

"COUNSELLING OLDER APPLICANTS FOR EMPLOYMENT"

by

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"In heathen times, when skulls were thick, did primal passions rage.
They had a method, sure and quick, to cure the blight of age.
If one's native youth had fled, and time had sapped his vim,
They simply popped him on the head; that was the last of him.
But in this, our enlightened age, we're made of finer stuff.
And so we look with righteous rage, on methods crude and tough
So when our man grows old and grey, and bent and short of breath
We simply take his job away, and let him starve to death."

Dr. C. Ward Crampton of New York City in his book "Live Long and Like It" says - "Now that doctors have made it possible for people to live longer, our next task is to make old age tolerable." Foremost among the intolerable things vitally affecting a growing number of the aging is uselessness or unemployment. The resistance of many employers to engage workers over 45 - in some cases - over 35, creates serious problems. Personal frustration results. Also if left unemployed, there is economic loss to the individual, the community and the nation concerned. Again, since life is a continuing process, one must remain active to survive. Compulsory retirement at 60 or 65 causes many older persons to atrophy and die.

Alive to these problems, four years ago, a survey of "the over 45" applicants for employment was made by the Ontario Region of the Canadian Unemployment Insurance Commission-National Employment Service. One recommendation of the survey report was that counselling of many of these persons should be considered. The report of the survey reads in part:

"Many will need counselling. Because they have become accustomed to think of work in terms of jobs in definite factories or shops, they must be given guidance to think in new terms of work possibilities. They must become willing to experiment along new lines-----A parallel exists between youth and age. In youth, vocational guidance is one of the major needs - the youth has no work experience - has no intimate knowledge of the requirements of the many occupations, and of the advantages and disadvantages involved in them. He must relate his training, ability and interests to possible occupational fields. The older person, too, requires vocational guidance. He is reluctant to admit that he can no longer keep pace or fit into the occupation in which he has been successful and happy. Providing guidance for such individuals is just as essential as for youth, but it requires a radically different approach and technique and as much, if not more, expert direction."

Accordingly on December 1, 1947, an interesting experiment was undertaken in Toronto, Canada - the counselling of mature applicants for work. Mr. B.G. Sullivan, Ontario Superintendent, Unemployment Insurance - National Employment Service, was the man who sparked the enterprise. We have been told that the N.E.S. was the first state employment service to recognize the plight of the older unemployed and to seek to remedy it through special intensive counselling. The aims of the project were:

(1) to better understand the older unemployed. This was our first scientific attempt to do this.

(2) to re-classify workers, where necessary, into their most promising fields of employment. The development and results of this counselling service form a fascinating story. This work has been endorsed by the Canadian Unemployment Insurance Commission and is going forward in five Canadian cities.

The first task of the counsellors was to study the philosophy and techniques necessary for interviewing older persons. Relevant literature was read. It became clear that our group was a frustrated, confused, defeated segment of society. How great the frustration was depended on the sensitiveness of the individual and the number of "refusals-to-hire" he had encountered.

Remember we were not miracle-workers. We were people just like you, with a genuine interest in the job before us. We desired to assist these discouraged people to the best of our ability. Our problem was - How best to do it!

We reached an important decision. We decided that we would be extremely courteous and understanding in all our dealings with these individuals. Courtesy is a must in all social relationships. You may think that it should be taken for granted - that it is not worth special mention. However, it is my firm conviction that whatever success we reached depended upon this decision. Courtesy manifested itself in a genuine interest on the part of the counsellors in the stories of the applicants. Everything - their academic and employment successes and failures, their personal problems, their leisure time activities and their ambitions were all treated with the utmost consideration! The aim was to listen attentively, and briefly answer questions regarding job opportunities. We endeavoured to assist them to evaluate themselves and to decide for themselves what they would prefer, and were capable of doing. In this sense, the counselling was non-directive. The interviews were not hurried. A one-hour minimum was deemed necessary for an interview. Appointments for additional interviews, as desired and required, were arranged.

Now an amazing thing occurred! As these mature persons talked freely in a friendly and understanding atmosphere they were actually transformed! Instead of fearful, confused, and defeated people we saw appearing before our very eyes - happy, eager and purposeful individuals. They universally remarked "This is wonderful"! One older school teacher said "I did not know before that anybody really cared whether I was employed or not". They gained real insight into their own work possibilities. They left with a definite job plan of their own making - and with a fresh determination to put it into operation.

Those counselled formed a dependable group. The criterion used to test stability was five years continuous employment with one employer. Judged by this yardstick the vast majority were most stable. Many had records of 20, 30 and some 40 to 50 years continuous work experience. One man (82) had been 66 years with one firm!

