

Book reviews

CAREER ERRORS – STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT THE STEPS AND MISSTEPS OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Author: Frank Burtnett
Rowman & Littlefield
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240pp.

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This is an ambitious book. It seeks to address common issues, mistakes and misconceptions that cause people problems throughout their careers, from the first job through to retirement. As such, it appears to be aimed at the widest possible audience. However, the advice is often too tailored to the North American education and labour system to be useful to anyone outside the US.

Career Errors consists of four main sections.

Section one is on 'Entering, Reentering and Moving about the World of Work' and contains subsections on poor career decision making, inadequate occupational research, inappropriate qualifications and ineffective timing.

Section two deals with 'Finding, Acquiring and Moving into the First or Any Job' and has information on traditional job search topics such as applications and interviews, but also contains advice on coping with common new job anxieties.

Section three is entitled 'Achieving Career Satisfaction and Dealing with the Occasional Crisis'. This contains chapters on maintaining career growth in a transforming career landscape, issues of career satisfaction and 'life-work balance', and how to respond to some common career difficulties.

The final section addresses 'Winding Down and Exiting Career'. It looks at positioning for retirement and dealing with change.

Despite this range of topics, the book is only 240 pages long, with almost 170 of those pages dedicated

to the first two sections. This brevity frequently means that the advice given is very superficial and often amounts to little more than imperatives that sound like hollow truisms, especially for some of the more complex mid-career issues. For example, part of the advice in response to job loss is 'Be positive and do everything from a position of strength.' There is no argument that it is better to maintain a positive attitude to job hunting in the face of job loss, but the more difficult question is how exactly you do that when your confidence and sense of identity may have taken a major hit. This book makes no attempt to answer that more fundamental question. *Career Errors* is full of similar high-minded (possibly high-handed) instructions about what you should do but not nearly enough about how to do it in the real world. On the few occasions when Burtnett provides more detailed practical advice, such as how to evaluate conflicting job offers, there are some useful tips, but this does not happen frequently enough to make the book particularly useful to that very wide intended audience.

Another disappointment of this book relates to its theoretical underpinnings. Burtnett occasionally talks about the rapidly changing and unpredictable nature of the modern job market, driven by technological development and increasing globalisation. However, his advice appears to be firmly based on a very traditional matching plus developmental perspective, with all the underlying assumptions of predictable career paths defined by progression and promotion. Based on this, the career management advice follows an equally traditional Research-Decide-Plan-Do pattern. It is like stepping back into a universe where Protean Career, Boundaryless Career, Planned Happenstance, Chaos Theory of Careers and all the other developments in career theory from the last twenty years have never happened. Similarly, the book takes a very Western positivist individualistic approach with no reference to the social nature of decision making and career identity formation. There is woefully little on managing professional networks both online and in person, developing adaptability and resilience, managing your personal career brand in a social media environment,

the lens of psychology and human development is integrated with exploration of the social and economic context of individuals and their work situations, and further situated within the ecology of our planet. Both the individual client and the career practitioner are scrutinised through these multiple lenses.

The Handbook is arranged in eight sections, with reviews of career theory (section 1) followed by explorations of views of 'the person' across the life span (section 2). This provides a context within which following sections explore volatile labour markets (section 3), and the social and environmental contexts for our work, with profound questioning of the role of the career practitioner in supporting social and ecological justice (section 4). Sections 5 and 6 explore career service practice and careers services for special groups respectively, including attention to migrant and ex-patriot workers and students. Section 7 addresses career assessment, challenging constructs that underpin much Western assessment of individuals, as well as the thorny questions of assessment of career services. Finally, section 8 turns to the lynchpin in career development work, the career practitioners: what training, competencies and standards are required to meet the challenges investigated in the preceding sections?

Whilst robustly theoretical, this handbook does not neglect practical applications of the ideas it contains. Most chapters address some aspect of the 'concrete, practical dilemmas that the career guidance professional community has to deal with' (Chapter 18). It is however a weighty tome (in physical and intellectual senses) and will not reach the bookshelves of many busy careers centres. Its greatest value – beyond the considerable contribution to the theoretical field – is to the growing international community of those who offer training and development to career practitioners. All practitioners work in multicultural settings, and there is much here to help practitioners and trainees to deepen their understandings of cultural processes which influence the individual and the work economy.

Too often in the past, 'international' has had the limited indication that both North American and European perspectives are included. This book is a sustained attempt to weigh the potential contributions of both Eastern and Western philosophical traditions to

the field of career development and to the work of career practitioners. It goes far on its stated journey to 'consider both universal and specific principles for guidance and counselling that are socially and economically relevant to the contemporary situation'. For me, it has gone further still, in reflecting to me how little I know. I am left contemplating my ignorance of the beliefs about person in indigenous African cultures, in the Arab world, and in the Chinese and Japanese traditions. Limited reference is made to the seismic impact of the rebalancing of the global economy on regions such as the Middle East, and on North and sub-Saharan Africa (Chapter 13), and to structural change as Eastern European (and other) countries shift from command towards free-market economies (Chapter 11). I have been led to consider the *acculturation* that occurs when Western call centres and manufacturing plants appear in Asian countries. But what do I know of the impact of Chinese investment in the continent of Africa? What *acculturation* is happening as Chinese investment has increased 8-fold in the last decade, and will double again in the next five years? This Handbook has offered a profound experience in both gaining understanding and concurrently gaining awareness of my ignorance. I suspect it may offer the same experience for others, and will indicate extensive fields which remain as yet beyond the boundaries of career theory.

References

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- Leung, D. & Zhou, L. (2014) *Where Are Chinese Investments in Africa Headed?* World Resources Institute. Available at: <http://www.wri.org/blog/2014/05/where-are-chinese-investments-africa-headed> [Accessed 5 January 2015]