

“Why should a church have a career ministry?”

“Pastor, I lost my job! Can you help me?” An all too frequent question for most Pastors... and not an easy one for most to answer.

THE NEED:

The reason the question is so prevalent is based on the reality of today’s work environment:

- Nearly 9 million people are currently unemployed.
- Another 35 million people in the workforce are at a crossroads in their career – either thinking about or actively looking for a new work situation.
- And, perhaps most compelling is that more than half of the balance of the workforce (another 60 million people) are generally dissatisfied with their current work or calling!

All of this is made more compelling when we recognize that work, for most people, represents their primary means of financial security, a significant part of their personal identity and the greatest investment of their waking hours. In fact, as I’ve interviewed hundreds of “career explorers” in various stages of career transition over the past few years, they consistently explain that the career journey is a lonely one and it’s particularly hard on their confidence, their marriage, their finances, and for most, even tests their faith.

Whether we’re working or not, most of us struggle with the same questions and issues about work and careers:

- “Why does work dominate my life?”
- “Is this what God intended for me?”
- “How can I find a better balance between work and family?”
- “Why can’t I do work that I enjoy and that suits me well?”
- “I’d work for half the pay if I could work half as hard as I do!”
- “Is this all there is to life?”

As my personal career journey progressed, God continued to put me in work environments where my skills were being refined and improved. I was learning, and I was challenged. In fact, I almost always enjoyed the work I was doing. *Maybe this is where God intends for me to be*, I often thought—but I was rarely convinced. My struggle was that it was hard for me to imagine a corporate job as the end goal for my life here on earth: setting and reaching for objectives, maximizing profits for the corporation, and dealing with the inherent politics of most organizations. I was reasonably good at the game; it just didn’t seem particularly fulfilling.

It’s easy to see the problem today’s corporations face caused by the constant pressure that Wall Street places on them to drive costs out of their business – and more than half of these costs are labor related. But because of this pressure, the nature of the employment relationship between employer and employee has changed drastically and forever. Let me highlight a few points of evidence:

- The productivity improvements made by most corporations, largely through technology investments, have decreased workforce requirements. Higher efficiency requires fewer employees to generate the same amount of profit—or more.

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- The trend to outsourcing, using both onshore and, more prevalently, offshore providers has already eliminated several million positions in the U.S. in the past five years.
- Legislation has fostered a business environment that allows corporations to “prune” (a.k.a. lay off) employees as often as practical. And they can do that without facing excessive severance payments or lawsuits claiming unfair labor practices, which were more prevalent in the days of the paternalistic corporation. As a result, layoffs are now commonplace, not occasional as they were in the past.
- The most recent research suggests that the average American worker will have 13 or more jobs in their career – 20 years ago the number was 5. That’s nearly three times as many “career crossroads” for each person
- The Conference Board’s research suggests that less than 49 percent of workers are satisfied today. Less than half of us! In a recent web survey by Monster.com, the results support our lack of satisfaction:
 - 57 percent responded that they feel overworked
 - 83 percent of participants said they are not satisfied with their jobs
 - 80 percent said they were unhappy with their work/life balance
 - 71 percent contend that they work more than 40 hours per week
- The ever-increasing percentage of labor represented by temps is compelling as well. In 2002 an average of 1.6 million people went to work as temporary employees in this country, earning nearly \$20 billion. Even more compelling, the temp workforce is expected to double in the next six years.

When you consider these changing dynamics, it can get downright intimidating for the average American worker, who has to be asking, “Will my job be eliminated as well?” “Should I be looking for alternatives regardless of my current circumstance?” “How can I minimize my risk in this environment?”

These are valid questions that all working Americans should be asking themselves because of these and related changes. You may ask, “So what? What are the implications of these facts and trends?”

These issues should convince us that the employment landscape is shifting right under our feet. Sometimes change occurs so close to our noses that we don’t see the forest for the trees. While these changes shouldn’t cause anyone to panic, they are too significant to be ignored. The implications are profound for both the individual worker (what we’ll call Career Explorers) and for the Church community in this country to support their congregations and local communities.

For Career Explorers - These changes should compel the average worker to begin the process of determining how they can best thrive in this evolving employment environment. Some implications to consider:

- The work you’ve been doing may not be as available in the future as it has been. What are you doing to prepare yourself and develop skills to match the requirements of the jobs that will exist and abound in the next decade?

