

**Counseling's role in America's economic recovery**  
**An ACA interview with career development icon Edwin L. Herr**  
**By Frank Burtneett**  
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Editor's note: Frank Burtneett conducted the following interview for publication in the Winter 2010 edition of *ACAeNews for Counselor Educators*, one of four special focus e-newsletters produced by the American Counseling Association.

As the economy and job market continue to present challenges for many Americans, counselors likewise continue to ask how they might best help their clients face these challenges. Edwin L. Herr, a prolific writer and researcher in the areas of career development, career counseling and work issues, took some time recently to share his perspective on the role counselors can play in helping their clients—and, in the process, our nation—to stabilize.

Herr has served as president of the American Counseling Association, the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision and the National Career Development Association. His accomplishments as a teacher, author, researcher and administrator at the Pennsylvania State University are a model for aspiring counselor educators and academic administrators. Today, he holds the rank of distinguished professor emeritus of education and associate dean emeritus at Penn State, where he also is codirector of the Center for the Study of Career Development and Public Policy.

**Considering the current times, how can counseling and counselors contribute to the economic recovery of our nation?**

In order to make a major contribution to economic recovery, I think that counselors must be increasingly immersed in the language of change: the reorganization of work; the use of advanced technology in the workplace and in the counseling setting; the importance of lifelong learning; the effects of globalization and the role of international competition on the creation of new jobs and the elimination of many traditional jobs; corporate environments that increasingly use outsourcing, off-shoring and the extensive use of part-time workers tied to production cycles; the emphasis on non-human processes of productivity—advanced technology, robots, computer-driven machinery, etc.; and the importance of labor surpluses and skill shortages. Each of these and other dynamics constitute the context that workers must deal with in the future and must understand. Obviously, counselors, too, must understand the language of change and how it affects individual workers.

Counselors also must be alert to the expectations that clients, employers, policy-makers and others have of them. For example, two very old but important terms that both counselors and clients need to understand are *frictional unemployment* and *structural unemployment*. Frictional unemployment concerns how long one is unemployed, how that time between jobs could be reduced and what strategies a worker should use—for example, networking—to pursue work. Structural unemployment addresses the reality that a client's skills and those required by the jobs they are pursuing do not match. In such cases, the skills the client has are not elastic or transportable from job to job.

Therefore, the client is either in need of retraining to acquire the skills necessary in the work desired or seeking another career path in which the skills possessed are compatible.

### **What must counselors know about the American worker and workplace?**

One is that in the United States and other nations, career paths have been changed. Many have been eliminated. Others have been created as a function of advanced technology, outsourcing and changes in the organization of work. Many of these new career paths require new skills. The new status quo for workers is characterized as continuous learning and feeling continuously on the edge, off balance. Thus, being prepared to adjust, to adapt, to the frequent transformations in the workplace is an ongoing factor in the lives of workers (as) the global economy is shaping and reshaping the organization of work and how it is done.

But, having said this, the changes in the workplace and the processes by which work is done have affected individual career development in many nations and many organizations. The paths to and through the careers of many workers are no longer linear, predictable, long term and secure. The availability of lifelong employment in one firm, one corporation, one occupation or one job is very unlikely, even though a generation ago, many workers expected such a career pattern. They hoped to obtain employment in an organization, advance through the ranks and retire. The phases of such a pattern—exploration, preparation, induction, consolidation, advancement and retirement—were age-related, understood and anticipated. That view of career development is significantly less likely to occur in a rapidly changing global economy where one's career development will be shorter, more fragmented, more abrupt, more mobile, more spontaneous, more values-oriented (and) more influenced by environmental and organizational flux, unpredictability and turbulence.

### **What differences do you see in the needs of clients?**

I see several perspectives merging here. One is that counseling about work is likely to require a fusion of career counseling and personal counseling. Many workers coming to counselors will do so out of anger and confusion. While they will likely need to examine the implications of structural or frictional unemployment and its meaning to them, they will also need to consider their emotions about losing their job. Before trying to negotiate new career paths, counselors will need to help them answer questions like, "Why did I lose my job? Why me? What could I have done differently? Why don't I fit into this workplace anymore?"

