

Dissertation 1999

The current state of the Canadian economy was predicted 18 years ago. If it comes as a surprise today, you weren't paying attention. Research shows the steady growth in short-term contracts, part-time jobs, self-employment and the "gig economy" were all expected. What is surprising is the lack of preparation for this trend. We need to remind ourselves that a full-time job with benefits and a single employer for life was a blip in human history. How you adapt to the new economy will depend on how you respond to the changes underway. (Work Futures, 1996, p.16)

In 1998, Mark Swartz was asking the question, "have you considered self-employment?" in an article he wrote for the Globe and Mail. In 1981, Stats Canada said 12% of the Canadian workforce was self-employed. Since then, those numbers have steadily increased. By 2020, Intuit Canada predicts freelancers, independent contractors and on-demand workers will account for 45% of the Canadian workforce.

Government-funded programs run by employment agencies tend to revolve around helping clients find a full-time job rather than the alternate types of 'work' cited above. Con-

sequently, if a client can't find a 'traditional job,' he or she will receive little information about how to pursue alternate types of work instead, even though those alternate types of work may be more readily available as well as more personally rewarding.

Stress is on the rise among those who feel unprepared for the changing nature of work. Unemployed workers don't know where to turn for help. (Lerner, 1994, p.7 of 10). Our education system is still preparing students for work in the old economy.

The thesis, *The Future of Work* (1999), was a research project for a Master's in Leadership & Training from Royal Roads University. It revealed how workers made the transition from a traditional full-time job to self-employment and short-term contract work, and how they felt about their new way of working.

Pessimistic view of the Future of Work

A number of different authors (Adams, 1997; Rifkin, 1995; Baum & Cameron, 1984; Henderson, 1981; Bridges, 1994) predict a bleak outlook for the future. They believe only a select few will have a decent income, that there will be general feelings of despair and uncertainty

for everyone else, and this will result in increased crime. People are increasingly losing secure full-time jobs, due to downsizing and the quest for company profit. They work in a series of temporary short-term positions. It is felt this will be on the rise in the next century.

In 1983, Canada's Catholic Bishops alerted us to the social implications of our economic crisis – to the dismay of many business and political leaders and were "denounced by politicians and businessmen for shifting their gaze from the spiritual order to the economic one." (Baum & Cameron, 1984).

Optimistic view of the Future of Work

A number of authors paint a much rosier picture. (Elgin, 1981; Beck, 1993; Feather, 1994; Toffler, 1990; Richards, 1995) predict that self-fulfilling work is just around the corner. They believe that most of us will be able to have meaningful work now that technology rules the world.

"Most Canadians will find the late 1990s a time of liberation, of greater freedom, and prosperous career opportunities. They will be at ease with their future and in control of



their own career destiny as we move into the 21st century.” (Feather, 1994, p.14)

“The renaissance in today’s business universe offers an opportunity to resurrect the soul and thus imbue our work with deeper meaning and commitment.” (Richards, 1995, p.66)

Self-created Future of Work

A number of authors believe our destiny will unfold dependent on the way we ourselves create it. (Kirk, 1996; Bridges, 1994; Winter, 1993; Everett, 1995; Dent, 1995; Godin, 1994). Barbara J. Winter, the author of ‘Making A Living Without A Job’, told us in 1993 that having multiple sources of income would be the best way to enjoy a secure income in the future. (Winter, 1993, p. 103)

Guiding Research Questions

There were three general questions the researcher felt needed to be answered:

- Are people who make the transition from a full-time ‘job’ to alternate types of ‘work’ acting in a reactive (pessimistic) manner, in a pro-active (optimistic) manner, and/or in a self-directed manner?
- What factors enable people to successfully make the transition from a full-time job to alternate types of work?
- Are these leadership qualities

that will allow the participants to serve as role models for others?

Methodology

The decision was made to use an Action Research methodology because action research, and specifically, an ‘action learning’ model of action research, enables the researcher to join with the research participants in a collaborative manner that links academic ‘theory’ with the actual practice of people who live in the ‘real world’ rather than under laboratory conditions. Action learning is built on the idea that research can have a dual purpose of producing useful research knowledge while at the same time helping the research participants gain a better understanding of themselves and their situation (Morgan, 1997).

Research Participants

The interview participants all made the transition from a full-time job to alternate types of work and have worked that way for more than two years. All 22 of the research participants volunteered to be interviewed after reading a small ad placed in a Victoria, BC magazine, Focus on Women. Most of the participants have post-secondary education and all work primarily in the knowledge sector.

Twelve participants had left full-time employment voluntarily to pursue self-employment. One was laid off. Eight participants were initially distressed

about not having a full-time job, but voluntarily chose self-employment rather than looking for another full-time job. (One person dropped out of the study and reluctantly returned to a full-time job.) The remaining 21 made the decision to pursue self-employment and/or short-term contract work.

Results

Of the 22 people interviewed, there were 6 men and 15 women and one who withdrew. They range in age from 32 to 63. Each was interviewed on tape for 2 hours and transcribed for study. The research study results evolved around seven subthemes.

