Career Development During a Pandemic:
Using Harris Poll Data to Identify Challenges and Possibilities

Spencer G. Niles
William & Mary

The latest NCDA study conducted by The Harris Poll entitled *Perceptions from Working America* provides important information regarding the current state of American workers (employed and unemployed). The poll also offers important insights into ways career practitioners and employers can help workers address career development challenges moving through and beyond the pandemic crisis. Finally, poll data elucidate the possibilities that exist for elevating the visibility of career services professionals, while at the same time shining light on the degree to which our work remains invisible to many.

Some Methodology Background. The study was conducted online in the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of the National Career Development Association. More specifically, the survey was conducted between July 22, 2021, and August 5, 2021, and included 1,535 adults aged 18 and above. Among the total sample, 56% were employed, 24% retired, 5% were stay at home partners, 4% were students, and 12% were unemployed. Most adults (59%) were white, 17% Hispanic, 12% Black or African American, 6% Asian, 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 1% Native American or Alaskan Native. Forty-eight percent identified as male and 51% as female Survey data were statistically weighted where necessary by age, gender, race/ethnicity, region, education, marital status, household size, household income, and propensity to be online to bring the participants in line with their actual proportions in the overall American population.

Current Status of Working America. Survey results reinforce the reality that the American workforce is in transition. This fact represents a statement of the obvious in the (hopefully) latter stages of the pandemic. Although major events influencing a person's career development typically occur idiosyncratically, a pandemic impacts the collective (not always evenly as we will see). For the most part, many of us have had somewhat similar experiences as the pandemic has shaped our lives for nearly two years. Lockdowns, fear of getting the virus, getting the virus, losing loved ones, working from home, being laid off or furloughed, waiting for, and then getting, the vaccine, and all the while reflecting upon this strange life and its implications for who we are and what we do. Thus, it is no surprise that many people report that they are either in career transition or seriously considering a career transition. The Great Resignation highlights the sense that many workers either voluntarily yearn for something different or involuntarily are searching for the next career option. The NCDA data indicate that, when thinking ahead to the next few years, 56% of those employed are likely to leave their current employer. Retirement will be the choice of 23% and another 23% will choose to change jobs. Despite the high percentage of those likely to transition, 85% of those employed report that they are satisfied with their career- 15% indicate that they are dissatisfied. Many workers believe that globalization of the American economy will require them to learn new skills (32%), be retrained (15%), or cause

them to lose their job (9%). Similarly, many workers believe that technological automation will also require them to learn new skills (32%), be retrained (17%), and will have a significant impact on their career (19%).

When looking ahead to the future, Hispanic and Black adults are more likely to be looking for a career change than their white colleagues (81% and 71% are at least somewhat likely to pursue a new career vs. 55%, respectively). The COVID-19 pandemic has had disproportional effects on BIPOC workers, as two in five (41%) report that the pandemic has significantly impacted their career compared to just 25% of white adults. The relatively more fragile work situation many BIPOC workers experience highlights the intersection between the need for career development services and social justice interventions that address systemic racism. This intersection should result in social justice and anti-racist activities being part of the job description for all career services professionals. Interestingly, fewer white adults (35%) report that their career choice was influenced by a career service professional than Hispanic (50%) or Black (48%) adults. Thus, data are a mixed bag for career professionals- especially when considering the data in their entirety. On one hand, there is much positive feedback for career services professionals (e.g.,65% believe it would be helpful for them to work with a career services professional as they explore career moves). On the other hand, there are gaps that career services professionals must step into to address the career needs of all workers but especially workers of color. Additionally, there is a high degree of urgency for this to occur now.

