

First Do No Harm

Expanding Our Thinking About Opportunities

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Surrounded by media messages of “tough economic times,” we may inadvertently limit the options we explore with clients. What if our assumptions about limited opportunities are incorrect? What if the types of jobs towards which we are directing clients are not sustainable?

The Context of Career and Employment Counselling

Clients come to career and employment counselling practitioners in order to achieve several objectives, for example: (a) learn about opportunities that could fit for them, (b) learn how to research options, and (c) find out how to find and secure work. Part of this process is understanding where they are currently with respect to their “employment readiness” and planning ways of building readiness in any areas needed. Further, clients come in with certain perceptions or assumptions about themselves and the world of work and where they think the opportunities may lie.

A challenge arises for service providers because clients see the practitioner as an authority on the world of work, whether practitioners view themselves that way or not – after all, that is one of the key reasons clients seek out these services. This perception on the part of the client implies an ethical responsibility for practitioners – a responsibility as a professional to learn and grow and to be aware of one’s limitations including limiting beliefs. If we avoid this responsibility, we may be engaging in a form of harm known as “dismissiveness,” not recognizing or trivializing the impact of our assumptions on others (Riddle 2010).

There is an ease with which our assumptions as practitioners affect the options of others, whether or not we are aware of this. Think, for example, about your own work life. Are you currently employed full time, with benefits? Have you had any positive experience working as a contractor? What if a client wanted help developing a portfolio of contract work – how skilled and comfortable would you be in providing assistance?

Mismatches between clients and work opportunities may arise for a number of reasons. Clients may not believe that they can succeed. Or they may not understand how to network and learn about available work that would suit them. Perhaps clients’ skills don’t match the available jobs. Clients may have the skills but not interview well, or interview well but not be able to keep the job due to limitations in their job maintenance skills. But perhaps the most troubling contributor to this dynamic is a shared belief between clients and practitioners that, “There are very few jobs available.”

The reality in British Columbia (BC) is that the jobs available did increase between 2005 and 2011 at an average rate of 1.4 percent a year (BC Stats 2012a). True, jobs were lost in agriculture and manufacturing, but there was an above average increase in positions in professional and technical services (2.3%), educational services (2.7%), health services (3.6%), and construction (3.9%). And in northern BC, there is an immediate as well as a projected future need for skilled workers, with over 10,000 jobs coming online within the next ten years (Hansen 2012).

Myths and Realities in the New World of Work

While an individual staying with a single employer throughout their work life is now a rare occurrence, data from the Employment Readiness Scale™ (ERS) suggest that there are some important gaps in addressing clients' needs for assistance in managing work and career transitions. Data from over 80,000 clients in BC who took the ERS show that 61 percent of those clients lacked competence in Ongoing Career Management, and yet none of the agencies interviewed had an intervention specifically designed to strengthen this skill set. Further, BC interventions to improve job maintenance skills or outcome expectancy (one's belief in the ability to succeed through one's own efforts), as evaluated by ERS data, are the least effective of the interventions offered. We believe that there may be a series of limiting beliefs contributing to this issue.

Limiting Belief #1: Tough Economic Times

Our media are filled with headlines about slow recovery from a recession, the jobless rate, plant closures, layoffs, cutbacks, and so on – generally a picture of doom and gloom. Added to that is a strongly-held belief that our Canadian economy, including job creation, is tied to the vibrancy of the U.S. economy.

We know that, while the global economy has been expanding at a rate of 3.7 percent, the Canadian economy has grown by only 2.2 percent and the U.S. economy by a slower 1.5 percent (CIA 2012). But a significant shift in the world economy has occurred in the past year. Growth is now centered on key Asian economies, and overall the Asian economy is growing at 8.4 percent, with China the leader at 9.5 percent. And BC has strong and growing ties with Asia. Both BC and Canada as a whole now export more to Asia than to the U.S.A. (Schrier 2011).

So the economic picture, taken as a whole, is actually quite optimistic. PricewaterhouseCoopers' (2011) recent survey showed that the biggest barrier to growth in Asia is the lack of talent, coupled with a high turnover rate as the select employees move from company to company. Asian companies, as well as branches of BC firms in Asia, are looking for skilled, dependable workers to work either on location or at a distance. Northern BC's economy is booming. Not only BC but also the rest of Canada and the U.S. are facing the void about to be created by the retirement of millions of "baby boomers," starting this year (Jarvis 2012).

Limiting Belief #2: The Best Work Structure

Our typical picture of a “good” job is one of long-term employment in one’s current location, working full time in an office or plant, with full benefits. Our media tends to criticize any other model, asserting that part time work is low-paying and marginalizes the worker. On reflection, though, the “good” job scenario can actually be considered to be a passive, entitlement model. Once hired, the worker simply follows a job description and expects regular increases in pay and benefits.

