

**W**hile different circumstances motivate individuals to make a career change: personal preferences, better salaries, management, better benefits to name a few; each individual engages in a process of sorting out options to determine a workable next step. Fortunately, career counseling can take the trial and error out of career transition by helping an individual assess skills, values, and personal goals and then match specific career needs to opportunities in the marketplace.



# Trial and Error in Career Transition

– A CASE STUDY –

By Dr. Victor L. Kennerly, LPC

*"I always knew that I was good at my job, but as I became better, I became more confident. I began to think maybe there is something else that would suit me better, someplace where I could have more responsibilities and better compensation."*

*"I came to a point that this job stopped working for me."*

*"After all these years, I get no pleasure from this career now. I have talents that could better serve me in another field."*

*"I was never cut out for this line of work. I just fell into it and stayed too long. But I don't know what I'm suited for."*

Do the above statements sound familiar? The American Counseling Association defines career development in broad terms that reflect individual life stage needs. Therefore, the career counselor takes into account the many factors that shape an individual's vocational needs, including psychological, sociological, educational, physical, economic, and choice elements that encompass the total life of an individual. Career counseling therefore requires the individual to examine multiple factors while making these decisions.

The following case study shows how meandering occurs when an individual manages career development through trial and error. This case involves an individual who has changed jobs several times, experiencing the work-to-work, work-to-school, and school-to-work career transitions repeatedly. Carolyn, 21, is married with one child when she begins the career decision-making process. Carolyn faces a career transition eight times. By helping Carolyn focus on multiple considerations before each decision point, career counseling may have helped Carolyn discover choices that satisfied her broader long-term needs and more specific short-term needs.

### Transition One

Carolyn is married and has one child. Her first work experience came at the age of 21. While reading a newspaper, she spotted an advertisement requesting volunteers at a law library. Carolyn applied for a job as a library assistant because it sounded impressive. After one year, the head librarian on staff convinced Carolyn to pursue the field of law, possibly as a Legal Assistant/Paralegal. Carolyn did not pursue the four-year program as

## Fast Facts

- ◆ Career counseling requires an individual to examine multiple factors while making decisions.
- ◆ Most career counselors are more concerned with career adjustment and career selection than with finding a job.
- ◆ It is paramount in career counseling that life roles are not segmented but integrated into the career decision-making process.

was recommended but attended the two-year program. She continued to volunteer with hopes of being employed in a law firm and maybe one day becoming a lawyer.

Carolyn found a part-time job in a county office as a filing clerk while taking classes at a nearby college. The classes, she said, were the motivating factor that contributed to her self-esteem. She believed that she had found her niche. Carolyn talked about her compassion for "the people on the street." She went on to discuss how she could empathize with and have unconditional positive regard for the people that she would work for. "I remember being young and seeing these people on the street and saying, I can do something to help them, and this is what led me to this field." She used her experience in the law library to acquire a part-time job as a filing clerk to make additional money. Carolyn completed the two-year program in five years. At the age of 25 Carolyn graduated with an associates degree as a Legal Assistant/Paralegal. She quit her volunteer work, spotted another newspaper advertisement, and found full-time work at the Michigan Humane Society as a receptionist. The decision to take this job was based on her need for full-time work and her love of animals. She had fond memories of this job but quit to pursue voluntary certification through the National Association of Legal Assistants.

### Transition Two

Using her first search strategy, armed with a degree, Carolyn landed a temporary job as a Legal Assistant in training at a law firm that did a fair amount of pro bono work. She told me that some employers prefer to train paralegals on the job, however, this job became

available because the staff paralegal was going on maternity leave. Carolyn talked about her passion for this kind of work. She went on to discuss her compassion for the people that this company represented. As expected, this job came to an end in four months when the employee on maternity leave returned.

### Transition Three

Carolyn's next job was in a county office as a court clerk. One of the employers at the law firm recommended her for this job. Carolyn became unhappy with the climate at this job because some of the attorneys she encountered, as well as other employees, weren't very professional. As she put it, "While I liked the job, it was high stress and sometimes an explosive kind of working environment." She quit working there after two years but continued to work off and on part-time at various jobs.

### Transition Four

Using her search strategy for a third time, Carolyn read about an opening for a Law Clerk at a small firm, performing research for briefs using a computerized database. Carolyn worked this job for six years until the firm moved to another location. There were rumors that this was going to happen but she did not believe it would happen to her. Carolyn was unable to relocate with the firm for personal reasons.

