Abstract

The very nature of work is changing because of rapid social change, a culture of abundance, and the ability to substitute information for equipment, inventory, and other material aspects of value creation. In America, we are experiencing an erosion of the concept of a "job," a dramatic shift to service and information as the basis for value added, market commercialism, and the importance of the self-managed career. In some of these areas, dentistry has been consistent with the patterns of innovation—even being a model in some cases. There are also areas where dentistry is moving in contrary directions.

Work isn't what it used to be. We do it in different ways, at different places, and for different reasons than we did in generations before. The way dentistry is practiced has changed, but perhaps not as much as the difference we now see in work patterns in America generally. When we look closely at it, we will find that dentistry is changing in harmony with the evolution in work patterns generally, and in some cases, not changing at all or moving in a contrary direction.

When I came to San Francisco in 1971, I visited a business acquaintance of my grandfather's. It was an enjoyable evening of light conversation as this older man and his wife shared their experiences with a kid just out of school. He summarized his life in these terms, "After high school I went with Grace." He was referring to Grace Shipping Lines, and he wanted me to understand that everything that had happened to him since late adolescence was a result of that decision. Grace determined where he lived, where he traveled and vacationed, what he did each day of the week, how much he earned, the way he dressed, his friends, and even his outlook on life. His wife went with her husband, and there is nothing more to say about that.

There are still examples of such men and women, but they are a dwindling minority. Today, the typical American will have three careers (not jobs), and that does not include the half who have already worked momentarily in the fast food industry. One hundred and fifty years ago, 47% of Americans worked on farms and 2% were professionals. Today, 1% are in agriculture and the proportion of professionals is one in five.

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Dejobbing

Jobs are a creation of the Industrial Revolution. In the middle ages, the word was "gob," and it meant roughly a lump or pile of stuff that had to be handled. "The horse left a job in the driveway." Gradually, job came to refer to the doing of specific tasks, "Cleaning up that mess will be a job." With the need for standardization and a mass labor force introduced by mechanization in the late 1700s, workers became associated with bundles of tasks that were repetitive, and the term came to stand for opportunity and obligation to do a particular class of work. Workers now "had" jobs instead of "doing" them, compensation shifted from outcomes to time available, and people's identities became defined in terms of the jobs they held.

Certainly at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, privileged gentleman abhorred jobs. Even when one was quite good at something, it was preferable to style oneself as an amateur and to avoid being characterized by what work one did. Being called a professional was anything but a compliment. Benjamin Franklin, for example would have bristled if he had been complimented as a scientist. He was a natural philosopher.

But mass manufacturing is withering, and so is the concept of a job. Union membership is approximately one quarter of what it was fifty years ago. Machines are now doing many of the jobs and others have been exported. Who knows how to shoe a horse, repair a television set with vacuum tubes, or pick cotton? At my high school reunion a number of years ago, I scanned the lists of work my classmates listed. At least half of the jobs (environmental engineer,
computer programmer, personal trainer) didn’t even exist when we graduated from high school.

Dentists have been way ahead of the curve in the process of dejobbing work. Although dentists take great pride in crowns that fit perfectly and surgeries that heal as they are expected to, all of what they sell you in the box is about 15%, something tangible you could drop on your toe and the rest is design, marketing, service support, reputation, access to software and other hardware, and repairs.

Americans add value to their lives through service and information because the essentials of life (food, shelter, security) exist in abundance and because information in particular is not dependent on time and location in the same way material things are.

Dentistry is custom work and “putting the patient first” means that dentistry will always be more than a collection of jobs. Management gurus are telling companies in America today that the future involves selective outsourcing and mass customization. Dentistry, with its patterns of patient centered care and referral to specialists, has been doing this for decades.

Information and Service

Some work is pure service, such as waiting tables or being a prison guard. Some is pure information, such as newspaper careers or computer programmers. Some—such as education, entertainment, and many aspects of health care—are combinations of both. Counting the service and mixed categories together, 70% of every dollar in the American economy is spent on services, and the number is heading for 80%. Taking the information perspective and including pure and mixed information components of our economy also shows that 70% and perhaps soon 80% of the economy is engaged in the information business. There just is not very much agriculture or manufacturing left. And much of what is thought of as manufacturing is really service and information. IBM doesn’t really make computers, and neither does Compaq. The “manufacturing” is largely a matter of gluing a brand label on the equipment that is made by someone else. The value of what they sell you in the box is about 15%, something tangible you could drop on your toe and the rest is design, marketing, service support, reputation, access to software and other hardware, and repairs.

