

Addressing the College-to-Work Transition

Implications for University Career Counselors

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This article reviews recent literature highlighting the challenges associated with the college-to-work transition and proposes a model for understanding the experience of workplace entry for new graduates. This model outlines three stages of development in the transition process, namely (a) anticipation, (b) adjustment, and (c) achievement, and identifies a number of challenges that can be addressed prior to college graduation. In response, this article suggests that university career counselors can play an increasingly supportive role in easing the complexities of the transition. Evidence indicates that students may benefit from a more thorough understanding of workplace realities and resources for coping with the significant change inherent in this transition experience. Implications for university career counselors are provided.

Keywords: *career counseling; college to work transition; organizational socialization; workplace entry*

The transition from college to work is a significant and often difficult process for the traditional undergraduate student (Holton, 2001; Polach, 2004). This difficulty is clearly evidenced by the high rate of job turnover among

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recent graduates. Studies show less than 50% of college educated employees remain with their first employer two years after graduation, with the average tenure at only 11 months (Gardner & Lambert, 1993; Holton, 1995; Sturges & Guest, 2001). Although recent graduates may change jobs for a number of reasons, including opportunities for further career advancement, research suggests a direct relationship between newcomer adjustment and turnover (Polach, 2004; Saks, Uggerslev, & Fassina, 2007; Sturges & Guest, 2001).

Whereas the negative effects of employee turnover (e.g., financial costs, time loss, and instability) have caught the attention of employers (Holton, 1995; Saks et al., 2007; Wanous, 1992), it is imperative that universities address students' preparation for this transition. Currently, career counseling in the university setting is primarily focused on choosing a major, improving resumés, practicing interview skills, and providing job search assistance. However, the transition from undergraduate education to the workplace involves challenges that extend beyond securing employment (Perrone & Vickers, 2003). Subsequently, the purpose of this article is to identify the common challenges that graduates encounter and provide a theoretical framework with relevant interventions that can be utilized at the university level to facilitate this transitional period.

Challenges in the College-to-Work Transition

There is a growing amount of research highlighting the difficulties associated with the transition from college to the workplace (Perrone & Vickers, 2003; Saks & Ashforth, 1997). By recognizing and understanding the key challenges involved, both graduates and university career counselors can better manage this period of adjustment. Phenomenological studies designed to capture the subjective experiences of graduates who recently completed their undergraduate degree reveal three clearly defined themes: (a) a change in culture associated with the transition between two different environments, (b) the lack of experience and skills required by employers, and (c) inaccurate expectations about work life (Gardner & Lambert, 1993; Graham & McKenzie, 1995; Perrone & Vickers, 2003).

Change in Culture

On entering the workplace, college graduates experience a considerable change in culture (Chao, 2005; Gardner & Lambert, 1993; Graham & McKenzie, 1995). Longitudinal studies following students from the university

through their first few years of work suggest that school and work are very different communities (Gardner & Lambert, 1993; Le Maistre & Paré, 2004). Results indicate that school and industry are distinct in purpose, activity, rules, and hierarchy. In addition, qualitative research shows that the cultural change from the university environment to the workplace dramatically affects the transition experience (Graham & McKenzie, 1995).

For example, a recent study (Sleap & Reed, 2006) found that 79% of graduates felt they had little or no awareness of work culture prior to entry. Similar studies (Holton, 1995; Kammerlyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003) surveying the organizational entry experiences of bachelor's degree graduates one year after graduation also found that graduates indicated a weak understanding of organizational culture. Furthermore, respondents to the above studies believed that this lack of knowledge negatively impacted the socialization process (Holton, 1995; Kammerlyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003; Sleap & Reed, 2006).

Results across studies suggest that the culture of the work environment differs from the culture students experience in the college setting in a number of ways. For instance, new graduates observe that interactions with fellow employees in the workplace are very different from their interactions with peers in college. Specifically, graduates note that it is difficult to get to know coworkers because employees are often isolated in their own workspace and focused on different tasks (Polach, 2004). They also report feeling uncomfortable as one of the few younger employees. Recent graduates are accustomed to interacting primarily with classmates about their same age; in the workplace they are surrounded by people of a much larger age range (Graham & McKenzie, 1995; Polach, 2004). In addition, Sagen (1990) found that the reversal in relative status, from an experienced college senior to an inexperienced new employee, is difficult for many new graduates.

