

CAEWAS Corner

The New Definition of Work: Technology's role in the modern workplace

By Jodi Webster, CD, Hons. BA, RRP, CVP

With all the changes in the labour market—and the technological advancement of occupations—we need to consider the use of technology within the workforce and its impact on our development of vocational assessments, plans, and career exploration. In his book “Average is Over,” Tyler Cowen covers a few key categories that are relevant to the field of vocational rehabilitation.

One of the most interesting aspects of his book was the fact that Cowen looks at the “new office” and describes the increasing reliance on technology. Interestingly enough, he makes multiple links to career exploration, education, and occupations where the impact of technology has had both positive and negative effects.

But how does this impact our work within the labour market? And, what effects does this have on the views and recommendations that we are making within occupational exploration? What implications does this reliance on technology seem to have? Although Cowen is not specifically considering workers with limitations, what additional factors do we have to consider that will have an impact on our work with clients?

Job Availability

Cowen looks at technology's impact on the changes to available jobs as well as changes to job availability. Jobs are becoming more technological and, as a result, more competitive. He considers customer service

type occupations and uses receptionists, clerical staff, and even bank tellers as examples of occupations where we have witnessed a significant increase in the reliance on technology. We as consumers may see many benefits to this technology (i.e., bank ATMs and grocery store self check-outs, which make banking and shopping more efficient and more convenient), but at what cost?

Increased technology has directly, and inarguably, impacted—and certainly reduced—the number of available jobs within these categories. Workers in today's market are now competing with customers capable of “self service,” machines that complete many of our daily job tasks, and even offshore companies who provide this service just as readily. Cowen posits that those who are well-educated and adept at working with technology will likely see an increase in available jobs, and potentially earn higher wages as a result. So, technology is increasing the number of jobs within technological fields, and decreasing job availability (and wages) in occupations with tasks that can be taken over by technology. He also considers personal service occupations such as assistants, maids, and chauffeurs, which may become available as services to these higher earners. These occupations would focus less on finding them consumer objects, and more on finding ways to make these high earners “feel better.”



So far we've determined: a greater number of jobs require better technological skills; increased technology has reduced the demand for specific occupations; and it is predicted that those who work in technology-based fields may earn more. This leaves us with quite the career conundrum.

Job Suitability

Cowen believes that there will be a direct link between education and the types of jobs (and specifically types of wages) for which workers will be eligible. Therefore, higher education will yield jobs with a greater wage scale.

Now, let's not lose sight of the implications that this has on how we look at someone's suitability for positions that are available. We have all seen the changes and the fact that many entry level and sedentary positions are requiring a much greater proficiency with computers. This is very applicable to our consideration of occupations; how many times

CAEWAS Corner

Dear fellow colleagues and readers, here is our most recent contribution to CAEWAS Corner.

As many of you know, CAEWAS (Canadian Assessment, Vocational Evaluation and Work Adjustment Society) is a member society of VRA Canada, serving in large part to represent and support the professional and developmental needs of vocational evaluators as well as professional rehab personnel specializing in work adjustment of injured workers and the like. In this section, you will find current and candid articles authored by CAEWAS members, non-members (and future members alike) that will share, discuss, and communicate with you developments and changes affecting our membership. Amongst them issues of best practice, professional development and designation, as well as industry trends.

We hope you continue to find the content in this section stimulating, motivating, and informative and we encourage your ongoing participation and contributions.

Enjoy!

CAEWAS National Board Of Directors

If you are a CAEWAS member and have any ideas, opinions or thoughts relevant to this section and you would like to share, discuss, and communicate them in the next issue, please contact: Jodi Webster at jodi@keyrehabservices.ca. We also encourage you to join our group on LinkedIn.

have these occupations been considered for clients who have physical limitations?

Assessing and recommending skills upgrading is necessary when considering a worker's transition to a new occupation. Retraining programs and computer skills upgrading are considerations; the expectation that a worker will be trained "on the job" is less likely, and applicants need to be more competitive in order to be selected for paid employment opportunities.

We also have to consider the prerequisites for each position, which Cowen notes have also increased. Transferrable skills based opportunities may not be as readily acceptable—with desired applicants now needing certifications, diplomas, and even degrees in order to be considered for positions.

