

The Reality of Career Counseling in Outplacement and Related Issues

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In the 1980s, “outplacement” services, which had originated in the U.S., were imported into Japan. However, only in the last several years have they been recognized and accepted in practice as a service supporting reemployment. With the bursting of the bubble economy and the subsequent changes in the industrial structure, the traditional, stereotyped human resource management policies — the seniority and the life-long employment systems — began to crumble, the chief sufferers being middle-aged and elderly employees, who are relatively expensive to keep on. A succession of employment adjustments called “restructuring” were carried out, resulting in a large number of workers leaving their companies. For the first time many became aware of the existence of services that offer assistance in finding reemployment.

Japanese workers unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately in one sense) have hitherto left their own career formation to their employer, whereas companies have sought to frame certain working styles, encouraging individuals to develop loyalty to their company. However, nowadays companies find it difficult to keep all their employees, and have shifted their policies, which have shocked workers. The biggest risk for workers who move out of their companies is undoubtedly employment insecurity. If this meant simply that they are taking the price for leaving their own career-making to their companies, the matter would end there, but now “assistance services for reemployment” are being provided to cope with this risk. Japanese workers who previously had not seriously thought about their careers are now aware of these services, at least the fact that such services exist to help them find a job and alleviate their insecurity after retirement. In other words, the personnel mobility attributable to structural changes and subsequent employment adjustment has helped change commonly accepted beliefs among ordinary people, who now regard job-switching and reemployment as normal, everyday occurrences, and has

built a basis for social acceptance of reemployment in a quite natural manner. Nevertheless, it seems that workers, as seen above, have little idea about how to adapt themselves to a sudden change in the environment, and jump desperately at the chance offered by outplacement services, without properly understanding their nature. There is a wide spread misunderstanding that these assistance services to help find reemployment are actually job placement services.

The above describes the current situation facing outplacement services in Japan. Put differently, the current situation suggests that one aspect of the service, the job matching function, is excessively highlighted, and that career counseling, which should be the chief function, does not always work properly. On the other hand, however, this contradiction may be inevitable if the essential nature of outplacement is taken into account. Although the term, “assistance service for reemployment,” is used in Japanese, the basic idea behind outplacement is to support firms which encourage their employees to move out of their company, rather than to support individuals who are looking for a job after having left their company. That is, the services are mainly geared toward supporting personnel measures taken by the companies, and the swift settlement of new jobs for the workers concerned satisfies corporate needs. In this sense, the emphasis tends to be on finding new jobs, while the process of increasing awareness of one’s past career record, self-understanding, and decision-making is unduly neglected. At the same time, if individuals decide to use these assistance services in the hope they will be offered a job without having developed adequate career awareness, it means that they have simply gone from their company to outplacement services, always relying on someone else to develop their career. Here lies the contradiction and problem of career counseling within the framework of the outplacement services. How to assist individual workers within the framework of services that were developed to assist firms is viewed as the biggest problem by career counselors involved in outplacement services.

It is undoubtedly effective for workers who have reached such a turning point in their careers to undergo career counseling services that provide a development and growth model. However, if individual workers do not have a strong sense of how to form their own career and, in order to find

another job have simply thrown themselves into a course provided by their firms, it is somewhat dubious that they will find the services effective. In this article, I would like to throw some light on the actual situation surrounding career counseling for outplacement in Japan, introducing a number of case studies. At the same time, by raising some of the problems inherent in counseling, the article aims to explore ideal, meaningful forms and the future direction of career counseling, while highlighting the qualifications that the individuals need.