Dentistry has followed the trend of substituting service and information for material things and this has proven to be a major driver for value. In 1960, dentists spent about three quarters of their time in the manufacturing end of practice, doing crowns, bridges, dentures, and amalgam and gold foil restorations. Today, these procedures account for less than half of a typical dentist’s productivity, and dentists are spending less time at chair side. They are doing more diagnostic, prevention, management of the team of auxiliaries, claims and other paperwork, and even marketing. They are using more skilled help, especially in orthodontic offices, and are actively involved in insurance. As a result of substituting information and service for some portion of the manufacturing functions of dentistry, practitioners have significantly improved productivity and have been rewarded with incomes that have increased consistently beyond the cost of living.

Although service and information are increasingly important in dentistry, the change has not been as complete or as enthusiastic as it has been in other parts of the American economy. The potential for adding value through information is limited by the size of the organization. This is why group practices are becoming more popular in dentistry and why the larger practices enjoy the greatest profits. Dentists’ traditional sense of pride in their handwork is also a limiting factor. The compensation structure of billing by procedure that dentist originally chose and insurance companies have now locked the profession into further limits the capacity of dentists to use service and information to add value. The non-insurance practices are the ones most capable of charging a fair price for comprehensive diagnosis, long term management of patients’ health, and personal service. The difference in popularity among practitioners between

Leadership

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Career Complexity

Because of the pace of change in society, the freeing of work from intensive
manufacturing, a culture of abundance, and the importance of information that can be sold simultaneously to multiple customers, the nature of the work one does over a lifetime has become more complex. Americans now change their work to “get ahead” or “find fulfillment” rather than sticking with what they have for the sake of security. Re-entry education is now an important part of the curriculum at every college. The part time MBA—an outlet for under-challenged people early in their careers and a common base for switching careers—is still the cash cow at most universities. Americans are also working more “jobs” simultaneously. It used to be that moonlighting was term with a faint odor. It was a signal that your current employment was insufficient for your economic needs. Now, multiple simultaneous jobs are badges that one’s expertise is widely appreciated, that one is engaged in career growth, and that economic risk is being diversified.

Dentists are typical of part of this trend toward career complexity and untypical of other parts. There are small numbers of second career individuals entering dental schools, but dentistry is unique among career paths in that it is chosen by many during high school rather than college. Orthodontists work with young people at a very impressionable time in their lives. Although dentists claim in large numbers that if they had known everything about it they would have never chosen dentistry, their behavior proves this is just a gripe. (They can’t complain about their boss.) Aside from the obvious benefits of economic return, independence, and satisfying work, dentists have large investments in capital and patient rapport. The average American is fifteen times as likely to voluntarily change careers than is a dentist.

On the other hand, dentists do engage in multiple careers. They are active in organized dentistry, they give continuing education programs, teach in dental schools, consult for insurance companies, and make golf clubs and sell real estate. This branching out in dentistry is due in part to the intensity of practice and the ability of dentists to earn a substantial income in fewer than five days a week. (The average dentist now works thirty-seven hours each week. This is a reduction at a time when the typical American workload is increasing.)

Multi-jobbing is common at the end of dental careers, and may involve exploration of work related to hobbies or life-long interests, investing, and other secondary interests remote from dentistry. It is also very common at the beginning of dentists’ careers. Counting associateship, working as an employee in a dental office, owning one’s own practice, teaching, and working entirely out of the profession as different forms of expertise is widely appreciated, that one is engaged in career growth, and that economic risk is being diversified.

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everyone, not just those whose years of career experience in a focused area built up expertise. The architecture of the Internet also demonstrates new practices of working by project and not by job. Standardization of terminology, coding, and transmitting, make it possible to operate in vary small units that are reassembled in flexible ways for multiple specific purposes. Headhunters, personal coaches, trainers, and even personal public relations specialists are rapidly growing industries. Tom Peters recently published a book with a subtitle, Brand You, where he suggests that the new economic heroes don’t run companies they are the company. He offers as the new model for success Martha Stewart, Dr. Phil, professional athletes and supermodels, and any of the headliners at the ADA Convention.

Dentists tend to be ahead of the curve in this aspect of the emerging approach to work. Although practices are self contained businesses, dentists focus intensely on those areas where they can add the most value to their patients. Accounting, hygiene, front desk operations, supply ordering, infection control, and computers are contracted out, typically on a project basis rather than by hiring categories of employees. A balance has to be maintained in order to avoid the fragmentation that is plaguing medicine, but additional profits could be taken by dentists if they send patients to independent radiography laboratories or independent hygiene practitioners or otherwise engage the patient in underwriting part of their own care. Where dentists do their own computer or laboratory work, it is usually out of a sense of personal enjoyment in these activities rather than an economic decision.

