

Ring Roads and Roundabouts: Navigating Careers in the 21st Century

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Ring Roads and Roundabouts: Navigating Careers in the 21st Century

As a traveller, I have often been impressed with the efficient systems of ring roads and roundabouts in other countries around the world, designed to improve traffic flow and road safety. Admittedly, as those of you who have driven around and around a roundabout or been caught in traffic on a ring road already know, such initiatives don't always work flawlessly. However, for the purpose of this paper, I would like to introduce ring roads and roundabouts as metaphors for new ways of navigating careers amidst the economic and social changes of the 21st century. My goal is to stimulate creative discussion and generate potential solutions for some of the roadblocks encountered by skilled workers and professionals attempting to move between organizations, occupations, industries, and countries within an increasingly global workplace.

Career Paths: An Historical Perspective

Early road systems were simply well-worn paths between a starting place and a destination. No engineers identified the most efficient routes. No professionals provided strategic design guidance. Often, the destination was carefully guarded. In Canada, we have numerous historical forts; in Europe, remnants of castles and walled cities abound.

Castles, forts, and walled cities generally accomplished the goal of keeping invaders out and members of the community safe within. Many castles, surrounded with moats or built on almost inaccessible mountain tops, were carefully protected to ensure that the privileged were safe from attack and only a select few foreigners were admitted. Some castles, like Budapest's, developed extensive labyrinths that served both to hide defenders and disorient invaders. In the 21st century, professional associations and colleges, unions, and other regulatory bodies serve as castles and walled cities for various careers – and, in some cases, the walls or labyrinthine entrances may appear impenetrable.

Engineering as a Profession

I will use “engineering” as an example. The Engineering Association of Canada (n.d.) was established in 1887, twenty years after our country was founded. A google search in 2005, using the key words, "professional engineer," "Canada," and "immigration," resulted in 5090 “hits.” First on the list was the Canadian Council of Professional Engineers (CCPE, n. d.) which was established in 1936 and “is the national organization of the 12 provincial and territorial associations/ordre that regulate the practice of engineering in Canada and license the country's more than 160,000 professional engineers” (¶1).

Therein lies the complexity of the regulation of professions in Canada – because regulation is a provincial or territorial mandate, across the country there may be different requirements to enter a profession or trade, or maintain credentials in it. Immigration requirements, however, are regulated at a national level. Hence, through a comprehensive “points system” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, n.d.), professionals and other skilled workers may be admitted to Canada based on their level of education and years of relevant work experience, yet, due to professional regulation may find themselves unable to work within their own career area. It is not uncommon to find engineers working as taxi-drivers or in other entry-level careers after immigrating to Canada. Foreign credential recognition has recently emerged as a major focus for Canadians at many levels – within governments, professional associations, educational institutions, sector councils, and community agencies.

Roadblocks in the 21st Century

As professions and skilled trades developed, many workers followed a clearly mapped-out route of formal education and supervised work experience before being licensed to practice within their fields. However, in an increasingly global economy, career paths are rarely so clearly defined. Many Canadian workers, impacted by downsizing, mergers, and acquisitions, have been

laid off mid-career. Others have had their job descriptions dramatically changed; still others have relocated their families to accommodate job transfers within multinational organizations. Some workers are pushing back, choosing to downshift their careers to achieve greater work-life balance. Twenty-first century career changers need to be able to manoeuvre quickly and easily between organizations, occupations, industries, and, in many cases, countries.

However, just as traffic congestion tends to stop or delay motorists from entering, exiting, or travelling within a city, career roadblocks prevent many workers from entering new careers or transitioning within their old ones. Many of my clients and students are in the midst of mid-career transitions. Some feel like prisoners within their current professions – or invaders, unwelcome within professions that they are preparing to join.

Road systems have changed dramatically from the days of castles, fortresses, and walled cities with single, carefully guarded entrances. Ring roads and roundabouts have facilitated smoother traffic flow. Our systems for entering and moving between occupations might benefit from a similar redesign.

Ring Roads and Roundabouts: Easing the Flow

Ring roads could be compared to the national and international systems for navigating within and between careers; roundabouts, on the other hand, could represent the local systems that facilitate movement within or between organizations, professional associations, or industrial sectors.

For example, my work as a self-employed career counsellor crosses several professional boundaries. I am certified as a Global Career Development Facilitator (GCDF), a Registered Rehabilitation Professional (RRP), and a Canadian Certified Counsellor (CCC). Each requires memberships in different professional associations and tracking Continuing Education Units (CEUs) according to different guidelines. In all cases, however, my graduate degree in

counselling and my years of work experience were the qualifications that permitted my registration or certification.

In a similar example, a student in a program for career management professionals reported working under 10 different Codes of Ethics. Portfolio workers (i.e., individuals who juggle a variety of contracts with various employers) have become increasingly common in many industries. Yet many of our current systems create unnecessary roadblocks for portfolio workers and others who need to transition efficiently between jobs or organizations – applying for specific certifications, having credentials re-evaluated, and paying membership fees for several related associations takes time, energy, and money and, in many cases, is both inefficient and redundant.

