The Future of Career Services - Straight from the Decision-Makers

Every business and profession is dependent upon serving the needs of its customers. As career transition and career management professionals, are we meeting our clients' current needs? Do we adapt as our clients' needs evolve? Recently the DC and Philadelphia chapters of the Association of Career Professionals International asked their customers what they expected and needed from career services. Each chapter hosted panel discussions with human resource and corporate managers who purchased our services. Also included were clients who had paid individually as well as those who received services paid for by their employer.

Observations our customers shared with us:

- Organizations that are undergoing downsizing, mergers and restructuring often are not aware of the value of career transition services. Can you imagine that?!
- Federal government agencies are all over the map when addressing outplacement and aging workforce issues. Some agencies have excellent transition resources available while others offer minimal assistance.
- Individuals struggling with their own career issues don't know how to find counselors or coaches, despite existing search engines, websites and career portals. They don't know what we offer or how to evaluate different providers and services.
- Employees are aware that senior managers get executive coaching; many however do not know that career management coaching is appropriate and available for workers at all levels and of all ages.
- Small businesses don't even have career transition services on their radar screen. Many cannot afford the services of the larger providers but are not aware that individual practitioners can provide a cost effective service.
- Organizations require services that are responsive, will customize programs and perhaps be international in scope. They want services to be available upon demand – either electronically or face to face, sometimes with less than 24 hours notice.

As with all professional services, our reputations (and our futures!) are made or broken through customer satisfaction and the relationships we build. Panelists agreed that individual relationships and personal connections are crucial to their decision to purchase career services. They need career transition providers to be partners with them in facilitating the process of change within their organizations. Both organizational buyers and individual clients expect, and will demand, a keen sense of respect and integrity from providers. This means treating each person with dignity, no matter what the revenue potential. Timing is often a big piece of getting the business, so staying in touch with former and potential clients on a regular basis is important. [Does this sound like what we coach clients about networking?]

Services should be geared to the diverse demographics of clients; workers with one or two years of employment, mid-career job shifters, dual career couples and retiring baby boomers. AARP and other surveys indicate retirement often means a different kind of work rather than not working at all. "What do I want to do with the rest of my life?" is added to the basic question of “Where will I find my next job?” While it is known that executive coaching and career services are available for high level professionals, we must get the word out that our services are available to young workers starting out and for others at different points in their career. The “just for executives” and “when you are in a career crisis” labels need to go.

Costs are a critical issue. When an organization is considering downsizing employees, the goal is usually to save money. Why should part of already reduced profits be spent on this service? Executives are asking what is the ROI for this expense – we need to prove our work makes good economic sense. Consider how to justify why an individual who has received career transition services in a past lay-off needs services again? Cost is clearly an important part of the decision to initiate career coaching when an individual is paying the bill from her/his own resources.

No one would argue that confidentiality is a critical piece of the relationship. What are our obligations to report to people writing the check and when is that information violating the confidentiality of the candidate receiving our services? In the past organizations were only interested in whether or not the employee actually used the services for which they are being billed. Today, results and candidate satisfaction measures are more important as CEOs question the value of career transition services. Our ethics and attention to contracting details come into play on this issue.

Many cost-savings can be attained through effective use of technology, self-assessment tools and extensive databases. We need to be prepared to demonstrate the tools and methods that we use. What proof is there that what we do improves and shortens a candidate’s job search or enhances a career path? Updated technology is essential, but not at the expense of an individualized and personal touch. Clients may need resources for emotional support for themselves and family members, advice on image and finances as well as resume advice and job leads. Our services and fees need to be sensitive to the dynamics of the organization and individual clients. We often counsel our clients to be flexible and we need to be flexible with decision-makers. Don’t we all want the biggest bang for the buck?

Implications for providers of career transition and career management services:
The message parallels much of the advice we give to our clients who are looking for new opportunities.

- Know your strengths and what services you are best positioned to offer and to whom?
- Research resources available to you and your clients – technology, government funded programs, industry networking forums, etc. Consider collaborations to reduce costs and enhance offerings.
- Decide which markets you can best serve. Study the demographics and target specific organizational or individual needs.
- Identify and share new ways to measure, evaluate and communicate results.

- Build a comprehensive business plan – including a marketing strategy to stay focused.
- Establish a professional development plan that includes continuing education, credentialing and business training.
- Re-commit to developing and nurturing authentic business relationships and providing outstanding customer service

ACP International can partner with firms and individuals in order to educate the general public about proactive career management through the lifespan for all workers. As individual career practitioners, we can seek opportunities to deliver presentations and write about career management. We must be accountable and innovative in evaluating the results of our work. With confidence in the service we offer both to organizations and individuals, we must gain recognition for our profession. Each of us must continue to listen to our customers!

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