Just as internal markets for work are creating a consultant class generally, gurus are becoming a fixture in dentistry. A number of dentists now sell two products, one is dental care to patients and the other is information on how they provide that care. The information, along with the expectation of its benefits, is sold to other dentists. This market is now supported by state dental practice acts that require specific numbers of continuing education credits. It is probable that most dentists spend more on education after they graduate from dental school then they do when earning their professional degrees. This market commercialism is very current and business like. But it is certainly different from the Hippocratic tradition, whose oath contains these words “To reckon him who taught me this Art equally dear to me as my own parents, to share my substance with him, and relieve his necessites if required; to look upon his offspring on the same footing as my own brothers, and to teach them this Art, if they shall wish to learn it, without fee or stipulation.”

Self Managed Careers

A consequence of dejobbing, the role of service and information, complexity and overlap, and market commercialism is a profound shift in who is responsible for workers’ careers. When my grandfather’s friend said he “went with Grace,” he meant that Grace Shipping Lines assumed responsibility for his career. But the values of loyalty and security are being replaced by flexibility and growth. The best way to make certain that you have a job today is to be able to add value in a rapidly changing environment. And responsibility for career growth has to be in the hands of each worker.

All that need be said about responsibility for continuous career growth is that dentistry has set the model which the rest of the workforce should emulate.

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**Recommended Reading**


The job is not going to be part of tomorrow’s economic reality. Although there will always be enormous amounts of work to do, this book suggests that the work will not be contained in the familiar envelopes we call jobs. It is a truism that today’s careers must be self-managed. Bridges gave up his college teaching job to find work — consulting on dejobbing.


The first of these research articles describes the multiple jobs of dentists early in their careers. The second discusses work values over the entire professional career.


Inventorys and then critiques traditional theories of motivation in the work environment. Proposes instead that there are five patterns of internal drives: innovator, expert, helper, defender, and self-developer. Effective organizations match tasks with the drivers. Dentists would tend to be “experts” and seek situations where they can demonstrate “mastery.”
Maister, D. H. (1993). Managing the professional service firm. New York, NY: The Free Press. Describes how professional service firms such as law offices, accountants, and to some extent, healthcare and educational organizations function by adding value for customers through knowledge, face-to-face interaction, and customized problem solving. Success can come in only two ways: substituting a class of customers who need higher value and by leveraging the ratio of senior to junior professionals. Underdelegation is a killer.

Peltier, B. (2001). The psychology of executive coaching: Theory and application. Ann Arbor, MI: Sheridan Books. Executive coaching is one-on-one work designed to improve the skills of organizations’ leaders on the assumption that improved capability will filter through the organization. The book lays foundations for coaching in alternative psychological theories: psychodynamic, behavioral, person-centered, cognitive, family, hypnotic, social, existential, and others.

*Peters, Tom (1999). Reinventing work: the brand you 50 New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.ISBN 0-375-40772-3; 200 pages; about $16. Urges us all to become CEOs of our own companies where we are the only product—brand you. “Begin to think and act like an Independent Contractor. Even if you plan, for the foreseeable future, to stay on someone’s payroll, an Independent Contractor is self-reliant. Dependent on her-his skill ... And the constant upgrading thereof. An Independent Contractor has ... In the end ... ‘Only’ her-his Track Record. I.e.: her-his Projects.” “I am as good as my last-next gig.” A brand is a promise. “Survivors will ‘be’ a product ... And exhibit clear-cut distinction at ... Something.” This is not a book in the traditional sense, but an outline for a book that might be written, with crude language and typographical and stylistic elements added to convey emotion rather than the rational development of thoughts. Fifty very short chapters that are nubs [Peters’ word] of ideas and suggested actions to be taken—many of them with the added exhortation that the action must be taken now. Two paragraphs following show Peters’ typical style. First paragraph in its entirety: “Love that!” Second paragraph: “Master. Growth. Distinction. WOW Projects. Autonomy. Self-control. WHAT I VALUE. These are the staples of Brand You.” BrandMe/ Inc./You & Co. (And, again: What a difference from Dilbert-ville?)”

Schön, D. A. (1983). The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action. New York, NY: Basic Books. This book started the study of how professionals work and popularized an approach to learning as reflection on how one is performing. Professionals learn by reflecting-in-action (thinking about what they are doing while doing it) as opposed to learning about their subject or reflecting on what they have done. Professionalization means absorbing a template for how to reflect-in-action. Practice is defined as custom problem solving, using professional templates, on a very narrow range of problems.


**Editor’s Note**

Summaries are available for the three recommended readings preceded by asterisks. Each is about four pages and conveys both the tone and content of the original source through extensive quotations. These summaries are designed for busy readers who want the essence of these references in fifteen minutes rather than five hours. Summaries are available from the ACD Executive Offices in Gaithersburg. A donation to the ACD Foundation of $15 is suggested for the set of summaries on work; a donation of $50 would bring you summaries for all of the 2002 leadership topics.