### Transition Five

Carolyn now had six years of experience as a Legal Assistant/Paralegal but was currently anticipating a divorce. Carolyn acknowledged at this point being at a crossroad where she no longer would rule out work-to-school. "I started to believe in myself and had thoughts that maybe I needed to get more education and maybe enroll in a four year Pre-Law program." Carolyn took the summer off and found part-time work at a real estate company as a Title Clerk where she examined titles to determine their legal status. Divorced that summer, Carolyn would now need to look for full-time work. The supervisor from her previous job recommended her for a position as a legal secretary working for a small firm. This job did not work out, she said. She

received a divorce settlement, which sustained her to the next stage and transition. Now at the age of 33, as a single mom, she was slowly becoming impatient with job searching, security, and life goal needs. This job was hectic and the long drive to work was daunting. This job lasted for two years.

### Transition Six

Carolyn searched the local newspaper and landed a job in a small law firm as a Legal Assistant. Carolyn worked this job for six years. "I came to realize it, maybe two to three years into that job, that my associates degree was not enough." While working, Carolyn went back to school and completed her bachelor's degree in business with a focus on its legal aspects. At this point, Carolyn became drained and tired, and needed more responsibility and more pay. She began to re-evaluate whether another job as a Legal Assistant/Paralegal would give her the lifestyle she was looking for. The pay would not support the way that she was able to live before the divorce. "I came to realize, after all these years, I get no pleasure from this career. I have talents that could better serve me in another field. I was still getting associates-degree pay."

"I was not pressed to be out there during my marriage, but now my lifestyle had changed and caused me to think differently. I thought my marriage would last forever. I also believe that I became a more skilled worker, which gave me more confidence. I always knew that I was good at my job, but as I became better I became more convinced. I began to think maybe there was something else that would suit me better, where I could have more responsibilities and better compensation."

### Transition Seven

"At that point that field of work stopped working for me. So I watched people who were working in the business fields at the school where I had attended. The workers who worked in financing and human resources were making more money than I. I felt that maybe I should go back to school and work in this area. Besides, I had some business responsibilities at my present job." Carolyn made a decision to take classes and major in business. In August 2002, Carolyn

The results of a national survey of U.S. workers indicated that adults usually turn to friends for career advice. U.S. Department of Labor and other studies confirm and elaborate these findings. Here are the most common methods by which employers find employees in order of priority and success:

1. word-of-mouth contacts, employee referrals, networking
2. internal job postings
3. college/high school recruitment
4. search firms, employment agencies
5. check callback files
6. want ads

Here are the ways most people search for jobs:

1. classified/want ads
2. applications at personnel departments
3. recruiters, headhunters, agencies
4. high school/college placement

quit working at the small law firm and enrolled in school full-time in a Masters degree business administration program. She will graduate in the spring of 2004. Carolyn is now interested in Human Resource work. "I wanted to have a well-paying job, I wanted to be independent, and I wanted to be well-respected and have more responsibilities."

### Transition Eight

Carolyn visited a counselor after enrolling in the business program to determine whether she was suited for this line of work. Through the years Carolyn had kept in touch with employers from her old job at the Michigan Humane Society. Ironically, in a strange turn of events this job has haunted her. Looking to work temporarily, Carolyn applied for a job working there as a receptionist and was hired. Management trained her for a management position. Carolyn is now working as the business manager with many duties as well as the responsibility for hiring and firing. In her leisure time, Carolyn is an animal advocate lobbying against the current legal standards of animal welfare. She speaks about the treatment of animals, anti-cruelty statutes, vivisection, and the federal Animal Welfare Act.

**L**et's discuss possible career counseling solutions as they may apply to Carolyn's case. There are various models, theories, and techniques that career counselors use in working with individuals who are coping with transitions. No one model fits every individual, therefore the career counselor may modify approaches depending upon the counselees' age, gender, and other

variables. Let me provide an example. In a study testing theories of gender differences in the careers of lawyers, women exhibited lower satisfaction than their male colleagues with how the job allows them to balance work and personal life. Many studies have identified women's dissatisfaction with available workplace supports, benefits, and accommodation for family responsibilities.<sup>1</sup>

More troubling in the above study is the number of women who consider leaving the profession as a result. They found that more women were likely to look for a new job within a year than their male counterparts. Women were significantly more likely to look for a new job at present, or planned to seek new employment within the next year. Women were also more likely than male lawyers to state that they planned to change careers, leaving the profession of law. However, most career counselors are more concerned with career adjustment and career selection than with finding a job.

