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**Preparing students to find work instead of a job**

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These are challenging and confusing times for graduates trying to find meaningful employment in today’s workplace and for their parents. The same goes for experienced people who are losing what they thought were steady jobs and trying to find new jobs in a workplace they don’t recognise.

For those who still have steady jobs and all the traditional benefits that are included with them, today’s workplace looks and feels like it did to previous generations. They may be nervous as they look at what is going on around them, but for now, they feel secure. They know that their world is shrinking and that the non-traditional job world is expanding.

Trying to make sense of what is going on is very challenging, even for those who have been studying the workplace for years.

The place to start is to understand that the workplace is going through the biggest transition to occur in the past 200 years. We haven’t seen anything like it since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution when our ancestors began to make a living from something called a ‘job’.

We don’t understand how the job has evolved to the point where it has become an integral part of our lives and the economic foundation we depend on to live in our society. Our job, in many respects, has become our identity.

Our ancestors must be having a good laugh as they watch us struggle to wean ourselves off the traditional, 20th century job. If you look at your family tree, you’re likely to see that you’re descended from self-employed people who earned their living as contractors, trades people, craftspeople and small business owners.

When the concept of working for someone else full time became widespread with industrialisation, many of our forefathers thought it was a crazy idea. It was seen as unpleasant, unnatural and an inhuman way to work. It’s the ultimate irony. The job, that thing that our ancestors saw as abhorrent, is the thing to which we’ve become addicted.

**A new era**

Like it or not, employment seekers need to face the reality of today’s workplace and be willing to accept temporary or contract work without reservations. They also need to accept the fact that there’s no guarantee that anyone will offer them employment. They may need to create their own employment.

That doesn’t mean they have to give up looking for a job, if that’s what they want; it means recognising how the workplace has changed and understanding that the path to a traditional job today is often via the temporary or contract work route. There is work available, but a lot of it is not packaged in the form of a job, as we traditionally understand that term.

So it makes more sense to look for work as opposed to looking for a job. But that is a huge psychological shift for people to make in their approach to finding employment considering how entrenched the full-time job model continues to be in our society. It’s also a new role for most people, and our education, training and in some cases our upbringing does not prepare us well for it.

Today’s employment seeker must be more entrepreneurial and enterprising in his or her search for work than previous generations, and needs to be better at selling themselves. Acquiring self-marketing skills is a must, as is the ability to find hidden employment opportunities, since at least 80% of these today are never advertised.

Finally, employment seekers need to learn how to approach employers in a strategically effective way rather than the reactive, mostly passive approach used by people in the 20th century. And they must understand the role social media plays in finding employment today and how to use it effectively.

Those who are unable or unwilling to adapt to this reality will find themselves competing for a dwindling number of conventional, full-time jobs. Those who aren’t afraid of a freelance career, who can adapt their job-search strategies and market themselves effectively will have more options, offer more value to employers, and best position themselves for 21st century success.

**Challenges for educators**

The fundamental challenge for colleges and universities is that for generations they have been turning out employees, ie graduates who invariably found a job. Now, increasingly, they will need to turn out entrepreneurs, or students who have an enterprising approach to finding work.

This doesn’t mean students have to start a business when they graduate, though those who want to do this should be encouraged and given as much help as possible to succeed. It does mean that graduates must have an entrepreneurial mentality in terms of marketing themselves and meeting the needs of employers.

We tend to equate anything related to entrepreneurship to be the domain of business or commerce and MBA students. We need to change that thinking and recognise that this also applies to graduates in the liberal arts, social sciences and every other sector in post-secondary education.

Like all other employment seekers, today’s graduates must acquire self-marketing skills and be right on top of what is happening in the sectors they want to work in. The key question is, who is going to teach them these skills?

The biggest weakness in the post-secondary education sector in all countries is the lack of experience in today’s workplace by those who are responsible for education policy, funding, administration and delivery.

How do these people who live in the land of the steady pay cheque and traditional benefits relate to the challenges graduates face who will make their living from contract, temporary and part-time employment with few, if any benefits, including a pension?

There’s a huge disconnect between these bureaucrats, administrators and educators and their students in terms of their own work environment and the workplace their students are entering. And that disconnect will exist into the foreseeable future.

Going forward, we must find ways to educate those already in the education system about the challenges of earning a living in today’s workplace and hire people at all levels that have this type of experience. Only then can we realistically align the educational system with the needs of today’s graduates.

**Career counselling**

The area of career counselling needs a major overhaul and more resources need to be allocated to it. This area has never been a high priority within the education system and that has to change.

While there are a few examples of innovative thinking in this area, in the main, most colleges and universities are doing a poor job of preparing their students for today’s workplace.

And some of the career counsellors who do recognise the need to update and improve the services they offer to their students are not getting the resources they need or the support of senior administrators. Effective career counselling must be a part of the curriculum, not an option, as it currently is.

Before they graduate, all students must be required to take workshops and courses provided by the career counselling department that educate them about today’s workplace and show them how to succeed in it. We also need people in these departments who are entrepreneurial, have operated their own businesses and who can adequately prepare students who want to pursue that option.

Canadore College, in Ontario, Canada has recently decided to offer ‘job counselling for life’ to its graduates. That’s a forward-thinking initiative that all colleges and universities should consider offering alongside compulsory classes that prepare students for the process of finding work.

Another useful tool for graduates and employers is the ‘co-curricular record’ or CCR, which is a second transcript that graduates receive which highlights their leadership and other skills they’ve developed in volunteer activities on and off campus. This is a very useful tool for employers to get a broader understanding of who graduates are and what they’ve achieved outside the classroom.

Sending our graduates out into the workplace as unprepared as they are currently is inexcusable.

*Ron McGowan is author of*[***How to Find Work in the Gig Economy: A road map for graduates and precarious workers***](https://amazon.com/How-Find-Work-Gig-Economy/dp/1684560314/ref%3Dsr)*. This is an edited version of the preface to his book.*