

Work, Mental Health, and Our Role As Career Practitioners.



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The world of work continues to change. In this article, we look at some of the changes, draw connections between work and mental health and point to the ways our work as career practitioners will need to adapt.

The Changing Nature of Work

Of all the trends impacting work (e.g., demographic, environmental, economic), current advances in technology will likely have the greatest impact on the changing nature of work. Although it seems like advancing technology is eliminating jobs, these losses are balanced by the new opportunities technology creates. Robots are replacing jobs in some sectors, but in developed countries like Canada, technological advances are creating work opportunities by shaping demands both for goods and services and for more specialized skills and competencies. Occupations relying on these new skill sets (e.g., advanced problem solving, socio-behavioural skills such as teamwork, and adaptability skills such as reasoning and self-efficacy) have increased by about ten percent since 2001 (World Bank, 2019) and the demand for less advanced skills is declining and being replaced by a rapidly growing need for technology related skills.

Additionally, technology has set the stage for the rise of the virtual worker (Kuek, Paradigulford, Fayomi, Imaizumi, & Ipeirotis, 2015). Online work platforms (for an example, see the Freelancer website - <http://www.freelancer.com/>) make it possible for businesses to distribute short-term work contracts and projects to an easily-accessed and economical network of specialists. Similarly, workers with in-demand skill sets also have increased

access to a global market of flexible paid work. Although there will always be demand for routine-skill jobs and part-time and full-time jobs, we are likely to see more flexible short-term opportunities requiring complex and specialized skill sets. Traditional organizations and jobs aren't going anywhere just yet, but the nature of work opportunities is changing and will likely change rapidly in the near future.

Work and Mental Health

So, the nature of work continues to change and workers will in turn need to change and adapt as well. With these trends in mind, we've been reflecting on our recent focus on the relationships between career development, work, and mental health and how our work as career practitioners may need to be adapted. Overall, the research suggests that career development intervention plays a positive role in happiness and wellbeing. In a recent article (Redekopp & Huston, 2018), we reviewed and summarized current research on the topic and were able to draw some important conclusions:

- "Generally, work has positive effects on mental health and wellbeing. For most people in most situations, working is better than not working. This point is particularly evident through consideration of the experience of unemployed versus employed persons. Work can be a source of identity, social support, financial and other coping resources, and it can also bolster one's sense of purpose.
- Person-work fit is related to mental health/wellbeing. For psychological health, working is better than not working, and employment that fits (work that affords an expression of one's interests, values, strengths and needs in work or in other life roles) is related to better wellbeing outcomes than work that does not fit.
- Work-related factors can play a role in the development of mental illness. Excessive job strain, related stress, role ambiguity, job insecurity, unsupportive management, and psychosocial concerns are associated with sickness, absence and presenteeism due to mental health concerns. It is likely that certain work contexts, environments, and factors have a causal role in the development of mental illness.
- Work-related factors can contribute to the development or maintenance of mental health/wellbeing and can be effective adjuncts in the treatment of a range of mental illness concerns. Fitting work in good work environments bolsters mental health and wellbeing." (p. 6)

These conclusions point at the key role our work as career practitioners might play in supporting and sustaining mental health and wellbeing and possibly preventing the development or recurrence of mental illness. Career practitioners address career development and work-related concerns. Work factors impact mental health and mental

illness. Career intervention assists clients in navigating and choosing better work factors or more fitting work. The idea of career development as mental health intervention makes sense to most people and we all know people and/or have had clients whose experiences provide anecdotal evidence of the relationship between career intervention and mental health. But, as a profession, we have focused on measuring the career related outcomes (e.g., jobs, placements, interviews, outcomes, program admission, participation) and have mostly ignored outcomes related to mental health and wellbeing. We therefore have little or no direct evidence that we support mental health.

