"CHOICES" In A University Setting

Paula S. McDonald
University of Manitoba

INTRODUCTION

The University of Manitoba Counselling Service expanded its career counselling facilities and services by purchasing access to the mainframe CHOICES* program in September 1983. At that time the purchase price was slightly in excess of $6,000 per year. Considerable staff time was spent in preparing students to use the computer, in supervising them during the interaction, and in working with them in follow-up counselling. These heavy financial and professional staff expenditures indicated that it would be prudent to assess the benefits to students engaged in this type of career exploration. To accomplish this, all students using CHOICES between September 1, 1983 and March 31, 1984 were invited to complete a questionnaire concerning their experiences with and their attitudes towards CHOICES.

The questionnaire was adapted from the one used by Colert (1983) at the University of Brandon. Forty-three of the 114 CHOICES users at the University of Manitoba during the 1983/84 academic year agreed to complete the questionnaire. Results, analyzed using an SPSS program (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) on the University of Manitoba central computer, indicated that CHOICES was moderately helpful (a score of 3 on a 5 point scale) in career planning.

BACKGROUND

The use of CHOICES at the University of Manitoba involves three phases. Students must first attend a two hour orientation session. Following this, students spend nearly two hours completing the *CHOICES Guide* and *CHOICES Profile* (Jarvis, 1982) on their own time. Finally, they return a few days later to spend 1½ hours at the terminal.

The orientation sessions are conducted to instruct students in the use of the *Guide* and *Profile*, to explain difficult categories (such as Interests and Temperaments), to explain how students will work at the terminal, and to explain the process of occupational elimination used in CHOICES.

* An acronym for Computerized Heuristic Occupational Information and Career Exploration System.

Concerning this last point, students need to understand that occupations are logically maintained or eliminated based on how they describe themselves at the terminal. They learn that CHOICES is not a career counselling "crystal ball" but rather a very sophisticated information sorting tool using high speed technology.

Students learn about CHOICES from information bulletins posted throughout the university and by referral from other students and counsellors. They pay a $10 fee which includes the orientation session, the *Guide* and *Profile*, and the 1½ hour interaction at the terminal.

METHOD

A survey questionnaire was designed to evaluate the use of CHOICES in the University of Manitoba Counselling Service. Students were invited to complete the questionnaire following their terminal experience.

Research questions included (1) who were the users of CHOICES (demographic and degree program data), (2) how useful was the orientation session, and (3) how useful was CHOICES for these users in career planning. It is assumed that the respondents' answers accurately reflect their evaluations of CHOICES.

The results of the questionnaires were analyzed using an SPSS program (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) on the University of Manitoba central computer. Simple descriptive statistics such as frequency counts and measures of central tendency were computed for each variable. Scattergrams and crosstabulations were included for two sets of variables.

RESULTS

During the 1983/84 academic year, 114 students used the CHOICES system. Of these, 43 (38%) students volunteered to complete the research questionnaire. Of these 43, 19 (44%) were males and 24 (56%) were females. The 20 to 24 year age category was most frequently indicated (39%). Sixty-nine percent of the sample were either first or second year University of Manitoba students, with the strongest representation from the faculties of Arts and Science. Fifty-three percent of the users had never done any other career testing or exploration. The remaining 47% had done previous testing with the most frequent response (23%) indicating that the Strong Campbell Interest Inventory was completed.

Respondents rated the orientation sessions as "helpful." The most frequent response (39%) indicated that the most useful part of these sessions was "learning the necessity of understanding the Interest and Temperament factor definitions." There was no significant correlation ($r = 0.06$) between the degree of helpfulness of the orientation session and the degree of difficulty in completing the *Guide* and *Profile*, nor was there a correlation ($r = 0.00$) between the degree of difficulty completing the

Guide and *Profile* and the amount of time spent completing the self-assessment materials.

After participating in CHOICES, 67% of the respondents expressed a clearer idea of occupations suited to them. On a 5 point scale between (1) "not at all helpful" and (5) "extremely helpful," the mode score concerning CHOICES' overall effectiveness in respondents' career planning was (3) "moderately helpful." The respondents were asked if they anticipated seeking further career planning assistance within the next six months. The majority (60%) said "YES." Of these students, 40% would be looking for help concerning clarification of personal criteria used in selecting occupations. The final question was whether or not the respondents would recommend CHOICES to a friend. Seventy-four percent said "YES," with 23% being "UNCERTAIN."

There were two open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire. In response to "What did you like most about CHOICES?", the most frequent reply concerned getting information on occupations. What was appreciated least about CHOICES were the difficulties in accurately expressing themselves in the Interest and Temperament categories.

DISCUSSION

The majority of the 43 CHOICES users were full-time students in either Arts and Science. It is reasonable to expect career planning needs to be greatest among these students because Arts and Science studies are not generally clearly defined career patterns like Medicine or Law.

The orientation sessions were seen as helpful in terms of learning the importance of understanding the Interest and Temperament factor definitions. Since users reported difficulty with CHOICES in relation to these definitions, it is recommended that the information sessions be continued.

The greatest benefit of CHOICES was gaining information on occupations; 67% of the resondents indicated this. While 74% of the users would recommend CHOICES to a friend, respondents rated the program as only a 3 on a 5 point scale concerning its overall effectiveness in career planning. The majority (60%) indicated that they would seek further career planning assistance within the next six months. Of these, the greatest need was for further clarification of personal criteria used in selecting occupations.

IMPLICATIONS

These results represent the attitudes and experiences of 38% of all CHOICES users during the 1983/84 academic year. Those that did respond rated CHOICES as only "moderately helpful" in their career planning (a rating of 3 on a 5 point scale). This may explain why the voluntary sample was so small.

The respondents from this 1983/84 survey indicated that they would recommend CHOICES to a friend. In the 1983/84 year, however, only 30 students in total elected to use CHOICES in their career planning. This less-than-enthusiastic interest in CHOICES on this university campus, following on the indication by 60% of the 1983/84 users that they would seek further career planning assistance, suggests to this writer that CHOICES is not seen as a helpful resource in career planning among university students.

It is the writer's opinion that the greatest weakness of CHOICES lies in the nature of computer-generated decisions. In CHOICES this means that all variables, such as Interests and Temperaments, must be treated as if they are discrete when in fact they are continuous. The problem is that no student, for example, has an interest in working to help people 100% of the time versus never, but this is how they must describe themselves in order to have information such as interests used in a computer-generated decision. As a result, this writer concludes that CHOICES' strengths lie in its high speed information retrieval functions. Its occupational decision-making functions do not meet the requirements of our university students.

References

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