

Transitions to work: A model for program development

KRIS MAGNUSSON

Department of Educational Psychology, University of Calgary, 2500 University Dr. N.W., Calgary, Alberta Canada, T2N 1N4

Abstract. Interventions designed to assist the unemployed make the transition to employment have typically focused on the development of specific skills. In this paper, the author argues that such approaches are insufficient for counselors to assist individuals attempting to make the transition to employment. A brief background to the unemployment problem is presented, followed by a summary of some of the major problems with traditional employment programs. The author then presents a comprehensive model for program development that incorporates seven levels of intervention, and five components of effective transition programs. Implications for counseling are discussed.

The spectre of unemployment continues to haunt most industrialized nations; the trend towards massive and chronic unemployment is indeed an international issue (Gregory, 1983). As nations face times of fiscal restraint, the ranks of the unemployed continue to rise, and it is becoming increasingly more difficult for the unemployed to make a successful transition to the work force.

The rising rates of unemployment have direct implications for the counseling profession. First, unemployment often results in moderate to severe emotional responses which may require therapeutic intervention. According to Borgen and Amundsen (1984), individuals facing unemployment experience emotional reactions not unlike Kübler-Ross's (1969) description of the grief cycle. They suggest that unemployment results in a reordering of individuals' perceived needs, in a manner consistent with Maslow's concept of prepotent needs. That is, higher-order needs and desires are pushed aside because of the reemergence of basic survival and shelter needs. As people attempt to cope with this reordering, they tend to experience emotional reactions similar to the Kübler-Ross's cycle of coping with loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Borgen and Amundsen also found that these individuals were likely to experience feelings of victimization, such as shock, confusion, anxiety, fear and depression. These findings were supported in works by Hurst and Shepard (1986), Levine (1979) and Lopez (1983). Thus there are direct relationships between career development and

mental health. Herr (1989) provides a forceful argument for such a relationship; he argues that “the absence of work or underemployment are reflected in behaviors which suggest various problems in living or, indeed, mental illness” (p. 5).

The second direct implication of rising rates of unemployment pertains to the development of programs or interventions that will mediate the effects of unemployment. Drier and Ciccone (1988) and Whitfield (1988) argue for enhanced preventative measures to assist individuals in the transition process with the incorporation of career guidance programs in educational settings. However, the majority of programs are offered by government agencies and are remedial in nature; that is, they attempt to assist unemployed individuals make the transition to work.

It is this second major counselling implication that will be the focus of this paper; specifically, it is argued that integrating general counselling practice with the principles of career development provides a comprehensive framework for the conceptualization of unemployment interventions. A brief review of unemployment issues is presented, and problems with traditional intervention programs are discussed. A model of self-directed adaptation is then presented, followed by a discussion of the components of effective transition programs.

Background to the unemployment problem

The problem of unemployment is multifaceted; Kroll (cited in Herr and Long, 1983) identified four distinct kinds of unemployment. *Structural* unemployment reflects a condition in which jobs are available, but potential workers do not possess the required qualifications. For example, one impact of new technology is often to displace semiskilled or unskilled workers; these workers usually do not possess the sorts of skills that the new technology demands. *Seasonal* unemployment is characterized by regular patterns of economic activity that are affected by the changing seasons. Jobs abound in hospitality and tourism occupations during the height of the tourist season, and decline markedly during the “off-season”. *Cyclical* unemployment is the third category described by Kroll, in reference to semiregularly occurring peaks and valleys of large-scale economic activity. Periods of national or international recession followed by “boom” periods exemplify this category. Kroll’s fourth category is *frictional* unemployment, which is usually associated with short-term transitions in individual’s lives, such as the typically brief interval between jobs for professionals, or the transition from school to work for most youth.

Another way of viewing the unemployment problem is to consider the

issue from the perspective of the individual; that is, to focus on the skills that individuals would need in order to make a successful transition to employment. These needs are commonly referred to as specific versus general employability skills (Dunn, cited in Herr and Long, 1983; Kazanas, 1978b). Specific employability skills refer to those skills that the job or transition specifically requires, and are usually developed in educational institutions, or through job related experiences. General employability skills pertain to the social and attitudinal skills that facilitate movement into, and coping in, the work force in general. Counselling is typically seen as playing a major role in the development of general employability skills.