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- The concept of career will take on a whole new meaning for most of us—no longer describing tenure with one company, but rather a set of experiences with multiple companies that increase a person’s marketable skills.
- The changes are not occurring in a linear fashion. Rather, accelerating technology innovations and corporate earnings pressures resemble an exponential-change curve, which simply means that change is accelerating.
- Each of us must be proactive in dealing with these changes; you can’t afford to simply “wait and see” how things evolve. Well, you can take that approach, but you’re likely to be victimized by the changes. People who proactively take charge of their careers will have the best opportunity to take advantage of this emerging employment environment.
- The changing employment trends should prompt us to put our work and career in the proper life and spiritual perspective. If you’re looking for your work to provide you with total fulfillment in life, you’re likely to be disappointed. This point will become more compelling as we look at the condition of the American worker today.

For the Church – These dynamics make it far more compelling for the church to prepare itself to support the needs of the church body and those that can be reached by the church. Consider the following:

- According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) , 48 percent of job seekers reported using places of worship as a search tactic.
- The career explorer needs more than a new job in most cases. It is a multi-dimensional challenge – financial, emotional, marital, and certainly spiritual. In fact, the real opportunity associated with being at a career crossroads is that it is one of only a few times in most people’s lives (men more so than women I would argue) that the average person is more receptive to the notion that we are not in control of our own destiny in life. That we are not entirely self-reliant. Therefore, career transition represents one of the best evangelism opportunities possible.
- The church is best positioned to contribute in supporting those in career transition because life change best occurs in a church environment where the love of Christ is prevalent.
- Plus, there are benefits for the church that rises to this need:
 - Provides volunteers in the church to minister to others leveraging their talents (particularly HR and recruiting professionals).
 - Provides a tremendous outreach opportunity to fulfill the great commission.
 - Represents a great opportunity to increase the church’s ability to fund new programs/staff. Consider that one additional person going back to work for \$50,000 per year who tithes represents \$5,000 in church contributions.
 - Provides a great “adjunct” resource for those churches that have had active programs with Crown Financial Ministries or Purpose Driven Life initiatives, both of which encourage the participants to determine how to best use their gifts in ways consistent with their God-given talents and calling.

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FILLING THE NEED:

There are roughly 300,000 Christian churches in the United States today – very few of which provide programs or resources to serve the needs of those in career transition. The reason is often that there are limited resources, too many existing programs, and lack of supporting funds, among others.

The interesting fact is that it doesn't take much to help. Consider the following 5 steps that any church could take to help serve this prevalent need:

1. Identify the need. How many people in your congregation are out of work? What's the nature of the issues they are dealing with? How high is this priority?
2. Determine the resources available – both staff and volunteer. You can evaluate these both within the church and even within the community (I've seen many volunteers get involved in career related ministries who aren't even a part of the church when they initially volunteer – they simply wanted to find a channel to “give something back”). There are likely more resources than you might guess and many of them have been looking for ways to contribute in ways that leverage their skills and talents (recruiters, HR professionals, etc).
3. Decide on your goals. Is the intent to:
 - Evangelize?
 - Provide practical career support?
 - Facilitate networking?
 - Provide emotional and spiritual support for your congregation and community?

All of these are worthwhile but should be the basis for whatever program your church provides

4. Develop the best approach accordingly. It doesn't necessarily require much resource. In fact, many churches have found that there are programs and approaches that require no additional volunteers or staff to support. Here are some approaches to consider:
 - Individual care through coaches/mentors
 - Monthly networking meetings
 - Small group support
 - Career search workshops
 - Providing a Christ-centered website to career explorers (requires the least support resources)
5. Get help – **Crossroads Career® Network** – our organization was formed to help equip churches to serve this need. We are a non-profit 501c3 whose mission includes:
 - Helping people to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ;
 - And, to help support these people at a Crossroads in their career.

You can learn more about Crossroads Career® Network at www.crossroadscareer.org.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Bourke’s background includes:

- 23 years of work experience with global companies including IBM, Nynex (now Verizon), Andersen Consulting (now Accenture), and Spherion.
- Most recently president of the outsourcing division of Spherion, a \$2 billion staffing, and outsourcing, and human capital corporation.
- Author of numerous thought-leadership white papers covering topics including alternative recruiting models, the “people” side of outsourcing, and new customer service models.
- An accomplished speaker on various topics, including the future of outsourcing, trends associated with today’s emerging workforce, and the keys to finding new work for the employed, misemployed, and unemployed.
- Volunteer CEO and President of Crossroads Career® Services, Inc. since June, 2004.
- Founded a career ministry in 2003 called Christ-Centered Career Groups (C3G), which focuses on serving the practical, emotional, and spiritual needs of unemployed professionals.
- Married 23 years with three daughters.

Because I believe God does not want the majority of working people in this country to be unhappy doing what occupies most of their time, I consider it my mission to challenge, educate, and inspire people to find a better way to work and live—a way that leverages their God-given talents, a way that is consistent with God’s purpose for their lives, and a way that gives them a sense of fulfillment and peace. I also believe the church has a tremendous opportunity to support individuals in this journey!—**Peter Bourke**