



Adult Career Counseling: New Clients, New Strategies

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The world of work has changed. Few jobs last the length of one's working life. Mutual bonds of loyalty among employers and employees have weakened or disappeared. Whether due to increasing economic globalization of the economy, demanding and ever changing technology, or because of a struggling economy that encourages employers to have smaller staffs, more contingent workers, and early retirees, individuals find themselves navigating new territory – one for which few are properly prepared.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2002) estimated that the average baby boomer in the United States held 9.6 different jobs from the ages of 18 to 36. Peterson (1995) stated that “most people entering the work force today will have three to five careers and eight to ten jobs” (p. xiv). Armour (2003) said that in 2002, 85% of workers who changed jobs switched industries, up from 11% in 2001, although 66% said they would be happy spending the rest of their career with their current employer. As the information economy continues to mature, average workers will experience a half-dozen major career changes during the course of their professional lives. In a highly dynamic, knowledge-based economy, constant learning and retraining are not simply desirable; they are necessary to stay relevant.

The basic structure of the labor force has changed due to the combination of changing birthrates, the entry of large numbers of women, aging workers, and increased diversity (Toossi, 2002). Add to this the growing American population – an estimated 300 million in October 2006 – and a new wave of immigration, and you have a society in which workers are unlikely to be able to make a one time career decision.

Career counselors, therefore, must learn new skills, stay aware of new trends in work and the economy, and provide expanded services geared towards those with patchwork careers, portfolio workers, retirees who need or want to continue employment, and workers who have not been able to accommodate themselves to these changing conditions.

Adult career counselors traditionally dealt with the concerns of re-entry women or employed men and women who were questioning the direction of their current occupation and looking for possible career alternatives. However, other groups of people now appear frequently in the adult career counselor's office: older adults looking for post-retirement careers; displaced workers, both white and blue collar; and the portfolio worker who needs assistance in determining and developing the skills that are and will be in demand.

Counselors must stay abreast of the latest computer software and Internet sources monitoring changes in occupational trends and labor market projections. A particular challenge is distinguishing good from mediocre or downright

false websites and information. A good guide to using the Internet is Harris-Bowlsbey, Dikel and Sampson (2002), *The Internet: A Tool for Career Planning, 2nd Ed*, especially pp. 1-13.

The career counselor needs to keep abreast of demographics, events and trends that affect local, national and international employment. This information should come from a variety of sources so that the counselor can make educated deductions about current occupations or jobs that may not even be created yet. Reading the business sections of newspapers with a national and international focus such as *The Wall Street Journal* or *The Washington Post* is one way to do this. Talking with or listening to business leaders at networking breakfasts, Chamber of Commerce meetings, or similar venues is another. The effective career counselor must dedicate time and energy to be on top of world economic trends. In addition, career counselors and their clients must also consider options beyond the familiar and predictable. Feller and Whichard (2005) define career development as “expanding from a focus on mechanistic matching of people to a list of existing choice to creating opportunities from things that don't presently exist” (p. 15).

Portfolio Workers

Increasingly, marketability in employment is based on skills and knowledge rather than titles and seniority. Portfolio workers may work for one organization over time and increase their employability by learning new skills that fit their employer's new needs. They are flexible and mobile. Others (sometimes termed contract employees) move from employer to employer looking for opportunities to match their skills to an organization's current needs. In general portfolio workers' loyalty is to themselves rather than an employer. Career counselors need to acknowledge and understand this new kind of employment and have referral sources for the needs of self-employed individuals.

Older Adults

The “percentage of Americans over 65 who still work has been rising since the mid 1990's, reversing a trend of nearly a century” (Walsh, 2001). Older workers who accept buyouts, are forced to retire, or retire by choice often require career counseling as they seek full or part-time work. Individuals may seek work due to necessity, a desire for new challenges, or a need to contribute to their community. Many do not anticipate their need for fulfillment, affiliation, and a predictable schedule as they transition from a full-time job to unemployment. Career counselors must be able to help these individuals identify and improve their skill sets, assess wellness and financial need, evaluate self-employment or

franchise investment, resurrect dreams and values, balance work and leisure, and present their abilities to an employer.

Displaced Workers

Large numbers of displaced workers are facing decisions about new careers and confronting a job search for the first time. Many moved into their previous work without much conscious thought, and find themselves ill equipped to develop new work lives. While the counselor must attend to the emotional impact of displacement, there is another challenge when working with displaced workers: convincing them to change industries, entertain a new type of work, and to learn new skills if they are to attain (or come close to) the level of employment and income afforded by the former job. The career counselor and the displaced worker need to realize the labor market is experiencing tremendous change requiring retraining and consistent skill acquisition. Counselors also need to become aware of the financial impact of long-term unemployment and re-training resources.

Career counselors must be aware of job market globalization and its impact on those who must reskill to be employed at all. Many formerly middle class jobs, particularly those that can be done outside the United States, are most at risk. Friedman (2006) said:

In a flat world there is no such thing as an American job. There is just a job, and in more cases than ever before it will go to the best, smartest, most productive or cheapest worker – wherever he or she resides. (p. 277)

Not only do counselors need to help clients manage this ‘new world’ but they must also target their strategies to the different psychological stages experienced by most displaced workers. Some authors (e.g., Goodman & Hoppin, 1990) have compared these stages to Kubler Ross (1969) stages of grief, from initial denial through anger and depression and, with luck, acceptance.

Amundson and Borgen (1982) focused on strategies appropriate for stages of unemployment. Loss and search interventions can include: (a) understanding clients' feelings and challenging them to view their job loss from different perspectives, (b) assisting in the resolution of conflicts related to the loss, (c) developing a realistic view of skills and strengths, (d) evaluating options and job search approaches, (e) continuing client support, (f) developing specific action plans, and (g) practicing necessary skills for implementing the plans. Burnout strategies should include validating client feelings, building self-concept, and identifying new approaches to the job search.

Career Planning at the Work Site

Career counseling programs for adults have been delivered in academic institutions, community agencies, private offices,

and the workplace. Profit and non-profit sectors realize the benefit of conserving both human and financial assets and of saving recruitment, training, and outplacement costs. Career assistance is focused primarily on those individuals who have skills essential to the organization's ability to compete.

Providing career counseling in the workplace allows individual employees to become aware of current and future needs of the organization as well as opportunities for skill development. Additionally, it improves employee relations and productivity. The better placed an employee is, the greater his or her satisfaction and likelihood to stay.

Career development assistance is being provided by outside career counselor consultants hired by an organization, career development specialists who are members of an organization's human resources team, or managers within the organization who have been trained in career pathing and monitoring.

The counselor providing services in the work site must often take into consideration the needs of the organization as well. This may require redefinition of the counselor's role and increased emphasis on counselor ethics.

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