From Vocational Decision Making to Career Building:

Blueprint, Real Games, and School Counseling

Phillip S. Jarvis

National Life/Work Centre

240 Catherine Street, Suite 110, Ottawa, Ontario CANADA, K2P 2G8

1-888-579-1396, psjarvis@lifework.ca

An authority on career education and counseling, and a primary architect of Canada's *Blueprint for Life/Work Designs* and *The Real Game Series* international partnership, Mr. Jarvis is Vice-President of Partnership Development for the National Life/Work Centre in Ottawa, Ontario.

Ethel S. Keeley

7710 Greenbrier Circle

Port St. Lucie, Florida 34986

1-772-461-4168, ethelskeeley@earthlink.net

A former teacher and Tech Prep and School-to-Work Coordinator, Ethel Keeley is President of Keeley Consulting Inc. Ms. Keeley specializes in workforce development with emphasis in career development and employee training and she is a Real Game Series Master Trainer.

Abstract

The evolving knowledge economy is altering the skills students need to be successful in the workplace and in life. As a result, the more traditional vocational decision making model is inadequate for helping students make informed career choices and for gaining necessary employability and self-management skills. This article addresses the characteristics of the evolving workplace and offers a new career building/management emphasis to help students learn the skills needed to become healthy, self-reliant citizens who are able to prosper in the rapidly changing workplace. The Canadian *Blueprint for Life/Work Designs* (National Life/Work Centre, Canadian Career Information Partnership & Human Resources Development Canada, n.d.) and *The Real Game Series* (Barry, 2001) are suggested for use by school counselors to provide a stronger career development emphasis within school counseling programs.

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School counseling's foundations developed from vocational decision making models. As schools, the workplace, and career development change, so does the need for school counselors to demonstrate leadership in helping students prepare for the future. As D.E. Redekopp (personal communication, November 13, 2002) stated, "Increasingly, career development is about leadership. It's about the personal leadership required to take action, take risks, and learn new skills. It's also about the leadership required to help others develop, grow, and learn. Creating things that don't yet exist is now part of career development, not just choosing among existing options. Preparedness for an environment that does not yet exist is key to adaptability and leadership – therefore, it's key to career management."

The new knowledge economy is changing the way people work. The very notion of "job" is shifting dramatically as workers increasingly seek meaning, purpose, and fulfillment from their work roles. With growing frequency, career is viewed as something every human has for a lifetime (Gysbers, 1997). According to R.E Straby (personal communication, October 31, 2002), "Work is now defined not by occupational titles or categories, but by skills and values. Effective career builders know how to shape and build their careers project by project. This is a new competency, still largely unrecognized by most adults in the workforce." As a result, a new paradigm is needed to help students make informed career choices and gain the necessary employability and self-management skills. This article describes the characteristics of the evolving workplace and offers a career building focus to help students learn the skills they now need to become healthy, self-reliant citizens, who are able to prosper in rapidly changing labor markets, and maintain balance between life and work roles.

The Changing Workplace

The workplace of the knowledge era is different at the beginning of the 21st century than that of the 20th century (Cappelli, 1999; Feller & Walz, 1996). Notions of self-employment and working for customers have replaced working for a boss. Following established orders and procedures is now balanced with encouragement to invent new solutions to get the job done, and to quickly serve customers.

Responsibility only for one's job has been replaced by pressure to be a good team player able to help the team continuously learn and improve. Respect, formerly accorded to position or title, is now earned by anyone at any organizational level on the basis of contribution, commitment to learning, and a willingness to help others improve. The following provides a comparison of characteristics of the old and new workplace:

Old Workplace	New Workplace
Office	Virtual space
Success = career ladder	Success = valued skills
Authority	Influence
Entitlement	Marketability/impact
Loyalty to company/organization	Loyalty to work and self
Salaries and benefits	Contracts and fees
Job security	Personal freedom and control
Identity = job, position, and occupation	Identity = life circumstances and contribution to work, family, and community
Attention to supervisor and managers	Attention to customers
Employees	Vendors, entrepreneurs, and team members

Career Development Implications of the New Economy

Small companies and microbusinesses are the fastest growing category of companies, and they have the greatest failure rate (Pink, 2001). Larger companies are being merged, downsized, split, redesigned, or purchased. Job security is no longer a guarantee for anyone at any level in any organization. Workers need to prepare themselves for periodic job loss and the inevitable loss of income

(Carlson, 2002). Consequently, workers need to follow occupational and industrial trends, observe job growth or decline information, and position themselves to respond to these trends.

