



## Counseling Knowledge Nomads for a Changing Workplace

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Counseling clients to plan for satisfying careers by finding the perfect job is naïve and short sighted. Workplace turbulence, pervasive life style choices, and questions such as, *What kind of person do I want to be? What am I doing with my life? and Am I living the way that I want to live?*, demand techniques and principles aligned with reflection and courageous choice making.

Learning, work and success expectations are dramatically impacted by sophisticated technologies and globalization. Clients accommodate new realities with traditional terms. Complexity, information overload, and infinite choices demand focus, reflection, and personal filters at every turn. The speed of change challenges the ability to stay apace, and a growing *risk shift* (Hacker, 2006) creates uncertainty and insecurity. Consider the following context within which we now counsel “Knowledge Nomads and the Nervously Employed” (Feller & Whichard, 2005):

- In the U.S., heightened productivity has rewarded capital investment rather than worker compensation (Mishel, Bernstein & Allegretto, 2005)
- Automation has dislocated workers on a scale not seen since the Industrial Revolution (Lamb, 2004) with “smart systems” gobbling up checkout clerk jobs at Home Depot.
- Leaders have mortgaged America’s future through reckless tax cuts, out-of-control spending and Enron-style accounting in Congress (Peterson, 2004).
- Economic leaders are making statements like, “If we have promised more than our economy has the ability to deliver, as I fear we may have, we must recalibrate our public programs so that pending retirees have time to adjust through other changes. If we delay, the adjustments could be abrupt and painful” (Greenspan, 2004).
- Five out of 10 men and 6 out of 10 women say they have little or no money left after paying bills to save for retirement (Stern, 2006).
- Americans spend 40% less time with their children today than in 1960, 72 minutes driving daily, and a meager half-hour per week making love (Honoré, 2004).
- “Traditional macro policies are less effective than they used to be. We don’t know how to ensure strong job creation and strong wage growth anymore” (Shapiro, 2006)

### The Changing Workplace and Knowledge Nomads

Think about how work was traditionally defined – shifts from 8 to 5; longevity at one company; wages to match ages; specific job descriptions; up-the-ladder promotions; livable wages; retirement with pension at age 65; and so on. Security and feeling in control despite fewer choices and creative opportunities was common. Today, clients meet a very

different prevailing reality of work. No longer place-bound, time-bound or delimited by clearly prescribed job descriptions and products; highly creative, independent and self-directed workers have evolved into *Knowledge Nomads* - workers possessing the skills to continually innovate regardless of geographic location or time zone.

Sophisticated global consumers demand excellence in their purchases. Their pursuit ratchets up the need for companies to continuously innovate to garner market share, capture the attention of harried and over-worked parents, technically savvy employees, and an over indulgent youth consumer culture (Feller, 2003). With their capacity to work globally 24/7, *Knowledge Nomads* are in heightened demand, able to add value with intuition and agility anywhere and at any time. Their ability to maximize technology and negotiate databases surpasses the influences of time and geography as they produce and deliver on-demand excellence. These *Nomads* are increasingly loyal to their ideas, skill sets, and learning opportunities; rather than to their temporary employer or company.

With their highly attuned radar scanning for the next available learning opportunity, these *Knowledge Nomads* elevate (or add to) the tension felt by their *Nervously Employed* colleagues. These equally important workers are frequently frustrated by rapidly changing expectations, accelerated rates of performance and frequent demands to retool. The *Nervously Employed* are the majority of employees hired to job descriptions that are no longer clear or definitive. Their positions and opportunities are fluid, yet these workers continue to seek job security.

The *Nervously Employed* reluctantly come to understand that there are only two kinds of workers—self-employed owners and temps. They increasingly acknowledge that success and opportunity are tied to challenging old assumptions and to making courageous choices about learning, working and living.

Wages and employment opportunities have decreased in manufacturing and increased for those providing services offering a human touch and/or systems thinking. Technology and automation replaces costly laborers, and temporary contract workers replace tenured employees. Competitive services demand higher human intervention, meaning higher wage costs for the added value stemming from creativity and innovation attainable only through workers. Consumers now generally pay less for products because they are typically made outside the U.S., and more for services because of the greater human touch. The implications of these trends for those seeking family livable wages is to keep abreast of local, national and global economic trends; develop and hone skills and marketing strategies accordingly; and continuously scan for unique ways to create, innovate, and add value.

## Building Alliances to Prepare Clients to Face Change

Within this context counselors build alliances to help clients manage their career development, negotiate turbulent times and make choices that create gainful employment and fulfilling lives.

For students, counselors must help them understand that:

- The bar has been raised for achieving livable wages
- Job security as their parents knew it is a thing of the past
- All work is best understood as problems to be solved
- Excellence comes from using one's strengths (which are not field specific)
- What and when you study is more important than where you go to school
- *Knowledge Nomads* are increasing in numbers, can be found world wide, and respond to the highest bidder
- The *Nervously Employed* are increasing in number, are found world-wide and compete against world wages

For the currently employed, the messages are:

- Paternalistic company loyalty decreases as profits are more determined by a worker's ability to translate the currency of what they know into added value
- Job security decreases as the availability of world-wide cheaper talent becomes accessible
- Employee loyalty is increasingly tied to organizational climate, the opportunity to learn new skills, and a sense of engagement
- Gainful, fulfilling employment means demonstrating STAR behaviors and learning agility on a daily basis
- How one enhances, or adds value to an organization is how one's contributions and benefits are judged
- The *psychology of earning ethic* is challenging the *entitlement ethic*

Adults in transition must learn to:

- Expect change as normal and gain the emotional skills to manage ongoing transitions
- Define themselves as more than their job title
- Understand the paradox of relinquishing security to gain freedom
- Recognize the trade-offs tied to both workaholicism and balance
- See themselves as consultants or free agents in charge of their own careers

## Courageous Choices

Most clients chronically face competing demands on their time, prompting a myriad of over-whelming choices. Decisions based on too much hype and too little personal reflection can cloud the search for life's vanishing simplicity and clarity. By focusing on the following questions, clients may find greater development and fulfillment as they work to become fulfilled *Knowledge Nomads*.

1. What do I need to cultivate within myself to ensure that I take responsibility for creating my life?
2. What are my core values and how do I demonstrate them?
3. How can I align my values with my career goals to find significance in all that I do?
4. How can I best use my strengths to serve my family, community, country and world?
5. How can I be more honoring of others in all that I do?
6. What am I willing to give up to make time for reflection?
7. Do I go beyond expected roles to find value added ideas and encourage the same in others?
8. Do I confront what I need to learn and seek "guru networks" as my allies?
9. Do I navigate competing interests to promote cooperation and help move beyond conflict to getting things done?
10. Do I act in ways that would make my grandmother and children proud?

Clients face exciting, yet anxious times as workplace change affects every aspect of their lives. As counselors embrace a realistic view of the changing workplace, promote deeper reflection, and offer courageous questions they create an alliance to match the expectations of "Knowledge Nomads".

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