

Coaching Clients, Working Smarter Embracing the New Realities

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Based on Employment Readiness Scale™ research as well as ideas contributed by session participants at 2017 Cannexus and BC Career Development Association conferences. For further information, contact Valerie Ward at valeriegward@gmail.com or 604-886-8905.

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Context

The world of work is changing rapidly, compelling career and employment services to change as well. Gone are the days when a client securing a suitable job meant we could assume that they were now set for long-term success, or when it was reasonable to expect that many of the more challenged clients would be on staff caseloads for several years. In the current environment, clients' – and our own – work life success will require being nimble in facilitating future transitions and the ability to adapt in a timely way to changing conditions.

This article will address five common myths still present in how career and employment services are structured and provide suggestions for how to shift to a more forward-moving approach. Those unfamiliar with the Employment Readiness Scale™ from which the Canadian national data cited below have been derived can find background information at www.EmploymentReadiness.info.

Myths, Realities, and Implications

Myth #1: Secure a good job and you are set for life

Research shows that Canadians average 15 jobs in their work lives and over half now stay in one role for less than two years (Harris 2014). Of the workers surveyed, 41 percent had already been employed in three or more occupational fields and only six percent of current workers have been with the same employer for at least 12 years.

Implications: The ability to plan ahead and move successfully between jobs and occupational fields is becoming an essential skill. So, the focus of employment counselling needs to move beyond preparing individuals for effective job search towards helping them learn to manage ongoing work life change. Data from the Employment Readiness Scale™ indicate that 88 percent of Canadians seeking case management assistance need help with managing ongoing change (known as Ongoing Career Management). This is not surprising as training youth in the ability to manage work life change is not yet a part of standard educational curricula. Of particular concern, though, is Employment Readiness Scale™ data showing that, even after completing standard employment service interventions, 75 percent are still not prepared to manage work life shifts effectively. Specific coaching is required for clients in learning how to anticipate and manage future work life transitions.

Myth #2: Full-time employment is the "best" goal

Our society still portrays full-time employment, with benefits, as the goal towards which to strive, creating a potential for those in other work structures to feel that their

work life is somehow deficient or less secure. The problem with this scenario is that experts project that by 2020 no more than 55 percent of the labour force will be in standard full-time employment, on location and with benefits (McConnell 2017; Tencer 2017). Increasingly employers are perceiving workers as a “just-in-time” production factor. Rather than nurturing full-time employees, they may view a “contingent” work force as helping ensure their competitiveness as they purchase the assistance they require only on an as needed basis.

Recognizing that such a strategy may be short-sighted in terms of customer satisfaction does not mitigate this clear trend. When employers contract with independent workers for short-term engagements, it is being known as the gig economy. Fortunately, an increasing number of millennials are embracing the flexibility that alternate work structures can provide (Bricker 2016). At the same time, an increasing number of Canadians are in “precarious” employment – i.e., part-time work with unpredictable hours, low wages, and no benefits (DePratto and Bartlett 2015; Noakes 2016).

Implications: It is important that career and employment services provide information about, and assistance with, an array of work structures other than standard full-time on-location employment (with benefits) as legitimately reflecting work life success. Alternatives, for example, include:

- Telecommuting: Full-time employment, not on location
- Telework: Employed online by a distance employer
- Employee of a temp agency (with benefits)
- Self-employed with solopreneur benefits (e.g., through the Chamber of Commerce):
 - As an independent contractor on a project-by-project basis
 - Self-managing diversified simultaneous contracts

To reflect these current realities, information about such alternatives needs to be available at the point where individuals begin thinking about work life options and such possibilities should be portrayed in all visuals and resource materials related to work life success.

Myth #3: Career training and technical skills are key

In keeping with the myth of a single job launching a successful work life, there remains a perception that choosing a career direction (for life) is key to success. However, technological changes are resulting in the rapid rise of work options that did not exist five years ago (e.g., social media consultant). Having a post-secondary degree in an acknowledged career track does not guarantee success; indeed, one-third of university and college graduates are ending up in low-skilled jobs (Younglai 2016).

Career paths have become non-linear, with individuals sometimes moving from a senior position in one occupational field to an entry level position in a new field. Also,

employers are increasingly concerned with excellence in soft skills rather than technical expertise (which may become outdated rapidly).

Implications: It is critical that career and employment counsellors are sensitive to the need for client strength on key soft skills as clients themselves do not typically seek help with such skills. Data from the Employment Readiness Scale™ indicate that Canadians seeking case management help require assistance with the following key soft skills:

- 73% with Work History
 - The feeling of having performed well in the past in volunteer or paid work settings
- 67% with Self-Efficacy
 - A sense of confidence that one can perform well
- 67% with Social Supports
 - One's network and ability to reach out for help and support
- 50% with Job Maintenance
 - Interpersonal and self-management skills
- 41% with Outcome Expectancy
 - Expecting to succeed and the willingness to take responsibility for creating that success

Myth #4: Life stabilization issues must always be addressed first

Often staff feel that clients' life stabilization must be attended to first, thus delaying a focus on employment-related issues. Life stabilization issues include addictions, bereavement, child/elder care, disability, domestic violence, housing, legal issues and more. However, data from the Employment Readiness Scale™ indicate that 72 percent of "Fully Ready" (i.e., ready for independent job search) clients have life stabilization issues, and such concerns can emerge at any point during one's work life.

