

The "High Five" of Career Development

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Background

Canada's Stay-in-School initiative was moving into a new phase some time ago, and a few people were asked to spend a day together to summarize everything they knew about career development in five pithy, understandable messages. These messages were to be used to promote career development to Canadian youth. This seemingly impossible task turned out to be not only achievable, but exceedingly powerful for ourselves and our clients, regardless of their age. What follows is a description of these messages, the "High Five" of career development:

1. Change is constant.
2. Follow your heart.
3. Focus on the journey.
4. Stay learning.
5. Be an ally.

The "High Five"

Change is Constant. The famous American philosopher Yogi Berra once said, "The future ain't what it used to be." We Canadians took that statement to mean that predictions about the future are difficult because the very processes of change are changing, not just the content of change. In the world of work, for example, the role of the automotive technician is changing not only due to technological changes in cars but also due to segmentation of the industry; the process of defining an "automotive technician" is changing while the content of the technician's work also changes. Thus, predictions about the technician's role (or any other work role) are tenuous.

Rapid and continuous technological, economic, demographic and social changes directly influence the world of work. As a result, the "labour market" of the past is quickly becoming a "work dynamic" that is difficult to encapsulate with occupational dictionaries, codes or titles. For example, there are dozens of environmental roles today that did not exist at the turn of the decade. Entirely new work roles are emerging, and old work roles are changing to require new skills, knowledge and attitudes.

Personal change occurs continuously as well. People grow and develop new skills, attitudes, knowledge, beliefs, networks and other assets at varying rates. Assessment tools, the backbone of traditional career development, give our clients the impression that change is unlikely; that who they are is

who they will be. People who recognize, value and nurture their own fluidity will better adapt adequately to their changing environments.

Goal-setting needs to be reconsidered in light of constant change. Goal-setting can be useful, but the dogged pursuit of goals can also prevent people from optimizing chance opportunities. Goals have to be seen in context with serendipitous discoveries. Gelatt's (1989) concept of "positive uncertainty" applies here.

Follow Your Heart. When change is constant, relatively stable guideposts become all the more important. The "heart" (the set of characteristics that include values, entrenched beliefs and interests) is reasonably stable and is well worth heeding. One's "heart" drives one's career path. Skills, knowledge and attitudes are simply tools that allow the path to be followed.

A corollary to this message is that dreaming is normal, natural and appropriate. We career development practitioners often concern themselves with helping clients become "realistic" at the expense of following their dreams. Many people have "unrealistic" dreams, but there is nothing wrong with pursuing them and cherishing them. Reality will impose itself on people of its own accord; accelerating this process may be of little benefit. People can move towards their dreams when provided with tools and strategies to do so. People may not live out their visions, but they are able to strive for them and perhaps live out portions of their dreams.

Focus on the Journey. One of the reasons our field has been preoccupied with helping individuals select appropriate occupational destinations is that we wish to help people find work that is meaningful and fulfilling. In doing so, however, we have tended to underemphasize the meaningfulness of the journey towards one's vision. Now, since continual change is rendering redundant the practice of predicting occupational destinations, we must take great efforts to help people better fulfil their values, beliefs and interests with **every** decision they make. In fact, focusing on the journey means people move away from feeling a need to correctly make "the" decision ("What should I be?") and move toward examining the immediate and enduring effects of virtually all decisions.

Stay Learning. We all know about "lifelong learning" and its importance. However, the beliefs that the public appear to hold imply that nothing more needs to be done once an occupational destination is reached. We will be better able to

communicate the prescription to stay learning when the above messages have been adopted. Learning is constant when change is constant.

Unfortunately, many people cringe in terror when they hear about "lifelong learning." People who have had limited success with formal learning and who are therefore anxious about "lifelong learning" need to know that most learning does not occur in formal settings. People learn in effective and enjoyable ways within informal and non-formal learning events.

People also need ways to keep track of their learning experiences. Individuals are continually accumulating assets (e.g., skills, contacts) through learning events, but few people have a mechanism by which they can identify, record and organize these assets. Consequently, they often do not recognize that they have undergone a tremendous amount of learning.

Be an Ally. This last theme brings us back to the very old idea of the importance of community. Many people do not feel part of a community and do not have the wherewithal to create one for themselves. Many youth, in particular, see the labour market (or work dynamic) as something external, "out there," and distant. They do not realize that the labour market surrounds them, as represented by their neighbors, friends' parents and parents' friends. These allies surround youth, yet they appear to have little ability to connect with each other.

Our field and our society has stressed independence and autonomy; perhaps a re-examination of interdependence and community would be appropriate. It is not a sign of weakness to ask for help. Rather, it is a sign of strength when one can identify a need, clearly express the need and articulate how others can help one meet the need. This is particularly true when one wants to learn continually, keep up with change and adapt to change.

Applications

The "High Five" can be described in a variety of ways besides the manner provided above. Different client groups respond to different descriptions and examples. We have incorporated these messages in a variety of products, workshops and speeches, and we have used a variety of ways to explain them. Some examples of their application follow:

- **ENGAGE** is a learning-to-learn system for youth that includes products and workshops for youth, parents and teachers. The "High Five" messages form the core of the system.
- **Opportunities with Change** is a career development workshop for professionals, in which the concepts and

activities directly follow the "High Five."

- **Everyday Career Development** is a course and text for secondary school teachers designed to help them infuse career development into their day-to-day teaching activities. The course is based heavily on the "High Five."

We have found that people respond very favourably to these messages. They seem to have a universal quality that reaches virtually all audiences. From a grandmother who read the **ENGAGE** materials: "Don't know how I reached this age without knowing and achieving some of the suggestions. Good for any age--real treasures. ... We sure do a lot of muddling along in life without knowing how to improve." Parents respond particularly favourably to the "High Five;" the messages remove some of the intense pressure they feel to help their children decide "what they are going to be."

The group for which these messages resonate most strongly are front-line career development practitioners. The "High Five" seems to provide a framework in which they can place all their reservations about elements of their practices (e.g., giving tests, helping clients choose occupational destinations, ensuring clients are "realistic"); elements that they were guiltily subverting without being able to fully explain (to themselves or others) their reasons for doing so. We generally hear a collective sigh of relief from practitioners when we present the "High Five."

References

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¹ These individuals were Pat Butter, Donna Davidson, Barrie Day, Aryeh Gitterman, Helen Hackett, Tracy Lamb, John McCormick, Dave Redekopp and Michele Tocher. Don Myhre, Bev Ross and Marnie Robb formalized the messages into the "High Five."

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