



Recessionary TIMES LEAVE A Changed Workplace AND WORKER

By the end of the 1980s, government budgets were seriously strained and “deficits compounded from year to year created large debt loads that had to be financed through loans from financiers.” In the neo-conservative mood of the day, post-war goals of social security and full employment were replaced with “policies designed to increase global economic competitiveness through decreased government spending and reduced deficits,” recalls historian Alvin Finkel.

So powerful had multinational corporations become that they were frequently able to “extract favourable conditions from governments of western nations eager to prevent jobs from being exported to other countries,” Finkel notes. “Corporate taxes were cut” by such governments, “trade union protection reduced, environmental regulations relaxed and social programs cut”—all in order to secure corporate investment.

Like that of virtually every other country in the industrialized west, Canada’s economic growth had shrunk to a fraction of the rates posted in the buoyant post-war era. Opportunities for work had been disappearing at an alarming rate and few were the families who had not had some experience of unemployment. By mid-decade, while the economy was on the mend in southern Ontario and Quebec, “the recession persisted grimly in much of Atlantic Canada and remained as a cruel affront in the recently buoyant west.”

At the same time, overfishing was rapidly killing the Atlantic fisheries and a poor wheat crop in the prairies “was hardly worth marketing while the subsidised growers of Europe and the United States pursued

their trade war.” In his first post-election budget, Finance Minister Michael Wilson imposed drastic cuts on crown corporations, reduced pension benefits and imposed the much maligned Goods and Services Tax.

The end of “old certainties”

In just fifty years, from the dire days of the Great Depression to the employment upheaval of the 1980s, the workplace had gone through several complete transformations. At every stage, the increasing need for diverse and sophisticated guidance had spurred a process of inspiration and innovation by individuals within the institutions that were required or which saw it as their role to respond.

It was a radically changed workplace, as an increasingly anxious workforce was in the process of discovering. Workers might be better equipped and more highly educated than ever before, but in an age of economic uncertainty and ongoing workplace upheaval, the fact remained that people and technology frequently sparred for jobs.

Throughout the western world, many industrialized countries were facing similar situations. Old certainties were vanishing in an inundation of high tech newness and, with every wave of change, work and the way people did it changed as well. Career and labour market awareness were fast becoming a global necessity for institutions everywhere.

The federal government responded by creating the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB) but eventually this was disbanded in favour of a further devolution to the provinces.

As the 1980s drew to a close, in the currents and crosscurrents of interactivity between the institutions of education, government, labour and not-for-profit agencies, the diverse and fascinating field of career counselling was gradually taking shape. Career education, career training and career counselling, all virtually unheard of half a century earlier, had evolved and developed into an identifiable form—a complex, interconnected, nationwide, career-related community of professionals with a growing commonality of purpose.

Skills and youth and the gap between two economies

By 1990, the Canadian economy was again in deep recession. Although the downturn was widespread throughout the western world, it was even more severe in Canada than in most other countries.

Many long-established companies simply collapsed, while among those that remained, mergers, acquisitions and large-scale restructuring were rampant, often including “drastic ‘downsizing’ that reached into the executive offices and emptied whole floors of the computer-literate information handlers who had held the future in their hands.” In the short span of two to three years, literally hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost. “Experts blamed a lack of global competitiveness, an underperforming economy, even high taxes,” writes Desmond Morton.

Whole corporate empires collapsed, and long-established retail chains dissolved into liquidation, as huge warehouse operations, often

U.S.-based, overturned the merchandising industry. To anyone opposed to the Canada-U.S. pact, however, the culprit was clearly Free Trade. Supporters of the deal argued that the recession was to blame for the disappearing jobs. With or without Free Trade, they said, the economy “was merely making the necessary adjustments to survive in an increasingly competitive environment.”

It was the type of work one did, according to Toronto economist, Nuala Beck, which determined how vulnerable one was in the workplace. In Beck’s view, the North American economy had been forced to restructure as a result of an inevitable economic shift that had occurred in the early 1980s. While economic growth since the First World War had been fueled by mass manufacturing, she said, a great deal had changed when, beginning in 1981, technology became the primary engine of economic growth.

