

Career Counseling for the 80's: Providing Services in a Shrinking Job Market*

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Perhaps most important, though, is the philosophical perspective that defines for our work a clear context of economic realities which we explain carefully to our clients; a perspective of caution about placing total blame on our clients for their failures or about assuming excessive responsibility ourselves; and yet, a perspective in which we recognize productive and meaningful work as a basic human right, and strive skillfully and courageously to help our clients find the satisfaction and meaning in work they desire.

Everywhere (especially in the author's Bay Area) we see ads and notices for workshops, seminars and counseling services to guide people in their search for work. *Career design; career redesign; getting out of teaching; getting into management; moving up; moving out*—everyday our mail bulges with flyers and notices. Bookstore shelves are lined with books on finding and changing careers; community centers, junior colleges, Boy Scouts, even banks and corporations now offer career services.

Why now? What changes in our social and economic situation have created the demand for this plethora of aids and services? How is the field of career counseling responding to these demands? Fully to understand and answer these questions, we need first to look back over the historical development of vocational counseling. We need to see how its practice and style have shifted with the changing needs of industry, the changing nature of the labor market, and changing cultural expectations around work. Within this context, we can then analyze our current situation and explore the implications for the services we provide as Jewish vocational professionals.

The Development of Vocational Counseling

Vocational guidance, as it has been called, began in the early part of this century as a product of the many reform movements that attempted to deal with the upheavals brought on by the Industrial Revolution. Industry required a huge unskilled labor pool and it drew people into cities, from the American countryside and Europe, creating crowded conditions, illness and poverty.

Frank Parsons, in his 1908 work *Choosing a Vocation*, attempted to bring some order into the process of entering the industrial world.¹ His was a three-step system, in which one develops self-understanding, gathers knowledge about the world of work then reasons on the relation between these two to find a vocation. This became a framework which still serves as the basis of career counseling.

Another legacy which has continued into our time is the concept of individual adaptation. The person was fit into the system, so that success and failure were *prima facie* indicators of individual strengths or weaknesses, reasons for individual triumph or blame. This was the time

¹ Frank Parson, *Choosing a Vocation*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909, as cited in Roger F. Aubrey, "Historical Development of Guidance and Counseling and Implications for the Future," *Personnel & Guidance Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 6. (1977), p. 289.

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Denver, May 27, 1980.

of Horatio Alger, with enough rags-to-riches examples to deepen the faith of all.

As industry grew in complexity, it called for workers with increased skill and training, and a better system for matching workers with jobs. It found such a system in the trait-factor theory, which relied primarily on psychometrics. Testing reflected the early 20th century American passion for scientific accuracy and efficiency. Binet was developing his intelligence test at the same time Parsons was building his vocational theories, and World War I saw the emergence of psychometrics used on a mass scale, soon wedded to vocational guidance in a marriage that has survived to the present day.

The counseling style was then a rather authoritarian one, with the burden on the counselor to guide young people into the "right" field, where they would stay and advance. The counselor's authority rested firmly on the scientific accuracy of testing.

Early applied industrial psychology also found its way into vocational guidance. Frederick Taylor's breakdown of work into its basic parts, for greater industrial efficiency, formed a major component of trait-factor theory. We see another tradition forming here, the subtle connection between the needs and theories of management and the style and substance of vocational counseling.

The great depression of the 30s, with its massive unemployment, brought placement activities within the scope of vocational guidance. The U.S. Employment Service and many private and public centers, including Jewish vocational services, provided job placement. It was World War II, however, that changed the face of American society, its work force, and with it, counseling theories and methodology.

World War II brought us out of the Depression, with millions of jobs created in the military and the supporting war efforts. The defeat of facism, a lasting peace, and a

booming post-war economy reinforced faith in the American system. The growing field of counseling psychology was nurtured in the military during the war, and afterwards, through counseling services provided by the GI Bill, the Veteran's Administration and the emerging National Institute of Mental Health.

Also at this time, the counseling profession was shaken by the work of Carl Rogers. His emphasis was on the total person, on the need to treat the whole person, rather than the problem, in his or her growth toward freedom and self-determination. As counselors became more aware of the complexity of personality, vocational guidance assimilated this new psychotherapeutic approach, and the trait and factor techniques were replaced by counseling as a key guidance function.²

Counseling techniques and theories based on personal choice and freedom made great sense in an expanding economy, with open opportunities for growth and advancement. The GI Bill sent millions of people to college and brought massive growth in educational institutions. Education was seen as the pathway to personal and material success, an expectation reinforced by the open and growing labor market.

The post-war years also brought the baby boom. These "babies," shaped by those years of economic growth and optimism, now fill our agencies as adults, full of faith in the power of education, and laden with expectations around work. As children, they reaped the benefits of Sputnik-era developments in education, including the quadrupling of counseling services in the schools.