The two environments also differ in the amount of structure and feedback provided. College is typically defined as a structured learning environment, with course syllabi outlining specific objectives and concrete measures of performance. Students regularly complete assignments and tests on which they are provided an indication of their performance (Chao, 2005). However, tasks in the workplace often arise unexpectedly and employees are offered limited guidance. In addition, employers typically conduct performance reviews on only an annual or semiannual basis. This relative lack of structure and direction is often initially challenging and frustrating for new graduates and may leave them feeling lost and unsupported (Graham & McKenzie, 1995; Hettich, 2000; Holton, 1998).

Although as employees graduates may receive less instruction on task completion, they are at the same time likely to experience a decrease in autonomy. College students are accustomed to working independently on tasks and being evaluated individually. Employees, on the other hand, are often required to work cooperatively with others and are evaluated as a collective group (Candy & Crebert, 1991). This shift corresponds with a change in goals. A college student's focus is generally on individual growth and development, whereas the focus in the workplace is largely on getting results for the organization (Hettich, 2000).

In the comparison above, several differences between the college and work environments emerge. New graduates must adapt to the interactions, structure, and work style that constitute organizational culture to become successful employees. The difficulties attributed to these adjustments are often then exacerbated by the lack of experience and skills required of new employees.

Lack of Experience and Skills

Graduates entering the workforce for the first time often lack the experience and skills required to obtain and perform jobs at satisfactory levels (Fallows & Steven, 2000; Perrone & Vickers, 2003). Results from longitudinal surveys of skill development in college and the workplace suggest that there is a mismatch between the skills graduates possess and those employers desire (Evers & Rush, 1996). Such findings have been based on both employer and graduate reports (Fallows & Steven, 2000; Perrone & Vickers, 2003).

According to employer reports, communication skills are ranked as a top priority for both securing and retaining employment (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2006; North & Worth, 1998). However, employers consistently state that new graduates lack effective oral and written communication skills. This is often apparent even in the application or interview, where students struggle to articulate how their educational experiences relate to the positions they seek (NACE, 2006). For example, Stevens (2005) found that less than 10% of the 74 employers surveyed were satisfied with the communication skills of newly hired college graduates. Oral and written skills appear to be in high demand, and employers consistently recommend that students receive extensive training in self expression, public speaking, and effectual writing.

Surveys of recent graduates suggest that deficiencies extend beyond communication skills. In a study by Nabi and Bagley (1999), graduates were asked

to assess both the importance of and their levels of ability for 25 transferable skills. Besides communication, time management, teamwork, and problem-solving skills were also assessed. The respondents rated the importance of all 25 skills higher than their own abilities. Corroborating these results, Slep and Reed (2006) found that graduates feel more emphasis needs to be placed on developing transferable skills during their undergraduate coursework.

Largely because of this disconnect regarding skills, prior work experience, whether paid or unpaid, is often a critical factor in employers' hiring decisions. However, traditional undergraduate students who have been enrolled full-time at the university during their course of study typically lack sufficient work experience (Fallows & Steven, 2000; Perrone & Vickers, 2003). Students are often discouraged to find that earning a university degree is not an automatic ticket to employment or, once hired, job competence and adequate performance (Graham & McKenzie, 1995).

Overall, research has found that the transition to employment following graduation is often difficult because the skills cultivated in the college classroom typically differ from those required to succeed in the workplace (Holton, 1998). At the same time, many graduating students lack the formal work experience necessary to develop the skills essential for successful employment. The combination of these factors creates a gap that leaves many new graduates unprepared for the workplace and may lead to questions concerning the worth of a college degree. Furthermore, because there are such significant differences in the culture and skills required within the two environments, students leaving college often do not know what to expect as they enter the workplace.

Inflated Expectations

Along with the difficulties associated with the change in culture and lack of skills required in the new environment, studies indicate that college graduates often hold unrealistic expectations of the workplace and their role as an employee (Gardner & Lambert, 1993; Perrone & Vickers, 2003). Thus, in addition to facing the challenges associated with learning the norms and skills important to the organization, graduates must also manage the disappointment resulting from unmet expectations. Research suggests that newcomers who must adjust their views to fit with the reality of the organization will experience greater stress and difficulty in their transition experience (Holton & Russell, 1997; Louis, 1980; Wanous, 1992).

