



*Special Q&A with  
Dr. Patricia A. Zapf!*

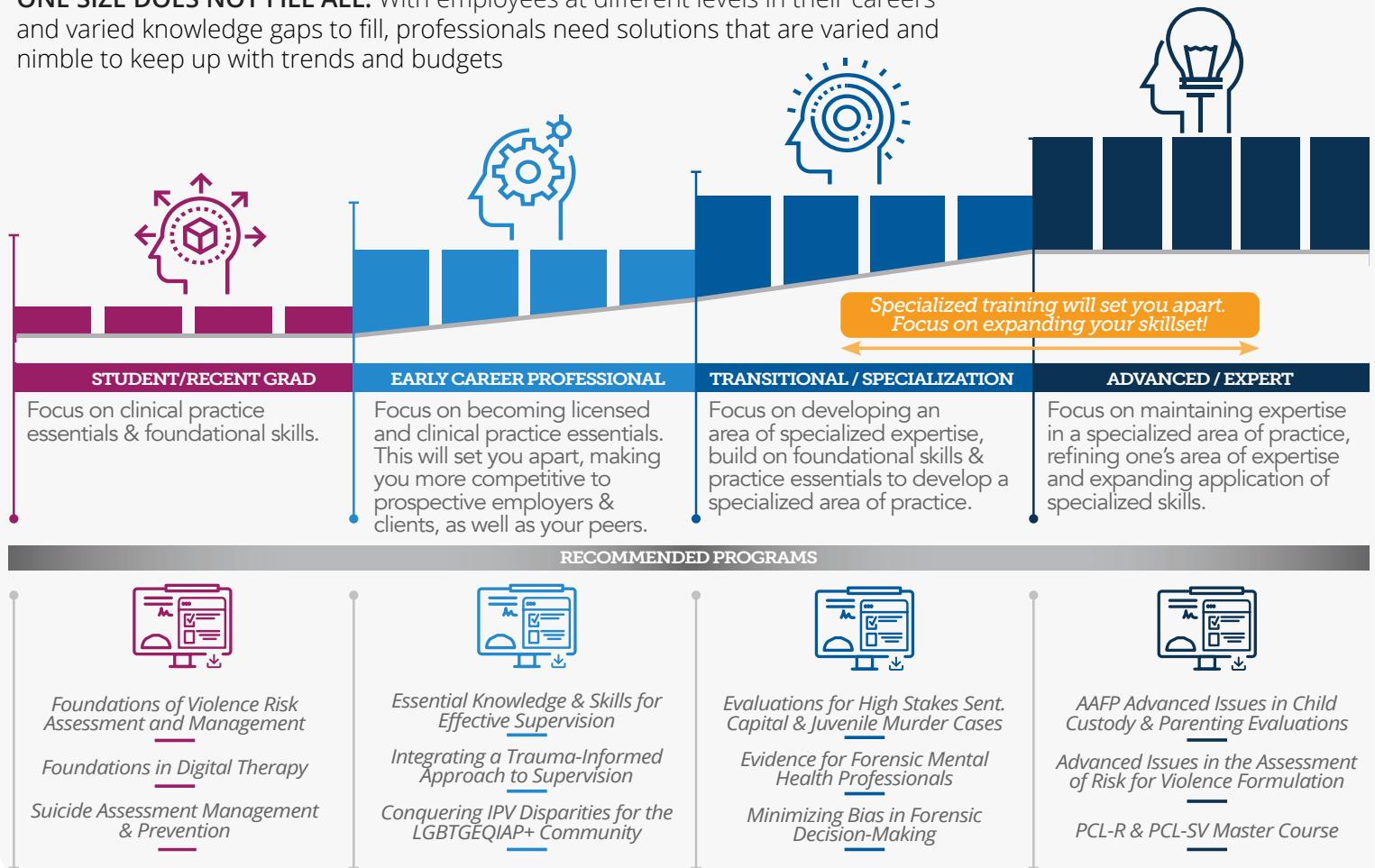
## FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY

# INSIGHTS



## CAREER PATH: LIFE-LONG LEARNING & PROFESSIONAL FULFILLMENT

**ONE SIZE DOES NOT FILL ALL.** With employees at different levels in their careers and varied knowledge gaps to fill, professionals need solutions that are varied and nimble to keep up with trends and budgets



## SPECIAL Q&A WITH DR. PATRICIA A. ZAPF | FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY INSIGHTS

### Q: What graduate programs do you recommend for someone looking into forensic psychology?

A: There are a growing number of graduate programs that offer training in forensic psychology (clinical) or psychology and law (nonclinical). One of the best resources has been developed by the American Psychology-Law Society and is a list of information about each of the available programs. This is definitely worth a peruse if you are considering graduate training in forensic psychology/psychology and law -- [Guide to Graduate Programs in Forensic Psychology](#).

### Q: What is the best way to get experience in the forensic psychology field?

A: It can be difficult to gain hands-on experience in forensic psychology since most sites and organizations require a vetting process to gain access to the facilities. A formal practicum experience, offered through graduate training programs, is one of the best ways to gain experience. It might be possible for non-graduate students to volunteer for programs or organizations that work with offenders, but it is generally not easy to volunteer at prisons or other secure facilities; these are best accessed by formal practicum experiences through graduate training programs. If you know of a licensed forensic psychologist, you might be able to volunteer to work directly with that professional to gain experience but, remember, that professional is the licensed party responsible for any work of volunteers or others so it is not likely the case that you will be able to engage in evaluation or interventions directly with forensic evaluatees or treatment recipients.



**Q: What steps should someone take if they want to begin a private practice?**

A: One of the easiest ways to start a private practice in forensic psychology is to begin to build a practice while you are employed full-time at a community mental health or state forensic facility. Many new professionals find it overwhelming to try and build/support a private practice immediately upon licensure after graduation but building a practice on the side (side hustle.)

It is a great way to get your name out there while gaining clinical experience. There are an increasing number of open positions in mental health organizations or state facilities that provide forensic services; this provides great clinical experience and a way to conduct evaluation reports that are ultimately consumed by the courts - the same people that will likely be retaining your services as a private forensic practitioner (judges, public defenders, attorneys general).

Generally speaking, most professionals make the jump to their own private practice once they have enough side hustle to cover expenses. I would estimate about 5 years to build a forensic practice that can sustain the professional.

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**Q: When completing a private practice eval how do you ensure biases don't impact your opinion?**

A: This is a great question! We know that the research shows that the side (defense or prosecution) that retains a forensic professional impacts the way that professional approaches the evaluation, selects the tests that they will use, and even the way that the test results are interpreted. It is REALLY important to think about this and to understand the impact of this adversarial allegiance.

One of the best ways to guard against this is to have a standard way of conducting your evaluations. For example, for competency to stand trial evaluations, using a standardized interview of competency-related inquiries for each and every competency evaluation - regardless of which side retained you - is a really good way of keeping the same method and allowing transparency into the questions asked and how you formulate the case.

Another way is to consider the order in which you review information. It is useful to review information in chronological order, whenever possible, to guard against hindsight and other biases that might arise when the outcome of an event is known. Of primary importance is being aware that we are all biased and making attempts to look at the data from all angles (consider different perspectives) in trying to formulate the case.

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**Q: What do you assess when making a decision about a defendant's restorability?**

A: There is a growing body of literature on competency evaluation and restoration - much more on evaluation than restoration - and a growing literature on predictors of restorability. We know that there are two groups that are notoriously difficult to restore to competence - those with chronic, acute mental disorders with multiple hospitalizations (such as schizophrenia, schizophreniform disorder, etc) and those with intellectual disabilities.

