

A Moving Target Navigating Work-Life Change Proactively

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The accelerating half-life of occupational knowledge is a topic that has received relatively little attention to date. “Half-life” refers to the period of time that elapses before half of what we accept as factual becomes obsolete (Arbesman 2012). Given the rapid pace of technological change, estimates of occupational knowledge half-lives range from a maximum of three years to a minimum of 18 months. There are widely-advertised occupations that did not even exist three years ago, for example: app developer, data miner, 3-D printer repair, or social media manager. The fact that individuals now average 15 to 17 changes in their work lives—in work situations or even changes in career direction—is testimony to our increasingly fluid work environment (Harris 2014).

The terms “lifelong learning” or “continuing education” have become an accepted part of our understanding of how people develop throughout their lifespans. Requirements for continuing professional development credits are common in order to maintain professional licenses or trade certifications. Educational institutions have been issuing credits for life experience to meet standard academic requirements. Non-academic curricula have blossomed through continuing studies departments at colleges and universities as well as through separate organizations such as Elder Hostel.

But this acceptance that we remain vital and engaged through ongoing learning does not address how we adapt to the rapid churn in our paid work lives. Research indicates that technological disruption is accelerating, with 61 percent of larger businesses indicating that they are redesigning jobs around AI (artificial intelligence) and robotics and 42 percent reporting that automation will have a major impact on the structure of work (Abbatiello et al. 2018). Algorithms are replacing many complex tasks thought to be safe from automation, including in the professions (Royal Bank 2018).

A recent study by Randstad Canada suggests that the workforce of 2025 will be composed of agile workers—those who have up-to-date knowledge, on-demand availability, flexibility with time and work schedules, the ability to adapt quickly to the job, and a breadth of experience (2018). Deloitte’s *2018 Global Human Capital Trends* report describes the new work environment this way: “Rather than an orderly, sequential progression from job to job, 21st-century careers can be viewed as a series of developmental experiences, each offering the opportunity to acquire new skills, perspectives, and judgment” (Abbatiello et al. 2018). Or put another way, people need to “shift from thinking about jobs and careers to think about challenges and problems” (Dizik 2017).

If we are to assist our clients and learners in moving agilely from one work context to another, we need to help them learn a process of navigation rather than simply help

them obtain a job. “Faced with a future in which AI makes work even less stable, what is needed is a wholesale transition from *knowledge work* to *learning work*. This comes from acknowledging that when the context of someone’s job is fluid, what they already know matters less than how quickly they can learn” (Khurgin 2017).

Career and Employment Services and Ongoing Work Life Management

While anecdotally we know that work life “churn” exists, is this something with which clients and learners need help in order to succeed in work life? The 1998-2000 research (Ward and Riddle 2001) that resulted in the Employment Readiness Model™ and its measurement tool, the Employment Readiness Scale™ (ERS), identified a critical employability factor that was not yet the focus of professional attention—Ongoing Career Management, or one’s ability to move proactively between work situations and career tracks. Embedded in the ERS is an outcome-validated measure of this factor, and data from 218,735 individuals (in Australia, Canada, the U.K., and the U.S.A.) have verified that Ongoing Career Management is the lead factor with which most individuals seeking employment assistance were not yet self-sufficient. Of those who scored on the ERS as requiring only minimal assistance, 31 percent scored as not self-sufficient on Ongoing Career Management. Of those requiring more extensive support (i.e., scoring on the ERS as “Not Ready”), 88 percent scored as not self-sufficient on this aspect of anticipating and managing future work life changes.

Table 1 provides a breakdown of ERS “Not Ready” respondents by age group. Those data show that, while the need for assistance with Ongoing Career Management decreases slightly as clients age and presumably have more work experience, that decrease is not statistically significant. Even among older individuals, 86 percent showed a need for help with how to navigate changes in work life. When one looks at the changes in employment readiness as a result of assistance (as measured by the ERS), over half of clients scored as “left behind” when exiting service—i.e., still not self-sufficient on Ongoing Career Management. The highest percent “left behind” were those aged 18 or younger (significantly higher than the total average percent) who are at the start of their work lives. Having two-thirds of youth not prepared to anticipate and manage changes in their work environment implies the likelihood of ongoing challenges in making appropriate transitions.

Table 1: Percent of “Not Ready” Clients Needing Help with Ongoing Career Management

Age Category	% Needing Help Initially	% Still Needing Help on Exiting Service
18 and under	92%	68%
19-24 years old	90%	63%
25-29 years old	88%	60%
30-45 years old	87%	58%
46-65 years old	86%	54%
Total “Not Ready” clients	88%	58%

Source: Employment Readiness Scale™ as of April 2, 2018. Percentages in bold are significantly higher than the average.

