



Careers at the Crossroads

A changing economy calls for a reassessment of our ideas about working life. During Career Week in Canada, it's a good time to question old assumptions. Certainly no one today can trust to luck to find satisfying employment. Careers no longer happen; they're planned...

□ People a few generations ago had little trouble choosing a career, because circumstances usually chose one for them. If you were a young man, you did what your father did, or something close. If you did not follow exactly in his footsteps, neither did you stray far from the path laid out for you. A lawyer's son might become a doctor, or a butcher's son a baker; but it was unlikely that a butcher's son would become a doctor under a stratified social order that kept people fixed in their class.

If you were a young woman, the terms were even simpler: you were expected to marry and raise children. The next choice was to stay at home for the rest of your life and care for your parents in their old age. Either that, or you sought one of the very few occupations open to the "weaker sex" — but only if you were single. Respectable married women did not work outside the home unless they were in desperate financial straits.

If you were a member of a minority, most fields of endeavour were securely barred against you. Blacks were consigned to menial labour, and the Chinese were expected to run restaurants or launder clothes. North American Indians were expected to be... Indians. And the handicapped were told that they might as well forget about most types of work.

The result was that careers and personalities were mismatched across the whole spectrum of employment. On one hand, men and women of intelligence and talent were prevented from living up to their potential; on the other, individuals with no particular aptitude for their work struggled along in it because of their status at birth.

The system spawned considerable personal misery, to say nothing of professional incompetence. Certainly generals who were born to be generals often proved disastrously inept at their craft. The two chief bunglers in the military debacle immortalized by Lord Tennyson in *The Charge of the Light Brigade* might have been better employed as clothing designers. Lord Cardigan invented the sweater that bears his name, and Lord Raglan designed the raglan sleeve for coats.

The bad old days of job discrimination have not entirely passed into history. Minority groups still have to struggle for employment opportunities which others take as their right. For the most part, however, the difficulty in choosing a career in Canada today is not that the choices are restricted. For young people in high school, there is no shortage of career possibilities; the problem is to zero in on one which both offers a future and satisfies their psychological wants and needs.

At last count, more than 7,000 different occupations existed in Canada, and the number is growing. Faced with such a vast and complex array of career possibilities, young people may be forgiven if they don't know where to start. The sheer number of choices is partly responsible for the fact that, in a recent survey of 100,000 Canadian students, 30 per cent of them said they had no idea of what they would do when they left high school. But a senior federal civil servant read a more ominous reason into the response.

"This appears to relate to a pessimism and fatalism that is tragically wide-spread among Canadian

youths, and which prevents them from seeing any point to career, educational or other planning for their future," he commented. The pessimism is a product of the latest economic slump, which has left a large proportion of the labour force unemployed. In effect, youths are asking: "What's the use of planning for a career if you can't get a job of any sort?" The answer is that, at a time of tough competition in the employment market, the jobs available will go to those best-qualified in a given field — those who are prepared.

It is true that, in a serious recession, even well-qualified workers may not readily find employment. But it is also true that the economy moves in cycles. It only makes sense to work towards having your qualifications ready for the time when conditions improve and fresh opportunities open up.

On-the-job training no longer suffices to carve out a niche

As for the fatalism detected in the survey results, hard times are the worst times to trust to fate or luck in the search for suitable and satisfying employment. When jobs are scarce, there is limited room for people to drift from one employer to another until they land in a position they like.

In any case, the day has passed when a young person with little formal education or training could parlay ambition and diligence into a successful career, like the hero of a Horatio Alger novel. Except in the case of apprenticeship — which is essentially a form of education in a working environment — on-the-job training alone is rarely sufficient to secure a well-paying job offering scope for personal growth. In a wide range of jobs which people once learned as they went along, employers are now demanding prior schooling. To take a random example, ambulance attendants are expected to have completed a course in a community college before they start to work.