BUT we also know that the vast majority of defendants can be restored to competence within 6 months to a year. Defendants who are younger, who have personality disorders or substance use disorders as a primary diagnosis, and those who have not had prior competency evaluations are typically the easiest, quickest to restore to competency whereas those who are older, have more chronic, severe disorders (psychotic disorders, mood disorders), and those who have had prior competency evaluations are more difficult to restore. These data provide the forensic evaluator a good basis for predicting which defendants will be more difficult to restore. Of primary importance is the defendant's response to psychotropics medications as an indicator of prognosis and restorability.

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**Q: Have you worked and/or connect with a law enforcement agency applying forensic psychology in criminal profiling?**

A: No, criminal profiling is really not a part of my practice. A former colleague who works at [John Jay College](#) - [Gabrielle Salfati](#) - is an expert in this area and has worked with the FBI and other organizations to better understand criminal profiling. I suggest you have a peek at her work.

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**Q: Can you share your career trajectory from grad school to now?**

A: I graduated from Simon Fraser University in Canada and completed my year-long internship in Tampa, Florida, at the Florida Mental Health Institute, University of South Florida. I then took my first academic appointment as an assistant professor in the psychology and law doctoral program at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa (1999-2002). I was there for 2.5 years when I was recruited to start a doctoral program in forensic psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, The City University of New York. I was a professor at John Jay College for 16 years from 2002-2018. In 2000, While at the University of Alabama, I started a small private forensic evaluation practice that I have maintained since. I'm licensed in 4 states and focus primarily on competency issues in capital cases.

While a professor at John Jay College I started [CONCEPT](#) in 2009 as a means of providing quality training in forensic evaluation to professionals who wanted to engage in forensic practice but didn't know how to get the training to do this. CONCEPT grew from a small side hustle into a legit company, which I then sold to Palo Alto University in 2018 to become the Continuing and Professional Studies Division of Palo Alto University and I continue to build and grow that Division for PAU. In a nutshell, this has been my career trajectory to date, with professional highlights along the way, such as serving as the President of the American Psychology-Law Society and being appointed a Fellow of the American Psychological Association for distinguished contributions in the field of forensic psychology :) [End of lengthy response :)]

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**Q: Was there a catalyst in determining your career path that stands out to you?**

A: Not a catalyst per se that I can identify but my focus has consistently been forensic evaluation and the evaluation of criminal competencies - from thesis and dissertation topics focused on fitness to stand trial (in Canada) to research on competency evaluation and restoration, to teaching courses on forensic evaluation, to my own private practice as a forensic evaluator. This focus has allowed me to wrap my research, teaching, and practice around one specialty area and to build my expertise in a very systematic way. I tried to take advantage of opportunities to develop skills and build competencies as they arose.

I've been privileged to have been educated in Canada and to be able to practice in the United States and to travel all over the world to speak on competency evaluation and forensic psychology as they pertain to different countries and different parts of the world. One opportunity that was a huge career highlight was the 4 months I spent traveling around the world teaching forensic psychology to 600 undergraduate students with [Semester At Sea / ISE](#) in 2018. This was an amazing opportunity to teach and learn about forensic psychology in many other countries around the world and a career highlight (to date) for sure!

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**Q: What was the most challenging thing you accomplished in your career?**

A: For me it was probably building CONCEPT from a hobby into a business and then selling it to [Palo Alto University](#) to become their Division of Continuing and Professional Studies - all while traveling around the world with Semester at Sea and working a full-time job as a tenured professor. The transition from academic to administrator has been challenging and rewarding, allowing me the opportunity to take business courses and develop a new set of skills. I'm amazed at how much the research and analytic skills that I developed through my doctoral training have transferred to the business and marketing arena. Same skills, different context :)

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**Q: What are your thoughts about jail based and outpatient competency restoration?**

A: I think these are VERY IMPORTANT alternatives to traditional inpatient restoration that provide a means of restoring individuals in a least restrictive environment and without the lengthy delays we are seeing across the country for inpatient forensic beds. There are at least 13 states that provide outpatient or jail-based restoration services and a growing body of literature on the efficacy of this approach as well as the financial savings that result from outpatient alternatives for restoration. I'd like to see us continue to develop these services while conducting research on ways that we can continue to provide more effective and efficient forensic services.