This means that in the new workplace, with its frequent transition and change, new sets of skills are often needed. These are not just technical or job skills. They are called by some authors protean career skills. These skills accent the importance of individuals being able to constantly adapt to change, being personally flexible and taking personal responsibility for their careers. In addition, workers are expected to plan and engage in lifelong learning—anticipate and prepare for trends potentially affecting their career development rather than expecting employers to create and be responsible for the individual worker's career development.

Another scenario reflects the reality that a worldwide labor surplus, consisting of many well-educated and trained persons for whom there are not adequate opportunities to work in their own nation, raises the level of competition for any given worker. Within the

global labor surplus, there is almost an unlimited supply of industrious and educated workers willing to work at a fraction of U.S. wages. These persons naturally gravitate to the economic opportunities available in the U.S., intensifying immigration at a level, even with visa controls, similar to that which occurred 100 years ago at the height of the industrial revolution. They also add to the competition for jobs, heighten the anxiety about who will be employed and raise questions about the fairness of who is hired. Thus, career counseling and personal counseling, together and separately, must be used with clients trying to understand their employment status, their needed skill development and their emotions related to the uncertainty of the opportunities for the work they seek.

A further scenario has to do with the work of the counselor. In an era of professional counselors dealing with a wide range of clients seeking employment and work adjustment, it is important to note that counseling is an umbrella term. Career counseling is almost always embedded in a program of supplementary activities which augments or goes beyond the one-to-one interaction of a counselor and a client. Career counseling may involve a comprehensive program that includes such elements as anger management, support groups, communication skills, job search skills, the use of simulation and gaming, use of computer databases of potential employers and other forms of information, how to manage one's career development and how to cope with change. Career counseling also may involve use of referrals, job shadowing, information interviews with employers and other sources of recommendations for employment.

Finally, there is the issue of human capital investment. It is important for counselors to know this term and use it with clients when appropriate. At a national or organizational level, human capital may mean the numbers and types of skilled, educated people available to do the work of the nation. At an individual level, it is important for the counselor and the client to consider that each person possesses his or her own human capital and the possibility to invest it.

Thus, at the individual level, human capital can be identified by its elements. For example, ability, behavior, effort and time. Each of these sets of behavior can be managed and used by the client as an investment in their job. Each can be analyzed and discussed with the counselor in terms of how much each of these behaviors is being used by the client. How much is not being used? What are the obstacles to being the most effective worker possible? What is the expected return on investment? What are they seeking from work—for example, prestige, amount of income, interesting work? Each of these elements of human capital investment can and should be a target of intervention. Clearly, these elements underlie individual motivation and tie together performance, behavior and skill investment, and clarity of client understanding about how to frame one's commitment to work.

### **How will counselors and counseling make a difference?**

There is no easy answer to how counselors and counseling can contribute to the economic recovery of the nation. Research tells us that each of the techniques mentioned here have been found to be effective. The problem then is one of capacity. There needs to be enough trained, skilled and available counselors to create and deliver programs that address workers who need different kinds of job-seeking assistance, including counseling.

An alternative approach is to do what some one-stop centers and other employment services are doing. Basically, they have set up “triage” processes by which they can classify new clients into those who can work on their own to examine available information, those who can work within support or information groups to learn about job-seeking processes and, third, those who really need one-to-one counseling. In the first two groups, the use of counselor time is minimal and, thus, saved for clients who really need direct interaction with the counselor.

Such an approach saves the time of counselors to work with people who really do not need to be counseled but need other services. This approach adds to capacity time without adding more counselors to the staff. In such creative ways, more counseling can be available and more persons served.

Counselors are committed to helping each person seeking work to find it, to strengthen their job skills and to learn the importance of personal flexibility. Ultimately, in their understanding of change in the workplace and their assistance to displaced workers in applying the skills related to change, each counselor and counseling contributes to the economic recovery of the nation.