First of all, let us look at the nature of the services provided by outplacement. Some people seem to think that outplacement is identical to career counseling. However, outplacement is a comprehensive service that facilitates a business which is shedding workers, whereas career counseling is merely one of many activities towards being outplaced. Outplacement services fulfil, for example, the following other functions:

- Vocational ability development
- Provision of facilities
- Exploration of job vacancies

Vocational ability development provides seminars and learning opportunities through correspondence courses for computers and other skills essential to becoming reemployed, allowing job seekers to accumulate special knowledge and upgrade their qualifications. Outplacement services provide facilities in which job seekers can look for work without being stuck inside their home and isolated from society. Providing these workers with a base that is equipped with the information files and tools necessary to undertake job searching activities gives them incentives to continue their search. It is also an opportunity for job seekers to come together and share a common goal. Another main pillar of outplacement services is the exploration of job vacancies. In reality, the biggest reason job seeking workers use these services is precisely summed up in the term, “job vacancies;” it is this point that has sparked the most interest. Most people do not show any particular interest in ability development, facilities, or career counseling, but are very keen on “being provided with information about job vacancies.” Of course, they need this

information to become reemployed, but, put differently, for job seekers the presence of job vacancies means first and foremost the existence of a possible goal. This gives them a sense of security. But reality is harsher than they think. They might have thought that the job vacancy was a goal, but before reaching the goal, they have to clear at least two hurdles — documentary screening and interviews. And unfortunately, quite a few job seekers are not aware of the unexpected height of the hurdles. In this sense, too, they eventually come to the conclusion that career counseling is the most important service clearing the hurdles and reaching the goal.

Then, how does career counseling proceed? Let us examine it in outline form, taking *JMAM Change Consulting* as the example:

- (1) Constructing a relationship between job seeking workers and the supporting group; enhancing their motivations
- (2) Assisting workers to understand themselves
- (3) Establishing their goals
- (4) Specifying tasks to achieve the goals
- (5) Drawing up activities plans
- (6) Assisting their activities
- (7) Achieving the goals (including review of results and follow-up activities)

This consulting service guides job seekers, through the stages shown above, to the immediate goal, reemployment (achieving the goal). To reach the goal, workers must understand and recognize that they must follow these stages. With this understanding, career counseling, as a part of outplacement services overall, can in fact prove effective as a bridge to a second career for job seekers. But at the same time, there are still more hurdles to overcome if the career counseling services are to function efficiently in the real world. Before shedding light on such tasks, let us first highlight some actual cases.

Case 1

A, aged 55, worked for a large manufacturer of electronic parts for about 35 years. After designing, developing and analyzing product

prototypes as an engineer early in his career, he spent 15 years in the sales section, working to strengthen channels between sales agencies and in management. After retiring from the company through its early retirement scheme, he decided to use a supporting service to seek reemployment. But he was not very keen on actively searching for work partly because, as his life revolved around his job, he felt he had lost his own identity. Going to career counseling sessions at least once a week, looking back on his career, and analyzing his own characteristics, he only became more confused about what he should do. By the time he left his company, he had decided he would not work in sales because he felt hard pressed when faced with target figures, and he was hoping to do something less stressful even if his income dropped substantially. Despite this, his career analysis testing showed that his strength lay in his energy, vitality and experience in sales management, while the result of character analysis testing also showed high potential in business negotiations. There are a surprisingly large number of people who do not wish to do something although they are aware that it is certainly to their advantage. Since A came to a roadblock when he reached the stage of having to set up his target, he was advised to spend some time thinking. It was suggested that he take a training course in computers which would give him an opportunity to improve his skills, as well as provide him with a refreshing change. A was gradually attracted to the idea of learning computer skills, and held off job searching activities, using the computer course as an excuse.

Six months after retirement, he saw a job vacancy notice for a caretaker of a public facility near home, for which he applied. Many others also applied, and A failed to show enough zeal, and did not get the job. However, this failure triggered a slight change in him: he began to wonder if he would be able to last long in a job that was not connected with figures and that might be less stressful. He began to suspect that he actually liked sales and the business front, and that such work gave meaning to his life, even though it was in fact stressful. And he also began to think that he would not regret it if he chose a job he really liked. He suddenly began to look for work more energetically, which he had been doing half-heartedly. He soon applied for a job as a sales representative at a machine trading

company, and succeeded in getting the post. The key factor in his success was “enthusiasm.”