STAY IN SCHOOL

Running at roughly 30 percent in these years, the unemployment rate among high school dropouts was more than double the percentage of youth unemployment as a whole. Nonetheless, as countless others had before them, young people continued to drop out of school for all sorts of reasons. Canada’s high school dropout rate, having declined earlier in the decade, was again on the rise. Youth unemployment remained high. Young people who stayed in school and then carried on to post-secondary education had significantly lower rates of unemployment than those who dropped out before finishing high school.

Quebec had the highest rate of “school leavers,” as they were called, just over 37 percent. Alberta, Ontario, British Columbia and Nova Scotia were not far behind.

As often as not, whatever the province, young people dropped out because they had not done particularly well as students and, at sixteen or seventeen, “finally” felt they could take their lives into their own hands. Many believed that nobody cared whether or not they finished their education.

Convincing young people like these that parents, teachers, employers—society itself—actually cared about the educational level they attained was a primary objective of the federal government’s Stay in School initiative. It was “aimed at informing young people about the importance of education and training and the direct relationship between education and training and labour market prospects,” said Paul Boisvenue, a senior official in the federal employment service.

A special department for youth concerns was established within the federal employment bureaucracy and a five-year national strategy was implemented with major initiatives centred on youth and their career and employment needs. High school mentoring and tutoring programs were set up. Young people were asked to become peer counsellors and participate in support groups for other students. Parents were encouraged to become more involved in school life.

To support the program, career awareness and career choice materials were developed and distributed each year during Canada Career Week, which was given a higher profile to encourage communities to organize career fairs and special career and employment events each fall.

Federal and provincial partnership arrangements were encouraged and a Canadian Career Information Partnership was established to bring together representatives from the various provinces to share ideas and materials related to youth and labour market issues.

In mass manufacturing or resource extraction, which Beck defined as the “old economy,” people were seen to be at far greater risk of finding themselves on the chopping block. “My research shows that if you’re employed in the old economy,” Beck wrote in her book *Shifting Gears*, “the odds are better than 50 percent that your job will disappear.”

New work was available during these years of restructuring and re-engineering, Beck pointed out, despite the dreary unemployment statistics. Where it was to be found, however, was in the “new economy,” fueled by technology and centred in industries like computers, semiconductors, telecommunications, instrumentation, and health and medicine. People working in and looking for work in industries such as these would have a far easier time building successful careers and working lives.

According to Beck, the western world had experienced several different economic cycles since the middle of the 19th century. Every time an economic cycle shifted, there were new demands for higher level skills.

“Back in the Industrial Revolution,” Beck observed, “the vast majority of workers had just a few years of elementary school; they could write their name, read simple sentences and add simple numbers. With skills like these, they had a leg up on everybody else.

“In the mass manufacturing era, we upped the ante. It wasn’t enough to have a grade school education. The message was loud and clear. Get a high school diploma and you’ll have a job with a future, you’ll have a leg up. And once again, we’ve upped the educational ante. Industries with a future are knowledge-based industries, industries in which you’re paid to think, not just to do. Industries now have a strong demand for high level skills and education.”

As it had at the turn of the century, the workplace was splitting itself. Ninety years earlier, society was divided among agriculture, skilled crafts and upstart industry. Now, in the post-industrial ’90s, the split was between manufacturing and the exploding field of technology.

On the one side, there was a rapid disappearance of jobs, as technology took on more work. On the other, jobs were being created, although not in equal numbers, in a burgeoning market demanding ever-higher level skills. From the broad-backed labourers of the early 1900s to the technologists, systems analysts and software specialists of the information era, the job descriptions had changed and changed again. And so had the requisite skills.

In circumstances such as these, workers of every age and level of the workplace were vulnerable, but none more so than the young. With fewer manufacturing jobs available, and more positions requiring higher skills, it was difficult for newcomers to get a start. Post-secondary education made it somewhat easier, “but even this proved no guarantee,” notes Alvin Finkel. “Lifelong employment with a single company became increasingly uncommon and young workers often had to be content with

Community agencies and organizations, often the service delivery network closest to those most economically marginalized including youth and newcomers, developed new resources and techniques to respond. Youth organizations developed models of service delivery to accommodate an insatiable demand. Immigrant serving agencies developed Mentoring Programs linked to career coaches for foreign trained professionals (Skills for Change, Toronto). Junior Achievement of Canada developed a new board game “The Economics of Staying in School” which was introduced in classrooms in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatoon, Manitoba and Ontario.

short-term contracts followed by a new intensive job search.”