Charles Handy (1989) was one of the first to begin speaking positively about a different model. Over twenty years ago he made the distinction between “core” workers and “portfolio” workers, asserting that the “portfolio life” was actually more secure than a one-income life. In other words, proactively seeking out several different contracts, Handy maintains, offers more security than being dependent on a single employer who could choose to terminate one’s employment at any time.

What we see emerging is a wide range of work structures. If labour mobility is assumed, then there is a wider range of choices for workers who come to service providers looking for full time employment with a single employer. If the growing trend towards distance working (teleworking) is accepted, then the field broadens considerably (Coombs 2007). There are workers currently working for supervisors outside BC or even outside North America who they have never met except in a teleconference. Another option for those wishing the security of full time employment is to become an employee of a temp agency, such as Manpower, where work assignments may vary but the person is under the corporate benefits plan.

A more proactive work structure model is that of the portfolio worker (McRae 2010). Here the person markets their skills to a range of companies, remaining an independent contractor. There are a growing number of electronic networks for locating opportunities and posting skills, such as www.guru.com, www.elance.com, or even Craig’s list. A minimum level of business skills is required as a self-employed person. Or one can get more formal about setting up a business and becoming a solopreneur.

Limiting Belief #3: Drawbacks of a Portfolio Life

The usual assumption is that, without a full-time job, a person would have no pension or insurance benefits. Further, working on one’s own, whether as a teleworker or a portfolio worker, is assumed to be lonely.

With the growth of solopreneurs, the supports for individuals have changed. The BC Chambers of Commerce now have an affordable group plan that is available to individual self-employed persons who are members of a Chamber of Commerce. It includes life insurance, dental and health insurance, and business overhead insurance.

There is also a general move away from “workplaces” to “workspaces.” One of the newer trends that has spread to over 20 countries is “co-working” where a number of portfolio workers share a business office, high-speed internet, and networking

opportunities so that they have social contacts and support (DeGuzman & Tang 2011). The Network Hub, for example, offers such an arrangement in Vancouver and New Westminster. More formal arrangements with fully furnished offices are available through companies like Regus Canada. Association memberships and their networking activities also provide social and business support.

Limiting Belief #4: The Basis of Success

Fundamental to traditional employment services is the importance of accurate labor market information. Clients are assumed to need up-to-date data on local job vacancies, salary scales, and occupational trends. In addition, they need to know how to put together an excellent resume and how to interview well.

In a portfolio life, there are other factors critical to success that may not be considered in a traditional assessment at an employment services office. More and more companies are looking for persons who have an innovative mindset, who can problem solve, who can learn quickly, and who can communicate effectively across cultures (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2011). This holds true both for core employees and portfolio contractors. The portfolio worker also has to be able to identify needs to be met in their community or other arenas into which they have connections and match these needs with their own skills and experience.

Limiting Belief #5: Self-Employment Requires Advanced Education

When thinking about the types of contracts that a portfolio worker might obtain, often the focus is on specialized professional skills that would require a post-secondary education. There is an assumption that, without advanced education, workers are limited to dead-end, low-pay jobs.

In 1999, the Canada Career Consortium compiled a resource handbook called *Career Directions - Occupations: University Not Required*. While some of these require specific experience, others are suggestive of areas that might be of interest to clients who position themselves as portfolio workers or solopreneurs. Here are some current examples: A highly-organized person could become a clutter consultant. A person with an excellent sense of space and design could become a home stager for real estate companies. Other possibilities include cleaning and maintenance, meal preparation for working parents, personal assistant to run errands, and so forth.

Skills Needed in the New World of Work

Many of the skills needed by a portfolio worker or solopreneur are the same as those needed by full-time employees, but with a different priority ranking. Of the validated Employment Readiness factors, the lead skill for a portfolio worker or solopreneur is *ongoing career management* - the ability to anticipate and plan for change as well as to see

new ways to use one's skills and experience (Neault 2012; Riddle 1999; Ward & Riddle 2000).

Next would come *self-efficacy*, or a sense of competence and belief in one's ability to perform and manage one's life, followed by *job maintenance* which includes the ability to work well with others. *Social supports* are also critical, both to help an individual handle stress and to provide a network through which to learn about work opportunities.

Being able to adapt successfully to changing conditions is critical as the structure of work continues to change and is measured by two of the ERS factors in addition to ongoing career management - outcome expectancy and work history. *Outcome expectancy* is the person's belief that their own efforts will result in a successful outcome regardless of what happens, coupled with a willingness to take responsibility for creating that success. One component of *work history* is the person's ability to identify transferable skills, which is critical in a portfolio approach, as well as their ability to recognize the positives in their previous work or volunteer experience.