A frequently cited study in organizational research, conducted by Gardner and Lambert (1993), demonstrated some of the discrepancies that exist between newcomers' expectations and their experienced reality. In utilizing a longitudinal design to assess the expectations of students approaching graduation and their experiences as employees two years later, the researchers found significant differences between expectations and reality for all variables evaluated. For example, college seniors anticipated having responsibility for a variety of tasks requiring a range of skills. They also expected to receive regular guidance and feedback from supervisors. However, as employees they described their work as routine and restricted and found that they were provided little direction and infrequent evaluation.

Overall, the research has indicated that graduating students are generally unfamiliar with the differences that exist between college and work and therefore anticipate little change. The inaccurate expectations they hold can be a cause of considerable disappointment, leading to job dissatisfaction (Gardner & Lambert, 1993; Graham & McKenzie, 1995; Perrone & Vickers, 2003). As job dissatisfaction is consistently related to decreased levels of well-being, performance, motivation, and ultimately employee turnover, the effects of this disappointment should not be dismissed (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003; Saks & Ashforth, 2000).

The problems identified that arise from the change in culture, lack of specific skills, and unmet expectations present significant challenges for students in the transition from college to work. Holton (1998) provided a clear summary of these interrelated problems by noting:

The paradox is that although the knowledge acquired in college is critical to graduates' success, the process of succeeding in school is very different from the process of succeeding at work. Many of the skills students developed to be successful in education processes and the behaviors for which they were rewarded are not the ones they need to be successful at work. Worse yet, the culture of education is so different that when . . . [graduates] continue to have the same expectations of their employers that they did of their college professors, they are greatly disappointed with their jobs and make costly career mistakes. (pp. 100-101)

Therefore, it is important for career counselors working with graduating students to address some of the difficulties inherent in the college-to-work transition. In developing methods to more effectively prepare and assist students in this transition, career counselors may benefit from a thorough understanding of the student's experience and needs during the process of organizational entry. Accordingly, we review theoretical perspectives and

propose a model that can inform this understanding and the development of effective interventions.

Transition Theories

The process by which newcomers learn and adapt to the norms and values of an organization is often referred to as “organizational socialization” (Polach, 2004; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Wanous, 1992). Several theoretical perspectives of organizational socialization have been developed in an attempt to better understand the transition experience of new employees and its associated outcomes. We suggest that models of organizational socialization that break down the process of workplace entry into dynamic stages can provide a clear and organized method for examining the college-to-work transition.

Notably, theories of organizational socialization coincide with and supplement traditional models of career development by expanding on one aspect of the larger process—workplace entry. Career development and transition theories such as Super’s life-span, life-space theory of career development (Super, 1992; Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996) and Schlossberg’s transition theory (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) have typically been applied independent of socialization theories. However, these theories can be used in conjunction with stage models to further identify where challenges occur and appropriate modes of intervention.

Below, we outline a three-stage model of organizational socialization developed to understand the unique experience of college graduates. This framework draws on commonalities across the more prevalent socialization stage models, proposed by Feldman (1976), Louis (1980), Porter, Lawler, and Hackman (1975), Schein (1978), and Wanous (1992), and incorporates concepts from established career development and transitional theories. Importantly, although this model suggests that the transition process can be divided into three defined stages, we view the process of socialization as continuous and passage between the proposed stages as flexible, with individuals likely to recycle through the process during their work life.

1. **Anticipation:** The first stage of the socialization process is exploratory in nature and occurs before individuals actually enter into an organization. During this time, prospective employees gather and evaluate information regarding employment, formulate expectations about organizations and employees’ roles, and determine their needs and wants (Feldman, 1976;

Louis, 1980; Porter et al., 1975). These steps are central to transition outcomes, as occupational choice and workplace adjustment are often largely dependent on the evaluation of available career information and a developed understanding of self (Super, 1990, 1992). It is important to note that the first stage of a transition can also be viewed as “moving out” (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg et al., 1995). Individuals experiencing transition are entering a new stage while leaving something behind. Thus, in addition to exploring what comes next, the anticipation stage may involve reconciling a loss of the familiar.

