

A Study of Career Self-Help Discourse on Employment Insecurity in the U.S.

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고용 불안에 관한 미국 커리어 자기계발 담론의 고찰

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Abstract This paper examines career self-help advice as one of the important channels that offers converged information, as well as influences popular perception, on white-collar labor market changes in the U.S. In this regard, the paper critically looks at career self-help advice by examining its discourses on the shift to white-collar employment insecurity as well as their problems. It especially focuses on a few of the leading career self-help books as an exemplary case, showing that they urge people to readily embrace the rise of precarious employment by presenting it as an inevitable as well as positive and empowering development. The paper also explores the problems with such accounts, showing how they foremost serve the needs of corporations seeking workplace changes.

Key Words : Employment insecurity, Lifetime employment, Job market, Career advice, Self-help

요약 본 논문은 미국 화이트칼라 노동시장의 변화에 대한 융합 정보를 제공하고 대중적 인식에 영향을 미치는 중요한 매체들 중 하나로써 커리어 자기계발 조언을 고찰한다. 이에 본 논문은 특히 커리어 자기계발 조언이 1980년대 이래 점차 일반화되어 온 미국 화이트칼라 고용 불안의 문제를 어떻게 다루고 있으며 그 문제점은 무엇인지를 비판적으로 살펴본다. 논문은 대표적인 커리어 조언서 및 자기계발서들의 고찰을 통해 이 문제를 고찰하고 이들이 화이트칼라 노동자들의 고용 불안을 불가피한 것으로 제시하며 이를 긍정적인 변화로 받아들이도록 조언하고 있음을 보여준다. 또한 이의 문제점으로 고용 불안에 관한 커리어 자기계발 담론이 어떻게 기업의 필요에 부합하는지를 살펴본다.

주제어 : 고용 불안, 평생직장, 노동시장, 커리어 조언, 자기계발

1. Introduction

This paper aims to critically examine how career self-help discourses present and frame the rise of insecure employment. America boasts a long tradition of self-help culture. According to Sandra Dolby, self-help is a form of

self-education designed to help people better cope with a lack or a problem they have by offering practical “how-to” guides on numerous subjects[1].

Arguably, one of the contemporary areas of a lack or a problem is that of work. From the

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1980s, white-collar layoffs and unemployment have become widespread, entailing the need to go through job searching more frequently and make constant efforts to improve one's competitiveness and to stay employed[2]. In this context, there emerged the career self-help industry to assist Americans' efforts to help themselves at the career front through books, workshops, career coaching and networking events.

As studies on white-collar job searching in the U.S. show, the career self-help industry enjoy dominant influence on white-collar job seekers as the source of information they are most likely to run into in their job searching[3]. It offers convergent discourses on a wide range of issues related to job searching including not only practical ones such as resume writing and networking skills, but also more conceptual ones like how to understand job market changes, layoffs and insecure employment[4].

Precisely because of this far-reaching influence, it is important to critically understand career self-help discourses. In this regard, this paper intends to look into the problematic aspects of career self-help discourses by examining how they present and frame insecure employment. It focuses on this, since, as Carrie Lane show[5], employment insecurity is the core of contemporary job market changes in the U.S. and how it is understood affects the perception on matters such as corporate actions (downsizing, layoffs, etc.) and broader economic changes.

The paper especially looks at *What Color is Your Parachute?* (hereafter *Parachute*)—along with a few other best-selling career self-help manuals published around the late 1990s and the early 2000s (the period of accelerated layoffs)—as a representative case that captures career self-help discourses on insecure

employment as well as their problems.

The paper first discusses the shift to employment insecurity from the 1980s. It then examines how this is presented and understood by career self-help discourses as seen through a few exemplary cases. Finally, it looks at the problems with such accounts and how they serve corporations seeking changes such as layoffs and insecure employment.

This paper examines the American case as the most advanced example of white-collar employment insecurity and the career self-help industry that has grown alongside it. As such, its findings have implications for other countries including Korea that have undergone similar job market changes and the attendant rise of career self-help discourses.

2. Job Market Changes in the U.S.

Ever since the 1980s, the corporate practices such as restructuring, downsizing, and outsourcing have become commonplace across America, generating seismic changes in the white-collar world of work. Foremost, many white-collar workers have been increasingly subject to layoffs, unemployment, deteriorating working conditions and contingent forms of labor, which have left their work far more insecure than ever before.

This is a far cry from the employment relations after World War II. After the war, America underwent unprecedented economic expansion and companies offered lifetime employment to their white-collar workers in return for their loyalty and hard work. As such, they could boast about keeping their employees even in hard times[6].

Certainly, workers did lose jobs in this era, as blue-collar workers were often laid off during economic downturns. Yet, this was done only if the company's survival was in grave danger and

with the understanding that laid-off workers would be hired again once business recovered. Meanwhile, white-collar workers, seen as part of fixed costs of production, enjoyed the privilege of being exempt from layoffs[6], although they had their share of grievances, notably conformism to the organization.