Although few articulated it at the time, Canadian youth had slowly become aware that the world of work was changing, that technology was, in part at least, the driving force behind that change and that traditional expectations of job security were breaking down.

A landmark poll of Canadian youth done in the '80s had surveyed the values, beliefs, personal concerns and relationships of young people between fifteen and nineteen years of age. Some 3,600 Canadian youths responded to the questions of researchers Reginald Bibby and Donald Posterski. In their book, *The Emerging Generations, An Inside Look at Canada's Teenagers*, they write: “Teenagers go to movies and watch robots like R2D2 perform impressive feats and quickly compute that robots are more efficient than people for many of the jobs now and in the future.

“Listening to the news before supper, they hear that three hundred graduating lawyers and 1,350 new engineers face ‘no vacancy’ signs in their respective professions. Mentally they cross two further vocational options off their lists. They remember well how they wanted to work last summer but only found a job that paid the minimum wage and lasted for just two weeks.”

Without a sense of the future, the report's authors wrote, discouragement settled on many of Canada's young people. As one sixteen-year-old told them: “Teenagers go to school for twelve years and when they get out of school they have to fight for work. And if they don't work they get labeled as young punks or lazy bums. It isn't their fault they can't find work. The government isn't helping them any.”

Comments such as these no doubt frustrated government officials who had been attempting for years to find ways of meeting the needs of Canadian young people in the course of their transition from school to work. With demographics indicating unprecedented growth in Canada's Native youth population, attention began to once again focus on the development of programs specific to Canada's Native community.

Hurtin' for this job

By the mid-1990s, in anxious households throughout the country, the daunting issue of work, skills and unemployment had become an aching concern for many, frequently aggravated by immediate, close-to-home wounds. Throughout the Canadian workforce, regardless of age, gender or previous experience, the complex demands of the quick-change workplace were growing steadily harder to fathom.

In the office blocks and shopping malls of the industrial core, Out of

Mahjetahwin Meekunaung Walk the Path - a Multi-media Career Learning Program

Serving the Anishinabek territory, the Anishinabek Career Centre offers career counselling and resources to First Nations peoples at all stages: children, youth, adults and elders. The Mahjetahwin Meekunaung program includes hosting a career fair, producing an educational video, providing an interactive website, developing a poster series that promotes career planning as part of an ancient process, in addition to providing opportunities for face to face career counselling. The Centre provides information on scholarships, training opportunities, role models (success stories) and how to start your own business (either on or off the reserve). It has also created a Circle of First Nations Career and Employment Practitioners, a network of resource people in the field who can share best practices and proven approaches.



CP Picture Archive/Frank Gunn

Scenes like this, with hundreds of job seekers lining up for a few positions, were a reality in some parts of Canada in the 1990s, harkening back to labour markets of decades before.

Business signs were coming down as the first flushes of life returned to the economy. The profit curves on the graphs in corporate reports were on the rise again and, based on the wisdom of years gone by, the number of jobs in the want ads should have been as well.

Instead, as business resumed its pell-mell pace and productivity soared anew, a very different pattern had begun to emerge in the job market. The jobs that were coming back had different specifications, in slimmed-down factories with half their previous number of employees. In the secondary job market, moreover, home of the part-time temp and the “McJob,” workers were actually in demand.

Profitable and less successful businesses alike continued to shrink staff, always in the name of improved competitiveness. “That meant mergers, factory shutdowns and the introduction of technology, particularly computerization, all of which reduced demand for labour,” writes Alvin Finkel. “Robots often replaced assembly line workers, traditional ‘women’s jobs’ vanished as voice mail and electronic mail replaced many secretaries and automated banking reduced the need for tellers.”

What this all turned out to mean was that although the leading economic indicators settled back into the positive percentiles, higher ongoing levels of unemployment began to be thought of as normal, as did longer periods out of work for those unfortunate enough to find themselves among the unemployed.

The “jobless recovery” was the name it was given by the media. Increasingly, the unemployed included displaced workers at all skill levels throughout the ranks of industry as well as the gigantic service sector. There were jobs, to be sure, there were even “good” jobs for those who had the skills but, for a significant part of the workforce, there were few opportunities.

