Book reviews

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

Author: Frank Burtnett Rowman & Littlefield 2014 240pp.

> Reviewed by David Winter, Head of Corporate Consultancy, The Careers Group, University of London

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, Aquiring 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 balace', 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,

dealing with chance events and unplanned learning, and a whole host of topics that are vitally important for career success in a complex and ever-changing modern world.

Here is my 'straight talk' about this book. I cannot think of anyone who might buy this book who would not be better off picking something else from the shelves that is more focused to their immediate and specific career needs and more contains more up-to-date thinking.

UNDERSTANDING CAREERS (2ND EDITION)
Authors: K. Inkson, N. Dries and J. Arnold
Sage
2015
406pp.

Reviewed by Phil McCash, Career Studies Unit, Centre for Lifelong Learning, University of Warwick

This book is designed as an introduction to understanding career development and is a follow up to a successful first edition. The authors are well-known in the field and have many publications to their names. Kerr Inkson is an Emeritus Professor at the University of Auckland Business School in New Zealand, Nicky Dries is a Research Professor at the KU Leuven, Faculty of Business and Economics in Belgium, and John Arnold is Professor of Organisational Behaviour at the School of Business and Economics, Loughborough University in the UK. This gives the book an international feel which is mirrored in the content and examples.

The authors use metaphor as a key organising concept throughout. This leads to nine chapters focused respectively on: inheritances, cycles, action, fit, journeys, roles, relationships, resources and stories. These are followed by chapters on career self-management, career helping and organisational career management. Through these means, they are able to recognise, and make explicit, the transdisciplinary nature of career studies.

A key aspect is that *Understanding Careers* is designed as a *textbook*. As such, it contains a range of features appropriate to the genre. Each chapter starts with

bulleted lists of objectives designed to focus learning and these are followed by key points and general questions. Throughout, key career development concepts are used to illuminate over 50 career case studies drawn from contemporary contexts. Balloon sections entitled 'Stop and Consider' are used within chapters to reflect and apply ideas. Further reading and resources are highlighted. A companion website featuring student and instructor resources is promised although this was still under construction at the time of writing.

It is clear that considerable thought has gone into the redesign. For example, in the first edition, each chapter was immediately followed by a long list of references. These are now carried at the end of the volume. This makes the text more accessible without compromising the impressive range of sources. Generally, the layout is now clearer and the language employed addresses the reader in a friendly and approachable way.

The key distinguishing feature of this book is that it is the only contemporary textbook on career studies designed for the general reader as opposed to, say, career development professionals or organisational studies researchers. It has therefore found its way onto many reading lists for career management and employability modules in the university sector. Some tutors even using it as a core text to organise their module around, e.g. the *Understanding Employability:* Preparing for Your Future module at the University of Essex. The clear and accessible quality of writing and presentation means it may also be suitable for this purpose in school, college and the workplace contexts.

There are relatively few people in the world capable of distilling such a vast range of scholarship from across so many disciplines. As such, this book will also provide a useful overview for career development professionals whether experienced or inexperienced. Previous texts have struggled to connect career development theories and careers work and this book credibly addresses this for career education and employability activities. A further level of detail would be needed for one-to-one work but this feels beyond the scope of a textbook for the general reader.

The second edition contains more images than the first and this brightens the feel. Nevertheless, more extensive use of images would be appropriate to the metaphor theme and underline the role of career in

popular culture. This is perhaps something that can be incorporated in a third edition. In Chapter 11, entitled Careers as Stories, the authors link stories to constructionist trends in social science. Their abiding interest in metaphor and multiple realities is perhaps closest to these developments; however, there remains some ambiguity about this and it would have been helpful to hear more about the authors' underpinning epistemological stance. Admittedly, many similar textbooks do not venture into this terrain but it can serve as a guide and navigational aid to the student. In Chapter 12, there are useful sections devoted to helping the reader critically evaluate the popular career management self-help literature and more formal models e.g. the Greenhaus Career Management Model. This could have been strengthened by more detailed discussion of alternative career management models in this heavily contested field.

Overall, Understanding Careers is the essential career and employability studies textbook for general college and university-level courses. I have used this excellent book for several years in my own work and was part of a team that invited Kerr Inkson to speak at a conference in the UK in 2009 where he introduced a new generation of teachers and researchers to his ideas (see NICEC Journal, Issue 23, 2010). The career education field has been revolutionised in recent years and this book has proved an invaluable tool in helping us fundamentally re-think the design and content of programmes in schools, colleges, university and the workplace.

HANDBOOK OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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Editors: G. Arulmani, A.J. Bakshi, F.T.L. Leong & A.G. Watts Springer SBM 2014 771 pp.

Reviewed by Dr Lyn Barham, Fellow of NICEC and independent researcher

This Handbook was compiled largely from the papers presented at an international conference in 2010, but it is far more than 'conference proceedings'. The conference itself - co-organised by The Promise

Foundation in Bangalore, India and the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) - set out to address the much-criticised hegemony of Western thought in career guidance theory. Subsequent to the conference, the editorial team worked with presenters to further develop their papers to include non-Western perspectives, and to articulate universal concerns and principles. Additional papers were invited, to develop themes not otherwise covered in the conference papers.

This scheme for the Handbook encourages the contributors to address some fundamental questions. Bakshi, in Chapter 8, posits that the common concern for all career service professionals is the person whose career development they are supporting. This serves as a springboard for her exploration of different beliefs about the person both within and between Eastern and Western traditions. Common questions emerge: Are people mutable and malleable? To what extent can people exercise agency in making choice within social circumscription (or privilege)? Can people hold themselves apart from the assumptions learned in place and over time in order to be fully open to new learning and new possibilities?

Bakshi's questions are echoed by Sultana in Chapter 18: 'what view of human nature do we have?'. Sultana's argument for career practitioners having a necessary engagement with social justice follows Plant's (Chapter 17) assertion that individual career choices have environmental impact. In both cases, they raise questions about what it means to have a world worth living in, as well as a fulfilling individual role within it.

These themes reverberate with those of Arulmani in Chapter 6. Arulmani has elsewhere (e.g. Arulmani, 2007) raised with Western audiences the absence of a word - and concept - of 'career' in the Eastern tradition. Here (Chapter 6) he goes deeper, questioning constructions of work, and exploring the enculturation of individuals into their society of origin, and the processes of acculturation which occur when the individual - through processes of globalisation or migration - is forced to engage with other social and economic processes.

These themes reflect the editors' stated intention to reflect the interdisciplinary position of career guidance and counselling. Exploration of the self through

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 I) 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]