Even where on-the-job training is acceptable, employers tend to prefer the applicant with the better general education. In some instances this is a formal rule: recruits into most Canadian police forces, for example, are required to have completed grade 12, or the equivalent in Quebec. In other fields the requirements are informal, but employers quite logically assume that a person who has,

say, 12 years of schooling is a harder and more intelligent worker than one who has only 10 years.

So the old-fashioned Horatio Alger notion of a career as something one hits upon as a result of perseverance and good fortune no longer holds water. It is only one of the long-cherished assumptions about the subject which must be re-examined in the hard light of the new social and economic conditions that have emerged over the past few years.

Another is the assumption that a career is a life-long proposition. Professional consultants estimate that as many as half of all the occupations now practised in Canada will become obsolete or will be altered out of recognition in the next 25 to 30 years. Retraining to keep up with changing techniques and equipment has become a way of life in some trades, and "second careers" for middle-aged workers are becoming increasingly common. Ironically, this is happening at a time of growing specialization. The men and women best-equipped to deal with the future are those who have a thorough grasp of their specialty, but also have a broad enough background to adapt to new methods or to move into different fields.

The aging of the work force creates a whole new scene

People will have to work harder in future to keep their careers alive. And the competition, especially in the middle and top ranks of business and public service, will be intense. According to Elizabeth Hartzell in *Personnel Journal*, "Those who aspire to the upper echelons of authority and policy-making power will require previously unprecedented qualifications and abilities to make the jump. The ranks of middle management and middle technical workers will swell accordingly."

This is mainly because the average age of the population is steadily rising. As a result, "the problem of the work force in the '80s will be too many at the top and middle with too few workers breaking into the bottom," Ms. Hartzell writes. This should be good news for young people who will be starting their working lives over the next decade. But to take full advantage of it, they and their

parents and teachers may have to revise their ideas of what constitutes success.

For many years, the model of "the successful man" in Canada wore a white — as opposed to a blue — collar. In an upwardly-mobile society, blue-collar workers sent their sons and daughters to university so that they could move into the white-collar ranks. The bulge of the population of youngsters in the 1960s and '70s accommodated the growing supply of graduates by creating thousands of new jobs in education and the social services. But with the aging of the general population, a process which will continue until the end of the century, the pendulum of demand has swung back towards the skilled and technical trades.

In its Annual Report for 1981, the Public Service Commission of Canada observed: "A high percentage of skilled blue-collar workers in Canada are now over 40 years of age and few young Canadians are entering blue-collar trades. The number of young Canadians entering the work force is not large enough to replace retiring workers."

It is said that the emergence of robots in industry has cast a shadow over the future of blue-collar work. But robots are nothing but machines, and machines need to be maintained. Skilled tradesmen specializing in robot maintenance are expected to be in strong demand over the next half-century. In general, experts say, increased automation will mean less work on production lines, but more work in the background, making sure the production lines run.

In the meantime, there is also a demand for people following technical careers which fit somewhere in between the blue and white collars. Technicians and technologists in computers, electronics and telecommunications are reported to be in short supply. Among professionals, there is an evident need for more electrical, mechanical and chemical engineers.

The changes taking place in the kind of work to be done in the economy are part of an historical process. In 1901, 72 per cent of Canadian workers were engaged in manual labour of one form or another, compared with less than 40 per cent today.

The move towards more service and clerical work partly accounts for a rise in the participation of working-age women in the labour force from 12 per cent in 1901 to over 40 per cent today.

The end of the predominant male career in a marriage

About 60 per cent of Canada's 4.4 million working women are married and between the ages of 20 and 44. The fact that women now make up such a large part of the entire labour force represents a profound social change which calls for a change in traditional thinking about careers. For one thing, it signals the end of the predominant male career in a marriage. If he intends eventually to marry, a young man entering the working world today must think in terms of combining his career with his future wife's. No longer can she be expected automatically to sublimate her emotional needs and aspirations for the sake of his position. He must be prepared to share the practical and emotional burdens of both their working lives.

