

# Career Self-help Advice in the US and Its Limits

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## 미국 커리어 자기계발 조언과 이의 문제점 고찰

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**Abstract** This paper examines career self-help advice in light of its influence on white-collar job searching in the US. After a brief overview of the white-collar labor market changes in the past few decades and the rise of the career self-help industry in America, it focuses on career self-help advice concerning a resume and networking that involves the use of information communication technology (ICT) through the review of career self-help manuals and other related literature. Finally, it looks at some of its major limits, especially the problem of presenting job searching in terms of individual efforts without regard to its structural aspects and its implications—individual responsibility for job searching and its outcomes—along with a suggestion for the type of help that can be offered to job seekers.

**Key Words** : Career self-help, White-collar, Labor market, Networking, ICT

요 약 본 논문은 미국의 사례를 통해 화이트칼라 구직활동에 영향력을 미치고 있는 커리어 자기계발 조언과 이의 문제점을 고찰한다. 먼저 빈번한 해고와 불안정한 고용의 확산으로 대변되는 미국 화이트칼라 노동시장의 변화와 이와 함께 부상한 자기계발 산업을 간단히 고찰한다. 다음으로 문헌연구를 통해 미국 화이트칼라 구직과정에서 접할 수 있는 대표적 자기계발 조언을 살펴본다. 이는 정보통신기술의 발달이 구직과정에도 큰 영향을 미치는 점을 고려하여 이러한 기술의 활용을 포함하여 이력서와 네트워킹에 관한 조언을 중심으로 고찰한다. 마지막으로 커리어 자기계발 조언의 영향력에 비추어 이의 문제점들, 특히 개인의 부당한 노력만을 강조하며 이에 취업과 그 결과를 개인의 책임으로 돌리고 있음을 살펴한다.

주제어 : 커리어 자기계발, 화이트칼라, 노동시장, 네트워킹, 정보통신기술

### 1. Introduction

In the past few decades, there have been huge changes in the white-collar labor market in America, as downsizing, outsourcing, or other forms of corporate restructuring have swept across the US and led to waves of white-collar layoffs and job insecurity together with the proliferation of temporary and part-time positions. In the aftermath of these changes,

the concern for keeping or getting a job has become paramount in everyone's mind more than ever before.

Alongside such changes, there has been the growth of the career self-help industry, which purportedly assists American white-collar job seekers' efforts to help themselves find a job. Dispensing career advice and job searching tips through various channels, it has provided understanding on matters such as what is expected to get a job, how to go about job hunting, and

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how to improve oneself for future employment.

In this context, this paper intends to examine career self-help advice to show its problematic nature, which is important to understand in light of its influence on white-collar job searching in the US. It especially looks at career self-help advice involving the use of information communication technology (ICT), since ICT has been rapidly transforming our mundane lives including job searching. The paper focuses on the American case, as self-help culture is the most advanced in the US.

In what follows, the paper first presents a brief overview of the white-collar labor market changes and the career self-help industry in America. It then examines career self-help advice concerning a resume and networking through the review of career self-help advice manuals and other related literature. Finally, it looks at what such advice implies and its limits, especially the problem of presenting job searching in terms of individual efforts without regard to its structural aspects, along with a suggestion for the type of help that can be offered to job seekers.

## 2. The White-Collar Labor Market in the US and the Career Self-help Industry

American white-collar workers have been thrown into a turmoil in the past few decades, as corporate restructuring has greatly increased layoffs and unstable employments[1]. For example, between 1981 and 2003, around 30 million full-time American workers lost their jobs due to downsizing, with an average of a 17% fall in salary when reemployed[2]. The average duration of unemployment also increased from less than 10 weeks in 1970 to more than 24 weeks in 2009[3].

Unlike in the past, economic downturns since the 1970s have increasingly affected white-collar workers. Not only has the unemployment rate for college-educated white-collar workers grown faster

than that of blue-collar workers or those without a college education, but reached record-high during the Great Recession between 2007 and 2009. Among the long-term unemployed, i.e., those without a job more than 27 weeks, the share of white-collar workers rose from about 30% in 2003 to almost 50% during the Great Recession[3].

With these changes, a lifetime employment seems to be a relic of the past, while having 8-10 jobs in one's lifetime is increasingly common[4]. Americans are now expected to not only spend more time searching for jobs, but do so more frequently. In addition, it is not enough to be currently employed. It is more important to remain employable in case they need to go job-hunting again. Americans have to make every effort, constantly managing and improving themselves, in order to be hired again[5].

Given this, Micki McGee argues, along with the white-collar economic insecurity and the need for self-improvement, there has been a parallel growth of the career self-help industry[6]. It is estimated that the share of self-help literature in overall books doubled between 1975 and 2000, with its sales reaching about \$600 million in 2000. In 2008, the self-help industry did some \$12 billion worth of business[7,8]. The number of career coaches has also doubled every three years since the mid-1990s[9].