Ashley et al. (1980) suggest that attempts to deal with the problems of unemployment typically fall into one of five categories: legislation, the formation of economic policy, industry based employment programs, community service programs, and school based programs. The latter three are indicative of attempts to address the problems of unemployment from a skill-deficit view, while the former two take a more structural perspective. However, Gregory (1983) disputes the notion that the traditional macro-economic policies of the 1970s and early 1980s could have an impact on the problem of unemployment while simultaneously curbing inflation rates. Similarly, Curtain (1983) suggested that traditional structural ways of viewing unemployment categories (i.e., employed, unemployed, not in labour force) are not useful in a rapidly changing economic and employment climate, and recommends instead the study of ways in which people are employed.

Recent trends in Europe and North America towards a restructuring of international trade, and a focus on national deficit reduction seem to be having a small but noticeable impact on national rates of unemployment. However, in at least three of these countries – Great Britain, Canada, and the United States – the general national improvement in unemployment rates masks higher rates of unemployment within certain geographic, ethnic or demographic groups. Furthermore, these trends are cyclical. In Canada, for example, the brisk economy of Southern Ontario improved the national picture dramatically. Recently, however, unemployment in Southern Ontario has climbed, while other regions have remained stable (or rose at lesser rates). Whatever the national rates are, the rates of unemployment in the Maritime provinces (especially Newfoundland), amongst Native Canadians, and for those in the 15–24 age bracket remain very high. To illustrate, a national survey of youth in Canada revealed that 19% of young people aged 20–24 were unemployed, a figure nearly double the national average (Posterski and Bibby, 1988).

Transition programs

Traditional approaches to employment transition

Even with legislative action and responsible economic policies, unemployment continues to be a major concern, and resources are still being directed towards the development and implementation of programs and services to assist individuals in making the transition from employment to unemployment. However, due to the extremely complex nature of the problem, most programs are only marginally successful (Mangum, 1987). Programs in Canada have typically focused on the development of skills thought to be necessary to the transition process; most transition programs emphasized job search strategies, resume writing, and interview skills, while others focused on job maintenance, or employability, skills.

A major drawback to traditional transition programs is an overemphasis on the kinds of generic transition skills described above. Although these skills are certainly necessary in the transition process, there may be other barriers faced by the program participants which prevent success. Mangum (1987) convincingly argued that, in order to be effective, transition programs must consider the constraints imposed by cultural norms, labor market realities, and general human development. Thus, effective transition programs must be tailored to meet the specific needs of the participants; generic programs can only be expected to produce generic results. This point was emphasized in a survey of Alberta employers; Alberta Career Development and Employment (1988) concluded that "new graduates from universities, colleges and high schools do not have the broad skills that are necessary for industry. New graduates are lacking transferable skills (and) are 'institutional' in their approach and thinking" (p. 23).

Further to Mangum's list of criteria for effective transition programs is the critical role of the individual's perception of the transition, and especially the perceived relevance of the transition. Super (1985) has used the term "salience" to refer to this system of meaning that guides individuals; in the context of unemployment, a fundamental factor governing program outcome at the individual level is the salience of the transition for the individual. The role of attitudinal constraints was supported in an informal survey of managing directors of job entry projects (Canada Job Strategies), who cited attitudes and behaviors as the primary barriers to employment for their program participants (personal communications, 1988). These informal conclusions are supported by the works of Buck and Barrick (1987), Kazanas (1978a; 1978b), Walther (1975) and Williams and Priest (1978).

The issue of salience is a critical one for the development of programs in

general, but especially for programs designed to assist the unemployed. Saliency may be viewed as being structural or contextual (Magnusson and Redekopp, 1989). Structural saliency refers to relatively stable patterns of beliefs, values, interests, and personal characteristics. Contextual saliency, on the other hand, is temporal, and is based on how the individuals perceive their immediate situation. There may be specific needs in an individual's immediate experience (i.e., contextual saliency) that take precedence over long-term needs (i.e., structural saliency). In order to assist individuals to cope with the transition to work, it becomes necessary to address both levels of saliency.

