individuals therefore play a specific role in defined contexts and time periods. This system is made up of the four main immediate settings in which people evolve: family, school, peer group, and workplace. SA needs in relation to the microsystem are varied, as illustrated in Table 1. In light of Bronfenbrenner’s model, it is possible to conclude that one of the principal needs associated with SA is self-recognition of the skills individuals have developed through different activities in their work, family, school, and personal contexts. In a way, this means recognizing the skills “outcomes” arising from their development process and identifying the optimum contexts for that process through one or more career plans. This process recognition must take into account the interaction between their characteristics (values, interests, knowledge, qualities, lifestyles, etc.), contexts, and time. This need for self-recognition is described in different ways in the literature: need to take stock, need to develop one’s skills, need for self-recognition, need for support in their worker role, development of a career plan, and being supported in the adjustments inherent in the changes that we describe in detail below.

2.1.1 Need to take stock

Of the main needs identified, that of taking stock of one’s personal and work life, is frequently mentioned (Michaud et al., 2007a; François and Botteman, 2002; Foulard, 2001; Ferrieux and Carayon, 1996, 1998; Taïeb and Blanchard, 1997; Bekourian, 1991; Richebon, 1991; Lucas, 1991). Since SA is often done at a time when people are having doubts about their skills and more generally about their self-image (Lévy-Leboyer, 1993), they feel the need to take stock of where things stand at a key moment in their working life (Boursier, 1996). According to Boutinet (2004), that is how adults who are evolving within or outside the work context can come to have doubts about their life experience as a whole (p. 37). Lemoine (2005) notes that SA enables some people to recognize dimensions they did not think were relevant.
This questioning can be triggered by a work situation perceived as a failure (Gaudron et al., 2001a), and SA support can then, according to Lévy-Leboyer (1993), help to make people aware of the real weight of the different causes of the successes and failures they experience. They can then take stock during a time of doubt about their skills and thus increase their self-esteem and their feeling of personal efficacy with regard to achieving their work-related goals.

The need to take stock may also simply represent a need to develop one’s skills, notably for employees of companies that are expanding or shrinking (Michaud and Savard, 2007).

2.1.2 Need to identify, recognize, and develop skills

One of the universally recognized skills assessment needs is that of identifying and recognizing one’s skills, particularly in a skills portfolio (Michaud et al., 2007a; Aubret and Blanchard, 2005; Camus, 2003; Lemoine, 2005; Robin, 1994; Aubret, 1991; Lucas, 1991). In 1993, Lévy-Leboyer was already discussing the need to develop skills in order to remain in a labour market characterized by increasing technological development. The need to consolidate, even develop, other skills through the development or implementation of a career plan, was noted several times in the literature (Clot and Prot, 2005; Bournel-Bosson, 2003; Joras, 2002; De Crisenoy and Preterre, 2001b; Riard and Abollahzadeh, 1997; Dupiol, 1996; Divioux et al., 1991). Among other things, skills development makes it possible to cope with evolving duties, changing company demands, or transformations in the labour market. Similarly, Le Bras (2005) notes that, when obsolescence sets in, doing an SA makes it possible to develop an appropriate training plan in the face of the threat of job loss.

6 Particularly in several legislative texts on vocational training and learning in France.
2.1.3 Need for self-knowledge and self-recognition

In connection with questions about self-image, several authors point to a need for better self-knowledge among clients embarking on an SA approach (Michaud et al., 2007a; Lemoine, 2005, 1996; Aubin et al. in Blanchard, 2004; Blanchard et al., 1999; Ripon, 1998; Kop et al., 1997). Bertoli (2004) notes that individuals who participate in SA need to have a more thorough knowledge of their tastes, interests, abilities, attitudes, and values. They seek to gain a more thorough knowledge of their skills and the resources they use to mobilize those skills (Michaud et al., 2007a; Aubin et al. in Blanchard, 2004) and need to be supported so they can become aware of their personal potential (Lévy-Leboyer, 1993). For others, SA makes it possible to gain a better understanding of the relational difficulties experienced at work and thus develop strategies for more satisfactory adjustment (Michaud et al., 2007a).

2.1.4 Need for support in the worker role

A number of studies and articles on SA show that clients often experience serious psychological distress arising from their worker role or job (Michaud et al., 2007a; Blanchard, 2004; Boutinet, 2004; Brun et al., 2003; St-Jean et al., 2003). In this context, the workplace becomes a place of stress where they experience anxiety, depression, or burnout, all job-related realities experienced by a growing proportion of workers. When facing such an “identity crisis,” individuals increasingly feel the need for support in order to cope with the work-related confusion (De Crisenoy and Preterre, 2001b). They hope to defuse the crisis in order to regain power as a player in their working and social life (Richebon, 1991).