2. **Adjustment:** The second stage begins at the time of organizational entry. At this point in the transition process, new employees work to establish themselves as productive and valuable members of the organization. An important task in achieving this objective is becoming familiar with the workplace culture (Super et al., 1996). In addition, newcomers continue to learn the skills and tasks essential to their positions, build relationships within the workplace, develop role clarity, and evaluate their performance (Feldman, 1976; Schlossberg et al., 1995; Wanous, 1992). Finally, employees’ evaluation of the workplace is an essential element of the adjustment stage, as newcomers’ expectations are tested and discrepancies between their vision and reality may emerge (Louis, 1980; Porter et al., 1975; Wanous, 1992).
3. **Achievement:** Advancement to the third stage of the socialization process requires that the newcomers have evaluated their places within the organization. At this point, employees work to maintain membership (Super, 1992). This may include adopting new values, establishing an altered self-image, and acquiring new behaviors (Porter et al., 1975; Wanous, 1992). Successful socialization signals the end of this stage and is characterized by high levels of employee satisfaction, mutual acceptance between the organization and employee, newcomer commitment to the organization, and internal work motivation (Feldman, 1976; Schein, 1978, Wanous, 1992).

Implications for Career Counseling

An analysis of the key challenges involved in the college-to-work transition and the general process of organizational entry provides important insights regarding effective interventions that may be implemented at the university level. Importantly, we specify a number of suggestions for univer-

sity career counselors and the university system in general. Although career counselors are likely to encounter barriers when trying to initiate systemic changes, we encourage counselors to inform and collaborate with university administrators to address changes that could benefit students and the university. This perspective is consistent with the view that counselors increasingly need to serve as advocates, consultants, and agents of change beyond the individual level (Sue, 2001; Vera & Speight, 2003).

As outlined in the stage model above, the socialization process for students entering the workplace is likely to begin before college graduation. This suggests university career counselors might facilitate the transition experience by directly addressing the needs of students in anticipation and preparing them for the challenges presented in the adjustment stage. The recommendations that follow focus on (a) providing students with accurate information regarding employment during anticipation, (b) ensuring that students develop the skills required for successful adjustment, and (c) supporting students in coping with the process of change to aid movement toward achievement.

Addressing Anticipation Needs: Pre-Entry Knowledge and Expectations

The stage model of organizational socialization proposed above suggests that newcomers formulate expectations about an organization and their role as an employee during the stage of anticipation. These expectations are then tested during the adjustment stage and discrepancies between vision and reality may emerge (Feldman, 1976; Louis, 1980; Porter et al., 1975; Wanous, 1992). Reducing the degree of potential discrepancy could play an important role in easing the transition. Individuals who have developed accurate expectations are better prepared for the workplace and report more positive experiences in their transition from student to employee (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003). These students are likely to select more suitable employment and face less surprise than those who hold inaccurate expectations (Vandenberg & Scarpello, 1990).

In addition, uncertainty regarding the transition process is reduced as newcomers gather information (Saks & Ashforth, 1997; Van Mannen & Schein, 1979). Thus, it follows that expectation formation is directly related to the knowledge graduates possess prior to organizational entry and that unmet expectations are more prevalent among individuals with poor pre-entry knowledge (Saks & Ashforth, 2000). Unfortunately, newcomers often find

that they were not readily provided with sufficient information to accurately anticipate their jobs (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003).

In consideration of both research and theory, university career counselors can help graduates by working to ensure that they are provided accurate information and develop appropriate expectations regarding the workplace. This may be accomplished by actively assisting students in the anticipation stage as they gather information about careers and organizations. Career counselors might establish various methods through which students can seek out accurate information by developing stronger relationships between the university and local organizations. In addition, universities can utilize their alumni base to supply students with professional contacts for conducting information interviews. Such conversations with professionals may challenge students' assumptions regarding specific careers and provide accurate information about occupations and places of work.

Additionally, researchers have suggested that graduates hold certain expectations largely because employers trying to recruit new employees paint an unrealistically attractive picture of the organization (Graham & McKenzie, 1995; Phillips, 1998; Wanous, 1992). Realistic job previews during the recruitment process have been linked to an increase in accurate expectation formation, greater job satisfaction, and lower new-employee turnover (Phillips, 1998; Wanous, Poland, Premack, & Davis, 1992). Thus, it is also important that career counselors inform recruiters about the harmful consequences that result from presenting a job or organization in an overly positive manner. Graduates who enter the workplace with accurate perceptions of their jobs report higher levels of satisfaction, internal work motivation, organizational commitment, and psychological well-being (Holton & Russell, 1997; Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003).

