

Beyond the Basics: Real World Career Management

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INTRODUCTION

It's a whole new world for career practitioners. At the recent National Consultation on Career Development (NATCON) conference (and other large national and international gatherings of career specialists), it is easy to see that we are a very diverse group of professionals. Some career practitioners work within the public sector as government employees; others work in government-funded programs for the unemployed or under-employed. Still others work in schools—public, and private—with clients ranging in age from children to adults nearing retirement. Even within educational institutions, some career practitioners work as teachers or instructors, others as counsellors, and still others as advisors or career resource centre staff. Career practitioners also work as rehabilitation professionals, helping people with injuries, disabilities, addictions, or criminal records reattach to the workforce. Others work directly for corporations, providing support with recruitment, retention, and career transition challenges. Still others work as independent counselors, consultants, or coaches—helping individuals and organizations navigate the changing world of work. The list goes on, and many career practitioners, as they move between contracts in their own changing careers, find themselves working in diverse settings with very different client groups.

Mandates and philosophies change as well—over time and between organizations. As a result, services that were considered standard in one organization may not be part of the mandate of another. Traditionally, individuals entered the field of career and employment counselling from diverse educational backgrounds. Some practitioners were trained as teachers, counsellors, or social workers; others were trained as managers or human resource specialists within business. Many received the bulk of their career-specific training on the job or from in-house professional development workshops. In an era when individuals generally remained within one organization for much of their career, this approach made sense and worked well. However, in today's rapidly changing economy with short-term contracts, emerging programs and services, a variety of funders, a multicultural workforce, and an emphasis on lifelong learning, career practitioners need skills that will carry them across jobs and client groups and guide their practice in diverse situations.

Recognizing the challenges faced by career practitioners and their clients in an economy that continues to evolve, many college and university programs have been developed across Canada to train career practitioners. In addition, the Canadian career development community appointed a national steering committee to assist with developing guidelines and standards for our field (ATEC 2001). The resulting *Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners* (available on-line at www.career-dev-guidelines.org) are presently being field-tested across the country. A consultative approach was used to ensure that the standards met the needs (and represented the work) of diverse practitioners. These standards

also provide the foundation for a course (and accompanying mini-text) that was developed for career practitioners—*Beyond the Basics: Real World Skills for Career Practitioners* (Neault 2001). The present paper, as the title implies, highlights some of the challenges faced by career practitioners as they attempt to help diverse clients manage increasingly complex careers in Canada and abroad.

This paper begins by setting the stage—discussing the current labour market and resulting challenges for career practitioners and their clients. Next, the *Canadian Standards and Guidelines* are discussed as a framework for the skills that career practitioners need in their real-world work, regardless of setting. Finally, tips and strategies are offered to help practitioners reposition their own careers into emerging arenas of practice.

IT'S A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Over the past couple of decades, work (and how to find it) has changed in significant ways. What was once an assortment of local economies has now become, to a large extent, one global economy. In a local economy, government agencies or university placement offices could act as clearinghouses for many of the jobs available in the community—job boards at the Canada Employment Centre, for instance, served an important purpose. In a global economy, however, organizations may search worldwide for the best workers, resulting in some formerly Canadian jobs being relocated outside of the country. Even for the jobs that stay at home, competition may be worldwide. Internet sites (e.g., Monster.ca) have a much wider reach than a local job board. Networking has become more important than ever before in securing employment.

Another significant change for workers involves preparation for work and ongoing training. In the past, an individual typically completed school and then entered the workforce—often remaining with the same employer for many years. Further training (i.e., post-graduation) was often provided on-the-job or in specific workshops or courses sponsored by employers. In today's economy, however, many workers find themselves moving between employers—often working on short-term contracts. Most employers are reluctant to invest in significant training—instead they hire individuals who are already prepared to do the work that needs to be done. At the same time, however, ongoing learning has become more important than ever and many fields require specific certificates or diplomas. Therefore, individuals are increasingly responsible for their professional development in order to maintain employability in the emerging economy.

Demographics have changed as well. For the first time in history, most developed countries have more people retiring than they have younger workers coming along to fill the positions. In large urban centres, fewer homes have a parent who stays at home with the

children. Even in times of relatively high unemployment, many employees are working longer hours than ever before—reflecting a mismatch of skills and labour market demand. To meet the needs of an overworked workforce, the demand for personal services has grown. As well, some organizations offer flexible work options such as telecommuting, job-sharing and flex-time.