Table 2 displays the aggregate “left behind” data for all clients by the primary interventions in which they participated prior to exiting service. Interventions designed to address life stabilization issues (such as substance abuse) have the highest percentage “left behind” and thus are the least likely to help clients prepare to manage ongoing changes. Job search interventions, including job clubs, are shown to be the most likely to strengthen the ability to manage work life changes. Those 18 and younger were least likely to improve on Ongoing Career Management in any of the employment-specific interventions except Job Placement.

Table 2: Percent of Clients “Left Behind” on Ongoing Career Management

Intervention Type	Age Group					
	18 & under	19-24	25-29	30-45	46-65	Total
Addressing life stabilization issues	70%	73%	71%	72%	67%	72%
Personal support groups	69%	58%	56%	57%	57%	58%
Life skills/employment orientation	65%	60%	58%	54%	50%	55%
Workplace-based training	68%	61%	43%	50%	49%	55%
Academic upgrading/ESL	63%	61%	55%	50%	45%	53%
Career/employment counselling	65%	56%	52%	49%	43%	52%
Job placement	53%	47%	51%	47%	47%	50%
Skills training	54%	48%	42%	40%	40%	45%
Career exploration	41%	42%	38%	38%	39%	39%
Job search/job clubs	61%	49%	42%	34%	29%	38%
Total clients	61%	53%	49%	47%	44%	48%

Source: Employment Readiness Scale™ as of April 2, 2018. Percentages in bold are significantly higher than the total average for that intervention.

Relevant Lifelong Learning Principles

There are several principles of the lifelong learning process that are particularly relevant to the management of changes in one’s work life:

- The process is *self-motivated and self-directed* rather than being required. This is an important distinction from the concept of acquiring continuing education credits required to maintain a professional license or certification.
- The process is *ongoing and continuous* rather than time limited. Rather than being linked to enrollment in a specific course of study or a particular work application context, it is based in our ongoing interactions with others and the world around us (Fischer 2000).
- The process is *non-linear* rather than being focused on a single objective to be achieved. It includes the ability to make sense of disparate experiences and to construct personal meaning rather than simply accept authoritative dictums.

The combined impact of the three principles listed above is to embed a shift in the way in which learning is conceived and approached. Together they call for a new attitude of increased ownership by the individual regarding both learning and employment assistance, coupled with an openness to risk-taking as new behaviors are tried.

Necessary Changes in How We Work with Clients and Learners

All too frequently career and employment counselling staff are evaluated only on whether or not a client found a job and how quickly that occurred. This focus on one-time achievement is rooted in a traditional view of work life as linear or static in the sense of being linked to following a single career path. In the actual dynamic, “churning” work environment, significant shifts are necessary if clients and learners are to be ultimately successful. To implement the lifelong learning principles listed above, we will need to:

1. Shift the focus of assistance from *doing for* clients and learners (e.g., facilitating a job placement) to coaching clients and learners to prepare and search for work themselves. This includes stimulating clients and learners to want to take charge of their own work lives.
2. Help clients and learners identify their own best learning processes and how to apply those processes to their work lives on an ongoing basis.
3. Teach clients and learners how to evaluate new data in the context of their own core values in order to select next steps that will be congruent for them.
4. Communicate a new vision of life in general and work life in particular as constantly changing with risk-taking as an important component of trying out new directions.

A crucial first step is learning to scan for shifts in market patterns and infer possible implications. Traditionally we have viewed relevant labor market information as being data that describe which industries and companies are likely to be expanding and hiring, what new competencies might be needed, wage scales in key occupations, etc. Such data only describe the current situation but do not help us anticipate change. Here is a scenario to help illustrate the difference:

Esther lives in a small town with a large retail employer for whom she has worked for the past 20 years. She has enjoyed her work and has been promoted gradually, now serving as assistant manager of her department. She has just heard that the store in which she works is closing at the end of the quarter and is shocked. She thought the store was doing well. How could she have seen this coming?

Esther’s challenge illustrates the importance of looking beyond one’s immediate circumstances to identify broader trends. In Esther’s case, the rapid growth of online purchases (including by herself and her family!) would be a first signal that bricks-and-mortar retail establishments are being challenged. She could also notice the trends towards bricks-and-mortar stores being small specialty operations as well as the rise in using automated assistants to replace sales staff. This type of awareness could stimulate Esther to think about other ways to apply her knowledge and skills in a manner that would be gratifying to her (i.e., in keeping with her values). What options can you think of?

Suggested New Activities in Working with Clients and Learners

So how can we support the necessary shifts in focus if clients and learners are to continue to succeed in their work lives? Many career and employment staff have not themselves experimented beyond the model of traditional full-time jobs, especially in less usual scenarios such as telework or self-employment. This can make it challenging for staff to embrace the turmoil of the current work environment and help clients and learners become agile and creative in their approaches.

