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Motivating the Workforce in a Precarious Time: Focusing on Career Self-Help Advice in the U.S.

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine American career self-help advice in the context of white-collar labor market changes in the U.S., especially how it tries to motivate and empower white-collar job seekers and how fundamentally flawed this is. In this regard, we focus on *What Color Is Your Parachute?* by Richard Nelson Bolles, as it is the foundational and representative literature in the field of career self-help advice. We first look at the white-collar labor market changes in the U.S. and the growth of career self-help advice along with its influence. We then show that *What Color Is Your Parachute?* seeks to motivate and inspire job seekers by defining job searching in individual terms and overlooking its structural nature. From this, we point out the most problematic aspect of career self-help advice, i.e., shifting job search responsibility as well as its outcome solely to individual job seekers, while also making it difficult to scrutinize and understand the broader context affecting job searching.

Keywords: Career Self-Help Advice, White-Collar, Job Searching, Labor Market Changes, Motivation

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper intends to examine how career self-help advice tries to motivate and empower white-collar job seekers and how fundamentally flawed this is by looking at *What Color Is Your Parachute?* (hereafter *Parachute*) by Richard Nelson Bolles, the leading career self-help book in the U.S. In the past few decades, along with white-collar labor market changes in the U.S. such as frequent layoffs and precarious employment, career self-help advice has come to enjoy a great influence on white-collar workers and job seekers as the most accessible source of job searching and career advice. In particular, career self-help advice tries to shore up job seekers' morale as much as offer specific job searching tips, since labor market changes could be deeply frustrating, negatively affecting job seekers' motivation.

In this context, this paper examines the motivational aspect of career self-help advice and its flaws. It especially looks at *Parachute*, as it is the foundational work and all-time bestseller in the career self-help field, selling over 10 million copies across the world. It also recognizes the importance of motivation in job searching. Thus, *Parachute* is a representative work in career self-help advice with enduring impact. As motivation can be broad and abstract, the paper approaches the matter through a couple of specific and interrelated questions that are likely to be found in any career self-help manual. These are roughly as follows; what job to get, how to view one's job searching (by extension, labor market changes that have necessitated

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job searching), and how one gets a job.

By examining this, the paper aims to show that career self-help advice seeks to motivate job seekers by defining job searching a private matter—i.e., the area of individual efforts—and, in doing so, shifts responsibility, as well as blame, to individual job seekers, while making it difficult to raise other critical questions affecting job searching. This is not to say that such advice is blindly accepted by white-collar job seekers. Yet, considering the prevalence of career self-help advice in the U.S., it is difficult to be completely free from its discourses. In addition, similar career self-help advice emphasizing individual efforts and self-blame is found in Korea. Given this, this paper intends to explore the problematic aspects of career self-help advice by focusing on the American case as the most advanced example.

Below, the paper first examines white-collar labor market changes in the U.S., along with the career self-help industry as the broader context for this paper. It then examines *Parachute* and its messages of motivation and empowerment. After this, it examines some of the problems of such messages. From this, the paper reveals some ironic outcomes of career self-help advice's focus on individual solutions to the problem of job searching which is also structural.

2. LABOR MARKET CHANGES IN THE U.S. AND CAREER SELF-HELP

Ever since the 1980s, American white-collar workers have witnessed sweeping changes in the world of work. Restructuring, downsizing, and/or outsourcing have swept across America, leading to the layoffs of millions of white-collar workers. Between 1981 and 2003, about 30 million full-time Americans lost their jobs due to corporate downsizings. Those who have managed to survive layoffs have also experienced longer working hours, declining wages, shrinking benefits, and diminishing job security [1, 2].

The average length of unemployment also rose significantly from less than 10 weeks in 1970 to nearly 20 weeks in 2003 and to over 24 weeks in 2009. In addition, the long-term unemployment rate—defined as being unemployed for 6 months or longer—had been high since 2001 with around 18% [3]. Besides, the practice of hiring temporary or other forms of nonstandard workers has become more widespread, moving beyond the traditional fields of office workers and manufacturing to the engineering and information technology industries. Those working part-time because they were not able to get full-time jobs also increased from 20% in 1990 to 33.8% in 2010 [4].