In contrast, since the 1980s, white-collar workers, increasingly in all sectors and regions, have been relegated to the same fate as their blue-collar brethren. Besides, their unemployment rate has risen faster than those of blue-collar workers or people with less education[5]. Unlike in the past, layoffs have also occurred not for survival, but as a way to raise short-term profit by reducing wages[6].

Employment insecurity is certainly nothing new. Employment has been unstable for much of the history of capitalism[7]. According to Arne Kelleberg, the provision of employment security in the postwar years was the outcome of a triumph of the New Deal forces to regulate the unfettered market in the 1930s[6]. Yet, in retrospect, this was an exception rather than a rule, as the reversal of postwar employment security since the 1980s indicates.

Despite its relative brevity and novelty as well as the critique of conformism, lifetime employment had a strong appeal. Even in the 1980s when the layoffs of white-collar workers began, those with merits were still supposed to be protected from being laid-off[5]. Resentment, bitterness and the feeling of loss and betrayal that pervaded in the earlier accounts of white-collar laid-off Americans also reveal a sense of entitlement they felt toward lifetime employment[8,9]. In light of the financial and emotional tolls layoffs inflicted, it is not difficult to understand the appeal employment security had.

By the end of the 20th century, however, most

white-collar workers, especially young ones, accepted layoffs and insecure employment as a matter of fact. They largely viewed lifetime employment as a relic of the bygone era, subscribing to the notion that jobs are temporary by nature[2,5]. This represents an important change that freed corporations from any criticism for, or resistance to, firing their workers, enabling ongoing massive layoffs.

Yet, considering the strong attachment to the postwar provision of lifetime employment, such transition in perspective is likely to be neither natural nor preordained. Rather, to be able to fire white-collar workers at will, companies had to persuade them to consent to and readily embrace the shift to insecure employment.

According to Lane, one of the ways white-collar Americans have come to form their understanding of employment insecurity is through managerial culture and discourses to which they have been exposed via their work. Besides, she points out that career self-help manuals are an important channel, through which white-collar workers's perception on insecure employment is conveyed, mediated and shaped[5].

Indeed, since, as noted above, career self-help discourses are the leading source of information for white-collar job seekers, they are likely to affect their understanding of the shift to insecure employment. Given this, it is worthwhile to look at how they actually address the issue.

3. Making Sense of Employment Insecurity

Parachute, the most influential career self-help manual by Richard Bolles, practically created the career advice genre and has sold over ten million copies. It thus provides a representative case to look at career self-help discourses on insecure employment. First

published in 1972, the book has been revised annually since 1975 to be up-to-date with job market changes. It thus well documents the upheaval in the white-collar employment.

Reflecting the growing instances of white-collar layoffs and employment instability during the 1990s, Bolles addressed the matters first in 1991 and continued to do so in the later editions. He asserted that “nobody’s job is safe anymore” as “one of the rules” about employment. Unlike in the past, no longer would loyalty, years of service, or personal friendship with the boss guarantee a job[9]. According to this, the end of secure employment seems to be inevitable, a foregone conclusion, and therefore futile to resist.

Also noteworthy is Bolles’ advice to get a dream job in the context of insecure employment. From the first edition, Bolles advised doing what one liked to do or pursuing one’s dream job. Yet, by the late 1990s, he argued that “the likelihood to find a dream job is not great,” if people demand that their dream job is to be “permanent...in a predictable setting,” “with raises and promotions”[10]. In other words, accepting insecure employment without expecting raises or promotions is now the new terms of pursuing one’s dream job.

He then newly emphasized attitude as a key to turn any job into one’s dream job. Attitude has four parts, the first of which is to “think of every job you get as temporary,” since your job may end at any time due to “the nature of today’s job market.” As a job is temporary, the second attitude is to “think of every job” “as a seminar” and be willing to learn. Being temporary, the job is also unpredictable and you must “think of every job” “as an adventure.” Finally, you must “think of every job” as one “where the satisfaction must lie in the work itself” rather than seeking other rewards[11].

Much like the advice offered in the 1991 edition, the first three parts of attitude are in fact the advice to acquiesce to, and make the best of, the reality in which job is temporary. The fourth part—finding a dream job that is satisfying in itself—can be an antidote to the worsening working conditions that have accompanied insecure employment, i.e., declining wage, shrinking benefits, and the lack of promotion. Given this last position, it is not surprising that, along with the prevalence of insecure employment, there has been more and more emphasis on finding a dream job in the later editions of *Parachute*.

Who Moved My Cheese? published in 1998 is another bestselling commentary on the end of secure employment embodied as cheese in the title. As its subtitle, *An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life*, indicates, the fable of two rodents is a call to go along with the end of secure employment, suggesting that the flexibility to adapt to change is the way to assure prosperity in the uncertain economic time[12].

Vallas and Cummins’ study of self-help and career advice books published between 1980 and 2010 also shows a more upbeat vision of precarious employment. According to these books, the age of stable employment is not only over, but that is a desirable change. It is because lifetime employment fostered a kind of paternalistic dependence, inhibiting workers’ creativity and development as evidenced in corporate conformism and the limited initiative of the “organization man” during the postwar years[13].