The dilemma was crystallized one sub-zero day in early 1995, in a scene truly reminiscent of the Great Depression. The General Motors plant in Oshawa, Ontario was said to be considering adding a third shift, a move that would create as many as one thousand new jobs if the company followed through. On the strength of this rumour and nothing more, fifteen thousand people stood outside in the depths of winter just to put their names on a list.

There was no promise of interviews. The company was simply compiling names of people who might be interviewed if the jobs were created. “I haven’t worked for almost three years, except for odd jobs through Manpower,” said unemployed electrician Paul Little, age twenty-nine, in a *Toronto Star* article on January 25, 1995. “I’ve got four children. I’d do anything for a job at GM.”

“Hopefully this line leads to employment,” was the way twenty-seven-year-old Brian Scarlett put it. “I’m unemployed, I’m on welfare, I’m hurtin’ for this job.” Scarlett and the thousands of others who stood in line in Oshawa were the literal embodiment of a state of

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mind that had become prevalent among workers across the country. Whether it was fifteen thousand shivering outside GM, four thousand in an Air Canada office, or three thousand people at a food store opening in Windsor, Ontario, in pursuit of one hundred and twenty jobs, Canadians were waiting in line, physically and mentally, in the vain belief that the “good jobs” of days gone by were coming back.

And for many who were hurtin’, it was not just a case of a “good job,” but any job at all.

A U-turn in workplace policy

As Ottawa scaled back its presence in the Canadian economy to 1950 levels, everything, it seemed, was on the chopping block—from literacy training to environmental conservation efforts to industrial subsidies. As the government changed the ways in which it was involved in Canadian society, by reconfiguring programs or withdrawing services altogether, huge numbers of jobs disappeared. Among the ranks of those who remained, salaries had already been frozen and would remain so for years to come.

It was a carefully planned and executed strategy, designed to tackle the problem of government overspending head-on—and along the way to please the voters. And it worked. Through such procedures, in a matter of just three years, 45,000 public service jobs were eliminated; whole departments were wiped out.

Nowhere was the impact of the restructuring more pronounced than in the government’s giant employment service. An extensive internal reorganization had been underway for years, under Minister of Employment Lloyd Axworthy, who had been named, following the 1993 election, to a portfolio he had held in the Trudeau years.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) had been the government’s way of concretizing a grand vision—a comprehensive labour force and labour market policy. The brutal reality, however, of a \$1 billion cut that was announced early in the Liberal mandate had meant that, whatever the scope of the vision, the operational and management funds available to put it into practice had been sliced by more than a third.

Unemployment Insurance was reborn as Employment Insurance (EI) as benefits and entitlements were cut and qualifying criteria tightened. However necessary the change of direction, however long overdue the tightening of public purse strings, the cuts came at a time when individual needs for help and direction in the Canadian workplace were acute. After years of jobless recovery, high unemployment, restructuring, downsizing, mergers, acquisitions and shutdowns, the world of work had become a complex, volatile and threatening place.

Gaps within gaps

Within five years of the Chretien government’s election, Ottawa’s spending on social programs had decreased by more than \$10 billion a year. In those same years, real income had declined in three out of five Canadian households.

THE NOC AND CAREER HANDBOOK

The National Occupational Classification (NOC) was developed by HRDC staff under the direction of JoAnn Sobkow, Margaret Roberts and the late Lionel Dixon. It was implemented in 1993 as a replacement for the Canadian Classification and Dictionary of Occupations (CCDO). An extensive program of research, analysis and consultation with employers, workers, educators and associations as well as providers and users of labour market data ensured strong links between the NOC and Statistics Canada's parallel Standard Occupational Classification.

The NOC represents a new approach to occupational classification. The objective for the NOC was more ambitious. The NOC developers wanted the new

While a bare majority of people still enjoyed the relative security of full-time, permanent jobs, for a great many working people, economic uncertainty had become a fact of life. Savings accounts were depleted and, in record numbers, Canadian individuals and businesses were giving up and declaring bankruptcy.