Strengthening values frameworks. A key to empowering individuals to evaluate the myriad new work opportunities is clarity about what matters to them in their work lives. The following are examples of individual or group activities that can help clients and learners identify priority values:

1. Have clients and learners describe previous or current work situations and what they liked or disliked about them to help clarify their conditions of satisfaction.
2. Generate a values list with clients and learners and then have them sort the values into which ones are core deal breakers and which ones are less important for them.
3. Discuss how value priorities change over time and have clients and learners identify ones that are no longer important to them and ones that have become more central to their well-being.
4. Present a list of possible values or use value card sorts (e.g., Knowdell 2017) and have clients and learners rank order them for themselves; then discuss the work implications of their top two values.

Tracking new work life developments. Traditionally, labor market information (LMI) has focused on types of work currently available, based on an outmoded assumption that the basic types of work will remain consistent. Table 3 lists some suggestions for how to precipitate a shift in the approach to LMI.

Table 3: Refocusing Labor Market Information

Labor market	Traditional Focus	Proposed Focus
Labor market information	Describes current trends in industry growth	Anticipates future trends
Skill preparation	Focus is on specific occupational requirements	Focus includes how to learn, critical thinking, and pattern recognition
Planning framework	Linear sequential steps	Emergent design
Planning time line	Five to ten years	One to three years
Occupational focus	Select a specific career	Articulate a values framework
Occupational options	List of standard occupations	List of new options in the past 3 years & anticipated future roles
Occupational choice	Select the position that suits best	Explore possible applications of skills within one's values context

Labor market	Traditional Focus	Proposed Focus
Client/learner news content	Job vacancies	Trends that will influence the type of work that is possible as well as current job vacancies

Some possible activities for identifying new and developing labor market trends are listed below:

1. Have clients and learners bring in three articles about the trends in their industry and then discuss the implications for the types of work available.
2. Have clients and learners identify industry leaders who are at the forefront of change and then conduct informational interviews with them about how best to prepare for coming changes.
3. Have clients and learners monitor online publications like *Fast Company* that report on innovations and new trends in technology, leadership, and world-changing ideas, and/or TV shows like *Dragon's Den* that are focused on innovative business ideas, and then discuss work life implications.
4. With other agencies in your region providing employment-related services, publish a weekly or monthly *Work Life Trends* newsletter for clients and learners on new trends due to demographic or technology or automation/AI changes and implications for work possibilities.

Developing new work opportunities. Another way to assist clients and learners in embracing changes in work life possibilities is to give them practice in identifying new work life opportunities through activities such as:

1. Have clients and learners identify a need or problem, challenge, or change in their community (e.g., Michel 2017) and then brainstorm what new types of work could provide solutions and how they might take action.
2. Have clients and learners brainstorm different ways that their skills could be used, individually or collectively, to address an existing community problem.

Relevant Self-Help or Homework Activities for Clients and Learners

There are a number of activities that clients and learners can undertake on their own that can help them with managing ongoing life changes. Generally speaking, they fall into six categories:

1. Creating appropriate expectations by:
 - Recognizing that work life change is usual and ongoing
 - Monitoring news of new technologies and types of work
 - Ongoing mind mapping—considering potential new applications of skills

2. Clarifying values in relation to one's work life, such as:
 - Financial stability, including benefits
 - Opportunity to learn new skills
 - Flexibility for work-life balance
 - Colleagues/co-workers they enjoy
 - Able to work independently
 - Making an important contribution
3. Strengthening one's network(s) by:
 - Clarifying criteria for qualifying for a next step
 - Soliciting feedback from a supervisor/mentor
 - Setting and meeting objectives
 - Updating contacts regularly
 - Participating in at least one industry or business organization
 - Participating in hobby groups
4. Building transferrable skills by:
 - Keeping and updating a skills inventory
 - Asking a supervisor/mentor about what other skills to learn
 - Monitoring technological changes that could affect your work
 - Volunteering in a field of interest
 - Asking others what you do well
 - Mentoring others
 - Participating in project-specific working groups
5. Noticing and pursuing opportunities proactively by:
 - Shifting from thinking about jobs and career to thinking about challenges and problems to be solved and how they could match the individual's skills and interests
 - Identifying perceived needs that are not currently being met
 - Engaging in work life with entrepreneurial spirit, having a portfolio or freelance mindset including mobility within organizations
 - Considering opportunities from the perspective of skills that clients or learners want to utilize and develop
6. Planning for next steps by:
 - Developing a 3-year life planning horizon, expecting that you will make a change by the end of the third year
 - Mapping your own path and how you made changes
 - Job shadowing
 - Reframing your own experience in keeping with change

Conclusion

Many of our career and employment services training, programs, and resources are still predicated on the assumption of a single career path over a lifespan for ourselves and our clients. However, such an approach is no longer realistic. Drawing from lifelong learning principles, we can instead adapt our services to the dynamic realities of our twenty-first century work environment. In doing so, we can empower the clients and learners we serve to proactively take charge of creating positive and evolving futures in an ever-changing world.

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