In particular, the growth of the career self-help genre are largely due to *What Color Is Your Parachute?: A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters and Career-Changers* (hereafter *Parachute*) by Richard Bolles. First published in 1970, its sales were slow at the beginning. Yet, by 1979, the book landed on the *New York Times* bestseller list and remained there over 5 years, eventually becoming the all-time bestseller in career self-help[6]. By 2010, it sold over 10 million copies and had been translated into 26 languages including Korean.

Its success had much to do with economy. Not only did America's postwar economic supremacy begin to erode, but two oil shocks unleashed stagflation from

the mid-1970s. Along with this, the unemployment rate, which remained around 3 to 6% between 1955 and 1974, surged to nearly 10% in the early 1980s[6]. At the same time, *Parachute's* success demonstrated the existence of a market for career guides, and career advice books, which were almost none existent at the time of its first publication, have mushroomed.

Today, career self-help advice enjoys dominant influence over white-collar job seekers as well as workers who increasingly feel insecure. For instance, Ofer Sharone shows that the members, i.e., job seekers, of a state-sponsored support organization for white-collar job searching played an active role in imparting and enforcing career self-help advice[10]. The IT job seekers in Dallas studied by Carrie Lane similarly identified with career self-help ideas[3]. As Barbara Ehrenreich well documents, career self-help advice is passed around and reproduced as if it were common sense through various channels such as coaching, boot camps, workshops and networking events[11], making it difficult for job seekers to escape from its discourse.

### 3. Career Self-help Advice in the US

Then, what is some of career self-help advice American white-collar job seekers come in contact with during searching for jobs? Foremost, the career self-help industry sees that the critical factor in white-collar hiring decisions in America is chemistry—a strong mutual attraction—and/or interpersonal fit. In other words, getting a job requires job seekers to convince potential employers they will fit well with the company. If employers do not like job seekers, they will not hire them no matter how qualified they are. All this is not to say skills and credentials are not important, but to say they are not sufficient to get you hired[12].

Emphasizing the importance of chemistry in the hiring decision, career self-help advice provides detailed guidelines on how to present oneself as a way

to convey chemistry or fit to prospective employers. Foremost, conveying chemistry or fit requires job seekers to modify their self-presentation according to each employer, constantly adapting themselves to his/her needs.

In this regard, documents like a resume and a cover letter should be customized for each targeted employer. Customizing a resume is not simply a matter of deciding what skills and experiences to highlight to make them the most relevant to the needs of prospective employers. Rather, every detail of a resume has to be thoroughly reviewed and crafted, including its styles such as font, font size, margin, and length, which are also thought to be important factors affecting the impression of job seekers and should be thus constructed properly depending on employers[10].

The development of ICT, especially word processing and online communication, has enabled job seekers to easily craft and modify documents in response to each potential employer's needs. As Lane points out, this enhances job seekers' ability to adapt their self-presentation, which could also broaden the sorts of jobs for which they might be considered. Most job seekers she studied had at least three separate resumes, each as a template for a different position, and tailored them further for the specific work they applied. A programmer with management experience, for instance, prepared one resume for programming jobs, another for managerial positions, and a third as an independent consultant[3].

Yet, there is no definite answer to how best to customize one's resume and cover letter, which means job seekers can always try new ways to revise their resume and technology readily allows such endeavor. As a result, there is no end to customization. In addition, precisely because there is no one right way to craft a resume, most job seekers fear that their resumes, despite countless revisions, are not perfect, thus preventing them from getting invited for interviews[13].

Given this need for customization, applying for as

many jobs as possible (i.e., sending out resumes not fully personalized) is not a good strategy. Neither is posting one's resume on online job boards for the same reason. Employers also find using online job boards unreliable. A recruiter from Prudential said, "you'd be taking a risk to hire someone from one of the boards; you won't know them"[11].

The kind of argument is also used to support the importance of networking, which is considered by far the most important element in job searching. In fact, between 80%-95% of jobs are said to be found through networking. Networking events are also plentiful, with both free and paid ones. Interestingly, free networking events offered by local churches were the most popular among IT workers in Dallas studied by Lane, and as early as 2002, a quarter of all churches in America had such programs[3].

The importance placed on networking reflects the peculiar emphasis on chemistry or fit in hiring decisions, as well as the concern for reliability. As your acquaintance or contacts know you in person, they are likely to refer you to employers you can get along with. Employers similarly consider the referral by an acquaintance as a more reliable way to find employees who could fit well. Given this, it is generally believed that through contacts, your chance of getting hired increases. Yet, you are likely to quickly run out of contacts when relying on those you already know. Job seekers are thus expected to expand their contacts through networking.

Networking is another area of job searching affected by the development of ICT, particularly through social networking services. In particular, Bolles argues that 91% of American employers have checked job seekers' social networking profile before inviting them for an interview. Based on what they found on the profile, over 69% of them rejected job seekers, while 68% hired them[14]. Accordingly, advice has been offered on how to manage and customize the social networking profile.