Preparing for Adjustment: Work Experience and Skills

Because college and the workplace differ significantly in purpose and activity, a number of skills critical for employment are not developed in the college classroom. This leaves many students unprepared for the transition to work. Therefore, graduates and employers often stress that work experience may be the missing ingredient in undergraduate education (Blackwell, Bowes, Harvey, Hesketh, & Knight, 2001; Neill, Mulholland, Ross, & Leckey, 2004). In fact, Neill et al. (2004) found that both students and employers recognize part-time work during college as a significant advantage. Specifically, more than 70% of students surveyed who had engaged in

part-time work during their undergraduate studies concluded that work experience positively influenced hiring decisions. Employers participating in the study confirmed the students' perception, believing that part-time work experience, whether paid or voluntary, familiarized students with the work environment and demonstrated discipline and motivation. Moreover, some employers explicitly said that a lack of work experience was a definite disadvantage.

In view of the research and graduate reports indicating that the skills linked to employability—namely communication, adaptability, teamwork, and time management—are enhanced primarily through part-time work experience rather than college coursework (Nabi & Bagely, 1999; Neill et al., 2004; Sleaf & Reed, 2006), career counselors should encourage universities to implement workplace realities and the required skills into the college curriculum. Schlossberg et al. (1995) suggested that for anticipated transitions, such as starting a first job, the opportunity to engage in role rehearsal can significantly ease the adjustment process. Preparation for workplace entry through rehearsal could be accomplished by advising, or even requiring, students to interact with industry through field work experiences, such as job shadowing and internships. Faculty could also be encouraged to create an active learning environment in which students would be required to apply theoretical knowledge to authentic problems and real-life cases.

By incorporating work experience with classroom instruction, students will be able to put theory into practice and to test and expand their abilities, interests, and knowledge while gathering information about the workplace. In this way, university career counselors can ensure that graduates possess the experience and skills essential for the workplace. This preparation is likely to reduce the challenges encountered during the adjustment stage of socialization, in that students will be familiar with the skills required for successful performance and more readily able to adapt to the workplace culture.

Moving Toward Achievement: Resources for Coping in Anticipation and Adjustment

Individuals transitioning from college to the workplace may also benefit from direct support in coping with change. As indicated in the stage model above, transition involves passage from the familiar to the unknown. Many students approaching graduation experience feelings of loss and depression or intense stress and anxiety (Perrone & Vickers, 2003; Wood, 2004) as they leave their current role and confront greater independence, unfamiliar

responsibilities, and a new social identity. Often these feelings leave students paralyzed, uncertain of how to approach this new stage of life (Graham & McKenzie, 1995; Wood, 2004). Thus, methods such as seminars or capstone courses, workshops, and focus groups, in which students can explore and develop a more complete understanding of the transition process while identifying resources for support and coping, may be important elements in designing effective interventions.

Seminar and capstone courses often serve as a culminating experience and a method for summative evaluation during the senior year of undergraduate education (Brooks, Benton-Kupper, & Slayton, 2004). Such courses may be a promising approach to preparing students for the transition to work by helping graduating students integrate what they have learned across their college courses and through their college experience in general. These courses can also be an appropriate place to address how students can effectively connect their coursework to career, specifically by guiding students in identifying the transferrable skills they have already developed and how these can be applied in the workplace. Finally, inviting guest speakers, such as recent graduates and local business representatives, could be an effectual way to present and discuss the experiences that lie ahead.

Workshops and focus groups may serve as less formal methods for exploring the transition and providing support. Discussions regarding the feelings students experience and the challenges new graduates face can reduce the ambiguity surrounding the role change from student to employee. Career counselors might develop workshops that address topics such as thoughts and expectations about graduation and the life beyond, general differences between college and the workplace, professionalism, adapting to workplace cultures, and creating new social networks within new environments. Focus groups, or group counseling, may also be used to address similar topics. Notably, a number of the therapeutic factors in group work identified by Yalom (2005) are relevant to students in transition. These include the imparting of information, whereby obtaining information about the change can help students gain a sense of control, and universality, where students can be assured that they are not alone, and that they share feelings regarding the transition experience. Groups may also function as a place to develop individualized plans for coping with the transition experience. Overall, these methods can be an efficient way for career counselors to assist students in coping with the changes associated with the college-to-work transition.

Conclusion

The review above indicates that the transition from college to work is a difficult experience involving significant change. Theory and research indicate that the transition begins prior to actual entry into the workplace and that this period is critical to transition outcomes. Given that successful entry is largely associated with pre-entry knowledge and experiences, career counselors can play an important role in preparing students for the transition process. The model presented in this report can serve as an effective tool for understanding the challenges graduates encounter and identifying effective methods that can be utilized at the university level to facilitate the college-to-work transition.

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