As greater numbers of workers seek more satisfaction, stimulation, respect, money, and freedom, they are brokering portions of their time and skills to multiple organizations in creative new work "packages." As a result, the emphasis on obtaining and keeping jobs has changed. To succeed, self-employed workers in atypical, contract work arrangements need to have specialized skills, including an awareness of their value to specific employers and the ability to market themselves effectively. Their success demands a high level of self-knowledge and self-confidence.

Recent projections suggest that new labor market entrants are likely to experience a succession of work roles, with 12 to 25 jobs in up to five industry sectors in their working lives (Alberta Learning, 1999). Work periods will be interspersed with periods of learning, either full or part-time, while holding one or more jobs. Krumboltz and Worthington (1999) described a future where:

> . . . there will be more of a need for worker flexibility as worker requirements change more frequently and new teams are formed to work on specific projects. Workers will increasingly be expected to move from project to project doing whatever work needs to be accomplished, whether or not they have been trained for it, and not merely to fulfill a written job description.
>
> (p. 317)

Such changes underscore the need to supplant school counseling efforts driven by traditional vocational decision making and narrowly defined labor market information. A shift to an emphasis on expanded self-knowledge and concepts of life and career building, and acquisition of career management skills will better prepare students for the challenges of the new economy.

While availability of good career and labor market information is not sufficient, it is critical to successful choices. In the words of Richard Froeschle (2002), Career Resource Network Director with the Texas Workforce Commission, "…labor market and career information is to students and job seekers what market research data is to business – invaluable" (p. 1). However, high quality, current, and comprehensive information is only part of helping students make sound academic and educational

choices. Students need skills to use the information effectively while tying self-knowledge to exploration. They need to develop self-reliance, and focus on work activities that are important to them. They need direction to learn which workplace options can provide fulfillment and satisfaction so they can seek ways to qualify for opportunities. Finally, they need adaptability, the skill of making the best of ever-present change.

A Career Building/Management Emphasis

The traditional vocational decision making model, expecting students to make an informed, long-term career choice before graduating from high school and continuing through a career to retirement, followed fairly predictable steps. They often included the following:

1. Explore one's interests, aptitudes, and values (e.g., through assessments)

2. Explore the world of work using comprehensive, current information.

3. Determine a "best fit" occupational goal by matching personal traits to job factors.

4. Develop a plan to obtain the prerequisite education and training.

5. Graduate, obtain secure employment, work hard, climb the ladder.

6. Retire as young as possible on full pension.

This traditional approach reinforces societal expectations that people select an occupational goal and, then, pursue the requisite education. While preparing to enter the workforce, students are graded on acquisition of academic and technical skills, despite incessant pleas from employers to teach employability skills (Herr, 1984). Although academic and technical qualifications open employment doors, life and career management skills largely determine selection, success, and advancement (Krumboltz & Worthington, 1999; Worthington & Juntunen, 1997). Job seekers who market themselves as skilled in narrow occupational specialties do themselves a disservice; whereas those who can describe the skills they bring to an organization to help it achieve long-term success, in whatever combination of roles, are in greater demand (Worthington & Juntunen, 1997). The key in today's workplace as in life is not just finding the right job, friend, or life partner, it is *becoming* the right worker, friend, or life partner.

The new economy demands a new approach to facilitating career development. Initially, students need to identify broad industry sector destinations and prepare themselves for multiple roles within these sectors. Mastery of career management skills, which include transferable employability and personal management skills, needs to be part of mainstream primary, secondary, and postsecondary education programs, employee training and development programs, and remedial programs for adults in career transitions. Acquisition of these skills increases the likelihood of workplace success, and success in life. As students benefit, so do their families, learning institutions, employers, communities, and the nation.