With Carolyn, the initial intake interview could have begun at any transition of her career decision-making. It could have come at the first transition when she was deciding what career direction to take; or at transition five where she had gained experience as a Legal Assistant/Paralegal, or at transition six where she considered work-to-school, or at transition seven where she considered a different career direction.

For most, youthful dreams, personal interest, personal talents, market availability, geographic preferences, and likelihood that the career will support one's lifestyle usually drive initial career choice. First career choices are



usually a futuristic choice. One could look at it as the beginning and the most open of all career choices. For Carolyn, at transition one, the initial interview would cover job search skills, occupational information, dual roles issues, and if necessary, assertiveness training, self-concept clarification issues, lifestyle needs, ethnicity in career development of women in law, and counseling strategies. As counselor rapport is established, the counselor will begin uncovering issues that interfere with Carolyn's career decision making.

Carolyn's first job choice, however, came out of a need to feel important at work. This can be seen in her early statements in transition one as to why she volunteered as a Library Assistant. This need to bolster esteem is not unusual when selecting a career of interest. Social cognitive theorists believe that self-esteem issues coupled with environmental factors and behavior, directly impact job selection.<sup>2</sup>

Carolyn sought out her first volunteer experience based on very little knowledge of interest, values, previous experience, or life plan. In an initial interview, the career counselor would have Carolyn focus on past experiences, training, likes, dislikes, and leisure activities, then help her identify skills, values, and previous training. The initial interview would provide a foundation for the next step in the counseling program toward a life-learning plan.

As Carolyn's skills increased she continued to pursue her initial career choice initiated by encouragement from her superiors and newly formed confidence/skills. Carolyn may have claimed to find her niche (transition one) as a Legal Assistant/Paralegal, but it should not be assumed that this came as a result of occupational fit. It should be noted here that this feeling of job satisfaction (occupational fit) that she experienced in her initial vocational decision might have been based upon underdeveloped skills, which reinforced Carolyn's low self-esteem.

Some social cognitive career theorists believe that social and cognitive learning influences choices and preference.<sup>3</sup> That is, some people regulate their own behavior through beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals, whereby behavior works in harmony with self-belief. People avoid jobs that they do

not believe they are capable of performing. The emphasis here is on self-efficacy or one's self belief. In other words, an individual's belief that he or she is able to perform certain tasks determines whether the individual will attempt those tasks and how well they will be performed. However, existing theories view people in trait-oriented terms (occupation fit). Extrapolating from this theory one could believe that any occupation that allows Carolyn to experience self worth could have been viewed as a perfect fit, when only a portion of her skills were being set into motion. In other words, Carolyn's need to work with people, and her need to help people as she expressed, could have been experienced in other forms of activities outside of the job.

Listening to Carolyn's description of how she deals with events allows the career counselor to apply appropriate cognitive or behavior techniques. There are many factors that can constrain career choice, for example: economic need, family pressures, or limitations in one's educational background. Carolyn is definitely a candidate for career counseling. Helping Carolyn determine life roles could have been a vital and initial first step during the early transitions of her marriage and career goals. The career counselor will most likely apply an integrative approach that includes the total spectrum of life roles that Carolyn would play. It is paramount in career counseling that life roles are not segmented but integrated into the career decision-making process. People are simultaneously involved in many life roles. As someone becomes skilled and proficient in one life role, other life roles are affected as well.<sup>4</sup>

In Carolyn's case, at transition seven, divorce influenced her choices solely on the basis of pragmatic considerations such as job availability together with notions about personal beliefs and expected outcomes (e.g., will the pay be enough). These are the environmental effects on choice behavior. Carolyn said, "I was not pressed to be out there at that time and my lifestyle had changed and caused me to think differently. . . at that point the job stopped working for me." The fact is that Carolyn's career decisions from that point were made from a position colored by both experience and mortality. From this inspection, making a career choice is more or less

responsible in some form, and more liberating but yet more frightening in other terms.

There is much more to cover here than we have space for, however, an important introspection remains. Seventeen years later Carolyn is working at the Humane Society where she once worked as a receptionist. She is now in fact, the manager at a job that she landed because of her need for money and love for animals! Could this be happenstance or providence?

Whatever the case, this oblique approach could have jeopardized career decisions. The above trial-and-error approach could have been less happenstance and more a welcoming of indecision as an approach to the unpredictable future. We only touched on a small portion of concerns, and counseling solutions for Carolyn's case. Carolyn will complete her Masters in business administration in the spring. What techniques has she learned, will she recycle through earlier transitions, or will this be another work-to-school or work-to-work transition? ♦



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## Footnotes

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