Stagnating earnings, chronic unemployment, persistent underemployment, the computerization of work, and a workplace split between low-skilled service industry jobs and high-skilled "knowledge work" all tended to compound the problem. A flurry of reports by social commentators, religious organizations, policy-makers and think-tanks drew attention to a steadily widening gap, not only in levels of affluence, but also in opportunities, skills and even hours spent on the job.

Most in demand and best equipped to establish themselves successfully in the world of work, the reports revealed, were Canadians who were well-skilled, well-trained, astute and forward-thinking. Lagging far behind were those who had become overwhelmed by change, people who resisted training and re-training, and people who, in some cases, feared and resented the new technology and its demands in the workplace.

For many of those who had fallen behind, the only alternative to unemployment was temporary, part-time or short-term contract work, lumped by Statistics Canada under the catch-all label, "non-standard employment." Some people actually preferred work of this kind, of course—many of them women, especially working mothers. Since the 1970s, in fact, as women continued to move into the Canadian workforce in ever greater numbers, their needs for flexible working arrangements had become a major factor in the ongoing re-definition of work.

But by the mid-1990s, the widespread increase in non-standard work had less to do with women's needs than it did with those of employers intent upon cutting costs. "Generally-speaking," observed a 1997 study by the Canadian Policy Research Networks think-tank, "non-standard work falls into the 'bad jobs' category: low pay, few benefits, little or no job security and few intrinsic rewards." In the cost-conscious '90s, as full-time "good jobs" continued to disappear, such non-standard "bad jobs" were cropping up in droves.

For large numbers of young people "in an environment of great job insecurity," the Advisory Committee on the Changing Workplace

classification to provide a map of the world of work that would help labour market analysts, researchers, counsellors, students and educators understand not just the content of occupations, but also the relationships between occupations. These relationships were to be based upon empirical rather than theoretical observations. The NOC Matrix provides a framework for understanding the functioning of the world of work.

HRDC also developed the Career Handbook, which is organized according to the NOC structure and relates work to people by providing ratings and descriptions of a wide variety of worker traits such as aptitudes and interests. It was designed to facilitate career counselling and exploration.

concluded, “the stages of life their parents took for granted—buying a home, starting a family—loom as intimidating, risky, long-term decisions if not completely out of reach.”

Again, reduced benefits were denounced as a primary cause of financial distress among young Canadians. The school-to-work transition had never been easy, particularly for those without skills or adequate education. EI reforms had dramatically increased the amount of time on the job required to qualify for coverage and many young people found they simply could not accumulate enough working hours between one short-term job and the next.

In this toxic mix of chronic unemployment, income stagnation, polarization, skills gaps and lean, mean management, the Canadian workplace was becoming a very unforgiving place. It was a rare household that did not have a least one person in some degree of career distress...be it a breadwinner who was rarely home in time to share the evening meal, a part-time worker struggling to make ends meet, a young person just starting out or a mature, experienced worker struggling to start over.

Shifting values and perceptions of work

Workplace specialists Gordon Betcherman and Graham Lowe observed in their 1997 essay, “The Future of Work in Canada,” that “Transformations in the workplace are profoundly affecting individuals, families and communities. New technologies, economic globalization, high unemployment, declining job security, stagnant incomes, polarized working time, and work-and-family tension define the context of work for many Canadians...the changing world of work is often accompanied by a growing sense of anxiety.”

Security in “a job well done” had been a fundamental of middleclass life for most of the past hundred years. Now, however, as the century drew to a close, such feelings grew ever more scarce. No longer tied to lifelong employment with a single firm, security had become largely a matter of self-sufficiency, based on an individual’s ability to take full personal responsibility for success in the world of work.

“We are in a lurching kind of time,” observed Carla Lipsig-Mummé,

director of York University's Centre for Research on Work and Society, a time “when the things that we took for granted were related to each other—work and employment and national prosperity—are unhooked from each other.”



David Muir/Masterfile/Trading Floor 700-00024069

The introduction and widespread adoption of computers – starting in the 1970s and continuing through to the turn of the new century – continues to have a tremendous impact on the everyday working lives of Canadians

Slowly, hesitantly, reluctantly, Canadians began to confront their preconceptions on the subject of employment. Old notions of work as a kind of entitlement, something created by someone else and made available to them, were breaking down and people were coming to accept the need to look at work in different ways. Even as the message sank in, however, most Canadians remained deeply concerned about the future of work, in particular the prospect of being without it.