Case 2

After graduation from university, B, aged 48, worked for a medium-sized trading company in sales for 10 years. At the age of 32 he moved to a distribution company where he initially stood on the frontlines as a store salesman. In the latter half of his career, he worked on the management of inventories and products at a logistical center. When the company decided to cut its labor force due to the merger of logistical centers, he left the company using their voluntary retirement plan.

Since he was in the prime of his working life, in his late 40s and because he needed to pay for his children’s education, he wished to find a new job immediately, and started searching for another job before leaving the company, receiving assistance. Although he had previously switched jobs, he had not drawn up a proper curriculum vitae, so he tackled the steps from career analysis to the writing of applications together with a counselor. Thinking that distribution of goods will always be needed, he started job-searching activities, targeting those related to transportation, in which he could take advantage of his experience.

Immediately after he embarked on job searching, he realized that wage levels in the industry were fairly low. He had worked overtime and earned quite a lot in his previous job, but he thought that he would not get a job if he insisted on a similar salary. He discussed this with his family, and decided to cut back on household expenses, lowering his minimum wage target. Although he found some job vacancies that matched what he was looking for, he ran into problems. For some jobs he lacked practical work experience, and sometimes the descriptions in the job vacancy listings turned out to be different than the actual job, so he failed many times during the documentary screening stage. In order to carefully reassess his advantages and disadvantages, he thoroughly reviewed his career background, and was stunned to find he had nothing particularly convincing in his career.

It occurred to him that he had physical strength which he had used to accomplish hard work in his previous post. He then began to incorporate

this selling point in his curriculum vitae, made a strong appeal, and finally received an offer as a sales driver from a large transport company. The offer was unexpectedly attributable to his career in sales in his first job, but his success in job seeking was ultimately due to his own meticulous review of his career.

Case 3

After graduating from high school, C, aged 52, joined a local long-established wholesale company where he engaged in general affairs and accounting for more than 30 years. Obligated to leave the company due to a substantial reduction in company size, he decided to ask for assistance in seeking reemployment. Because of his strong sense of pride, he was reluctant to accept the fact that he was unemployed, urging his counselor to help him find a new job as soon as possible. But, contrary to his demand for finding a new job, he did not take any action himself, and was clearly beginning to leave everything to the assisting company. Turning a deaf ear to their advice, which emphasized the importance of career analysis and setting a target, in the end he demanded a new job be arranged immediately. The counselor patiently spent a lot of time helping him create a curriculum vitae, with which he applied for several jobs. But he was rejected, mostly because he lacked management experience and because of his age. He didn't even have the opportunity to go on interviews, and he became increasingly frustrated and dependent on the assisting company. He wasted nine months without doing a proper review of his career.

These three men are, roughly speaking, typical job seekers who received assistance in seeking reemployment through outplacement services. Their characteristics may perhaps be defined as a "loss of goals," "difficulty in finding a job that matched their talents" and "dependence." What paralyzes individuals most when seeking reemployment is establishing "targets." This seems to be attributable to the way they left their previous jobs. The sense of a loss of identity is tremendous. These individuals saw the company as the nucleus of their lives, and without the company they felt lost. Some people may say that they need time to affect a turn-about and set their own goals. At the same time, however, the time required can be shortened if career counselors can be taken advantage of in

an effective manner.

It is fashionable to attribute economic trends or a change in the times to the severe employment situation among middle-aged and elderly workers and the increase in long-term unemployment. But the biggest responsibility still lies with the individual. “I have no idea how to approach the question,” “I cannot attract the attention of recruiting companies,” “I cannot make up my mind what to do...” People with these problems can be led to solutions with a few hints and pieces of advice. Some job seekers randomly apply for job vacancies whatever they are, claiming that they will get something if only they keep applying. Such energy may in some ways be admirable, and in fact they may succeed in getting a job. However, jobs obtained this way may not be satisfying in the long run. In other words, the difficulty lies not necessarily in becoming reemployed, but in how much the new job provides a focus in their lives in the long term. Unless one deliberates over what one wants to do, what one can do, and what his/her advantages are, it is likely that they will end up repeating the same mistake. In this sense, reemployment is not effortless. Other typical job seekers are those who confuse their goal with their situation. The goal means the type of work one wishes to engage in. But, prior to this, some people place priority on how much they wish to earn and how many holidays they want, and then complain about the absence of suitable job vacancies. This attitude will not, unfortunately, result in successful reemployment.

