

## Career Counselling in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

*“We’re a society that knows how to apply for a job. The challenge for employment seekers today is to become proficient at finding work. That’s a much more complicated process than applying for a job.”*

This is the reality facing students who are graduating from secondary and post-secondary institutes and people who are losing their jobs due to downsizing. The vast majority of them have no idea about how to become proficient at finding work. It creates a huge opportunity for career counsellors. But it also creates a challenge for them because many of them have spent their careers in traditional jobs and have never had to become proficient at finding work.

In trend-setting California, according to a study by the University of San Francisco, 66 percent of the workforce is employed in non-traditional jobs, i.e. part-time, temporary, contract or self-employment. This is where we’re all headed – and we’re not ready for it. How do career counsellors who have never known anything but a traditional job prepare their students for this reality? Indeed, how can they relate to the challenges of earning a living outside of a traditional job if they’ve never experienced this themselves?

*“The fundamental challenge for educators is that for generations they’ve been turning out employees. Now they have to turn out entrepreneurs or at least students who have an enterprising approach to finding work.”*

If you’re a student or downsized worker looking for work, there’s no law that says that anybody is going to offer you a job. The onus is on these people to find the employment opportunities that are out there or, in some cases, to create their own. This is a new role for most people, and our education, training and in some cases our upbringing does not prepare us well for it. Acquiring self-marketing skills has to be a part of the educational experience, which is not the case for most students today.

Teaching such skills is a real challenge for administrators, faculty, teachers and career counsellors, because most of them have no experience looking for work in today’s workplace. All of them need to face the irony that they’re responsible for preparing their students for a workplace that they themselves can’t relate to and to see how best to address this lack of experience.

At a higher level, governments, school boards and the bureaucrats who oversee our education system must recognize how much the workplace has changed and make sure students are being adequately prepared to succeed in it.

*“We must recognize how much more important the field of Career Counselling is today given the challenges students face in entering the workplace. We must look for ways to make it more effective, and allocate more resources to it.”*

According to a January 2006 poll by Ipsos-Reid, two-thirds of working Canadians wish they had sought more career-planning advice when they were starting out. A February 2007 study by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in the U.K. showed that a third of the graduates believe they studied the wrong course at university. In September 2005, research from the U.K. Graduate Recruitment Bureau suggested that two thirds of graduates were dissatisfied with their university career services.

At Indiana University's Kelley School, business undergrads are now required to take two for-credit, career-related courses. One focuses on self-assessment and the other stresses actual internship and job-search strategies. These should be required courses in every Canadian college and university and more resources should be committed to these areas in our secondary schools. And they would be if the administrators, bureaucrats and politicians who are responsible for funding and managing our education system understood how much the workplace has changed.

Career counselling has never been a high priority within our education system, at either the secondary or post-secondary level. Further, in times of budget restraint, it is often first on the list of items eligible for cutbacks and that has to change. The key question is: how does the typical secondary school elevate an area that historically has been a low priority to the much higher level it must operate at in order for their students to succeed in the new workplace?

The challenge for secondary school career counsellors, today and tomorrow, is to show their students how to succeed in the workplace with a different set of tools and strategies than has been used in the past. All educational institutions must continually upgrade their training, teaching and skill-development processes to better enable their members and graduates to acquire the necessary ever-changing skills needed for success in today's workplace.

The transitions occurring in the workplace today are among the most significant since the high unemployment of the Great Depression and the need for effective career counselling is greater than it has ever been. This new era will be full of opportunities and challenges for career counsellors.

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*Ron McGowan is the principal of How To Find Work in Vancouver. He has been helping experienced people and college/university students find work for over ten years. The 2007 edition of his book "How to Find Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", currently in use at over 200 colleges, universities and secondary schools has recently been released. It has a new section "Career Counselling in Secondary Schools" and can be previewed at: <http://www.trafford.com/00-0131>*