Practically all persons claimed that their major problem was economic. They needed work urgently in order to maintain their homes. Sixty per cent of those counselled were over 60 years. Twelve per cent were on retirement pensions. For the most part these pensions were low in amount and needed to be supplemented by wages.

Contrary to popular opinion, the health of four fifths of those interviewed appeared to be good. Elderly persons should rightly have all the afflictions of age. Our group was remarkably free from these. They were for the most part "disgustingly healthy". Each applicant gave the name of his physician, and where it was deemed necessary, written permission for the counsellor to consult his doctor. The advice of the latter was often most helpful in the selection of suitable occupations.

Concerning their education and training - forty three per cent had the advantage of secondary school education and ten per cent had attended University; a small number had taken post graduate studies. At least six of the learned professions were represented. Many had taken specialized courses to fit them for their vocations.

The results of such intensive counselling are far reaching.

1. Increased Job Opportunities

Older applicants, discouraged by repeated refusals-to-hire have gained new perspective and assurance. The job opportunities of each were enlarged from a mere one or two choices to three or four, in some cases six or eight, possibilities. One writer in commenting on this said there was usually an upgrading in classification. To date approximately 5000 of these difficult-to-place applicants have been counselled. From checks made it is evident that there have been some 3200 securing permanent employment after counselling. Some two-thirds of this number found their own jobs unassisted after counselling. Again whereas people in the older worker placement field say that it is almost impossible to place a man over 60 - one half of the people securing jobs were over 60 years of age!

The employment of 3200 individuals at the modest salary of \$35.00 per week, means an added buying power to the community and country of approximately six million dollars per year.

A sample check of twenty per cent of those securing employment after counselling some eighteen months later showed ninety per cent still employed at the same jobs.

2. Added Prestige to the Canadian National Employment Service

The fact that our Employment Service had the vision to undertake this pioneering work has been recognized in Canada, the United States, Great Britain, and other countries. Letters of enquiry and commendation arrive regularly from widely separated points.

The Canadian Department of Labour Minister, Hon. Milton Gregg, and Deputy Minister Dr. Arthur MacNamara are still seeking a solution to the problems of older workers. Some little time ago the Department of Labour requested the National Film Board to prepare a documentary film "Date of Birth". This film which explains the values inherent in older workers has been shown to employers across Canada.

Some Successful Applicants Securing Work After Counselling

A.B. - 57 - competent secretary until her marriage 30 years ago. Accustomed to driving a car. Since her husband's death she had tried for some time to obtain employment as a stenographer. She confessed somewhat hesitatingly to her counsellor that what she really wanted was a position as Secretary-Companion-Chauffeur to a woman interested in travel. Her counsellor thought it an excellent idea and mapped out a plan for her. Ten days later A. B. telephoned gleefully - "I've got it! We're flying to England on Saturday. The car is going ahead. We're spending the summer touring the continent. I have a job - one I like!"

C.D. 67 years of age. Quite deaf. He had been interviewed by scores of employment officers and personnel men. His entire employment record was one of unskilled work in odd jobs. Yet he was, apparently an intelligent man - one who would not naturally be a drifter. Finally he came to a counsellor. The counsellor was not satisfied. The conversation went like this:

"Surely Mr. Dillon during your 50 years or so you have worked at some job long enough to acquire a real skill",

"My old trade is gone -- they haven't done that work for thirty years".

"What type of work did you do?"

"Many years ago I worked at the Canadian National Railway building passenger cars - but they build them of steel now".

"Then you were a wooden car builder".

"Why yes, yes—but they don't do that now".

"Tell me more ---- "

"Well then I went to Chrysler in Detroit where they were making motor cars. I tell you, we did a swell job on the wood work in those days".

A local firm was seeking a man to work permanently building wooden partitions and do other work in wood repairing. C.D.'s qualifications were outlined to the firm - the Company's reply: "That is exactly the man we want!"

"He is past 65 years of age"

"That is perfectly alright"

"He is quite hard of hearing"

"That is alright. We'll write out instructions to him".

The man was engaged. The firm is more than satisfied and C.D. is becoming more youthful every day. He is definitely happy using his skills.

E.F. - 69 years of age - strong and healthy man. 38 years with a national firm. Excellent business record, receiving five digit salary when he retired. Greatly discouraged by continued unemployment of more than a year's duration. Had tried to secure work at various jobs. He apparently was not wanted. His counsellor said "You must have saved your firm thousands of dollars through good business practices!" His reply "Yes, certainly I did". The possibilities of working for a firm which was losing out by not adhering to business practices was mentioned. "You might be a resurrector of failing businesses". He snapped his fingers "That's it" "I could do it!" "I know a firm that needs me!" Next day he sold his services to a firm requiring attention. His acumen vitalized this concern. One month after his appointment he was made a director and three months later vice-president.