These changes are generally traced back to the mid-1970s when the post-World War II economic order increasingly showed signs of strains. In the postwar years, workers could expect lifetime employment in one company in return for their hard work and loyalty. Yet, from the 1970s, America was faced with the heightened competition from Europe and Japan as these countries recovered from World War II. It also suffered from inflation due to the Vietnam War and the two oil crises.

During the 1980s, forces of globalization and technological advances accelerated global competition, while enabling American companies to outsource production to low-wage countries. In this context, companies began to see their employees as costs undermining their competitiveness rather than as assets and sought to fire them as they saw fit [5].

During the 1990s, despite the economic growth, laying off workers continued, as companies wanted to remain flexible amid ongoing changes. By then, the layoffs, initially affecting blue-collar workers in the 1970s, were extended to white-collar and mid-level managerial workforce as well as the service sector. Companies also used layoffs as a way to increase short-term profit by holding down wages. Yet, if layoffs were still largely confined to banking, telecommunications, or Silicon Valley high-tech industries in the 1990s, the Great Recession of 2008-2009 (caused by the bursting of U.S. housing bubble) led to massive layoffs of white-collar workers in all sectors and regions [6].

As a result of labor market changes, lifetime employment has become a thing of the past. Given the real possibility of being laid off at any time, 10 career changes during one's work life has become increasingly a norm. Besides, it is no longer enough to be simply employed. Maintaining one's employability, (i.e., job seekers need to make themselves employable in the future) is a lot more important—even more important than being employed. All this provides a ground for activities purported to improve individual competitiveness [7].

Micki McGee thus argues that, along with white-collar labor market upheaval, there has been the growth of career self-help industries that offer advice on career and how to remain employable. Indeed, *Parachute*, first published in 1972, became the *New York Times* paperback bestseller between 1979 and the early 1980s on the back of the rising unemployment rate [8]. Following the success of *Parachute* and the prevalence of layoffs, mass-market books on careers flourished in the late 1980s. The number of career coaches has also doubled every three years since the mid-1990s, as white-collar employment insecurity accelerated during the decade [9, 10].

As studies of white-collar job searching in the U.S. well document, career self-help advice is the most likely source of proverbial job searching tips and self-improvement tactics [11]. It is also the purveyor of motivational and empowering messages. In fact, self-help, especially the contemporary self-improvement kind, is largely about motivating people to achieve the goal they desire [12]. Given that job seekers are faced with the prospect of insecure employment and more frequent and prolonged job searches due to the labor market changes, offering them encouragement and motivation, as well as job searching tips, seems to be only too important.

3. MOTIVATING JOB SEEKERS AND CAREER CHANGERS

Parachute is a foundational work in the career self-help field, which did not exist at the time of its first publication. Indicating its influence, its messages—for example, pursue one’s dream job, be positive, and think of a job search as a full-time job—constitute the basics of career advice offered at job search support groups and institutions around the U.S. Bolles has revised the book every year since 1976 to keep up with changes such as downsizing and job insecurity. Yet, his core job searching strategy, as well as desire to give hope and inspiration to job seekers, has remained largely the same.

Given labor market changes in the U.S., Bolles recognizes that Americans need to go through job-hunting many times. Yet, ineffective job searching strategies often lead to no jobs, doing irreparable damage to job seekers’ self-confidence and causing them to lose hope and a sense of control. The job search may feel more like a burden, making it difficult for job seekers to continue job-hunting with any enthusiasm. Against this, Bolles aims to offer a strategy that gives motivation, hope and empowerment as much as a practical guide for job-hunting and career change [13].

His advice is to pursue what one wants to do, i.e., one’s dream job. Bolles sees that we are likely to utilize our full talent and do well when we enjoy what we do. Insisting on finding one’s dream job is also a way to inspire job seekers to work harder for job searching despite the difficulties they face. If you pursue your dream job, this would motivate you to pour much more energy to find a job, which could actually increase the chance of getting a job. Accordingly, pursuing one’s dream job is actually a practical strategy. In addition, a period of unemployment, frustrating as it may be, is not just time of distress or “a major calamity,” but time to pursue one’s dream job [13].