Choosing the Road Less Travelled

All spoke of their decision to choose the road less travelled. Brian said:

I think most people won’t trust themselves to move forward with their ideas – because that idea might be unconventional – and yet I think that what our society is crying out for is the unconventional. It’s the opportunity to be more fully realized and to do work that is of greater good in the world.

Emotional Intelligence and Authenticity

One aspect of emotional intelligence is demonstrated when a person’s public self and



private self are the same. Tricia said, “My work and life values are the same. Authenticity is very important to me. If it was just a job I wouldn’t be able to do it for long. I have to feel like there’s some part of me connected to my work.”

Passion

Passion for life and passion for work was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Every person, without exception, expressed this as an essential ingredient to being successful working in alternate ways. Karen said, “I have more passion for my work now because I’m moving forward and following what my heart wants to do – and that’s how I know that what I’m doing fits for me.”

Meaningful Work

Everyone interviewed expressed a desire for meaningful work. Romana said, “I wanted to do something that was more meaningful to me. Now, I’m very choosy about the kind of work I do. It really has to fit in with my values.”

Attitude – Choosing Hope and Optimism

Study participants spoke about attitude and developing optimism. Joan said, “You need to foster hope and optimism. I do remain optimistic as that’s the only choice there is. Leaving my old job made me realize I had a choice about how I was feeling

and I chose not to feel victimized.”

Lifestyle Choices

Many of the study participants commented on their lifestyle choices, and a large number mentioned choosing to simplify their life. Ann said, “I have simplified my life. I don’t sweat the make-up and clothes. I don’t play those games anymore.”

Leadership from Within

This was a theme that emerged unexpectedly during questions about who helped them make the transition to alternate types of work as well as the role mentors had played. While some mentioned mentors, most said the transition largely emerged from within themselves. Romana said, “I believe leadership comes from within. I think many of us have leadership qualities and we don’t need outsiders telling us we’re leaders. Once we have the security of that knowledge within us – that we’re leaders – then we’re leaders.”

Conclusions

Government, educators, the career counseling profession and individuals themselves will need to take responsibility for the way the future of work will impact Canadians. This research found that people who successfully make the transition to non-traditional types of work tend to act in a pro-active manner and deliberately choose to be

optimistic, even on their down days. They also tend to be self-directed.

A number of factors were found that enabled people to successfully make the transition from a full-time job to non-traditional types of work. The most important skills the participants identified as being essential for success in alternative work choices are: self-knowledge, be self-directed, have a willingness to take responsibility for yourself, passion, willingness to take risks, integrity, effective communication skills, life-long learning, a positive attitude and behaviour, ability to be flexible and adaptable, able to make decisions, open to change and able to clarify your own values and goals.

For those involved in this study, it was found that they exhibited leadership traits. For the most part however, they did not want to lead anyone but themselves. Although they made many conscious choices – consciously choosing to be in a leadership role for others was not one of them. They all successfully made the transition on their own terms. Others can learn from their example even though those interviewed suggested that each of us needs to create and then follow our own path and live our lives based on conscious choices that revolve around our values.

Study Recommendations

It is important to clarify your values and determine what you want out of life prior to making a major career transition. We



need to embrace the future of work rather than fear it. Many of us will need to learn how to adapt to changes in the world of work, whether we are ready for them or not. This is a valuable role for career counsellors to play – provided they're ready for the changes themselves. The new world of work can enable people to be more authentic and to live and work with integrity – to have a life and work style of their own choosing but will only happen if they embrace the opportunity.

From this study's findings, career counsellors and their clients need to be encouraged to:

- Take responsibility for planning their own futures.
- Recognize that the best leadership comes from within. Listen to your inner voice.
- Commit to life-long learning and be willing to invest in yourself.
- Be conscious of the choices you make and recognize that not making a choice is a choice. Evaluate the consequences.
- Follow an Action Research Model as a way to plan your life and work choices. (Plan, Act & Observe, Reflect, Revise Plan, Act & Observe, Reflect) Make a conscious effort to repeat this model throughout life.
- Be prepared for the unexpected. We don't really know what the future of work holds, but we'll have a better grasp of it if we have a hand in creating it.

Implications

The information gathered from Research participants indicates that to be successful working in the future we will need to take more responsibility for ourselves, see ourselves as a business of one, and look inside ourselves for leadership. We need to think like an entrepreneur even if we don't want to be one.

The reality is that our economy already consists of thousands of small businesses and "gig economy" jobs are destined to grow. Self-employment is the preferred option of many Baby Boomers and Millennials. The challenge is to help people transition from an "employee mindset" to an "entrepreneurial mindset." The Future of Work research results can get you started thinking along these lines and hopefully taking action. If career counsellors want to help clients transition successfully into the new economy, they will first need to examine their own mindset. Only then, will they be able to lead others confidently into the future.

Grab the future economy horse by the neck, harness it, and ride it in the direction it is headed. Encourage friends to join you. Cue the theme from Bonanza. The plot line of this popular TV show from the 1960s was about a family clan caring for one another, their neighbours and taking action on social issues. It's a global collaborative Ponderosa now. It can be celebrated rather than feared. Enjoy the ride.

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