Re-employment Psychology

A Personal View

By

Jerry Dixon M.Sc. (W/O Psych), B.Sc. (Psych), B.Ed., Dip.

Ireland currently stands in a vortex of change experienced at every level of society. Employment and organisational life is no exception, with every category, type, and size of organisation rapidly attempting to evolve and survive in an environment where human resources are now frequently perceived as the life force of an organisation, and the source if its development and success.

Many branches of psychology are concerned with such change. However, work and organisational psychology has traditionally, taken a perspective akin to the needs of organisational stakeholders and their existing citizens. Although not completely overlooked, many psychologists report that far less attention and research has been paid to individuals looking to access organisations (from a perspective that actually seeks to assist the job seeker). Vocational psychology and guidance counselling takes a valued, but ideographic approach to career choice in the context of personal development. However, according to principle authors in the counselling field, practice is primarily based around the experience of the counsellor rather than grounded theory and applied research. Furthermore, many prominent researchers in the field concede that most of the advice and instruction available to assist job seekers is largely subjective in origin, and currently remains an area wide open to further research.

So why should work and organisational psychologists step into this void ? The answer is really quite simple, organisations have fundamentally changed in the typical employee's they now seek to enrich their life force. However, the work environment appears to have evolved more rapidly than what many job seekers appear to be aware of. To this end, many job seekers have very little understanding of such concepts as person : organisation fit, psychological contract, or the interpersonal characteristics that facilitate organisational change. Even quite professional, and highly skilled job seekers confess they don't know how to succeed in job seeking, claiming they never had to before. Equally damaging, they frequently possess antiquated, myopic (and perhaps self damaging) perceptions of employment and job seeking techniques. However, the most dangerous phenomenon frequently observed is that many job seekers (of all types) are disturbingly unaware (or possess distorted self perceptions) of their own employable skills, attributes, and self worth; and this perhaps is the principle challenge facing re-employment psychologists. So why work and organisational psychology ? Well who better to equip job seekers with the requirements of contemporary selection methods, and the skills to develop successful and satisfying organisational lives. The work and organisational psychologist stands at the pivot that balances the see-saw of needs between workers and organisations. Candidates who might otherwise be screened out, can have the opportunity to relearn the rhetoric of today’s business needs, demonstrate their employable benefits more explicitly; Skills learned from the experts of organisational life and development. All this with the added benefit of helping employers make more accurate and effective hiring decisions.

The psychological application of theory used to enhance the application and interview success is a rich and fertile field rarely ploughed. Theories and psychological techniques can be drawn from any appropriate perspective. Re-employment psychology is not governed by a particular psychological perspective or methodology. In fact, it's potential positive impact in the lives of job seekers is dependant upon its openness to embrace all fields of psychology. Perhaps because W/O psychology is a context, rather than a theoretical perspective, W/O practitioners should be open to embrace the diversity that is contemporary psychology. Even theories that only indirectly contribute to an individuals job seeking and interview strategy are of interest (e.g. non-verbal gestures associated with positive relationship forming). Re-employment psychology seeks to understand the holistic job seeking process, and the principles of successful organisational entry from a board

psychological perspective (at several levels of analysis). Hence it is concerned with subjects like skills awareness and individual metacognition (tacit and explicit knowledge, and the all too frequent skill amnesia). Cognitive and memory systems that influence recall and memorability at interview. Self efficacy / locus of control, causal attribution, motivation, and impression management (from textual, visual, vocal, and non-verbal sources). We are also concerned with related aspects of relationship forming, information processing at the time of perception, subjective and criteria related decision making. Basically, any psychological theory that could account for, or relate to, job seeking and selection behaviour, and offer potential solutions and strategies that may enhance an individual's entry and survival into organisational life and employment.

To achieve such aims, a science - practitioner philosophy is required, and the understanding that our knowledge is merely unfolding (Which keeps us looking for new research). E-mail alerts with academic databases helps the psychologist remain abreast of new research material and trends in related research development. An appreciation of counselling / questioning / communication strategies is essential when dealing with individuals who may already present symptoms akin to the psychopathology of unemployment, social isolation, or low self esteem. An openness to assist individuals from the whole social, economic, and multi-cultural spectrum is ethically essential. Vital is the experience in the application, interpretation, and feedback of various psychometric instruments used to build employable awareness, self efficacy and confidence, and identify (and reinforce) vocational aspirations. Knowledge of organisational behaviour, as well as the various human resources methods of job analysis, application, screening, and interview techniques (and their respective evaluation / limitations) is also essential. Overall and paramount, the belief that the right job, for the right person, can have profoundly positive and enduring effects upon the personal, social, vocational, and even therapeutic development of the job seeker.

Re-employment psychology tends to be covered to only a small degree in post graduate courses in work and organisational psychology. However, there is frequently room for the student to approach some modules from this perspective, as well as focus their research in this underdeveloped area. Re-employment psychology practitioners, although few in number, largely find employment with state and community organisations. Unfortunately at present, few practitioners enjoy an employment status in a name appropriate to that of their credentials. This is largely due to a lack of recognition of the benefits re-employment psychology as a discipline can bring to the Irish economy (and how its application can actually enhance the re-employment organisation in its effectiveness and success rates). However, for the practitioner, the personal job satisfaction is immense, and few could question that the great sense of achievement and purpose, sincere positive feedback, and the opportunities for research which are considerable.

My understanding of re-employment psychology must be considered a personal view, a product of my experience, a view that has evolved many times and will no doubt evolve again in the future through dedication to the science practitioner cycle of enquiry. However, it is a vocation I pursue with dedication and passion and ask others to consider devoting themselves in a similar fashion.

Jerry Dixon is a work and organisational psychologist employed in the community sector, and associate lecturer in Psychology with the Open University in Ireland. He co-ordinates the operations of the Arklow Job Club, which has placed over 700 clients since 2000. Current research interests include the use of concrete imagery on CV's to enhance the application : interview ratio, and building self efficacy through skills awareness.

Enquiries to :- jerryou@eircom.net.