The percentage of workers in transition, indicates that a substantial number of people are encountering change. In an ideal world, change would be managed competently with little upset to one's ecosystem (family, friends, oneself), yet we know this is rarely the case. Change by definition requires us to move from the known into the unknown. It is often accompanied by anxiety and fear. Family members worry about how the change will affect them, especially if it requires a geographical relocation. Workers worry whether a new opportunity will bring increased satisfaction and positive work outcomes. In many ways, data from The Harris Poll represent a call to action for career services professionals. There is the implication that career intervention is more complex than many workers (and even career services professionals) acknowledge. Change is rarely simple and often calls for career services professionals to extend support and empathy to their clients. The Harris Poll data, however, allow us to be more specific about the support workers are looking for as they transition.

The Type of Career Assistance Workers Seek. When asked about which topics would be helpful to know more about when thinking about future career goals and decisions, adults indicated that it would be helpful to know more about job security (31%), work-life balance of certain job titles or industries (31%), resume writing and job interview skills (29%), overall job search strategies (27%), certification or degree requirements for certain job titles or industries (27%), and how their interests and abilities match labor market opportunities (26%). In this list there is, at least implicitly, reference to no small level of anxiety workers have because of their current experiences. One could argue that the real story in this list of topics points to workers' abiding fear of job loss and their need to know how to manage that experience without deleterious effects to their non-work life, while at the same time having opportunities to learn the skills they need to transition effectively to a new job opportunity. There is, as they say, a bit of

Niles, S. G., (November 2021), *Career Development During a Pandemic; Results of the NCDA Harris Poll*. National Career Development Association www.ncda.org.

"betwixt and between" associated with what workers experience at present. Many are either in or headed for transition but not sure to what and how to navigate it. The ambiguity of the current situation is heightened when combined with the sense that, be it through globalization or technological changes, the need to learn new skills or even retrain altogether seems to be a clear possibility for many. Freud noted that learning how to tolerate ambiguity represents a major life challenge for all of us. So, how can career services professionals step into this situation to help people navigate the changes they are either currently experiencing or anticipate experiencing?

The Harris Poll results provide some guidance here and also offer some good news. Most adults who have been impacted by the pandemic (59%) think it would be valuable to talk to a career services professional, and 85% of all American adults think that career services professionals provide valuable assistance. More than two in three adults (68%) also think that most people need career assistance from a career services professional. And 58% wish they had sought help from a career services professional. Many workers get it. They view career services professionals as providing important assistance for navigating career transitions. Although only 13% report having worked with a career services professional previously, 58% wish they had sought assistance from a career specialist. More specifically, 65% of adults indicated that assistance in understanding the career planning process has been very or *extremely* helpful in the past- the exact sort of assistance career services professionals are trained to provide. It is not surprising then that 74% of those workers who received help from a career specialist or counselor in private practice indicate that the assistance they received was very or extremely helpful to them. What is surprising is that when asked who they would seek help from if they needed career assistance, only 25% indicated that they would seek the services of a career professional. The same percentage (25%) indicated that they would seek the assistance of a friend and 36% would rely upon a career website or career professional to help them through a career transition.

The Challenges and Possibilities. Although the vast majority who worked with a career professional in private practice found those services very helpful, a staggering 75% of adults in the workforce would not pursue this source of career assistance. It is clear that many people either are unaware of the work performed by career services professionals or, worse, that the general public does not value the work career professionals perform. Regardless, this disconnect should be an area of concern for NCDA members specifically and career specialists in general.

Among other things, one could argue that the results highlight the need for an increased focus on branding, marketing, and disseminating information about evidence-based practices, among other advocacy strategies. Many career services professionals, however, are reluctant to engage in such advocacy. The responsibility for advocating for the profession, however, must fall squarely upon career services professionals. In considering why this may be the case, Niles, Nassar, and Sharp (2010) examined syllabi for more than 100 career development courses from master's CACREP-accredited counseling programs and found that course coverage of topics such as social justice, public policy, and advocacy was rare. They concluded the disconnect begins with those training career specialists. When trainees' preparation omits content related to advocacy and public policy engagement, then it is easy for those trainees to conclude that such activity is not relevant to the work of career specialists. This is a false conclusion.