Then what should be done in order to decide on a goal? The answer is, simply, to thoroughly review all previous work experience. Through sorting out one’s own experiences and reviewing the fundamentals of one’s career, one can for the first time detect a future course. Nevertheless, many workers are seeking jobs without a thoughtful career analysis. Understanding oneself enables one to observe oneself from an objective point of view. The source of self-understanding is to understand that there is a difference between the way one sees oneself and the way others see you. Unless one can perceive how he or she looks from another person’s perspective, it will be difficult to navigate the road to reemployment.

No one would object to the statement that the decisive factor in finding reemployment is an accurate match between the person and the job. Successful reemployment depends on accurately matching the person with

the right job. The question is what should be matched. The basic point in matching is to bring together the selling points of job seekers and the needs of the companies that are looking for workers. In reality, however, there are some job seekers who do not pay attention to corporate needs and talk one-sidedly about what they have done. One will not succeed without taking into account the intentions of the buyers, that is, firms looking for workers. Thus the essential factor is how to display one's strengths in a way that can satisfy the needs of companies which wish to hire new workers. If a worker intends to go for a job that is different from the ones he/she previously held, he/she will not be able to take direct advantage of previous work experience as such. Even so, it is possible to adjust previous experiences to fit new opportunities and apply an individual's character that has been cultivated through past jobs to the job he/she wishes to tackle now. The number of trump cards an individual has can be a vital indicator of success in career counseling.

At the same time, there are quite a few job seekers who, while seeking assistance in finding another job, remain mentally dependent on their companies concerning their own career formation. In this case, it is necessary to provide such workers with psychological counseling in order to remove that sense of dependency and other factors which might inhibit them from taking action. The counselor will need tremendous perseverance in order to make people like this understand that what they believe to be common sense is not actually so. It is people like this who have the fewest prospects for successful reemployment.

In this situation, how effective is career counseling in seeking reemployment? Possible functions of counseling can be broken down into three aspects. The first is assistance in self-understanding. After facing up to oneself via self-analysis with the help of career analysis, counseling and other tools, one can view oneself candidly, which leads to the task of setting up goals. Once basic questions concerning career formation — “what do I want to do,” “what am I interested in,” and “what do I place a high value on” — are answered, everything falls into place. This is the second stage of assistance, assistance in decision-making. Following self-understanding and decision-making, reemployment assistance steps into the final stage, assistance for action. At this stage, the assistance bears the

nature of coaching, rather than counseling.

If career counseling services can essentially follow the steps described above, they should be able to provide powerful leads for job seekers in finding reemployment. The important thing is to “follow the steps;” one cannot expect to be successfully matched by omitting the required steps. I would like to emphasize once more that a successful matching depends essentially on how far job seekers, as individuals, can present their career paths in a form likely to satisfy the needs of companies looking for workers. Breaking down one’s career into its component parts, and then putting the pieces together to find where one’s true worth lies will be particularly important tasks.

To review the main points: the point of career counseling for those seeking reemployment is to help job seekers understand themselves, make decisions, and take action, whereas the skills required of career counselors at various stages are to analyze the careers of job seekers, to motivate them, and to match them with the right companies. It would be accurate to say that the biggest task in ensuring an accurate match, the decisive factor in reemployment, is to provide the worker with a thorough understanding of him/herself; at the same time, he/she must realize that this self-understanding is the whole point of career counseling.

Since outplacement involves various prerequisites and constraints, career counseling services right now do not necessarily function efficiently. However, in a future Japanese society, it will most likely be normal for people to fashion their own careers as they choose. This is due mainly to the arrival of an “IT society,” bringing an entirely different dimension to society than previously experienced, and giving people a chance to rethink the way they live and the way they work. The way one lives is itself a career, and the career counseling that exists today as part of outplacement services may perhaps be a magnificent laboratory in which we can reconsider the way we live.