Research has shown that strength on soft skills is critical to managing life stabilization issues (Ward and Riddle 2001). Further, engagement in moving forward with employment readiness strategies can enhance a person's belief that they can manage their lives effectively.

Implications: Addressing soft skills will help clients with life stabilization issues as well as position them for work life success. Progress in identifying and preparing for the type of work desired can also reinforce clients' belief that they can be effective and proactive in other areas of life.

Myth #5: Thorough preparation and motivation will get you a job

Data from Statistics Canada indicate that there were 6.4 unemployed Canadians for every job vacancy posted in February 2017 (Statistics Canada CANSIM Table 284-0001, Table 282-0047). Older workers are remaining in the workforce longer, whether due to personal preference or financial necessity, and delayed exits mean fewer job vacancies for younger workers. In addition, the "churn" in younger workers shifting work situations provides employers with an increased pool of recently-skilled workers from

which to draw. With regard to motivation itself, research shows that those unemployed for more than a year still identify as “workers” and would strongly prefer to return to paid work (Murphy et al. 2011).

Research shows that increasingly employers are reluctant to interview those who have been unemployed for six months or more (Hartford 2014; Jarosch and Pilossoph 2016; Moffat 2014), which can be problematic for those seeking case management assistance if that assistance does not position them for independent job search within an appropriate window of time. Employers indicate concern over skills becoming outdated or irrelevant or social networks becoming obsolete the longer a person is unemployed. In addition, those unemployed for four weeks typically incur a one percent permanent loss in income, which increases to four percent when one has been unemployed for five months (Makovec and Zaidi 2006). In Canada, the average length of unemployment is 20.7 weeks, or five months (Statistics Canada CANSIM Table 282-0047). Thus, speed of reintegration is critical in ensuring successful employment opportunities and also in avoiding the negative health consequences linked to a delay in re-employment.

Implications: It is critical to streamline career and employment assistance so that it is both efficient and effective, and so that clients become ready for independent work search as soon as possible.

Optimizing Clients’ Journey to Work Life Success

In order to support clients’ consideration of a range of work structures, it is important to frame the sequence of work life preparation in generic terms so that our language is not just about “jobs.” The following table identifies the four key coaching stages and provides suggested strategies for working with current clients so they are ready to search for work within 13 weeks. “Reach back” strategies are also required for assisting clients who have already been unemployed for at least six months.

Coaching Stage	Coaching Strategies
1. Clarifying work life focus [maximum time 4 weeks]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask “how do you see your ideal work life?” then look for a match of skills/abilities & offer support or alternatives • Ask good open-ended questions: What does work mean to you? What are the most important things you want to gain from work? What do you enjoy doing? What are your priorities? • Identify financial need/urgency • Ensure client has a sense of the minimum earnings they will require to meet basic living expenses • Clarify issues they may have re: work focus; have them identify 2 priority

Coaching Stage	Coaching Strategies
	<p>occupational targets</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss using short-term, part-time or volunteer work to make their resume more attractive • Explore past successes & what the person is known for • Evaluate what would be the best work structure for them • Validate a person's experience; see the client as the expert on their own situation • Push clients - get them to set goals that are measurable & take action; celebrate small wins & build momentum • Use job shadowing to learn about work options • Mentorship programs
<p>2. Acquiring supporting skills, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening soft skills • Acquiring technical skills • Ongoing work life management <p>[maximum time 4 weeks]</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help client self-assess their own soft skills (e.g., listening, leadership, self-care, communication, networking, public speaking, research, time management skills) • Package life skills training differently, e.g., a menu of modules for self-study and/or small group • Essential Skills/literacy improvement strategies • Assist with occupational research to identify skill gaps • Determine if skills training will be for short term work or long term career planning • Consider school, workshops, tools & training opportunities to acquire skills including communication • Analyze/expand social network • Business management skills
<p>3. Learning work search strategies</p> <p>[maximum time 5 weeks]</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link work search process to work structure sought • Online search methods • Interviewing skills & practice through mock interviews • Feedback on mock interview/presentation

Coaching Stage	Coaching Strategies
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach networking strategies & skills, e.g., using LinkedIn, networking events • Developing referral networks • Using social/professional media
4. Launching / supporting work search	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help clients recognize benefits of enriching or adding to contacts in the community • Build skills in information interviewing • Keep client accountable • Learn/practice contacting employers/ customers to assess their needs • Ongoing work on networking skills & strategies • Job Clubs/work search groups • Mentorship with industry/organizations • Priority management/life balance for individuals managing multiple part-time work commitments • Follow-up 18 months later

Conclusion

The pace of change in the world of work will only accelerate. In response, it is important that we continually look for efficiencies in service provision while ensuring that we are addressing the issues that will best position clients for success. Ultimately we want individuals to be empowered to manage a series of often unpredictable circumstances and to be proactive in managing work life changes. Our assistance needs to include helping them to evaluate a range of work structures and to gain the strategies and skills required to take charge of their work futures.

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