When baby boom children became adolescents and young adults, they took over the 60s with social unrest and rebellion. Ironically, if we look closely, we

² *Ibid.*, p. 292.

see here a sustained, though somewhat different faith, supported by a strong economy. Only a booming economy could support the War on Poverty and other social programs which paid people to work for social change. Even dropping out of the system and forging an alternative lifestyle are a luxury of a growth economy and an open labor market.

The 60s and early 70s also brought a boom in counseling styles and techniques, seen most visibly in the emergence of the "human potentials" movements, which promised the full development of every individual's potential for growth and joy.

It was the mid-seventies, however, with the end of the war in Vietnam, the Arab oil embargo, the recession and spiraling inflation, that brought us to where we are today.

Changes of the Last Decade (Seventies)

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 90 percent of the college graduates of the 60s entered professional, technical and managerial occupations felt by graduates to be appropriate to their education and abilities. In the seventies, however, only 60 percent entered these fields. The rest spilled over into jobs not previously held by college graduates, particularly in clerical and service areas.³ These people formed the ranks of the underemployed or faced periods of unemployment.

Growing numbers of college graduates have met a series of downturns in economic conditions, with these trends expected to continue through the 80s. The estimated 13.5 million college graduates will be competing for the 10.2 million "traditional BA" job openings, with one in four facing either underemployment, unemployment, or both.⁴ These people comprise the bulk of the non-emigre clients of our agency and

their experience creates the context from which I speak.

Women, especially, have faced this tightened labor market with raised expectations around their careers and increased pressures for success and achievement. In fact, economic pressures have erased, for most women, the choice of *not* working.

While the 70s brought greater difficulties in finding work, these years also brought increased dissatisfaction among the employed. A 1977 survey of workers conducted by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center, designed to measure quality of employment over a four year period, showed significant decline in job satisfaction, pervasive across all demographic groups and occupations. More workers expressed a desire to change jobs, and fewer found in their work an opportunity for the full use of their skills.⁵

In many ways a time of cynicism and disillusionment, the 70s became known as the "me decade." As our economy and natural resources showed their limits, people turned inward, looking for personal fulfillment through encounter, gestalt, marriage and divorce groups. Volumes of "pop" psychology flooded the bookstores, exhorting readers to assert themselves, to "look out for number one," to "be their own best friend."

This movement raised expectations and offered individual, private solutions. Nowhere do we see this as clearly as in the recent mushrooming of career counseling, which in methods, style and ideology forms its own branch of the human potentials movement. I began research for this paper by looking through *Psychological Abstracts* and found five times as many articles on career counseling for a three month period in 1979, as there had been for the

³ Janet L. Norwood, "The Job Outlook for College Graduates through 1990," *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 4. (1979), pp. 2-7.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Graham L. Staines & Robert P. Quinn, "American Workers Evaluate the Quality of their Jobs," *Monthly Labor Review*, Vol. 102, No. 1. (1979), pp. 3-12.

same period in 1969. Compare this then, with the data on employment and economic growth for the 60s and 70s: a restricted labor market brought an upsurge in career counseling.

What we are now seeing is the headlong collision between our post-World War II expectations and ideology around work and the realities of the labor market of the 80s, especially for the college-educated, aspiring professionals we serve in most of our agencies. Career counseling in its current popularity and growth, has emerged as a great mediator in this conflict.

Richard Bolles revolutionized career counseling and became its new guru, with the publication of *What Color Is Your Parachute?* in 1972. Interestingly, this just preceded the greatest recession and highest levels of unemployment this country had seen in 30 years. Taking much of the ideology of the human potentials movement into the search for jobs and careers, Bolles' focus is on empowerment, helping individuals take charge of their lives to find fulfilling work.⁶

Rejecting methods of testing, Bolles devised a series of exercises designed to help individuals analyze their work histories and assess their own interests, preferences, and skills. He built on the work of Sidney Fine and John Holland, and developed a system of skills identification and clustering to help people identify their basic work "building blocks," and adapt them to the world of work.

Highly critical of the traditional system of getting jobs, with only 15 percent of available jobs listed, as he asserts, Bolles gave personnel offices a bad name, claiming that they screen people out instead of in. He suggests that job seekers circumvent personnel, turning instead to the person directly in command. Through a process of interviewing for information, they will convince the administrator of a gaping hole

⁶ Richard P. Bolles, *What Color Is Your Parachute?* Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1972.

in the organization and then sell themselves as capable and necessary for filling it.