The career building and management emphasis is about helping students become healthy, self-reliant citizens who are able to cope with constant change at work, as well as maintain balance between life and work roles. For students, the cornerstones of this new paradigm are termed the "high five" principles:

1. Know yourself, believe in yourself, and follow your heart.

2. Focus on the journey, not the destination. Become a good traveler.

3. You are not alone. Access your allies, and be a good ally.

4. Change is constant and brings with it new opportunities.

5. Learning is ongoing, and that is good. We're most alive when we're learning. (Barry, 2001, p. 46)

These beliefs reinforce the notion that people do not succeed by migrating to "hot" industries, but by focusing on work activities they enjoy. This emphasis recognizes that career development is a lifelong process of skill acquisition and career building through a continuum of learning, development, and mastery. This process enables students to be in charge of their own careers, and have enough focus and direction for stability and enough flexibility and adaptability to allow for change. Career management does not seek to help students make the "right" choice the first time. It helps them develop the skills needed to make appropriate choices, time after time, year after year, in all aspects of their lives.

A Framework for Career Building/Management

Achieving the goals proposed by a shift from vocational decision making to career building requires a framework for school counselors to help students become aware of and master career management skills. Programs and resources need to be based on clear and measurable career

management learning and performance outcomes. School counselors need readily accessible resources tied to this framework to foster student achievement. A common framework needs to illustrate the linkages or overlaps between programs, as well as identify gaps in existing school counseling programs. School counselors benefit from a common language of career management to eliminate ambiguity and confusion between schools and the public. A change strategy and professional development activities similar to those promoted by the National Career Development Guidelines (National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee, 1996) served as a model for large scale innovations. The *Blueprint for Life/Work Design* (National Life/Work Centre, Canadian Career Information Partnership & Human Resources Development Canada, n.d.) benefited and evolved from such efforts. The *Blueprint for Life/Work Design* provides a foundation for integration and infusion of career building and career management competencies into school counseling programs to effectively prepare students for the future.

The Blueprint for Life/Work Designs

Pioneering work on a national career management skills framework began in the United States in 1988 under the leadership of the National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee (NOICC) and its network of 58 State Occupational Information Coordinating Committees (SOICCs). The process of adapting the National Career Development Guidelines (NOICC, 1996) for Canada began in 1998. The result is Canada's *Blueprint for Life/Work Designs (Blueprint)* (National Life/Work Centre, Canadian Career Information Partnership & Human Resources Development Canada, n.d). U.S. and Canadian school counselors, career specialists, employment counselors, educators, human resources specialists, and researchers have been involved in developing, piloting, implementing, evaluating, and revising this North American blueprint.

The *Blueprint* identifies core competencies with associated performance indicators at four developmental levels across the lifespan (Level 1-Primary/Elementary School, Level 2-Junior High/Middle School, Level 3-High School, and Level 4-Adult, including Postsecondary). The core competencies are the basis upon which career development programs can be designed. The performance indicators, organized by learning stages (acquisition, application, personalization, and actualization), can

be used to measure learning gains and demonstrate the effectiveness of such programs. The following presents the *Blueprint* core competencies by area:

Area A: Personal Management

1. Build and maintain a positive self-image

2. Interact positively and effectively with others

3. Change and grow throughout one's life

Area B: Learning and Work Exploration

4. Participate in lifelong learning supportive of life/work goals

5. Locate and effectively use life/work information

6. Understand the relationship between work and society/economy

Area C: Life/Work (Career) Building

7. Secure or create and maintain work

8. Make life/work enhancing decisions

9. Maintain balanced life and work roles

10. Understand the changing nature of life and work roles

11. Understand, engage in, and manage one's own life/work building process

These competencies include the employability skills employer groups often suggest are lacking in too many youth employees (Barry, 2001). In fact, because work habits and attitudes strongly influence early adult earnings, educational and training programs should emphasize work behaviors as much as they emphasize job skills (Savickas, 2002).

Ultimately, self-reliance grows out of the acquisition and mastery of these skills. The *Blueprint* recognizes that people at different ages and stages learn differently and that even young children can learn and appreciate the *Blueprint* competencies. Attitudes toward work are formed early in life, meaning workforce and career guidance policy should take a developmental perspective. Super, Crites, Gribbons, and Lohnes each concluded from longitudinal studies that competence in early adolescence relates to

more realistic educational and vocational choices, occupational success, and career progress (Savickas, 2002). Consequently, the *Blueprint's* core competencies are defined for four developmental levels.

There are performance indicators for each competency, at each level, organized by learning stages. The following presents Competency 5 of Level 3 (High School) along with performance indicators for each learning stage:

Competency 5 – Locate, interpret, evaluate, and use life/work information

Learning Stage a: Acquisition

5.3 a1   Explore the educational and training requirements of various work roles.

