

Coaching Learners for Work Transitions Embracing the New Realities

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Context

Traditionally the completion of an educational milestone, whether it is high school graduation or a post-secondary degree, has opened the door to new levels of employment opportunity. However, currently graduates are having difficulty finding appropriate work (Rana 2016), with more than one-quarter being underemployed in relation to their educational preparation (Purdon and Palleja 2017).

In addition, our educational systems have been predicated on the assumption that, having chosen a career direction and received the required education or training, students will be “set for life.” Instead, research shows that Canadians average 15 job changes over the course of their work lives and over half now stay in one role for less than two years (Harris 2014, 2015).

Canadian learners face a work context that has changed significantly in the past five to ten years. Competition is much stronger due to several factors. Older workers are exiting later due to both financial needs and a desire to remain actively engaged into their seventies (Carrière and Galarneau 2011). Many staff transitioning from government positions are moving into private sector work rather than retirement. With an oversupply of experienced workers, entry level positions are increasingly filled by overqualified persons, restricting access to opportunities for youth and newcomers to the field. And the rapid churn among younger workers generates more applicants for position openings (Younglai 2016).

Work contexts have also changed. Increasingly employers are viewing workers as factors of production to be supplied “just in time,” with the result that by 2020 it is predicted that almost half of Canadians will not be in standard employment (McConnell 2017; Tencer 2017). An increasing number of workers end up in precarious employment, despite educational credentials, with unpredictable schedules and earnings (DePratto and Bartlett 2015; Noakes 2016). While some learners embrace the flexibility and variety that are hallmarks of a gig economy (Bricker 2016), others flounder.

So how can we ensure that there is no disconnect between educational preparation and work life success? How can learners be coached more effectively for work transitions?

Setting the Stage for Success

Realism about work life. Learners want to understand what to expect in their work lives, including the ways it may be different than what has been experienced by people they know or what is being portrayed in the media. They may need help in embracing the idea

of ongoing change and the nonlinear nature of work life involvement. Work that may be perfect for them now may not exist in five years, and conversely they may be ideally suited to positions that may not yet exist. In light of these realities, students will be best positioned for success if they can learn to carefully monitor trends to enable them to anticipate what shifts they may want to make over time. Staff can be particularly helpful by normalizing the realities of multiple work structures and of ongoing change.

Data from the Employment Readiness Scale™ indicate that 90 percent of Canadian youth do not yet have a clear sense of how to manage ongoing work life changes. Career educators and counsellors can address this lack by teaching learners the skills of environmental scanning or watching for opportunities. For example, they could ask the learner to identify five emerging work options implied in the daily news. Also, learners can be encouraged to reflect on previous changes they have made successfully and to seek out situations where they will be challenged to adapt to new circumstances or new team members so that the change process becomes familiar and their own adaptability skills are honed.

Self-determination. Traditionally the type of work available and the qualifications required have been set by employers. However, it is becoming more common for individuals to define for themselves what they want to get out of work experiences and then proactively seek out work scenarios that fulfill those requirements. This self-definition requires a process of reflection on personal values and what matters to them regarding their work life. Given the likelihood of ongoing changes, students can benefit from learning how to monitor shifts in themselves in terms of what they most value. Also, to the extent that they can learn to develop insight into the expectations and mindset of those in positions of authority, they will be better positioned to match their own desires with the expectations of prospective employers.

Acquiring a work orientation. Career educators and counsellors can make an important contribution to helping learners become successful in their work lives by framing the educational context in work life terms. Learners can be encouraged to view education as a preliminary step in their work life trajectory rather than as a separate and different experience from which they graduate. Strategies that can help with this framing include:

- Expecting the learner to exhibit good work habits, like arriving at appointments or completing assignments on time, exhibiting respect for others, following directions and asking questions when appropriate.
- Helping learners understand the expectations and mindset of instructors in the same way that they will need to with employers.
- Encouraging them to identify gaps in their work skills, such as soft skills, and initiate ways to fill those gaps.
- Encouraging them to seek out feedback from others and use it to hone their skills. Also structure situations where they can provide constructive feedback to others.

With rapid technological changes occurring, it will be important for learners to switch from a “get qualified first” attitude to “learn as you go.” Every activity can add to a solid experience base if approached from the perspective of what can be learned from that activity. Being flexible and adaptable is key to success. Part of a “learn as you go” attitude is being curious about different types of work, different work structures, and what skills can be transferred from one context to another.

There are also specific activities that can reinforce an appropriate work orientation. Career educators and counsellors can supplement regular job fairs with panels on different types of non-traditional work. Learners can be given assignments to research different types of work structures and interview people in a range of different work fields and structures.

Encouraging Transition Strategies

The value of volunteering. Research shows that employers are increasingly reluctant to hire workers who do not have current work experience (Jarosch and Pilossoph 2016). In addition, employers may be aware that many course curricula are not kept up-to-date with rapid changes in technology. There has been a degree of hallowing out with middle managers retiring or being let go, resulting in a lack of experienced supervisors to provide on-the-job training. And with an overabundance of applicants from which to draw, employers can afford to steer clear of those who lack current relevant experience. Indeed, employers sometimes inflate educational requirements as a way of narrowing down abundant candidates; as a result, some of the best candidates for a position may seem “not qualified.”