Guiding principles to transition program development

Magnusson, Day and Redekopp (1988) have identified two principles which serve to guide the development of transition programs in general, and seem relevant to the discussion of transitions to employment. The first reflects the previous discussion with respect to saliency: transitions are essentially a unique experience, and must be considered from the phenomenological world of the individual. While there may be times when group processes are appropriate, it remains essential to build in mechanisms which both account and allow for the contextual and developmental needs of the individual. The second guiding principle acknowledges the need for ongoing systems of support for individuals in transition. This support is intended to take the form of a continuous process of monitoring progress, the provision of performance feedback, and the development of social support systems. The authors contend that "constancy and consistency of support and feedback allow for the development and maintenance of saliency, as well as providing further opportunity for synthesis and integration (of program content)" (p. 7).

The goal of most employability programs is to assist individuals in making a transition to work. However, our rapidly changing society has had the impact of increasing both the kinds of transitions people are being forced to make and the number of such transitions people are likely to experience in their lifetime (Arbeiter, et al., 1978; Naisbitt, 1984; Toffler, 1980). This implies that people will need to develop the skills and attitudes required to make specific transitions and the capacity to make such transitions in the future. In other words, good programs must assist the individual with his or her immediate transition needs as well as fostering adaptability in general. Thus a primary goal of employment transition programs should be the development of personal adaptability for change.

A model of self-directed adaptation

Levels of intervention

The guiding principles presented above are incorporated into the general model of interventions presented in Figure 1. Interventions are considered in terms of seven hierarchical levels, which form the central core of the model: intensive support, advising/guiding, coaching, formal instruction, consulting, self-help, and personal innovation.

Intensive support represents the most primary level of intervention. At this level of need, the individual is characterized by a total, or near total, inability to personally cope with the transition environment. The function of the intervention is often to do things *for* the individual. Although modeling is a key component of intensive support, the primary function is to act on behalf of the client. For example, when dealing with a mentally handicapped individual, it may be necessary to approach employers to convince them that the handicapped person can perform certain occupational roles; on their own, such individuals may not possess the skills or confidence to represent themselves. Recent immigrants provide another example of a situation in

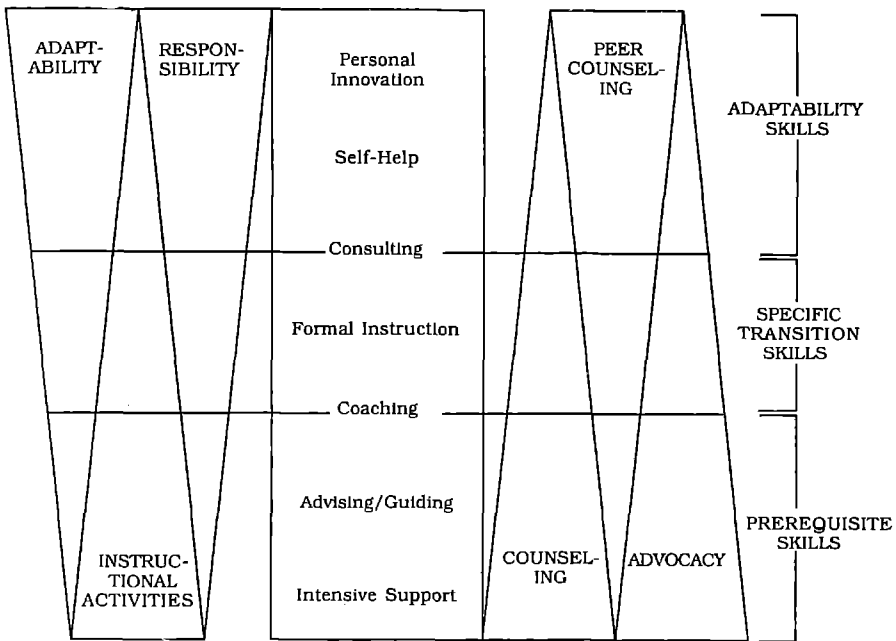


Fig. 1. A hierarchical model of self-directed adaptation.

which people may need intensive support because of a lack of specific adaptability skills. There may also be emotional barriers that prevent individuals from being able to act on their own behalf. A woman in a shelter for battered women may not have the initial emotional resources to approach an employer on her own, yet may still be capable of functioning on the job. In these types of circumstances, individuals need someone else to represent their interests.