What was underway was nothing less than a shift in the techno-economic paradigm: it was a time of rapid and profound technological and economic transition, when the turbulence of everyday life was actually a surface effect of disturbances underway at far deeper levels of society. New technology, global markets, new management practices and the computerization of work were all contributing to the uncertainty and angst, the increased polarization and even the growing distrust between employers and employees.

Not only were individual lives more turbulent in such a climate, the report said, “but the ‘anchors’ provided by existing social institutions become less and less effective in helping people adjust to changing times.” New anchors needed to be put in place. To these ends, the Roundtable on the Future of Work called for “action on the part of all stakeholders in Canadian society,” with government participation being central. “Leadership skills that fit with the culture of post-industrial society,” were required and governments would “have to be brokers for the different interests in society, and catalysts for new partnerships and a revitalized social contract.”

New forms of compensation and benefits, work sharing, limitations on overtime, even shortened workweeks could be investigated, as well as new forms of worker representation for those outside the scope of collective bargaining.

Education and training—no panaceas in themselves, given the number of Canadians who were underemployed or unable to find work “even though they have skills to offer in the marketplace”—were nonetheless essential. Labour market information was required “to inform people about what types of skills to invest in and where to acquire them.” Improved funding mechanisms were needed, along with more effective use of information and communication technologies for delivery of education and training services. It was clear, wrote the authors, that “investment in human capital is increasingly the best personal strategy for individuals and the best collective strategy for nations.” Ultimately, what was needed to overcome the country’s vari-

ous skills gaps was “explicit recognition that the development of the world’s best education and training system is a national priority.

“We can never expect to immunize ourselves from change,” said the report. But “the goal of fuller (let alone full) employment has simply not been a high priority in Canada over the past decade or so. Instead, the emphasis has been on inflation and, more recently, public debt.” These policies, while successful in achieving their immediate objectives, had also contributed to higher unemployment rates.

The furor over work and the workforce was a sore point for the Liberal government. As far as the prime minister was concerned, much of the criticism was unfounded. Close to 700,000 jobs had been created since he took office and the national unemployment rate was 9.5 percent, down from 11.2 percent in 1993.

The workplace, with all its woes and controversial problems, was the arena in which Jean Chretien’s government was most vulnerable. In the media, as in the daily question period and his increasingly frequent visits to various parts of the country, all the prime minister ever seemed to hear about was jobs. Jobs, jobs, jobs. But by April, the employment



Larry Fisher/Masterfile/Automotive Assembly Plant 700-00015274

statistics had begun to improve. Over 60,000 jobs had come on the market in the previous month and unemployment had dropped almost two full percentage points since 1994. An improving job picture was exactly what the Liberals had been waiting for. According to the polls, their popularity in the country was high. The opposition was extremely fractured. They gambled on the early election and issued an election call for June 2. The Liberals were victorious once again, although the results

Increased mechanization and the introduction of robotics has displaced industrial workers in all parts of Canada, but also created new jobs in the high-technology industry

emphasized the regional fragmentation of political support.

The federal government was in conflict with itself, pointing the way to a knowledge society with one hand and struggling to clear up a crisis in its active intervention policy with the other. Yet on Parliament Hill the mood was upbeat, with the Liberals winning a historic third term with a very comfortable majority of 172 seats in the 301 member House of Commons.

At century's end, there was no shortage of conflicts, crises and failures to preoccupy professionals in the career counselling field. The billions of dollars poured into the field of workplace management had furthered many valuable initiatives but the same lethal brew of stubborn workplace trends persisted—the same worrisome gaps in income, skills, age and gender. Devolution continued to sow confusion.

The realization that career counselling is not only for new entrants to the labour market, but also a service working people may require throughout their working life, has given rise to a specialization within the field known as the career coach. Like the rise in popularity of the personal trainer to assist people in realizing their physical fitness goals, a career coach is both advisor and advocate for their clients, providing various types of assistance. Career coaches can be found within human resource departments of large organizations, not-for-profit agencies, in the private sector and on-line.

The complications of the workplace had grown enormously in the course of a hundred years, having a serious impact on the career counselling community. It may be argued this impact was positive as it propelled the growth of a broadly based group of career practitioners and encouraged niche specialties within the wider professional community.