

Tales from the Employment Services Field: Asking Questions and Considering Contradictions

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Laura Charles

l.charles@utoronto.ca

Prologue

I have been a newcomer twice. The first time was when I left Canada for the UK in December 1976, as a young, Canadian, white adult and the second was my re entry back into Canada, 27 years later in 2003. Although I shared similar frustrations to other newcomers in my own search for equivalent work once back in Canada, i.e. not having Canadian qualifications or Canadian work experience, the plight of my immigrant newcomer friends' was much more arduous. I am not an immigrant but I spent a year closely alongside a number of them, who like me, opted for retraining into a different career, career counselling, with the hope of escaping underemployment and more precarious, customer service jobs. We were an odd group consisting of former scientists, engineers, university professors, English language teachers, senior business administrators and two social workers from all parts of the globe. I took leave from a very good job in a UK university as a full time, permanent senior lecturer. Although my work record in the UK is unblemished and I came with substantial references from my Dean and Assistant Dean, I could not find teaching work in Canada nor could I find any organisation or management development work which was my specialty at the university. Although I had taught for 17 years in college, university and local authority settings as a lecturer of English, Communications, ESL and staff development, I could not find work. I strongly sensed, at the time, the paradoxical nature of our journey, a contradiction – we were training to be employment counsellors, to help others find jobs because we couldn't find them ourselves. Reflecting on this in an informal way, I came to ask, "How did it come to be that my classmates and I were in this contradictory position and how was it that this was perceived as a sensible and even normal solution to our lack of decent employment?" Considering my paradoxical status as a Canadian citizen yet perceived by my fellow Canadians either as foreign or phony, I began unraveling other puzzling paradoxes and contradictions. If the barriers exist for me, who presents as only slightly 'other', 'foreign' or 'different', for my immigrant friends, they must be enormous. I ask, "How are immigrants being located and described within the employment services both as clients and as deliverers of the service?"; "What is the relationship of career counselling as a vocation for immigrants to the wider arenas of immigration and settlement and a globalized, racialized labour market?" and "How does this play into the ideologies of Canada as tolerant and fair 'multicultural' society?" Unfortunately, I ask only questions and provide no answers here.

Introduction

I attempt to give, a personal narrative drawn from a small paper that describes points of unease I have encountered with the employment services industry. That piece asks

questions and tries to identify contradictions as entry points for much needed critical research into the field of employment services for professional immigrants. Here, I give a brief look at a few of those points of the author's own journey as a newcomer through the landscape of employment services as both a client and facilitator/ deliverer of services and in particular, employment facilitation programs (EFP). My talk is not meant as a testifiable account of the career counselling field nor to explain, analyze or apologize on behalf of the industry but to give clues into directions that critical research might take. My impressions are drawn from only 8 organizations that I have had contact with as either as a client, student, volunteer, employee and researcher and my views are therefore purely subjective and open to argument. Indeed, my intention is to invite argument. I give an outsider an 'insider's' view, my understanding of how it came to be, that while strongly dissenting and resisting what was being talked about and taught, I and my immigrant friends persisted in a sometimes grueling and humiliating process of "refashioning" (Ng, 2006). When these experiences are expressed within the chorus of up to 120,000 immigrants entering Ontario each year, mostly landing in GTA (Ahmadi, 2007), they voice considerable humiliation and loss, both personal and to Canada as a country that prides itself on inclusiveness, fairness and tolerance. If this is the case, I ask, "How does the idea of a fair and inclusive 'Canada' stand up?"

My intentions now are to make sense of this puzzling and sometimes painful landscape of undergoing employment and job search training in the form of PhD study and the account I give here will establish the sorts of questions I will be asking of the employment services programs from the perspective of one who has been engaged and struggling within it both as first a receiver and then deliverer of services. My reasons for voicing such early thoughts into what will frame the start of my PhD thesis and why I feel this might be interesting to an audience other than myself, are that the contradictions that I personally encountered were indicative of practices and social actions that may be serving up hazardous consequences for immigrants and newcomers across the employment services field. How we, as researchers, enter this area of research is, therefore, most important.