Niles, S. G., (November 2021), *Career Development During a Pandemic; Results of the NCDA Harris Poll*. National Career Development Association www.ncda.org.

The good news is that although relatively few workers have sought assistance from a career services professional, when they do work with one, workers find the assistance they receive to be very or extremely helpful. Career services professionals simply have not been effective at informing the public about the excellent work they do. As a result, the term "career counselor" is more likely to appear in a Far Side cartoon than it is in senate testimony. If we are to become more valued to more people, we must change this. Training career services professionals how to engage in professional advocacy, social justice work, and effective branding is a starting place. Building these competencies into credentialing provides some accountability for this to occur.

Intentional and systematic dissemination of effectiveness data provides another possibility for elevating the work of career services professionals. These data should both inform practice and inform the public. Information from the NCDA survey is helpful in this regard. The work of career services professionals is valued by those who access it. Emphasizing the importance of career services professionals generating data regarding their services (what services they provide, to whom they provide services, what the outcomes of their services are, etc.) is crucial yet, many practitioners do not engage in this activity. Evidence is key, disseminating it is essential. As the adage goes, "facts tell and stories sell." Turning evidence into meaningful stories to effectively educate the public about the work of career services professionals improves public opinion regarding career services, impacts policymakers, and bolsters support for an increased presence of career services professionals.

In this regard, The Harris Poll results point to the magnitude of the challenge confronting career services professionals. For example, 60% of adults indicate that their career choice was not inspired by a career professional and 35% do not think it would be helpful to talk to a career professional as they explore new career options. And 15% do not think that career professionals provide valuable assistance. Collectively, these data reinforce the aforementioned need to advocate for the career services profession.

One final challenge confronting the profession relates to language. Career intervention work relies upon language. It is an oral profession. The language used by career services professionals, however, is confusing, lacks precision, and is simply sloppy. Even the term "career services professional" is confusing. It is an umbrella term that could include career practitioners helping their clients learn effective job search skills, career coaches helping their clients develop strategies for career advancement, career counselors helping their clients envision future possibilities, or doctoral level practitioners working with the intersection of career and mental health, to name just a few examples. How does a potential consumer of career services determine which practitioner best meets their needs? We are often reluctant to differentiate differences in training and competencies, perhaps out of fear that it will foster a career services turf war among those engaged in this work. It should be clear, however, that there is space for everyone to provide career assistance. The data indicate the vast number of workers who are either in transition or anticipating a transition. Because language matters, we need to clearly describe the services provided by the primary categories of career services providers. Not to compete but, rather, to complement the services each provider offers. In this regard, the NCDA Credentialing Commission has done excellent work attempting to add precision to the umbrella term- career services professional. Clarity and precision regarding training and services helps the

Niles, S. G., (November 2021), *Career Development During a Pandemic; Results of the NCDA Harris Poll*. National Career Development Association www.ncda.org.

public understand how to connect with career services professionals so that they may be more likely to seek assistance from a professionally trained certified career counselor, for example, rather than an untrained neighbor.

Summary. There is much to celebrate in the new NCDA survey results. When people take advantage of the assistance that career services professionals provide, they are very positive about the help they receive. However, the results also highlight that there is work to be done so that career services professionals are better positioned to serve the public across the lifespan as people develop the competencies required for making effective career decisions and navigating the career challenges that inevitably arise over the course of one's career. It is a strength that the career services profession represents a rich tapestry of services to help people develop and advance in their careers. The profession has come a long way in nearly 120 years. That said, it is just on the verge of moving from adolescence to maturity. Helping others navigate their careers so that they make the best use of their most precious resource- their time alive- is sacred and exciting work that makes a difference in the world. Spread the news.

References

Niles, S. G., Nassar-McMillan, S, & Sharp, J. (2010, March). Career counseling courses: Diversity, advocacy, and social policy. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Counseling Association, Pittsburgh, PA.