In this regard, in 2014 *Parachute* newly added managing one's profile on LinkedIn, a business-

oriented social networking service, offering advice on each section in the profile page such as one's photo, past experience, and specialties. As a way to show their expertise to potential employers, it also advises job seekers to consider filming themselves discussing some area of their expertise, post it on YouTube and link it on their LinkedIn profile page[14].

Online social networking could provide almost unlimited opportunities to identify potential contacts, as it allows job seekers to browse through their contacts' contacts. For those who feel uncomfortable with face-to-face networking, online social networking is particularly appealing, as it does not require initially face-to-face meetings. Yet, online social networking is never thought to substitute for face-to-face networking. It is because your contacts are not likely to refer you to potential employers, if they know you only online, but not in person[10].

#### 4. The Limits of Career Self-help Advice in the US

Thus far, some of the major career self-help advice has been examined. As the leading source of information for job seekers it not only governs their job searching activities, but affects their view of work and career. Yet, career self-help advice reveals some serious flaws, which seem all the more problematic because of its influence.

First off, job seekers and employers are never equal partners. It is certainly possible that job seekers screen or interview employers to decide whether they like to work with them, as Bolles argues[10]. However, far more often than not, it is employers who get to choose employees, not vice versa. Accordingly, emphasizing the chemistry factor in hiring decision and offering advice to convey it to employers really means asking job seekers to conform to and identify with their employers.

Also, career self-help strategies offered to convey

chemistry or fit to each employer requires constant self-efforts and labor. As seen above, there is no end to fine-tuning one's resume. Job seekers are also told that anyone they meet, including strangers in line at the supermarket, could be a potential contact. This means networking is always present, demanding them to be ready to connect with anyone at any time. The use of ICT further increases work. Social networking profile needs constant maintenance and updating. Meanwhile, online networking does not substitute the need for face-to-face contact, requiring job seekers to work on both.

All these exemplify complicated and exhausting work job seekers are engaged in. It involves not only administrative work of sending and fine-tuning a resume, but sales and product development, marketing and improving oneself. Job searching is indeed a job itself, and job seekers often work more than those employed[9].

While prescribing endless individual endeavors as a way to get a job, career self-help advice is silent about structural factors that can also play a role in one's job searching. Foremost, an economic recession could affect vacancies, the number of jobs available, and how many job seekers compete for the vacancies, which, in turn, influences their chance of getting a job. Yet, structural aspects are either ignored, minimized, or explained away. For instance, *Parachute* says that there are always vacancies whether times are good or bad, because, even if no new jobs created, people quit jobs all the time. Likewise, there are people who get a job regardless of the economic condition[15].

As there are always vacancies and there are always people who get a job, what is important in one's job search is not external factors like the state of economy or the tight job market. Rather, it is internal factors such as job seekers' choice of job searching strategy—the one career self-help advice recommends—as well as their individual efforts, perseverance and passion to carry it out. In this way, getting a job becomes an individual matter, one that lies within job seekers'

control.

One corollary of highlighting individual efforts while denying structural aspects in job searching is that individual endeavors are accountable for both success and failure. In other words, the responsibility for getting a job and its outcome is solely placed on job seekers. Accordingly, in case of failure, job seekers have no one to blame but themselves. Any mention of structural factors is seen as an excuse for their own inadequacies.

Meanwhile, emphasizing individual efforts in job searching helps the career self-help industry. Job seekers investing in its services to improve their self-presentations brings money in. In case they fail to get a job, career self-help advice is relieved of any of any responsibility for the outcome. As job searching supposedly depends wholly on job seekers' individual efforts, their failure to get a job does not necessarily call for rethinking the efficacy of career self-help advice.

Last, but not least, such individual focus obscures the fact that the same economic forces that have wrought labor market changes also factors in one's chance of getting or not getting a job. By obscuring this, career self-help advice helps to preclude any critical scrutiny of the current economic order as well as possible demands for economic reform. In this light, it may be said that career self-help advice helps the current economic order as much as, if not more, it does job seekers.

## 5. Conclusion

Examining some of the major limits and problems of career self-help advice is not to denounce it in its entirety. Nor is it to suggest that career self-help advice is imposed on reluctant job seekers or, conversely, blindly followed by them.

Rather, this paper points out the problematic nature of career self-help advice, as it is important to fully

understand a cultural phenomenon as influential as career self-help advice. In particular, career self-help culture exerts influence not only in America, but increasingly in other countries that have experienced similar economic changes and the white-collar labor market turmoil seen in America.

Understanding career self-help discourse and its problems also illuminates what kind of help can be offered to job seekers facing the difficult task of getting a job. Making individual efforts is certainly required. Yet, unlike what career self-help advice insists, getting a job depends on not only job seekers' individual efforts, but also the economy that lies beyond their control. Accordingly, the kind of help offered to job seekers should make clear the structural nature of their problem at hand, while also advising them on the efforts they can make to improve their chances.

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