An obvious but often not actioned alternative is for learners to acquire specific types of current “real world” work experience through volunteering, with career counsellors providing information on existing options. This can be particularly important given that Employment Readiness Scale™ data indicate that 78 percent of present-day Canadian youth indicate that they do not yet have any meaningful work experience. Volunteer work does not need to be in a field in which the learner wishes to become employed as long as it is approached from the perspective of learning to work effectively with others. Other approaches include doing a final project with a relevant company, working as a coop student, or applying for (or creating) internships.

Working with a mentor. Seeking out and working with a mentor can have a number of benefits. Most practically, it can hone the learner’s skills in accepting supervision and can also position the learner to have a strong advocate when interviewing for positions. Mentors can help learners design a series of activities both to clarify the learner’s real work interests and to strengthen the learner’s base of qualifications. In addition, mentors can help learners identify areas for growth to make themselves an increasingly valuable asset. They can also serve as guides in effectively evolving one’s work life by gaining further contacts and cultivating future opportunities.

When learning institutions choose to engage successful graduates to serve as mentors, those mentors gain experience in scanning for new work opportunities on behalf of the learner and thus are in a stronger position to anticipate and manage their own transitions. At the same time, the learner can gain an invaluable helping hand in the transition process.

Job shadowing. A variation on mentorship is the process of shadowing persons doing types of work that might be of interest to the learner. Job shadowing can be of particular value if the career counsellor encourages the learner to be analyzing why the work is (or is not) a good fit and under what circumstances that might change. If job shadowing is not a realistic option, informational interviewing could also be helpful in finding out about the realities of various types of work as well as building support networks.

Self-care. Managing transitions can be stressful, and career educators and counsellors are ideally positioned to help learners explore ways to manage that stress in a healthy manner. Part of that self-care could be learning how to reflect and self-assess periodically in order to anticipate work life changes so that they become more manageable. Learners can also be coached to advocate for and negotiate a work structure that suits their lifestyle.

Expanding Work Search Options

The role of social media. Learning about work opportunities is focused increasingly on social media. Becoming conversant with a range of media, including online job boards, networking websites, and the like has become an essential skill. They also need to be aware that prospective employers will search their online activities and thus to consider the importance of paying close attention to the online image they are presenting.

The role of networking. Networks have become important both for learning about opportunities and for validation of one's own expertise. Where quality positions are available, employers often ask the educational institution to recommend specific individuals for those positions so learners may benefit from nurturing relationships with those who could direct opportunities their way.

Employment Readiness Scale™ data indicate that, despite the prevalence of social media, 59 percent of Canadian youth feel socially isolated. Networking is a teachable skill – e.g., how to pick up information from others, the importance of offering assistance to others before expecting help in return, how to “work” a social event so that learners meet as many people as possible instead of staying with those that they already know, keeping in touch with their network to ensure that they know what type of work the learner is looking for, and so on.

The role of customization. In order to ensure an appropriate match, learners can be coached to tailor their resumes to address the priorities in a job listing, much as one does when responding to a request for proposals. Not all work is a good fit, and learners can find it valuable to practice evaluating work offerings in the context of their own work life

priorities. Practice in marketing their skills in different contexts (similar to proposal writing) can also be particularly fruitful.

Facilitating Change Management Strategies

Change is a constant in our lives as well as our work. Career educators and counsellors can assist learners by normalizing ongoing change and helping them identify strategies for managing that change process. Some of those strategies could include:

- Being realistic in expectations of themselves.
- Recognizing that learning is lifelong and life changes are to be expected.
- Strengthening learners' soft skill competencies, for example through workshops on presentation skills to help them become more articulate and better formulate their thinking.
- Becoming skilled at self-assessment.
- Evaluating and updating work life goals every two years.
- Developing "mindfulness" practices (stillness and noticing) and "withitness" (ongoing curiosity, experimentation, learning and active engagement with life).
- Encouraging risk-taking and initiating new experiences, setting aside preconceptions of the imagined value of an experience before trying it.

Addressing Professional Shifts

For career educators and counsellors, the challenge is to shift from a perspective of preparing learners to acquire their first position after graduation to coaching learners in adopting a change management approach to their ongoing work lives. Many staff in these roles have been in their positions for six years or more and so may not be personally familiar with the dynamic of rapid change in career focus. Similarly, many career educators and counsellors are salaried full-time employees with little or no experience with other work structures. In light of this, staff may want to reflect on the possibility of their having fears about or implicit bias against self-employment scenarios that unwittingly can colour the way they assist students in examining options.

Just as we want learners to acquire skills in informational interviewing and other research approaches to monitor labour market trends, so to do career educators and counsellors need to become familiar with the complexities of today's work environment. This may include the challenge of releasing the image of full-time employment, with benefits, as the "best" job scenario for all and recognizing the advantages of a range of work structures.

Conclusion

Because the pace of change in the world of work will only accelerate, it is critical that career educators and counsellors develop ways to help learners embrace and manage lifelong change. Learners can be taught how to recognize the trend shifts that herald new possibilities, find ways to continue to grow and expand their repertoire of skills, and to

market themselves effectively in evolving contexts that match their interests and values. Career educators and counsellors, in turn, have the challenge of embracing new work life models and positioning themselves as coaches who empower learners in proactively taking charge of their work futures.

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