In the first decade of the new millennium, many organizations continue to engage in restructuring, reorganizations and, mergers—struggling to remain viable in the changing economy. As a result, workers continue to be laid off and survivors become less productive as they worry about whether or not they might be next to go. New hires are often brought in for specific projects or short-term contracts—few under the illusion that they will have a job for life. Many organizations today choose to out-source their non-core work to specialist firms—payroll, for example, may be handled by an external company rather than by in-house staff.

In a global economy, the workforce has also become more diverse. Project teams often consist of workers from a wide variety of cultural and educational backgrounds and with vastly different abilities and disabilities; team-building may require extra effort as individuals learn to appreciate and accommodate individual differences.

NEW RESPONSIBILITIES FOR CAREER PRACTITIONERS

In such a complex, global economy, career practitioners can no longer be expected to be labour market experts. Nor can they be knowledgeable about the details of more than a few occupations or organizations. Much like librarians, however, career practitioners need to be research experts. They also need to be able to teach their clients appropriate research skills. Effective research goes beyond data collection. It involves analyzing information, examining it for patterns and themes, and synthesizing it to make it useful. Career practitioners, therefore, need to understand how to find current labour market information, locally and internationally, and how to use that information in practical, meaningful ways.

Recent Canadian research (Neault 2002) found optimism to be the best predictor of both career success and job satisfaction. Career practitioners, therefore, have a responsibility to instill a spirit of hope in their clients and help them to sustain that spirit as they search for appropriate work or move through career transitions. Normalizing the transition using models such as Bridge's Stages of Transition (Bridges 2001) or the Roller Coaster of Unemployment (Amundson and Poehnell 1996) can help to restore belief in a positive future. Offering opportunities for personal reflection and self-assessment can provide a deeper understanding of what kind of work might be the best fit. Introducing alternatives to full-time work (e.g., self-employment, contract work, multi-tracking) and lifestyle options (e.g., downshifting or voluntary simplicity) can also help clients to restore

work-life balance—contributing to both job satisfaction and career success. Finally, teaching effective work search strategies can help individuals to more easily move between jobs as they proactively manage their careers.

It is no news to career practitioners that most workplaces are in the midst of transformation. One of our emerging responsibilities, therefore, is to help our clients anticipate and successfully move through life-changing events such as job-loss, relocation, returning to school, or vocational rehabilitation. Planned Happenstance Theory (Krumboltz 2001) offers specific strategies for helping individuals to proactively create and benefit from chance occurrences in their lives. The process begins with the acknowledgement that uncertainty is natural. Next individuals are encouraged to pursue both formal and informal learning opportunities, following their natural curiosity. Then, Krumboltz tells individuals to actively create chance (e.g., conducting informational interviews or volunteering for interesting projects). Finally, according to the theory, identifying and overcoming barriers results in successful career transitions.

Many more responsibilities continue to be added to the plates of career practitioners. Although some of these emerging tasks are simply extensions of work that we've always done, others require a different skillset or a new philosophical approach to our work. As well, many career practitioners express an interest in moving their own careers into new arenas of practice. Most, however, don't know where to begin or how to make the necessary transformation. In *What Color Is Your Parachute?* Bolles (1997) describes making a career change one step at a time. He suggests that an effective career transition usually preserves some constancy in the midst of change (e.g., taking on a new position within the same field or moving to a similar job within a new industry or field). Bolles's model offers one strategy for manoeuvring—either performing new functions within the same arena (e.g., transitioning from employment counselling to project management within a government-funded program) or performing similar functions within a new arena (e.g., facilitating job search workshops within a corporate career transition centre instead of a government-funded job club).

The new *Canadian Standards and Guidelines*, highlighted in the following section, offer a systematic framework to organize the traditional and emerging skills in our field. These standards may help career practitioners to recognize the transferability of their skills and to identify skill gaps that need to be addressed before moving into new areas of specialization.

CANADIAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

The *Canadian Standards and Guidelines* outline core competencies (essential for all career development practitioners) and areas of specialization (competencies required within specialized arenas of practice). Within the areas of specialization, a subgroup of competencies is highlighted that are considered common to more than one area of specialization. These are called Common Skills and Knowledge.

The competencies considered core to our field include professionalism, interpersonal skills, career knowledge, and needs assessment. Common skills and knowledge (i.e., those that overlap areas of specialization) include work search strategies and group facilitation. Specializations within the field of career development include assessment, facilitating learning, career counselling, information management, work development, and building community capacity.