Many workers feel the need for support when they feel dissatisfied at work and turn to SA (Dupiol, 1996). In such situations, they are no longer able to engage or invest in a meaningful plan or job (Bouriser, 1996). Some see their current situation as acceptable but not interesting. They feel uneasy in their working life (Le Bras, 2005) and hope to better meet 

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7 For more details, refer to the study by Brun, Biron, Martle and Ivers, 2003.
their need for fulfilment and challenge. For others, their work situation has become intolerable (Gaudron et al., 2001a), and they want to make a change to a vocational future that is meaningful to them.

2.1.5 Need to identify a career plan

The need to identify or develop a career plan is one of the needs noted most often in the literature\(^8\) (Michaud et al., 2007a; Di Fabio, 2003; Barkatoolah, 2000; Blanchard et al., 1999; Clot and Prot, 2005; Ferrieux and Carayon, 1996, 1998; Ripon, 1998; Lemoine, 2005, 1996; Kop et al., 1997; Taïeb and Blanchard, 1997; Foulard, 1996; Dupiol, 1996; Lucas, 1991). According to Foulard (1996), individuals who engage in an SA approach need support in order to develop a meaningful plan that will keep them motivated. By doing this, they find some direction and see their careers as meaningful. In the short-, medium-, and long-term, they move in directions that may lead to labour market entry, job retention, or reorientation (Michaud et al., 2007a). Underlying the need to develop a plan, some authors emphasize people’s need for support in order to make decisions about their future or their working life (Aubret and Blanchard, 2005; Bertoli, 2004; Pellois, 2004; Taïeb and Blanchard, 1997; Divioux et al., 1991).

2.1.6 Need for support during change or transition

Whatever the objectives of their plan, some clients feel the need for support when undergoing work-related change or transition (Aubret and Blanchard, 2005; Clot and Prot, 2005; Michaud et al., 2007a; Dupiol, 1996) and when experiencing tension between maintaining stability and being open to the change brought about by the SA approach (Lecomte and Savard, 2004). According to Lecomte and Savard, skills assessment is a subjective change experience that people may find destabilizing since it often leads to internal disorientation perceived as a threat to personal integrity and security (p. 192). They need support in order to explore and

\(^8\) Particularly in a number of legislative texts on vocational training and learning in France.
understand the multidimensional experience\textsuperscript{9} associated with change and thus put in place adjustment strategies or actions enabling them to develop an optimum career plan (Michaud et al., 2007a; Lecomte and Savard, 2004). Clients are therefore hoping to learn how to manage their uncertainty and the questions that may arise about the evolution of their vocational future (Taïeb and Blanchard, 1997). Similarly, it is noted that SA seekers may feel the need for job retention assistance (Barragan and Hardy-Dubernet, 2005; Riard and Abollahzadeh, 1997; Mouveaux, 1991) and hope to adjust in a more satisfactory manner when it comes to their job, their internal mobility plans involving vocational evolution towards a job with greater responsibilities (Joras, 2002; Aubin et al., in Blanchard, 2004), or more simply their desire for horizontal mobility. More specifically, they hope to receive help in order to put in place an internal bargaining strategy that will enable them to have a vocational future and adjust better within the same company (Aubret and Blanchard, 2005; Bertoli, 2004).

It should be noted as well how important it is for SA seekers to receive support in coping with the effects of change or transition (job loss, change of job, etc.) on their development (Michaud et al., 2007a; Gaudron and Croity-Belz, 2005; Gaudron et al., 2001a). Also noted is the need for support in the face of the doubts, questions, and new reference points brought about by transition (Divioux et al., 1991). Furthermore, job transition makes a number of clients feel socially isolated, and the SA process, when carried out in a group, can help them to break out of their isolation, receive support, and share their experience (Michaud et al., 2007a).

As a criticism of SA, Bekourian (1991) stated that this approach is a palliative measure for the shortage of sustainable employment that it is intended mainly to help workers to manage their employability or to individualize their training path (p. 125). SA can therefore mitigate the disruptions brought about by labour market instability.

\textsuperscript{9} Affective, cognitive, summative, behavioural, and relational.
In short, many of the needs to which SA tries to respond are in the immediate settings in which individuals evolve: work, peer groups, family, and training. In addition to responding to the needs for self-recognition and optimization of the human development process, SA also responds to people’s need for support in the various transactions between two or more systems.

2.2. Needs in relation to the mesosystem

It is widely recognized that the interrelationships among the different systems have become enormously complex since the mid-1970s, and in the SA literature, we noted people’s need to be supported in order to better understand the interrelationships in which they evolve.