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**Q: When, if ever, do you use forensic assessment instruments or psychological assessment tools when completing a competency exam?**

A: For competency evaluation, my standard methods include the use of the Fitness Interview Test as a means of standardizing my competence-related inquiries and then the use of the MacArthur Competence Assessment Tool - Criminal Adjudication (MacCAT-CA) in 'grey-area' cases where it would be helpful for me to understand how this particular defendant compares to other competence and incompetent defendants regarding their scores on the understanding, appreciation, and reasoning sections of the MacCAT-CA. This allows for standardized assessment of competence-related abilities as well as normative data on these specific abilities. For the vast majority of competency cases, this is all that is required in terms of testing. However, I would include the use of other psychological tests when they measure a construct that is related to and has an impact on one's competence. The obvious example is that I would include intellectual testing when I am uncertain as to the cognitive abilities of the defendant and whether these are impaired in any way that would impact their competence-related abilities (most typically rational decision-making).

I've never used personality inventories for competency evaluation as they don't provide data regarding relevant abilities or deficits that typically impact competency. I try to be very intentional about the reason for selecting an instrument or tool to administer and in understanding the data that the tool will provide for the purpose of hypothesis testing.

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**Q: How do you suggest administering an assessment, such as TOMM or Dot Counting, when completing a CST eval remotely?**

A: This is a developing area for which the COVID pandemic has hastened our use of and research on remote evaluation techniques. To date, the literature suggests that there are no significant differences in evaluation outcomes when remote technologies are used to interview the defendant or to conduct standardized assessments using interview-based protocols and tools. Where there is less research is on the use of psychological tests that would typically be administered in a paper-and-pencil format to an in-person evaluatee.



At this point, I'm not sure we understand the implications for reliability and validity of administering paper-and-pencil tests in some adapted format for remote evaluation and would be hesitant to make this adaptation. Any deviation from standardized techniques should, however, be highlighted and addressed in the evaluation report. I'm confident that as we move forward and continue to conduct research on remote assessment techniques we will learn more about the ways in which adaptations can be made without impacting the reliability and validity of the techniques.

**Q: If you could do one professional thing different, what would it be?**

A: This is a really tough question! I can't really think of anything that I would have done differently. I'm encouraged by all the progress I see in the field and by the amazing colleagues that I have. I've loved my time at the University of Alabama and at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and all the amazing students I've had the pleasure of working with along the way. It's very rewarding to see my students develop into amazing professionals in their own right and to get to continue to work with them in different ways. I'm excited about the possibilities for growth in the Division of Continuing and Professional Studies at Palo Alto University and the opportunities to develop further connections with professionals all over the world to expand the continuing education and training opportunities for those wishing to practice in niche areas of mental health. The future looks bright and I try to focus on what's to come rather than where I've been. :)

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**About Patricia A. Zapf, Ph.D.**

Dr. Zapf is the author of Best Practices in Forensic Mental Health Assessment: Evaluation of Competency to Stand Trial; editor of Forensic Assessments in Criminal and Civil Law: A Handbook for Lawyers; and Editor-in-Chief of the APA Handbook of Forensic Psychology. She was named a Fellow of the American Psychological Association (APA) and a Distinguished Member of the American Psychology-Law Society (AP-LS).

She has served on the board of directors for the International Association of Forensic Mental Health Services, as an associate editor for Law and Human Behavior and as editor of the American Psychology-Law Society book series, as well as the International Perspectives on Forensic Mental Health book series. She has published 9 books and manuals and over 100 articles and chapters, mainly on the assessment of criminal competencies and forensic evaluation.