The *Canadian Standards and Guidelines* are useful as benchmarks for career practitioners who want to move their practice into new arenas. They are also useful for employers hiring career practitioners, giving them clear language to describe new job positions and assess the skills required for success in various roles within the field.

REAL WORLD APPLICATIONS OF THE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

Professionalism

Professionalism, for example, is a core competency within the standards. One specific skill identified as a component of professionalism is adjusting to different cultures. Therefore, a career practitioner who wants to move into a new arena of practice may need to spend some time reflecting on differences between the old, familiar client group and the new one. Years ago in my own career, for instance, I transitioned between working with clients who were long-term unemployed (severely employment disadvantaged) to working with business students and corporate managers. In the early weeks, the stories and examples that I used in workshops didn't fit the new audience. I received feedback from one university student, for example, that I was too caught up in prisoners and layoffs.

Another skill identified as a component of professionalism is time management. Again, time takes on different meanings in new arenas. Some programs take months or even years to move from the concept or proposal stage to the day when there are finally participants in a classroom. Others, however, have only days or weeks available for preparation and development. One of my corporate clients, for example, once approached me at 4:30 p.m. to prepare a workshop on facilitating career transitions for a group of human resource managers. The workshop was scheduled for 8:30 a.m. the following day and we successfully met the deadline, complete with customized handouts and transparencies.

Professional development

The *Canadian Standards and Guidelines* also highlight as essential skills commitment to professional growth and staying up-to-date with technology. As earlier mentioned, in times past in our field, employers often provided or paid for courses and workshops. However, in today's economy, many workers are expected to take charge of (and pay for) their own professional development. Career practitioners, unfortunately, are no exception to this trend.

Work search strategies

In the standards, work search strategies are included under the heading of Common Skills and Knowledge. Therefore, many career practitioners will be expected to understand the essentials of finding work in the current labour market. Depending on the client group, work search strategies may include using the Internet effectively, navigating the world of recruiters and search firms, preparing effective career portfolios, writing targeted résumés and cover letters, understanding the latest interview techniques, and even accessing visas for international work opportunities.

Facilitating learning

Many competencies in the *Canadian Standards and Guidelines* are considered to be areas of specialization. Moving between specialties, therefore, might also open the doors to new opportunities for career practitioners. The standards, for example, identify a number of skills related to facilitating learning. A career practitioner moving into a new arena might need to adopt multimedia approaches (e.g., PowerPoint or interactive video presentations), adapt to different learning styles (e.g., adjust presentations based on adult learning principles), or offer distance courses using Web-based technology.

Information management

Information management is another area of specialty that is affected by changing client groups or sectors. For example, resources that were important and meaningful to one client group might not be helpful at all for others. Gathering and staying up-to-date with resources that suit diverse clients takes time—practitioners might find it helpful to engage participants in contributing resources that they've found personally useful. The ongoing challenge, of course, is organizing and purging those resources. Information overload is becoming one of the biggest problems in our field.

Work development

Another area of specialty identified in the standards and guidelines is work development. As with other skills, approaches need to be adapted to suit new client groups. Although some clients require the kind of help offered in a more traditional placement model, most clients benefit from learning the skills themselves to develop job leads and secure employment. Practitioners moving between programs

with different visions of work development may find that they need to adjust their approach to liaising with employers, posting leads, and coaching clients to successfully find work. In a global economy, career practitioners can no longer rely on finding jobs for their clients within their own pool of friendly employers. They need to engage clients in generating their own leads and actively considering new possibilities.

Community capacity building

Community capacity building is yet another area of specialty that might offer new opportunities to career practitioners. Capacity building may involve partnerships with community groups and organizations, businesses, social planners, education, and government. As career practitioners work with these partners to build long-term strategies to reduce unemployment and grow the economy, they forge many new relationships that can open doors to new career possibilities.

MOVING INTO THE MAINSTREAM

This paper has highlighted only a small sample of the skills that are identified within the *Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners*. In such a diverse field as ours, it seems clear that there is plenty of room for stretching our skills and moving into new arenas of practice. Career practitioners are experts at helping individuals successfully navigate career transitions. Applying our career management skills to our own careers will allow us to respond to the changing landscape that we also face. By looking ahead to emerging opportunities, benchmarking skills against best practices in the new field, planning strategies for a number of future possibilities, and committing to continue professional development, career practitioners will be well positioned to thrive in the emerging workplace of the new millennium.

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