The process could be likened to traffic jams entering major urban centres – even more frustrating if one successfully makes it through the first roadblock only to encounter another one. Ring roads, on the other hand, could link several related occupations – facilitating efficient entrances, exits, and transfer of knowledge. Roundabouts, on a smaller scale, could provide individuals with flexible options as they navigate career and life transitions.

The following sections highlight several Canadian initiatives attempting to expedite the flow of people between occupations, industrial sectors, and organizations: the Agreement on Internal Trade, Sector Councils, Essential Skills, Workplace Literacy, Foreign Credential Recognition, and, specific to career practitioners, the Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners. A Canadian initiative that guides career counsellors in their work with clients – the Blueprint for Life/Work Design – is also highlighted. Finally, I will profile the Pan-Canadian Symposium that brought employers, career practitioners, and policy makers to the same table to discuss career challenges within the Canadian workplace.

Agreement on Internal Trade

As part of an initiative to “reduce barriers to the movement of persons, goods, services and investments within Canada,” the Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT) was introduced in 1995 (Industry Canada, 2004, ¶1). Several articles within the Agreement facilitate recognition of competencies across provinces and territories. For example, Article 707 specifies that there should not be undue delays in assessing competencies of workers from another jurisdiction, nor should additional fees be charged to workers migrating from other parts of the country; Article 708 of the AIT addresses the need to reconcile differences in occupational standards across provinces. Ironically, in this regard, skilled trades are far ahead of professions within Canada. The Red Seal program, established in Canada in the 1950s, permits certified journeypersons in 45 trades to work anywhere within Canada after they successfully pass an Interprovincial Standards Exam (Red Seal, 2004).

Sector Councils

In an attempt to address anticipated skill shortages, representatives from industry, education, professional associations, and governments have formed “sector councils” in Canada (Human Resources and Skill Development Canada, HRSDC, 2004c). There are presently about 30 sector councils; that number is expected to double over the next couple of years. One of the mandates of sector councils is to facilitate mobility between occupations and organizations within the sector – similar to a roundabout that provides easy access to several new destinations from a common starting point. Lifelong learning and continuous skill development are recognized by sector councils as essential building blocks for a successful economy. According to HRSDC, “Sector councils have a proven track record of making workplace learning happen” (2004c, *Why councils?*, ¶4).

Essential Skills

At a pan-Canadian level, recent research has identified nine “essential skills” for Canadian workers. Essential skills are defined as “the fundamental skills that make it possible to learn all others” (HRSDC, 2004a, ¶1). These skills include: reading text, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, thinking skills, computer use, and continuous learning.

There are many advantages to having identified these essential skills. They have provided common language for students, workers, parents, teachers, career counsellors, curriculum developers, trainers, and employers and form the foundation for almost 200 occupational profiles across diverse industries (HRSDC, 2004a, ¶1, 3). Just as universal road signs guide drivers on ring roads and roundabouts whether in Europe or South America, introducing a common language is an important first step in facilitating mobility between occupations, regions, and industries. If an individual could describe work from one industry using a common language of core competencies or essential skills, that work might be more easily recognized and valued by an employer or association in a related industry. For example, a rehabilitation professional might find it easier to transition to work as a counsellor, or vice versa, if both associations based their registration or certification criteria on similar core competencies.

Workplace Literacy

One specific aspect of “essential skills” that has received recent attention is workplace literacy – reading, writing, math, critical thinking, and problem-solving (HRSDC, 2004b). HRSDC reports that individuals with higher literacy skills earn more money and spend less time unemployed – especially in the current knowledge economy. From a business perspective, individuals with higher literacy skills contribute to the organization’s bottom line by enhancing competitiveness and productivity. Therefore, some employers provide literacy training within the

workplace – contributing to building a lifelong learning culture. Literacy initiatives could serve as ring roads or roundabouts by contributing to general employability skills. Enhanced literacy might even be viewed as a “meta-skill” because it facilitates the ability to learn other skills and more fully participate in the workforce.

Foreign Credential Recognition

Foreign Credential Recognition (FCR) is another initiative designed to address labour market shortages and facilitate worker mobility within Canada. According to the Canadian Alliance of Education and Training Organizations (CAETO, 2004), “In Canada it takes on average 10 years before a highly skilled immigrant reaches the same level of employment as a Canadian with approximately equivalent credentials” (p. v). This is a significant issue in an increasingly competitive global economy – immigrants are being welcomed to Canada based on their education and work experience and, then, find themselves unable to access work within their professions. Although various organizations and governments have attempted to facilitate the assessment of foreign credentials, their work has not been well coordinated. Expediting the process of FCR could serve as a significant ring road – opening access routes to a wide variety of occupations within an increasingly global economy.

Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners

Another initiative is specific to the work of career practitioners. Many professional associations, governments, and private sector employers are focussing more on competencies than education (e.g., the AIT, described in a previous section). The Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners (S & Gs) is one example of this trend (National Steering Committee, 2004). The S & Gs identify core competencies and areas of specialization, deliberately avoiding specification of educational requirements due to the diverse backgrounds of

individuals working within the field. Lists of professional competencies can serve as roundabouts, providing common language to describe work experience from related professions or employers (e.g., counsellors and career practitioners would both be expected to have good listening skills and to be able to establish rapport and a strong working relationship with diverse clients).

Blueprint for Life/Work Design

The Blueprint for Life/Work Design, has identified 11 competencies that facilitate individual career management (Haché, Redekopp, & Jarvis, 2000). The competencies cluster into three areas: personal management, learning and work exploration, and life-work building. The Blueprint, similar to the AIT, the Essential Skills initiative, and the S & Gs, uses a competency framework to provide common language for the diverse professionals that assist individuals and organizations with career management concerns. Like a roundabout, the Blueprint facilitates efficient transitions between school, work, and other life arenas.

For example, an individual working on the issue of work-life balance (Competency 9: Maintaining balanced life and work roles) might begin by meeting with an Employee Assistance Program counsellor, who, in turn makes a referral to a doctor. The doctor might recognize job-related stress as contributing to health issues and recommend a leave from work. A rehabilitation counsellor might become involved in developing a return-to-work plan and refer the individual to a career counsellor to identify some occupations that might be more suitable. Imagine the confusion if all of these professionals were using different language as they worked on the same issue with this client. On the other hand, if the professionals used a common framework to develop their interventions and communicate with their client, the process would almost certainly become more efficient.

Working Connections: Pan-Canadian Symposium on Career Development, Lifelong Learning and Workforce Development

The Canadian Career Development Foundation (n.d.) has been instrumental in facilitating several national and international initiatives to address the complexity of career development in the 21st century. One such initiative, the Pan-Canadian Symposium, brought provincial teams of employers, policy makers, and career development specialists together in Toronto in November, 2003, to share ideas and resources to facilitate the career development of all Canadians. In the foreword to the conference proceedings, Bezanson and Renald (CCDF, 2004) summed up the symposium by saying, “Working Connections was much more a process than an event” (p. iii). The process began with some international conversations about career development; continued with the establishment of provincial and territorial inter-disciplinary teams who met prior to, during, and after the symposium to grapple with local career development issues; and is ongoing through the website, email listservs, and a current proposal for a follow-up symposium. There was a general sense that we need common language to move career development initiatives forward within Canada, but that, more than talk, we need to take action. Each provincial and territorial team is working at a local level to integrate career development policy and practice.

Career Counsellors as Advocates and Strategists for Smoother Career Transitions

As we have learned through the Pan-Canadian symposium, career counsellors and other career practitioners are well-positioned to advocate for policies and procedures that will facilitate smoother career transitions for their clients. More than most other professionals, they hear stories about the challenges faced by skilled and professional immigrants, expatriates and repatriates, displaced and injured workers, mid-career changers, and students attempting to navigate the school-to-work transition. They hear of not-quite-retired individuals who would like to transition

their skills into a new field as they downshift their careers. They hear the frustrations of highly skilled workers who are waiting for foreign credentials to be evaluated or taking redundant courses in attempts to re-establish their careers.

Just as ring roads and roundabouts take time to design and build, it may take considerable time to streamline the complex processes that currently cause roadblocks for skilled and professional workers. Those of us that are leaders within professional associations can advocate for recognition of credentials from related professions or from other jurisdictions (e.g., easing the process for a counsellor to register as a rehabilitation professional or for a counsellor educated abroad to have credentials recognized in Canada). Support for common language and core competency initiatives will ease transitions for clients; skills developed in one arena will become more clearly recognized as relevant for another. Career counsellors can help clients learn to communicate effectively in the common language (e.g., highlighting core competencies and essential skills on resumes, in career portfolios, and in interviews).

Summary

Some ring roads and roundabouts may have design flaws – “the Magic Roundabout” in Swindon, England, is so complex that one could drive around in circles indefinitely (Wood & Pryor, n.d.). Similarly, some of the initiatives designed to ease the flow of professionals and skilled workers will create new problems of their own (e.g., core competencies or standards of practice agreed upon by several members of a profession may result in excluding other members). With any road construction project, we have learned to expect some detours, traffic jams, and chaotic confusion – we can expect the same to hold true as we build better systems for navigating careers within a global workplace.

Change takes time. In 2003, then Canadian Prime Minister Chretien announced ring road projects in Alberta; apparently discussions about these roads began over half a century

previously. Although an agreement was negotiated with a local aboriginal community in March, 2005, to allow the planned road to cross its lands, it is still unclear when the actual construction will begin (Canadian Press, 2005).

I hope this presentation will contribute to discussions of how we, as career practitioners, employers, and policy makers, can contribute to easing the flow of skilled workers between occupations, organizations, industrial sectors, and geographical regions. Perhaps the time has come for building some ring roads and roundabouts to replace the restricted and carefully guarded entrances to our professional castles?

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