This method of interviewing for information, formalizing what people have done informally for years, has become an enormously helpful tool for gathering information on careers and developing contacts in hard-to-find job areas. Yet not everyone has the *chutzpah* and poise to carry this approach off successfully. Howard Figler, in his article, wonderfully titled "Career Counseling for the Obscure, the Meek and the Ugly," mentions the limitations of the "you can do it" job search philosophies and then asserts that we as counselors must help our clients develop the tools to accompany their firm resolve and courage.⁷

Indeed, the model client of the Bolles approach bears a striking resemblance to the Horatio Alger we have known and loved—motivated, hard-driving and determined to succeed. How many of our clients really fit this mold? How many casualties do we see in our offices, who blame themselves for their inability to secure a job that perhaps does not exist?

Bolles calls for an individual approach to what is really a systemic problem: a labor market that cannot meet the expectations and aspirations of *all* those who approach it. This certainly does not mean that people do not need good survival skills, or that we should not encourage them to assert their right to meaningful and productive work.

We must be wary, however, of exhortations that "you can do it," of the admonition against the "victim mentality," and of the claims that, in Bolles' words, "people of every imaginable background, age, sex (etc.) . . . can deliberately set about to find a job that gives them a sense of meaning and mission and succeed at finding it."⁸

⁷ Howard E. Figler, "Career Counseling for the Obscure, the Meek and the Ugly," *Journal of College Placement*, Vol. 39 No. 1. (1978), pp. 30-39.

⁸ Richard P. Bolles, *The Three Boxes of Life*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1979, p. 268.

We infer from exhortations like these that if we can't get a job, there must be something wrong with us; that familiar "blame the victim" perspective. In times of high employment, people don't have to go through so many machinations to find work, to rely on personal charm and grace in addition to the skills needed to do the job. An individualized counseling model has given way to a group teaching model. We assume that everyone, with the possible exception of petrochemical engineers and physicians, needs to learn the skills of job seeking.

The Bolles approach forms the basis of many of the career workshops springing up around us. All the neat diagrams, boxes and flowers provide a sometimes dangerously simple system for the highly complex process of clarifying the meaning of work in one's life. These workshops are often large, expensive, and squeezed into a single weekend, with much of the work done in pairs or small groups on a peer basis, sometimes without the expertise of a trained counselor. Yet cutbacks in social services, and the glut of counselors, especially in the Bay Area, have made these workshops, and career counseling in general, an attractive though not always viable option for many counselors and therapists.

The Bolles-type techniques are finding their way into another arena, the corporate world. Many corporations have instituted career development programs for their employees as part of personnel and supervisory functions. Often in response to Equal Employment Opportunity and Affirmative Action pressures, these programs enable employees to assess their career development within an organization and have provided pathways to advancement, especially for women who have been stuck in clerical realms. They have also encouraged job redesign, changing a current job to better suit it to an employee's needs and preferences. Corporate career planning also offers some employment

opportunities, though limited, for counselors; who are frustrated with the poor pay and diminishing opportunities within the traditional social services.

These programs are conducted primarily in workshop settings, and generally follow a Bolles-type format. Often they utilize video equipment, as in the model program at Lawrence Livermore Laboratory in Bay Area. Career development activities may be geared toward grooming future management, toward mid-career assessment and change, toward pre-retirement planning and to facilitate "downward transfers for poor performers."

Why has the corporate world taken this interest in career planning? A careful examination of the personnel literature offers some interesting hypotheses: "The purpose and benefits of Career Development planning are stated in terms of the organization. Even though we talk about the individual career, the primary concern is for organizational performance and effectiveness."⁹

Personnel specialists cite demographic trends, particularly the maturing of the workforce, as those born in the post-war baby boom reach their most productive years, and crowd promotion opportunities. "Rather than upward promotion, lateral movement may be the primary career growth of the future." As this is seen to be potentially explosive, one author recommends more time in counseling.¹⁰

Personnel is warned against inflated employee expectations. "Don't focus only on advancement," they are admonished, "companies simply do not have enough high level positions open to make upward

⁹ Marilyn Morgan, Douglas T. Hall, Alison Martier, "Career Development Strategies in Industry—Where are we and Where Should we be?," *Personnel* Vol. 56, No. 2. (1979), p. 22.

¹⁰ Lawrence A. Wangler, "The Intensification of the Personnel Role," *Personnel Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 2. (1979), p. 118.

mobility a realistic option for large numbers of employees."¹¹

In a time of growing dissatisfaction among workers, along with fewer options for changing jobs, we can see that career counseling may become management's method for pacifying and appeasing employees. In fact, a brochure offering a "how to do it" workshop for personnel people includes in its rationale for career programs: avoiding unionization, improving productivity, decreasing turnover, and encouraging early retirement.