2.2.1 Need to consider the complexity of interactions among the systems

As part of the SA approach, individuals are asked to take stock of the interactions between school, work, family, and their personal life. This need to define a process that inevitably involves interactions between the different contexts is identified in several works (Lecomte and Savard, 2004; Bertoli, 2004; Joras, 2002; Foulard, 2001; Blanchard et al., 1999; Aubin et al., in Blanchard, 2004; Dupiol, 1996; Barragan and Hardy-Dubernet, 2005; Kop et al., 1997; Mouveaux, 1991; Lucas, 1991). By looking back at the interaction between these different contexts, individuals can gain a better understanding of the issues behind them (for example, tension between working life and family life). This exercise, which Michaud et al. (2007a)) see as a reflective conscience process, may help SA clients to become aware of the tensions caused by the interaction of the different contexts of their development.

Developing a career plan is one of the SA objectives. This need comes into play in the mesosystem as well since, in order to develop a optimum career plan, clients must take into account interactions between the different systems or spheres of life (family, work, personal life) (Michaud et al., 2007a). In order for them to identify and carry out their plan or plans,
one of the needs often cited in the literature is the importance of occupational information.

Far from being neutral, this information must be integrated and understood such that the individual can transform it into a career plan (Michaud et al., 2007a). This is made more complex by the presence of paradoxical information in the work setting and the school setting. In the current labour market, there is as much information about the shortage of workers as there is about the surplus; the need for a high school diploma to find a job coexists with employers that are prepared to hire young people without one; there is as much talk about the joys of retiring at age 55 as there is about extending the official retirement age. These contradictions lead to confusion about what supports human development.

In order to develop a meaningful career plan, individuals will have to go through a self-reflective process during which they integrate the impacts of the interaction between their different systems or different roles. They need to understand that, far from being stable and immutable, the different systems are constantly interacting and changing. That should enable them to put the path leading to their plan into perspective (Michaud et al., 2007a), making it possible to avoid a dictature du projet [dictated plan], as defined by Lhotellier (1997), and demonstrate people’s need for support in the face of the complexity, even the paradoxes, resulting from the different systems in which they evolve.

2.2.2 Need for skills recognition

In SA, individuals are first asked to identify their skills for themselves. Then, they will try to establish the link between this self-recognition and the labour market or the training setting. In that regard, several authors point to clients’ need for recognition of their skills (Lemoine, 2005, 1998; Kop et al., 1997) and what they have been able learn outside the school setting (Bélisle, 2006). People need to highlight the skills they have developed in different contexts (Robin, 1994), and SA may be the first response to the need to build links between these different contexts (Michaud and
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Bélisle, 2006). This will make it possible to promote better labour market adjustment, occupational evolution, or better management of their career path (Michaud et al., 2007a; Le Bras, 2005; Lemoine, 2005, 1998; Bertoli, 2004; Foulard, 2001; Barkatoolah, 2000; Taïeb and Blanchard, 1997; Dupiol, 1996; Mouveaux, 1991). For De Crisenoy and Preterre (2001b), SA responds favourably to people’s need for recognition of their skills so they can rethink their relationship with the labour market and thus find new, meaningful reference points.

2.2.3 Need to develop the ability to find bearings

Although this aspect is little explored, it would seem that an SA approach is also aimed at developing people’s ability to find their way through the different systems in which they are evolving (Michaud et al., 2007a), and this could help them to make better use of their skills in the different life contexts (Michaud, 2006; Lucas, 1991).

2.2.4 Need for support during the transition between systems

A transition is an event or the absence of an event (Schlossberg et al., 1995) that has an impact on all of the systems in which people develop. For instance, it is recognized that job loss affects people’s family and social systems. They may then need support in order to deal with the effects of one or more transitions. Also, according to Michaud et al. (2007a), clients note that their SA approach enabled them to better understand their transition and its impacts on the different contexts of their lives.

According to these same authors, the SA approach even enabled some people to clarify the effects of past transitions on their different systems, particularly the labour market.

Lastly, it can be noted that the SA approach responds to the need to gain a better understanding of the interactions between work, training, and an individual’s personal life.
2.3 Needs in relation to the exosystem

The exosystem is an extension of the mesosystem which does not directly involve human development but in which events that arise may affect human development. This system includes other specific social structures, both formal and informal, that surround the developing person’s immediate settings, such as the workplace, government agencies, federal, provincial, and regional policies, and social networks. In this regard, Bernaud (1998) notes that SA issues are also economic, social, and organizational. Overall, SA is aimed at supporting people such that they gain a better understanding of the effects these different social structures have on their development processes, thus enabling them to make informed decisions about their future plans.