5.3 a2   Discover how key personnel in selected work roles could become ideal information resources and/or role models.

5.3 a3   Explore how trends and work opportunities in various economic/industry sectors impact the nature and structure of work roles.

5.3 a4   Explore how employment and workplace trends impact education and training scenarios.

5.3 a5   Understand how a variety of factors (e.g., supply and demand for workers, demographic changes, environmental conditions, geographic location) impact work opportunities.

5.3 a6   Understand how labor market information (e.g., profiles, statistics) should be used when making life and work decisions.

5.3 a7   Explore a variety of work alternatives (e.g., full employment, multi-tracking, contracting, consulting, self-employment, entrepreneurship).

Learning Stage b: Application

5.3 b1   Use career information resources such as career monographs, occupation classifications systems, labor market information, mass media, computer and Internet-based career information delivery systems to educate oneself to the realities and requirements of various work roles.

5.3 b2   Consult key personnel in selected work roles as information resources, role models, and/or mentors.

Learning Stage c: Personalization

5.3 c1   Determine, according to one's preferences, the advantages and disadvantages of various work alternatives (e.g., full employment, multi-tracking, contracting, consulting, self-employment, entrepreneurship).

5.3 c2   Assess life/work information and evaluate its impact on one's life/work decisions.

Learning Stage d: Actualization

5.3 d1   Improve one's strategies to locate, interpret, evaluate, and use life/work information.

The *Blueprint* provides the basis for setting the learning outcomes, establishing performance standards, and measuring success in any public or private sector agency providing career development programs. The *Blueprint* can serve as the framework for activities and programs implemented as part of school counseling programs. One program utilizing the *Blueprint* competencies to enhance career building and management skills is *The Real Game Series* (Barry, 2001).

The Real Game Series

Career building skills need to be mastered by students of all ages at all stages of their education (Fouad, 1997; Lent, Hackett, & Brown, 1999; Savickas, 1999). The *Real Game Series* (Barry, 2001) is a comprehensive, developmentally-sequenced series of career building programs, set in the context of non-threatening, engaging, fun, real-life adult situations that assist students in thinking through and determining life planning, choices, and challenges. In the process, students learn to appreciate the relevance of their school courses, and they learn and practice the career management skills needed to achieve goals.

Supporting the *Blueprint's* (National Life/Work Centre, Canadian Career Information Partnership & Human Resources Development, n.d.) and *Guidelines'* (NOICC, 1996) tenets and philosophy, *The Real Game Series* (Barry, 2001) was developed to teach career management skills at all developmental levels. Input was obtained from school counselors, teachers, and students throughout Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, New Zealand, Hungary, Denmark, and, most recently, Germany. Six *Real Game* programs make connections among the world of work, personal and social skills, the

career transition process, and curriculum issues, and help students master career building/management skills. Counselors serve as game facilitators, team coaches, or resource persons within the game which adds depth to their career development responsibility. The games' content and simulations greatly enhance the career development emphasis within school counseling programs. Moreover, individual and group career counseling sessions can be more productive as students are more motivated, engaged, informed, and prepared to take action. The six programs include:

- *The Play Real Game* Grades 3/4 Ages 6 – 8

- *The Make It Real Game* Grades 5/6 Ages 8 – 10

- *The Real Game* Grades 7/8 Ages 11 – 13

- *The Be Real Game* Grades 9/10 Ages 14 – 15

- *The Get Real Game* Grades 11/12 Ages 16 – 18

- *Real Times, Real Life* Postsecondary Adults
  to Retirement

The *Real Game* Series can help make the learning of career management skills an integral part of the guidance curriculum. The activities and learning outcomes of these programs have been linked to core academic curriculum. Through this integration, school counselors and teachers can team to help all students learn career management competencies, including personal management, learning and work exploration, and lifelong career building, in the context of core academic curricula.

In many states and countries the *Real Game Series* meets or exceeds both academic and career development standards. A project undertaken recently for the Arizona Career Resource Network and the Arizona Department of Education (Keeley, 2002) linked *The Real Game Series* to the Arizona academic standards, the National Career Development Guidelines (NOICC, 1996), the National Standards for School Counseling Programs (Campbell & Dahir, 1997), and the employability standards of Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (1991). Other states and territories, such as California, Vermont, and New York, have completed similar linkages, as have most Canadian provinces and territories. With the emphasis on standards and academic outcomes in education, linking the content of

these programs to state education standards in multiple core curriculum areas illustrates how use of these programs can help students achieve state required outcomes.

