A QUESTION OF JOB RECKONING

As the post-pandemic recovery begins, what should I expect at my workplace and how do I continue to pursue career success in times of disruption?

by Dr. Rick Cotton

As Canada’s pandemic recovery begins, the federal government is prioritizing COVID-19 relief programs, job creation, investments in young Canadians and investing towards a greener economy. These are all important areas of focus that should provide interesting options that help buoy sustainable careers. The effects of workplace disruption and economic recovery will vary quite a bit and require determination, innovation and sensitivity.

Consequently, I’d like to examine how the recovery will affect three different worker groups.

First up are the remote workers. These are mostly technology, managerial and professional workers who work from home, and who have been collecting more or less the same pay as they were before COVID-19. This group is prone to anxiety and boredom as they cope with Zoom fatigue and juggle work-life responsibilities. In terms of disruptions during the pandemic, this group has navigated key work-life balance issues, ‘face time’ challenges and team interactions that in many cases are very different from their pre-pandemic worlds. These workers are likely to continue to have epiphanies regarding how they find meaning in and at work and may question their job commitments more broadly, especially at the organizational level where workplace cultures may not have the pull they once did. It will be important for them to consider their employment from a ‘Total Rewards’ perspective, for example compensation, benefits, work-life effectiveness, talent development and especially work satisfaction. These workers are increasingly facing a ‘great reckoning’ where the desire for career success is framed in new office configurations, changed relations and remote work norms and possibilities. For those in this sector, being true to what they really want (and need) will be key.

Next are essential workers. They include professions ranging from nurses and doctors to teachers, farm workers, truck drivers and firefighters. During the pandemic, this group has sometimes lacked protective gear, worked long hours and faced constant, debilitating worry and even PTSD. As recovery from the pandemic goes on, workplace disruptions will hopefully lessen for essential workers, with cleaning standards, protocols and required precautions gaining both clarity and predictability. These workers will face their own reckoning, but it is more likely to be at the occupational level as they do some serious reflection as to whether the pay they earn and the shifts they have to take in times of crisis are still worth it to them—financially and emotionally. For others in this group, their commitment to their profession may be even stronger as they recognize the critical roles that they played and may play again in such crises.

Those who were laid off or unemployed have made up 25 per cent of the workforce at various inflection points of the pandemic. They often hail from retail, transportation, travel, the entertainment and hospitality sectors. They have experienced the brunt of pandemic-driven layoffs and furloughs. Going forward, this group may see more of their jobs automated, eliminated or changed in substantive ways. They too will likely revisit their occupational and career choices while looking to education and training to make themselves more employable within and outside their industries. Being flexible and forward-looking will be key for this sector. In terms of career success, this group will need to determine whether the potential disruptions and uncertainty they have experienced in their lines of work will prompt them to switch careers in order to enhance stability, pay and work satisfaction.

The pandemic has disrupted all sectors of industry, but taking a clear-eyed and objective perspective on occupation and career choices has rarely been so important—and so ripe for innovative, life affirming options. For many, COVID-19 has brought with it feelings of languishing, despair, anxiety, and uncertainty. The key is to recognize that we are not facing these battles alone and that helpful resources abound.

As time marches on, work changes and what matters most comes into greater focus, it is appropriate for each of us to continue to look for that sweet spot where wants, needs, passion, strengths, profession and desired impact intersect. For it is in that space—whether we stay put or move on—where potential becomes purpose.

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