The second level of intervention is advising/guiding. At this level, the individual is still in need of concrete direction, but is more capable of functioning independently. Typically, the individual would progress to the advising level as soon as he or she is capable of relatively independent functioning; that is, intensive support is given only to the extent that it is absolutely necessary. Advising/guiding is also a one-to-one intervention, but the function of the intervention becomes one of monitoring and guiding activities, or of giving explicit instructions to guide behavior, rather than doing things for the individual. For example, an interview may be arranged for the client, but the client would present his or her own case after receiving detailed assistance. In some cases, individuals may even want someone to accompany them, as a “fall back”, or to provide emotional support.

As the confidence and skill levels of the clients increase, the focus of interventions shifts from one-to-one to small group assistance, or coaching. At this level, clients possess basic functioning skills, and can begin to benefit from the experience of peers. Furthermore, the tasks involved may be developed in small groups; the clients are demonstrating increased levels of independent behaviors and attitudes. Thus the coaching intervention utilizes a higher client to staff ratio than the individualized interventions of guiding or intensive support.

The general function of the first three levels of intervention – that is, intensive support, guiding/advising, and coaching – is to ensure that individuals possess the skills and attitudes necessary to function within more formalized training settings. As such, these levels serve to develop prerequisite skills. The nature and number of these “prerequisite” skills is a function of the specific transition environment and population.

Once the prerequisite skills have been developed, the individual is ready to proceed to more formalized modes of intervention. Typically, the possession of the prerequisite skills is an indication that the individual is relatively independent, and has the potential to benefit from group instructional activities.

Formal instruction represents the traditional method of service delivery for employment transition programs: skill development courses are offered in areas such as job search skills, resume writing, and interview techniques. Such specific transition skill development offerings are necessary for em-

ployment transitions, but as argued earlier, are likely not sufficient. Programs of formal instruction need to account for the idiosyncratic needs of the client group in addition to developing the kinds of generic skills that the transition requires. These additional program requirements are discussed later in this paper.

The conclusion of formalized instructional programs does not represent the end of the intervention hierarchy. The individual may possess the basic skills required to make a specific transition, but still often requires support and/or encouragement, and may even need additional tips on how to apply the newly developed skills. The level of intervention that addresses this need is one of consulting; as individuals make their first tentative steps towards personal adaptability, they may require a “booster shot” of the skills and attitudes developed during formal instruction. This typically does not require a great deal of time, and thus people providing such intervention services can manage relatively large case loads. The function of this intervention is to remind the clients of specific skills or strategies, and to provide ongoing support and encouragement.

The sixth level of intervention is simply called “self-help”. The purpose of self-help interventions is to provide resources that clients can access and use independently, or with minimal assistance. Clients functioning at this level are fairly independent, and already possess the prerequisite and specific transitions skills that are commonly developed at earlier levels of intervention. Typically, these clients need minimal “fine-tuning” of their skills, or are seeking new ways of applying existing skills. Thus, self-help interventions are primarily informational in nature.

The final level of intervention is called personal innovation. At this level, clients are encouraged to explore new opportunities, and to seek creative solutions to problems. It represents the highest level of personal responsibility and adaptability, and is the goal of any transition program. The interventions per se are primarily directed towards providing the opportunity or forum for such creativity to take place.

Thus, each level of intervention is directed towards fostering a particular type of skill. The first sets of skills that are required are prerequisite or basic functioning skills. Once these have been mastered, specific transition skills may be developed. The transition skills, in turn, become the foundation for the development of adaptability skills.