Programs of the Real Game Series

The Play Real Game, the first game in the series is designed for grades three and four. It focuses on building neighborhoods, paralleling common interests of this age group. Students use mapping coordinates, explore and work in local town businesses, create a marketing plan for economic development, and garner information about community and municipal businesses and services and work roles.

The Make It Real Game is designed for grades five and six. Students acquire jobs, form and work in small companies, make lifestyle choices (e.g., homes, vehicles, entertainment), learn about the work roles of employees in a wide cross-section of businesses and services in any community, develop a community tourism project, and deliver presentations on this project.

The Real Game, targeted for seventh and eighth grades, provides an opportunity for middle school students to discover what life is like as an adult. Students receive a work role with duties, salary, work hours, and education and training requirements. The game requires students to make lifestyle choices and choose housing, transportation, and leisure options. Students learn how to budget money and time while learning to optimize their lifestyle options within a balanced budget. They examine how school subjects they are currently completing relate to future life and work roles. Other adult experiences include exploring job loss, identifying transferable skills and how they pertain to different employment positions.

The Be Real Game, targeting students in grades nine and ten , focuses on work experience and job acquisition skills. Students' roles include interaction with spouses, children, family, and community responsibilities as they factor in costs and benefits of lifestyle choices. As the game progresses, each student loses his/her job due to displacement by technology, economic downturns, environmental factors, or personal initiative. During the final phase of this game students draw from the role-playing experience to begin identifying real, personally appealing work and life roles, and develop career plans that incorporate their personal preferences, skills and aptitudes, interests, and learning styles. Self-discovery

is paired with occupational/career options, resulting in planning how to optimize the remainder of high school to reach immediate and long-term career goals.

The Get Real Game, the last K-12 program in this series, is designed to help students in grades 11 and 12 plan for and rehearse prospective scenarios for their first five years after high school graduation. Five postsecondary career gateways—work, postsecondary education, military, internships, and self-employment—are explored as viable venues for meeting occupational goals. Through this game, postsecondary students learn to understand both the short-term and long-term consequences of decisions, fine tune their learning plans, and enhance their job application and interviewing skills. *The Get Real Game* culminates with students creating personal action plans they have tested and intend to follow, thus determining the course of their first years after high school.

Real Times, Real Life, the final program in this series, provides an opportunity for postsecondary counselors to reach clients. It is designed for adults in adult education, unemployment programs, and detention center pre-release programs. As with the other programs, role playing allows participants to experience job changes and transitions, learn to budget effectively, identify personal skills and interests, and target job skills and application strategies in a non-threatening manner. Participants create life/work action plans and identify life and career goals, and determine methods for achieving these goals.

The *Real Game Series* is designed to foster student-directed learning. School counselors serve as facilitators, acting as coaches for students and teachers. They enrich their role by interacting with students to ensure that they understand the activities, and experience guided discussion, reflection, self-discovery and creativity. Moreover, activities continually illustrate relevance between academic learning and future occupations while advancing higher order thinking skills.

Conclusion

The need to include career building/management skills in school counseling programs designed to help students succeed academically and within the workplace is critical (Feller & Daly, 1992). The school counselors' role in moving programs from a vocational decision making focus, to a career building focus needs to be significant as the school and workplace change. As school counselors advocate for change,

their influence is enhanced through implementation of the *Blueprint* (National Life/Work Centre, Canadian Career Information Partnership & Human Resources Development, n.d.) framework and *The Real Game Series* (Barry, 2001). Such efforts are designed to:

1. Help more students become satisfied, fulfilled, self-reliant, contributing, and prosperous citizens;

2. Bring more motivated and engaged students to teachers and classrooms;

3. Bring more informed and motivated students to counseling sessions that are more effective and productive and yield measurable results;

4. Provide more qualified and motivated future employees to businesses that are increasingly challenged to find the talent they need to compete successfully; and

5. Increase student assets and competencies needed to be productive employers in an increasingly competitive workplace and thus improve their economic options and living standards.

Momentum of the career building/management shift will grow as school counselors promote and integrate these philosophical changes and promising practices. As school counselors encourage each other and assist students in becoming career managers, school counseling programs will be more effective and valued. As that influence grows, more students will become self-reliant in building and managing their careers.

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