Employment Facilitation Programs (EFP)

The majority of immigrants I worked alongside of went through EFP programs at some point in their job search including myself. EFP programs are the bread and butter programs of most of the Employment Service organizations that I had knowledge of and typically last from 3 – 5 weeks. They are taught in a classroom situation with anywhere from 6 to 30 participants or 'clients', have a job skills curriculum and focus on skills training needed for job search such as resume writing, interview practice, job search on the internet, cold calling and how to network. Although I was trained as an employment counsellor, little counselling occurred in the centers I experienced. My 37 1/2 hour a week job was spent mostly as an employment facilitator no different to that of an adult education instructor. I was hired as an employment facilitator, and taught and managed classes, monitored success, designed a curriculum and awarded a certificates of completion for up to 30 participants in a class room setting and some facilitators teach up to 30 hours a week. Yet I had also had the duties of a counsellor: managing case loads,

assessing individual needs, creating action plans, producing reports and undertaking individual follow ups. In one organization I was everything: facilitator, counsellor, marketer and job developer.

A job developer's job is intractably tough. Job developers seek out employment opportunities with employers but the job opportunities that I saw were often low level, low skill, customer care service opportunities. Job developers pound pavements and make cold calls like door to door sales people approaching indifferent employers. Usually, only those organizations which require 'flexible', contract employees are interested in considering your applicants.

When I shared my experiences with fellow counsellors/workers and previous classmates, the most frequently discussed topic amongst us was 'burn out' and fears of losing our jobs. The larger employment services centers can afford to make clear distinctions in the various job roles and develop and support staff well, but these, well funded centers are not the norm that I saw. The exacting and complicated funding formulas with their manically driven reporting requirements produce organizations under a climate of 'siege' and the workers within them, feel embattled and exhausted and experience chronic job insecurity. It is ironic that considering my professional immigrant classmates and I re-trained to avoid precarious work, we were heading right towards it. Despite this, the instructors, managers, counsellors and facilitators I met in the field were a remarkable and resilient group of people. In the face of such a volatile and precarious work environment, they maintained the patient, caring and empathetic approach of highly professional people under continual duress.

Why research into EFP programming?

Much recent research has exposed the labyrinth of structural barriers that face professional immigrants trying to access the labour market in Canada (see Guo 2007, Man 2004, Ng 1996, Shan 2009 among others). Structural barriers identified in these studies include credentialism (Shan 2009), racialized government programs (Ng 1996), the gendered nature of the labour market (Man 2007) and the politics of difference playing out across the immigration services field (Guo, 2007) to name but a few. Only a small strand of research has been carried out on structural barriers embedded within the employment service programs for professional newcomers. Indeed, Ahmadi's 2007 ground breaking study of the effects of employment facilitation programs (EFPs) on changing the prospects of employment for newcomers notes, "amongst the vast resources of CERIS, this researcher has been unable to locate a single document on the topic of this study" (39). My purpose in presenting this narrative is to plea for more critical research into to employment service programming. As Ahmadi points out, in 2004 the federal government pledged \$3.5 billion over a five year period to increase workplace-training programs for newcomers (2007 p. 9). As well, the OCASI web site currently states that there are over 200 community based organisations serving immigrants in Ontario, most of which have employment service programs embedded within them and in Toronto alone, over 73 organisations deliver employment training to newcomers (Ahmadi, 2007). Indeed, in 2006 one center for Employment Counsellor training received \$328,000 from

CIC to set up a special program specifically for International Professionals to re-train as Employment Counsellors (CIC 2006).

As well, in March 2000, Douglas pointed out that there existed over 90 agencies in Toronto serving over 400,000 clients a year (Douglas in Ahmadi, 2007) yet The Office of the Fairness Commissioner, Ontario for example, just released a report (March 2010), that surveyed 3,784 professional immigrants from across 37 regulated professions detailing, that after substantial government investment and focus on helping immigrants from the regulated and licensed professions gain meaningful work, only 44% of Internationally Trained Individuals (ITI) as opposed to 76% Domestic Trained Individuals (DTI) successfully found equivalent employment in their designated professions. Moreover, the unemployment rate for licensed ITIs is still three times higher than DTIs. It is 10 years since Douglas produced his report and there is just a small improvement in the employment prospects of professional immigrants in spite of the concentration of employment service programs.