Primary processes

The levels of intervention are mediated by four primary processes: counselling, advocacy, instructional activities and peer support. Counselling is

viewed as an integral component of any transition program; the lower the level of intervention, the greater the need for counselling support. Similarly, the role of client advocacy is intensive during initial levels of intervention, but decreases in importance as the individual assumes greater personal responsibility. Time spent in instructional activities also decreases as the level of intervention increases; individuals needing intensive support require far more personal instructional time than do those at the self-help or personal innovation level. However, the potential role of peer support or peer counselling increases as individuals become more adaptive. Through these efforts, individuals increase in both personal responsibility and adaptability.

It is assumed that an appropriate level of intervention must be identified for each individual in order for the transition program to be a success; that is, the idiosyncratic needs of the individual should dictate the type of intervention provided. Thus the model described in Figure 1 requires accurate and extensive preintervention counselling. This preintervention counselling is seen as occurring in three phases: initiation, exploration and placement. In the initiation phase, the current levels of self-management capabilities, and transition salience are assessed. This is followed by the exploration phase, in which the impact of the entry-level characteristics on potential success in the planned intervention are discussed. Finally, based on the information obtained above, an appropriate type and level of intervention is determined.

Components of effective transition programs

As mentioned earlier, programs which have been designed to assist individuals with employment transitions have characteristically focused on the generic skills required by most people in similar circumstances, at the expense of those skills and attitudinal factors that may make the transition personally relevant. Although a full discussion of how these issues may be addressed is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief overview of essential program components is in order; these components are presented in 5 phases (see Fig. 2).

COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE TRANSITION PROGRAMS

1. SALIENCE
2. GENERIC TRANSITION SKILLS
3. POPULATION SPECIFIC SKILLS
4. IDIOSYNCRATIC SKILLS
5. SELF AND/OR ENVIRONMENT MANAGEMENT SKILLS

Fig. 2.

The first phase addresses the issue of *salience*; part of this task will have been completed during the preintervention counselling. Where salience for the transition (or transition component) is low, there will be a need to develop strategies to foster transition relevance. This part of the program directly addresses issues of values, beliefs and interests, and relates these to the transition. Furthermore, a rationale for the various subsequent skill acquisition activities is presented. In this way, motivation for the transition is at least identified, and in many cases, fostered.

The second phase incorporates the development of the *generic transition skills* that are commonly found in most programs, and that virtually anyone in a similar transition would need to know.

During the third phase, the intervention becomes more focused on the special needs faced by the specific population being served. This phase, called *population or environment-specific skills*, acknowledges that some cultural or social groups may face unique barriers to employment transitions, and therefore require distinct skill or attitude development. For example, the barriers faced by recent immigrants are likely to be very different from those faced by the chronically unemployed, or those who have been incarcerated. Of particular importance is the development of strategies for overcoming the unique barriers faced by the subgroup.

Individuals within groups also vary in their levels of skill requirements. Thus, the fourth phase of programs involves the development of *idiosyncratic skills*. These may be indicative of personal or environmental characteristics which are unique to the individual, and which generally require individualized attention.

The final phase of transition programs should focus on the development of self-management strategies. Such strategies provide a framework for the operationalization of the skills developed in the second, third and fourth phases. Typically, the skill development components of the programs are synthesized with the salience component, and strategies for the integration of the two are developed.

Summary

Unemployment is an ongoing problem which is not restricted to issues of economics and job placement. Counselling in general, and career counselling in particular, can play significant roles in helping individuals cope with the emotional, psychological and interpersonal effects of unemployment.

The hierarchical model of adaptation as described provides a general conceptual framework for planning interventions to assist individuals make the transition to employment. It assumes that not all individuals enter a

transition with the same needs, nor require equal levels of assistance. Furthermore, it assumes that personal relevance, or salience, is a critical component of any transition. Thus, the potential efficacy of intervention strategies is greatly enhanced when appropriate levels of intervention are identified, combined with the identification and development of mechanisms for enhancing salience.

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