Bolles also argues that there are always jobs, even when no new jobs are created. It is because people do quit their jobs for various reasons, leaving positions to be filled all the time. Accordingly, job seekers can focus on what they want to do rather than labor market conditions and begin with the energy and passion generated by the vision of their dream job [13].

Ultimately, finding a dream job requires job seekers to know what they like to do. Much of *Parachute* is devoted to helping job seekers figure this out, offering an array of exercises to find out what job seekers’ favorite skills are, where (the fields) they want to use them, and how to find a job that uses their favorite skills at the place they want to use them. To find one’s dream job, self-knowledge is thus critical. *Parachute* advises job seekers to start job searching by studying their self and what they want, before studying the job market. As such, if one fails to find a dream job, it is because of the lack of self-knowledge, not because of some external factors [13].

In short, Bolles advises job seekers to follow their inner desires rather than external labor market conditions. This seems inevitable, since rapid technological changes and ongoing labor market upheavals have made the job market utterly unpredictable and beyond one’s control. On the other hand, following one’s inner desire is not only predictable, but allows job seekers to take control of their job search.

To Bolles, the question of control is particularly important. He agrees that people do not have control over keeping or losing a job. Yet, as for a getting job, they are in control and their own master. Since job seekers know what they want to do, they could focus on what is within their power to achieve that, instead of complaining about what is not in their control (e.g. labor market conditions and the state of economy). It may be that the power within their control is only 2% or 5%, but this gives them something to work on. Accordingly, figuring out what is within one's control will improve one's chance of getting a job. It is the secret to a successful job-hunting [13].

Bolles also argues that job seekers help employers with their skills, rescuing them from whatever troubles they have and a job interview is part of ongoing research job seekers need to conduct in order to decide whether they want to work at a given company or not. Accordingly, employers as well as job seekers are on a trial during the job interview, both screening out (as much as being screened by) each other. Thus, hiring is like a conversation, or a two-way street, wherein what job seekers want is as important as what employers want and job seekers are an equal partner to employers, not a "job beggar" [13].

4. THE LIMITS OF MOTIVATION

It is not difficult to understand the appeal of Bolles' messages. In contrast to the workplace where you are likely to be unappreciated or laid-off, the prospect of doing what you like to do is alluring, while the message that job seekers are screening out employers and rescuing them gives a sense of self-importance. Amid labor market upheavals that are beyond one's control, the idea that you can control your job searching by pursuing what you want to do is also comforting.

Yet, these messages have troubling implications. When hired, the sense that people are doing their dream job is likely to make them work harder and be more productive. Besides, Bolles emphasizes finding a job that gives satisfaction in itself (i.e., a dream job) instead of seeking reward, raise, and promotion, probably a reflection of deteriorating working conditions. This shows that the idea of a dream job can be used to help offset negative changes in the labor market.

In addition, presenting the unemployment as an occasion to figure out and pursue one's dream job could temper and minimize possible disappointment and anger arising from a layoff. In short, the notion of pursuing one's dream job can help people more readily accept negative labor market changes including employment insecurity, which frees companies from any blame for laying people off.

At the same time, the ways in which Bolles tries to motivate and comfort job seekers reveal some problems. Bolles highlights the individual factors in a job search, while disregarding larger structural issues such as economy and labor market conditions that could also affect one's job searching. As previously discussed, he insists that there are always vacancies. He also maintains that people have been finding jobs even in hard times, while some could not find a position even at the height of prosperity. He further adds that people always compete with others for jobs whether economy is good or bad [13].

If there are always vacancies and people do (or do not) get a job regardless of economic conditions, the consideration for larger economic factors in one's job search is unwarranted. Likewise, if people always compete with others for jobs, there seems no need to consider job market competition or the unemployment rate. The problem is not external conditions, but internal ones such as one's efforts, perseverance, and passion. The following passage well summaries his position.