The demise of lifetime employment due to labor market turmoil thus means a chance for employees to reclaim autonomy and power. Tom Peters, one of the well-known self-help authors, urges his people to see such change as an

“opportunity” to become their own bosses—a chief executive officer of “Me Inc.”—or to transform themselves “from an employee to a brand that shouts distinction, commitment, and passion!”—and advises them to make efforts to achieve that end[14,15].

Presenting insecure employment this way reverses a conventional understanding of layoff and unemployment. Laid-off workers often felt shameful of losing a job and unemployment caused great distress. Yet, unemployment could be “a kind of time out,” a chance to think about and find one’s dream job[16] or to charter an independent course. Harvey Mackay’s bestseller in 2004 titled as *We Got Fired! And It’s the Best That Ever Happened to Us* is a telling example of the radical redefinition of unemployment[17].

4. Implications

As seen in the previous discussion, career self-help advice frames employment uncertainty not only as a development with no turning back, a “rule” as Bolles termed, offering tips on how to adapt to and make the best of it. Even one’s dream can only be achieved and maintained (or any job can be turned into a dream job) by accepting that a job is no longer permanent. Insecure employment is also said to be an empowering occasion, a chance to pursue one’s dream job.

Yet, insecure employment was imposed upon most white-collar workers, not that they chose it. In fact, in light of the emotional and financial stress caused by layoffs and employment insecurity, most of them were very likely to choose the security of lifetime employment rather than the freedom to be on their own and attendant economic insecurity. Considering this, career self-help discourses make insecure employment more palatable and likely to be accepted by presenting it as inevitable and even

desirable.

At the same time, framing secure employment as a form of dependence and job loss as a positive opportunity gives some comfort to laid-off workers. Seeing unemployment as time to pursue one’s dream job also motivates them to work harder to find a job and bolsters their optimism even when they are faced with the prospect of more frequent and prolonged job searches due to job market changes.

Meanwhile, Bolles’ message to get “a job where satisfaction lies in itself” is useful to companies that require employees to work longer hours for fewer benefits and diminishing job security. The thought that their job is what they dream of could make employees stay motivated and productive, when decreased compensation levels and employment insecurity could undermine their morale.

Accordingly, career self-help discourses on job insecurity can help to temper possible anger and disappointment from the layoff and unemployment, while obscuring the fact that insecure employment is imposed upon people. They also make it difficult to launch a critique of the economic system that has rendered them disposable and envision alternatives other than accepting insecure employment.

Undoubtedly, such messages are a boon to corporations that have sought workplace changes. If the proliferation of layoffs and insecure employment is inevitable as a rule, there is no need to try to resist it and there is nothing companies can do about it. Yet, the rise of insecure employment is not inevitable or natural. Rather, it was a conscious choice made by companies as one way—but certainly not the only way—to reduce costs and raise corporate competitiveness.

Career self-help discourses on job insecurity help to obscure this point. In doing so, they

exonerate corporations from the responsibility to offer lifetime employment and the blame for laying people off, while smoothing over the costs the corporate actions have inflicted upon people. In the place of corporate responsibility, career self-help discourses emphasize individual responsibility, envisioning individual efforts as the key to get a job or to become their own boss. An inevitable corollary to this is that, in case of the failure, people should blame themselves. certainly not corporations or the economic system.

Given all these, it is not surprising that America's largest corporations are now one of the major patrons of the self-help industry. According to Barbara Ehrenreich, as corporations tried to boost the morale of workers who survived downsizing and justify insecure employment, they have found self-help messages useful, thus buying self-help books and bringing in self-help speakers for their employees[18]. In short, career self-help discourses on insecure employment well serve corporate needs by highlighting its bright side and, in doing so, diverting any possible critique of the economic order insecure employment embodied.

5. Conclusion

This paper set out to critically examine career self-help discourses in the U.S. in light of the influence they have on white-collar workers. It especially looked at their presentation of the shift to insecure employment, showing how they advised people to accept insecure employment uncritically and how this served the needs of corporations. Although career self-help discourses are the sign or symptom of job market changes, not their cause, they certainly reinforce them by the ways they present insecure employment.

It is certainly not that career self-help

messages are uncritically followed by white-collar Americans. Nor is it to entirely deny their efficacy or importance as one of the leading sources of information and self-education on career. Besides, the career self-help industry benefits from the rise of insecure employment that drives people to more frequent job searching. Given this self-interest, it may be difficult to expect career self-help discourses to offer something other than the acquiescence to insecure employment.

However, career self-help discourses on insecure employment reveal some problematic aspects and point to the need to look at career self-help advice with a more critical eye, particularly so given its wide influence. This indicates that white-collar job seekers desperate to rely on it for help should be well informed of both its values and pitfalls. In addition, they should be given more diversified means of help and education to assist their job searching and make sense of job market changes.

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