Career Intervention is a Mental Health Intervention

For most people, work is important not only for financial reasons, but for expression of one's interests, values, strengths and identity. Also, work can be a key source of social support and foundational in supporting other life roles such as being a parent, family-member, student or leisurite. When work complements or supports personally meaningful outcomes in other important life roles, it can be considered to be supporting overall wellbeing and mental health. When work doesn't fit with one's interests, values, strengths and needs, it potentially not only interferes with expression of identity and sense of purpose, but it is also likely to hinder effective participation in other life roles. Career development intervention in all its forms, at all levels (e.g., school, post-secondary, workplace, and with unemployed individuals), increases the potential of finding and/or developing a well-fitting career path and, thereby, contributes to an individual's overall wellness.

In addition to helping with fit, career intervention is also usually a stress-coping intervention. Unmanaged, unrelenting stress is associated with a myriad of mental health concerns including anxiety, depression, and burnout. Stress is the physiological, cognitive, and behavioral reaction an individual has when they think they might not be able to cope with an important demand (Hiebert, 1988; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The amount of stress experienced increases with increased importance of the demand, with greater uncertainty about whether or not one will cope, and with increased ambiguity about how to cope. Career-related demands (e.g., choosing a major, job loss, financial concerns) are among the most concerning stressors individuals face. Career intervention functions to both reduce demands and increase coping ability, thereby increasing one's perception about their ability to cope with important career-related demands. For example, it is helpful for undecided college students to know they are completely normal, that they have much time to decide on a major and future career paths (reduced demand) while at the same time assisting them in learning about themselves, the world of possibilities, and career decision-making (increased coping ability). Stress associated with job loss is also

remediated by career intervention focusing on a meaningful path to re-employment. Stress is reduced as soon as one perceives they are more likely to cope. Perception that one will be able to cope is also known as “hope.” Given the role of stress in the etiology of mental health concerns, preventing or reducing stress and increasing hope certainly intervenes with and reduces or prevents some of the mental health concerns our clients are likely to face.

Now, let’s return to the discussion about the changing nature of work. Career-related concerns will continue to be among the most important demands individuals face. The changing labour market poses significant demands for job seekers. Increasingly varied work structures (e.g., part-time, contract, project base, online, gigs) offer both increased demands (such as financial concerns, ambiguous job search strategies, and concerns about competence) along with significant worries about coping. As in the past, career concerns will continue to be important, but we anticipate clients will experience more ambiguity about how to cope, and, therefore, more uncertainty and, as a result, more stress and associated mental health concerns. As career practitioners, we will play a role in our clients’ overall wellbeing by assisting them to better understand these demands and how to best cope with them.

Integrating mental health in our work as career practitioners

Understanding career intervention as mental health intervention is an idea that has been presented every decade or so for the last forty years (see for example Brown & Brooks (1985) and Herr (1989)). As mentioned above, we career practitioners have not measured or attended to the mental health outcomes associated with our work. Given the recent international interest in mental health and increased awareness of its cost for national economies, organizations and individuals (Harvey et al., 2013; World Health Organization, 2017), it is timely to recognize career intervention as an essential preventive and interventive element of mental health intervention.

In October 2018, and with the help of the Career Development Association of Alberta, we delivered four regional workshops focused on career intervention as mental health intervention. Having the chance to present the idea and hear back from frontline practitioners helped us shape the idea and become more clear about the kinds of things we need to do. At this point, here are some of the things we are more certain about:

1. Career practitioners do not need to be mental health experts, but we need to learn about mental health concerns. We recommended [Mental Health First Aid](#) , [Canadian Mental Health Association](#), and the [Mental Health Commission of Canada](#) as useful starting points.

2. We need to teach our clients about the relationships between career concerns, wellbeing and mental health.
3. We need to find ways to include the mental health outcomes of our career development work in our evaluation practices. We can ask directly about changes in thoughts, feelings and behavior, and we can include this type of assessment in our surveys and workshop evaluations.
4. We need to communicate the wellbeing and mental outcomes of our work. Stakeholders know we facilitate career outcomes, but career practice has been displaced by the recent global focus on mental health. It will be important to collect evidence about wellbeing outcomes and share it.
5. We need to work together. We are committed to this initiative and welcome ongoing input. If you would like to be part of a contact list for updates and information on our work on career development and mental health, or if you would simply like to send information our way, please contact Dave Redekopp at liferole@telusplanet.net or call him at 780 451 1954.

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