2.3.1 Need for a right to guidance counselling

In the SA context, the law passed in France represents a change in the exosystem that has had an impact on all of the Francophonie and European countries. This law, adopted in December 1991, confers a new right: that of allowing individuals both in and outside the labour force to apply for leave in order to analyze their job and personal skills, as well as their aptitudes and motivations for the purpose of developing a career plan, and if need be, a training plan (Gaudron and Croity-Belz, 2005). It provides the entire adult population, whether in or outside the workforce, with access to guidance services (Willems, 1991). The purpose of the law is to help people to understand their social, political, and economic environments, specifically in order to deal with the effects of labour market disruptions. Another objective is to ensure that companies and individuals are proactive in developing the necessary skills to remain competitive in a context of market globalization and technological development. Thus, continuing education is an established SA objective that fits in more broadly with a training strategy but also with life-long guidance. It is a response to the needs of a knowledge society, which requires that people
have more and more qualifications in order to access the labour market or remain employed (Michaud et al., 2007a).

2.3.2 Need for better workforce management

Societies in the OECD countries have also implemented SA in order to counter the effects of a declining working population with mechanisms that encourage non-working individuals to return to the workforce (Michaud et al., 2007a and b)), keep experienced workers in the workforce for a longer period of time before they retire, and facilitate the job entry of immigrants (Emploi Québec, 2008). By making SA accessible or relatively accessible, these societies are trying to provide support mechanisms for better managing their workforce, and more specifically, meeting the need for a balance between labour supply and demand.

2.3.3 Need for labour recognition

In addition to the needs to which SA responds, there may also be an official mechanism that promotes recognition of employees at work in companies which have human resources departments (Brun and Dugas, 2005).10 This need is located within the exosystem insofar as individuals do not have decision-making power over company policy on personnel management, even though they are affected by it.

In short, it is apparent that there are many fewer individual needs identified in relation to the exosystem, particularly since SA addresses the individual directly and the exosystem does not directly involve human development. However, according to our analysis, it is clear that SA leads to expectations of positive spinoffs for society. In the SA literature, this aspect is largely overlooked and has not been the subject of an empirical study.

2.4 Needs in relation to the macrosystem

The macrosystem comprises the micro-, the meso-, and the exosystem. It contains the cultural values, beliefs, and historical events that generally reflect the cultural context and its subcultures (economic, social, educational, legal, and political system). This includes the way in which information and ideology, both formal and informal, are conveyed.

In this system, SA responds to the current needs of a society that has a strong culture of work and training. Michaud et al. (2007a) note that the tremendous interest in SA occurs in societies that value work as a special, even unique, setting for self-realization. This mechanism reinforces the importance placed on work by looking at the skills implicitly associated with self-realization as the entry point. Productivity and efficiency are the dominant ideologies in the OECD societies, and SA points inevitably to the importance of being competent, i.e., being efficient and productive. Also, since one of the SA objectives is development through training, SA also responds to the dominant discourse of the knowledge society widely advocated by the OECD and UNESCO and that of life-long guidance counselling.

The fact that initial training is no longer a guarantee of labour market entry or job retention represents a profound change in mentalities, hence the importance of recognizing the skills developed in contexts (occupational, family, personal) other than the school context. SA responds to that need and helps people to further their development through continuing education. However, SA accessibility, which varies from country to country, indicates clearly that this cultural change has not been fully embraced.

Also, with regard to organizational culture, Lévy-Leboyer (1993) notes that organizational needs are constantly changing. Stability, which is no longer a part of the dominant ideology of organizations, is replaced by job instability and “just in time.” The demands placed on employees in terms of
adjustment or skills development are multiplying (Michaud et al., 2007a; Le Boterf, 2004). There is now talk of work pressure and a concern with always doing more with less in order to be competitive in the global market and thus preserve jobs. To sum up, while the SA approach contributes to this cultural context, it may also enable people to better understand the influence of the dominant culture or subcultures on their occupational and personal dynamics.
Conclusion

This review of the literature on the needs underlying SA, according to Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model, enables us to understand the complexity of the interactions between the different systems in which people are required to develop. Overall, this model responds to society’s need to support people in the face of this complexity. Consequently, SA can be seen as a response to several needs that we have categorized according to the different systems in which people develop. By responding to those needs, SA is aimed at supporting individuals in their need to optimize, re-establish, or maintain their proximal development process. According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998), this process that operates through time is a primary mechanism of human development that society chooses to support through SA. The results of the empirical research on SA enable us to conclude that this process provides an effective response to a number of the needs noted in this article that promote the proximal human development process (Michaud et al., 2007b; Gaudron and Croity-Belz, 2005). Other SA research currently underway (Michaud and Savard, 2007) will provide further information about the needs responded to effectively by SA.
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Abstract

This article is aimed at determining the needs to which the skills assessment approach responds. This literature review makes it possible to summarize the needs inherent in this type of approach.11 The authors grouped the writings together according to the different systems in which people develop, on the basis of Bronfenbrenner’s bioenvironmental model. The authors have placed the individual at the centre of these systems, which are the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem, and try to understand the development needs of people who are seeking to move towards a meaningful future.

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