I ask in the manner of a Van Maanen ethnography, “What is going on here?”

What are the assumptions behind an EFP curriculum?

Having just come from teaching in a business school, I particularly noticed that the texts, course materials, the lingua franca of the career discourse was strongly shaped by voices of business management, market capitalism, self-help therapies, behaviourist and positivist perspectives shaping a strongly business and market capitalist orientated agenda at the expense of other agendas such as those found in the traditional social justice and liberal fields of Canadian adult education. These strongly orientated business and management texts assume that problems encountered by those looking for work are problems they can fix themselves and so it follows that the texts (curriculums) are positioned to help the immigrant fill the missing gaps in their skill, knowledge or attitude sets. Areas of knowledge external to the immigrant yet particularly important to new immigrants such as workers’ rights, Employment Standards Act, Ontario Human Rights, trade unionism, anti discrimination practices was marginalized or absent. There was a taken for granted, corporatized thread that ran throughout the curriculum of how to get work in Canada ‘the Canadian way’ much of which was never fully explained and became the ‘natural’ understanding or setting of EFP programs. When I underwent an EFP program, my own feeling was that we were subtly being trained as sales people, hustling for jobs. We were taught the skills of marketing, competing, re-designing ourselves as products and we were to do the same for our prospective clients. For example, in one of our courses on the employment counsellor training program, ‘Career Development Theory II’, we were given a text from a former employment counsellor student as an example of an competitive way for your prospective clients to market themselves, called ‘You Inc.’ a two-fold brochure with smart looking graphics and bullet pointed, ‘zippy’ wording that advertised the student’s assets to a future employer that we were to use as a model for ourselves. In another text, ‘Brand Yourself’, (Andrusia and Haskins, 2000) the authors exclaim how you can, “...forge an identity that will help you make a dazzling impression and become a star in your own dreams” (Andrusia and Haskins in Career/Lifeskills 2005 catalogue). We were taught to promote ourselves and

our future clients in this fashion through the classic methods of advertising. This 'corporate' organizing of the curriculum and the discourse was also picked up in employment centers and it was the only model given of organizational life, a model where employers were ascribed absolute power and could write the recruitment and work agendas in any way they saw fit. It was our jobs, as future career counsellors, to shape and hone our clients to fit the supposed employers' style and needs and to ensure that the match was close. Disturbingly, I noticed how the 'client counselling' aspect of the employment counselling course demarcated clear fault lines between voices that were acceptable and those that were not. Through the traditional methods of client centered counselling or 'group counselling' we were to convey the norms or the codes of dress, behaviour and presentation that were unquestionably, 'mandated' by employers. As employment counsellors, we advocate for our clients and support their interests but this is very difficult to do in this one sided, market driven, employer takes all, arena.

Centering the problem within the client, in this manner, whose experiences and qualifications are 'not good enough', is an easy way to deflect other, more onerous, expensive to correct and difficult to locate, structural barriers. These might include attitudes and assumptions of Canadian employers, a structurally discriminating labour market, chaotic planning within CIC, contradictions within immigration policy and three tiers of government with differing and conflicting interests. Alternative explanations given for immigrants' lack of job success are not considered in the design of employment services programs. I question whether the personal deficit model underpinning the curriculum of EFP programs is taken because it is simple, cheap and the onus and the cost is placed on the client who has to make herself/himself more suitable by attending the EFP program and then studying and re-qualifying to fill a job skills gap? After all, it gives work to bureaucrats, and regulatory colleges and feeds the Canadian training industry.

Why doesn't networking work for Internationally trained professionals?