The more traditional factors of career decision-making, skills enhancement, and job search are also important but training in these areas is typically strongly slanted towards full-time employment and traditional occupational categories. However, strength in these factors is still important in helping portfolio workers increase their success in procuring contracts.

There is a second category of skills that relate specifically to alternate work structures. The portfolio worker or solopreneur needs to be able not only to understand their own skills and match them to opportunities, but they also need basic skills in managing a business (even if their status is self-employed), negotiating contracts and managing a project to a specific timeline and budget. Business skills would include selecting the best business structure (self-employed, sole proprietor, partner, corporation), arranging an appropriate and efficient work space, developing referral networks, and managing finances.

Challenges for Practitioners

For clients who are aware of their skills and interests and who have realistic expectations, the work opportunities are almost limitless. Using Vance Peavy's model for adult learning (1992), career and employment counselling practitioners have three areas of professional development to consider:

1. *Perceptual awareness*: Becoming aware of one's own limiting beliefs, clients' limiting beliefs, and the realities of alternate work structures.
2. *Discretionary judgment*: Screening clients differently so that the option of alternate work structures emerges, and ensuring that there are interventions available that support clients in evaluating and choosing alternate work structures such as portfolio work.

3. *Skilful practice*: Creating an alternate screening protocol (for an example, see Appendix A) and having patience with oneself as one learns a new approach.

One of the policy issues that will need to be addressed is how a service provider's success is measured. If we assume that the various forms of "self-employment" are only for a minority of clients and "not as good as" full-time jobs, we may overlook the potential of valuable interventions such as "business readiness" programs. If we define success primarily in terms of clients acquiring a full-time job or completing a training program, then helping clients explore alternate models such as portfolio work will not be a priority. To ensure that we work towards expanding rather than limiting clients' vision of what is possible for them, we will need to continue to evolve our outcome measures to similarly expand what is acknowledged as success.

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Appendix A
Sample Screening Process
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<p>Background Questions</p> <p>1. Positive experiences with work, paid or volunteer:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>																	
<p>2. Primary passions, skills, and interests:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>																	
<p>3. Degrees and certifications:</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p>Alternate Work Scenarios</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Full time, one employer</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Part time, 2+ employers</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Portfolio worker</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Solopreneur</p>																
<p>4. Openness to alternate work scenarios:</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 40%;">a. Degree of initiative or risk-taking</td> <td style="width: 10%;">Low</td> <td style="width: 10%;">Medium</td> <td style="width: 10%;">High</td> </tr> <tr> <td>b. Willingness to travel or relocate</td> <td>Low</td> <td>Medium</td> <td>High</td> </tr> <tr> <td>c. Comfort level with telework</td> <td>Low</td> <td>Medium</td> <td>High</td> </tr> <tr> <td>d. Open to managing several projects</td> <td>Low</td> <td>Medium</td> <td>High</td> </tr> </table>	a. Degree of initiative or risk-taking	Low	Medium	High	b. Willingness to travel or relocate	Low	Medium	High	c. Comfort level with telework	Low	Medium	High	d. Open to managing several projects	Low	Medium	High	
a. Degree of initiative or risk-taking	Low	Medium	High														
b. Willingness to travel or relocate	Low	Medium	High														
c. Comfort level with telework	Low	Medium	High														
d. Open to managing several projects	Low	Medium	High														
<p>Assistance Needed</p> <p>1. Employment ready on key factors?</p> <p>2. Know how to:</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 40%;">a. Match skills to needs?</td> <td style="width: 10%;">Yes</td> <td style="width: 10%;">No</td> </tr> <tr> <td>b. Negotiate contracts?</td> <td>Yes</td> <td>No</td> </tr> <tr> <td>c. Acquire a benefits package?</td> <td>Yes</td> <td>No</td> </tr> <tr> <td>d. Set up an efficient work space?</td> <td>Yes</td> <td>No</td> </tr> </table>	a. Match skills to needs?	Yes	No	b. Negotiate contracts?	Yes	No	c. Acquire a benefits package?	Yes	No	d. Set up an efficient work space?	Yes	No	<p>Employment Readiness Factors</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Ongoing career mgmt.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Self-efficacy</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Job maintenance</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Social supports</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Outcome expectancy</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Work history</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Career decision-making</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Skills enhancement</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Job search</p>				
a. Match skills to needs?	Yes	No															
b. Negotiate contracts?	Yes	No															
c. Acquire a benefits package?	Yes	No															
d. Set up an efficient work space?	Yes	No															
<p>Action Plan Steps</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>																	