Most people don't find their heart's desire, because they decide to pursue just half their dream—and consequently they hunt for it with only half a heart.

If you decide to pursue your whole dream, your best dream, the one you would die to do, I guarantee you that you will hunt for it with all your heart. It is this passion that often is the difference between successful career-changers and unsuccessful ones [13].

Employers' prejudice against age and a hiatus in one's career can be also overcome, "if you come with a positive attitude toward your aging; if you convey energy, energy from our excitement about life; if you keep going on interviews until you encounter an employer or two who isn't prejudiced about your age." He admits

that these are a lot of 'ifs,' but comfortingly all are within one's control [13].

Bolles also emphasize attitude, or how we think about things, as "the key to finding a dream job." Job seekers may not find a dream job, but their attitude has "power to transform just any job into dream job." He sees that the problem is not our handicap (i.e., the job we have), but our attitude to it [13]. Yet, if we can find a dream job by simply changing our attitude, there is no need to find one in the first place. Besides, attitude again makes external reality irrelevant.

Finding a job is thus insulated from outward reality and rendered as an individual issue amenable to one's control and efforts. Factors out there such as economic downturns and labor market reality are irrelevant and can be manageable through how we respond to them, i.e., attitude, or by focusing on what is within our control. In turn, focusing only on what job seekers can do further magnifies the perception of the degree of individual control and power in the job search.

Yet, it is simply undeniable that external structural factors like the state of economy affect one's chance of getting a job through the number of jobs available, if nothing else. Even if there are always vacancies as Bolles argues, an economic boom leads to more jobs available, increasing one's chance of getting a job. Likewise, people always compete with others for jobs, but, when the economy is bad, they are likely to compete with more people for less jobs available. In addition, age and other employers' prejudices would matter far less, if there are more jobs available [14].

In the end, emphasizing individual power, while disregarding the structural constraints and those beyond one's control, shifts job searching responsibility (as well as outcomes) to individual job seekers. As job searching depends on only one's self, job seekers have no one to blame but themselves in case of failure to get a job. Evoking anything other than one's self is regarded as an attempt to put blame elsewhere for one's inadequacy. The end result is that "there is no bad economic times, just bad job seekers" [15]. Undoubtedly, Bolles is quite sympathetic to job seekers and their plights. Yet, as he tries to motivate job seekers by purely individualistic terms, even he cannot be free from putting blame on job seekers for their difficulties.

5. CONCLUSION

Thus far, this paper examined career self-help advice through *Parachute* and how the messages of individual control and pursuing one's dream job motivate job seekers to work hard during a job search. At the same time, it also showed how such messages are problematic, defining job searching in individual terms and overlooking its structural aspect, which shifts job search responsibility and its outcome to individual job seekers.

In addition, in denying the structural aspect of job searching, career self-help advice precludes any chance to scrutinize the larger economic factors that not only affect one's chance of getting a job, but also have wrought labor market changes that drive people to search for a job anytime. Focusing on individual efforts in job searching also seems to make career self-help advice self-contradictory. Despite its positive and encouraging messages, career self-help advice seems negative and discouraging in that it envisions nothing other than an individual solution and narrows the options open to job seekers. In suggesting that one's self is the only help job seekers could rely on, it seems to say they are in fact helpless, not empowered.

All this is not to say that individual efforts are not required in getting a job, or that career self-help advice has no value at all. Individual efforts do make a difference in job searching, and Bolles showcases some practical things job seekers can do. Yet, unlike the claims of career self-help advice, individual efforts are a partial factor, not the entire one, in getting a job. Individual efforts make a big difference when the structural factors such as the economic conditions and the government policies are also favorable.

It is true that changing the structural factors affecting one's job searching is never easy and takes a lot of time, to say the least. Thus, job seekers have to be encouraged to do what they can do at the moment, i.e., making one's efforts. At the same time, they should be provided with the clear understanding of the broader context in which they make efforts to get a job, along with more sources of help other than their own self.

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