Implications for Service

As practitioners in Jewish vocational service agencies with long traditions of high quality service and concern, what should our response be to this flurry of career counseling activity? I'd like to describe some of the approaches we use in San Francisco, working with a young, well-educated and professionally aspiring population, that faces one of the tightest job markets in the country, although our efforts are far from being always successful.

We have found through careful needs assessment that the separation of counseling and placement functions does not meet the needs of most of our clients, since they search for career direction and employment at the same time. We do have job developers providing only placement services to those clients who know what they want to do and who are looking for work in areas for which there are ready jobs and listings—in San Francisco, clerical and unskilled service areas. We also provide this direct placement for clients who need survival work, while they look for other work or develop their career goals.

The great majority of our non-emigre clients, however, need a broader orientation and combination of services, to clarify career directions and find work in the more competitive occupations. Over half of our

clients seek employment in the social services, media and management areas. There are so few openings in these areas that they require months of hard, gutsy searching, calling for sharply honed job hunting skills and lots of support.

We place a great emphasis, both individually and in groups, on the teaching of job search skills, assuming that our clients will need them over and over again in their working lives. We teach the thorough development and use of resources, both through written and personal contacts, the effective structuring and managing of time, and the building of a personal support base to help endure the often devastating period of a protracted job search.

We also work long and hard to teach the difficult and subtle techniques of informational interviewing, both for career information and as a means of developing job contacts. We help our clients form their initial approach, often including tricks for getting past overly protective receptionists. We use role playing to help develop the skills of the actual interview, analyzing power dynamics and emphasizing the need for preparations. We urge careful follow-up and maintain our own files of contacts. Observing a growing reluctance to grant these interviews, as the market tightens and the approach gains in popularity, we warn our clients to keep their expectations realistic and not to expect the easy miracles the Bolles disciples often predict.

We conduct our career counseling both individually and in groups, working frequently with the casualties of other workshops, who complain, "Now that I know what color my parachute is, I still don't know what to do."

We keep our groups small, between 5 and 10 participants. Again, we teach the *skills* of self-assessment, presenting to our clients the likelihood that they will face this decision-making process again in their lifetimes. We also present a two-pronged model of career clarification, balancing the

¹¹ Morgan, *et. al*, *op cit.*, p. 26.

introspective self-assessment with an information-gathering process, again, teaching the skills of research interviewing.

We collect and adapt many counseling tools and exercises and develop our own, striving always to respect the complexity and depth of this process, while structuring it into manageable parts. We try to balance the need for the client's independent work on self-assessment with the expertise and perspective of our counseling skills. We teach goal setting, encouraging clients to face their decisions in more manageable steps, while still recognizing the forces which may be out of their control.

We've tried to expand the boundaries of career counseling to incorporate the major life decisions as they affect and are affected by vocational issues. We keep attuned, however, to the parameters of our work, and make frequent referrals for personal counseling and therapy.

We help our clients analyze their situations to help them find the balance between blaming themselves entirely, and feeling victimized by forces beyond their control. With this sense of balance, they can then pursue their goals, recognize the real, objective conditions which become obstacles, and develop strategies around or through them. We work with many clients who are already working, helping them solve on-the-job problems, negotiate salary raises and plan for their next steps, without the restrictions and contradictions of counselors paid by corporate management.

We have seen the connection between career counseling styles and the changes in the labor market. It seems imperative, then, for career counselors to be well-versed in labor market economics, to stay on top of economic trends and their implications for jobs. Most counselor preparation consists of clinical training, with some information on occupations and career development. These skills and infor-

mation are of course crucial, yet need to be supported with a concrete economic understanding. In our own agencies, we ought to provide in-service training and client education in these areas. We need to maintain up-to-date labor market outlook information to be read by both counselors and clients.

Also, to our advocacy for individual clients, in job placement and counseling, we must add another component: advocacy around social issues which affect the lives of our clients and agencies. We have seen the egregious effects of Proposition 13 in San Francisco, in cutbacks in social services which keep some of our clients out of work and attract others who need far more comprehensive services. We've seen our referral resources diminish, and individual staff members worked to defeat Proposition 9, which would have cut state income taxes and devastated health and social services throughout the state.

Perhaps most important, though, is the philosophical perspective that defines for our work a clear context of economic realities which we explain carefully to our clients; a perspective of caution about placing total blame on our clients for their failures or about assuming excessive responsibility ourselves, and yet, a perspective in which we recognize productive and meaningful work as a basic human right, and strive skillfully and courageously to help our clients find the satisfaction and meaning in work they deserve.

Everyday we see increasingly gloomy signs of the coming recession. The 80s do *not* promise open opportunities in the world of work. Restrictions in funding do not make our jobs easy. And yet, more than ever, our clients and communities need the high quality services and ongoing support we as Jewish vocational service workers have made our long tradition.

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