Although we frequently hear that there are looming skills and job shortages across Canada, it is commonly said that up to 90% of the job market is hidden. One central component of the EFP curriculum therefore, was training our clients to 'network'. Clients were taught to memorize small, 2 minute 'elevator speeches' to better prepare themselves for networking. This is a central item taught on EFP programs which typically consists of clients role playing and practicing 'cold calling' with the underlying assumption that the newcomer must independently create a network. Consider the unfortunate person who calls you in the middle of your dinner trying to sell you windows. That's cold calling. The kind of networking those who have grown up and lived here enjoy, is different. They have grown their networks and are connected through establishing a history of relationships - knowing people through a period of time. Newcomers do not have this; newcomers by definition are 'new'. In other words being 'new' means you haven't had enough time or a job that would give you your first contacts and so its similar to the conundrum that you can't get a job because you don't have Canadian work experience and you can't get Canadian work experience because you can't get a job: you don't have a network because you don't know anyone in the desired profession and you can't get

into the desired profession because you don't have a network. Simply put, native Canadians have lots of networks because they have had time to build them. I question whether networking or the establishing of a relationship can be taught. It's rather like teaching someone how to get a friend and I would certainly find this difficult. Although job search techniques are important, perhaps the greater problem is not the lack of resume writing or job search skills, or taking personality tests to find out what colour you are but the lack of connections to people in the industries we sought. Indeed, Ahmadi's recent study demonstrates this:

Opinion surveys of over 200 graduates from nine different EFP programs in the Toronto area confirmed that while the trainees' job-hunting skills improved, the improved skills did not affect their hope of finding relevant jobs. Similarly, my post-survey participants also thought that a lack of connectedness to professionals and Canadian workplaces hindered their access to professional jobs more than gaps in job-hunting skills" (Ahmadi, 2007 p. iii).

I also ask employers, "Does it make sense to hide all these vacant jobs which then necessitates a long and arduous process of learning how to copy the habits of established Canadians, like networking? For me, coming from the UK, it was rather like learning the secretive, mason's handshake. As a newcomer, I have spent a great deal of money and worked hard to refashion myself, to re-qualify, re-train but surely, if employers were so desperate for workers, might they do a little 'refashioning' too and make those jobs more accessible and visible? In the light of the changing demographic landscape through greatly increased immigration, perhaps the textbooks of the HR professional programs that teach recruiting practice in Canada need revisiting? I know the text books from my former occupation as a management developer certainly do.

Customer Service Training

Another observation I bring, is the embedded 'customer service' training within some of the curriculums of the EFP programs I witnessed. It assumes that the job placements or job success for newcomer clients, regardless of their qualifications or experience, will be in customer service jobs. My actual clients at this time had such backgrounds as a senior officer's position with the Ministry of Agriculture in Jamaica with an MA in Agriculture from the University of Texas, a recent researcher with the Women's College Hospital, Toronto and an individual with an MA in English and Linguistics from Hong Kong with 6 years translating experience, a high school music teacher and professional musician from Ethiopia and a senior administrator of a large international shipping organization in Africa to name but a few. When I checked the previous job developer's bank of possible employer contacts, most were in customer service positions such as The Bay, Zellers, Coffee Time, Canadian Tire etc, Shoppers Drug Mart etc. The horrible irony was that the clients were pleased to get these jobs as they were often in dire straits financially and the jobs were better than the lower skilled jobs they already had to make ends meet. In fact, as job developers and employment facilitators, the rationale that "they are getting 'Canadian work experience'" was commonly used. Also, in terms of the monthly reports that were required, placing clients

in a customer service positions were marked as successes. Much of our work as facilitators or job developers was driven by the need to report success through numbers and our short term contract jobs were precariously linked and driven by the monthly, reporting of numbers. Our job security rested on their gaining jobs, any job, regardless of the quality of the job. Reporting methodologies do not serve the best interests of clients.

Who benefits when immigrants volunteer?

My last question reflects on the practice of volunteering. Along with the advice to network, is the recommendation for clients to volunteer. The argument here is that this will help them get Canadian work experience and it gives them the chance to network. All fine when you have the privilege of time on your hands and are financially secure. Aside from the reality that newcomers either do not have jobs nor income or have several that consume all their time, a number of other difficulties are presented here. At one center where I worked, I was surprised to see one of our clients cleaning our offices and classrooms. I assumed of course, that this individual, who was attending for ESL, was being paid at least a minimum wage. I learned that she in deed was volunteering when I helped her prepare her resume. I leave this discussion by returning to my larger question, and invite others to ponder this, “What is going on here?”

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