Though financial pressures have had a part to play in the rise in female employment, the typical "working wife" can no longer be said to be working to make up for shortfall in the family budget. With the increased equality of education between the sexes has come increased equality in the type and status of careers. Women are streaming into professions once practically closed to them — law, accounting, engineering, and high-level management. Lately they have also been taking up male-dominated trades in industry and construction, where they are able to earn as much as double the wages paid to female staff in offices and stores.

Writing in *Jobs for Your Future*, a publication of the non-profit careers organization named Bridging the Gap, Audrey Swail of the Women's Bureau of the Ontario Department of Labour touched on another important result of the "liberation" of the employment market: "Men too are widening their options and moving out of traditional jobs. Sex stereotyping is no more satisfactory for men than it is for women. For reasons of changing life styles and greater demands for personal satisfaction, men are working in hospitals as nurses, in banks as tellers, and in offices as secretaries."

The "reasons for changing life styles" mentioned by Ms. Swail hold out the promise that, in future, more people will be happier in their jobs than ever. They are no longer restrained by social convention from seeking the type of work that most satisfies them. When a 32-year-old married woman became a transport truck driver a few years ago, there was no more delighted individual: "I had a love for trucks when I was a child. They fascinate me. Anything of such considerable size takes skill to drive. To be capable of manoeuvring something that big is beautiful."

Counselling helps people find themselves — and the right jobs

There is no guarantee, of course, that everybody can be happy in his work, any more than there is a guarantee of happiness in any other facet of living. Economic reality will continue to determine what jobs there are to be done, and it will be up to individuals to derive as much satisfaction as possible from the work they do.

Those who do find satisfaction are likely to be those who, in their youth, have thought hardest about what they want to do with their lives, and have taken advantage of the educational services around them to help them on their way to their objectives.

Such help is available in the form of professional career counselling. A position paper on career guidance prepared for the Canadian School Trustees' Association in 1980 neatly summarized what this under-appreciated activity is all about.

"Guidance," it said, "provides opportunities for students to consider their interests, aptitudes, abilities, values, beliefs and attitudes." All this has one overriding aim: to instil in students a knowledge of themselves.

It is generally recognized in the guidance profession that counsellors cannot make up their clients' minds for them about how they will spend their future. What counselling can do, though, is make them aware of their own strengths, weaknesses and inclinations through the use of aptitude tests, interest inventories and other modern evaluation

techniques. By sifting through the results of questionnaires, interviews, etc., counsellors are able to point in the general direction of a person's career.

"The next step involves developing an awareness of present-future relationships in which students relate present activities to future activities," says D. Stuart Conger, Director of the Career Analysis and Development Branch of Employment and Immigration Canada. "The student must realize that choosing algebra is essential to entering engineering school, or that taking blueprint reading is necessary to advance to the skilled construction or machine trades."

An awareness of present-future relationships is even more vital to life in general, because what you do in your youth can shape your whole future. It should be impressed on young people that they will be working for 40 years or more, barring spells of unemployment. That is an extremely long time to spend in a job or occupation you don't like.

Parents and teachers find it difficult to impress on the young just how crucial it is to plan and work towards a career that suits their unique psychological make-up. The reason is that the full effects of occupational mismatching are only felt at a later age. In your youth, you are naturally tempted to "take the money and run," trading eight hours a day at a job that means nothing to you for the cash to have a good time in your off-hours. But when people settle down to a less stimulating (but more expensive) family life, their work takes on greater personal proportions. By the time they reach middle age, they may feel that they have wasted a large part of their lives doing a job that offers only monetary rewards.

Career Week in Canada, to be held from November 1 to 7 this year, is designed to focus public attention on the importance of vocational guidance and career planning. It will also publicize the range of jobs available — including many in occupations that did not exist a few years ago. Above all, it will try to combat that "pessimism and fatalism" which has exerted a grip on far too many young Canadians. For their own sake and the sake of the national economy, they should be encouraged to prepare for a future of productive and personally rewarding work.