Technology has made access to education more available. Online retraining programs are available to students who can't relocate, so they can still take additional training in occupations that are suitable for them. Cowen notes, "workable machine intelligence means that a good education no longer relies on living near a major city." This can also broaden the occupations we consider for clients based on skills retraining—non class-based learning allows for self-pacing, again benefiting our clients with greater physical limitations.

Technology has certainly changed the face of the job search, as many employers are leaning towards online or email applications, viewing social media pages as part of the hiring process, and even using video teleconferencing for interviews. So applying for employment requires that applicants be strategic in presenting their suitability (i.e., education, transferrable skills, and technological capabilities) to show that they can bring a greater set of skills to the table. By doing this, they are more likely to be viewed as viable competition for positions that are available.

Job Sustainability

Securing employment does not guarantee job longevity. Once in a position, professional development, training videos, and seminars are readily available so that workers can maintain—and perhaps more importantly, increase—their skills within positions that are ever advancing. Platforms like blogs, apps, TedTalks, and YouTube all offer a variety of ways that we can learn "on demand"—often at very little cost, other than our own time. This learning is applicable to us as continuous learners, but more specifically, will be of

significant importance for workers trying to sustain employment and keep on top of changing workplaces and technological advancements.

"Those who are well-educated and adept at working with technology will likely see an increase in available jobs, and potentially earn higher wages as a result"

Assessments

There are multiple factors to be considered regarding assessments. The first being the use of standardized assessments and the changes we have seen based on new technology. Assessments now are becoming more technology based—you can get standardized assessments that can be completed online, used on alternate types of computers (i.e., tablets such as iPads), and even old school pencil and paper tests can be scored online. We can also utilize computer programs to consider career alternatives based on the results of aptitude scores.

Another factor is what Cowen considers the fear "about our growing ability to measure and grade one's performance at a task, and what that means for an individual during the course of their career." In other words, if we can put a number on someone's performance—and this is what we believe people need to meet as the criteria for certain occupations—what impact does that have on how we view competitiveness and our possible career advice? He notes that "a certain amount of ambiguity may be good for the career ambitions of young people, and in the future we may miss some of the ambiguity we enjoy today." So, will comprehensive ratings of jobs enhance career exploration or hinder it?

Professional Impact

Cowen considers the use of rating systems and how technology will allow us to "rate" our workplaces and even our service providers—similar to what we have seen for restaurants! As technology has made this information more readily available to almost anyone, he raises the

question: what information is actually relevant criteria to consider? Is it IQ? Academics? Track records? One concerning excerpt is his belief in the possibility that professionals may in turn be able to rate patients based on their adherence to medical plans. If a medical practitioner's ratings are based on performance, then will a doctor take a risk of taking clients who do not follow instructions? He comes to the conclusion that although some of these ratings may be relevant, there is the possibility that this may turn into a vicious circle of evaluations that may not be based on criteria that aren't necessarily relevant. The big question he raises is whether technology will have a positive impact on our ability to make these decisions. Or, are we going to allow technology to make these decisions for us? Should the decision reflect purely on statistics or should there be a human component to the higher-level problem solving? In our quest to be transparent in how we provide services, what criteria will be considered?

Within a very short period of time, technology has changed the face of work—specifically how we assess it, what we need to do to be competitive for it, how we train for it, how we apply for it, and how we sustain it. There is no doubt that technology has made positive advancements in the labour market; it offers us transparency and flexibility in how we provide our services, and a greater basis from which to make recommendations and decisions. However, it has also decreased the availability of occupations that we may be able access locally, with limited retraining. Where retraining is getting more accessible, this again relies on someone's technological skill in order to access it and benefit from it. Technology is changing the world, and the job market along with it. With no signs of slowing down, we must embrace these changes and learn to make technology work for us. ☺

To view references for this article, visit our website www.vracanada.com/media.php



Jodi Webster, CD, Hons. BA, RRP, CVP, graduated from the University of British Columbia with an honours degree in psychology. She is the owner and vocational rehabilitation consultant for Key Rehabilitation Services in Kelowna, B.C. and she currently provides vocational rehabilitation services within the Thompson/Okanagan areas. She brings with her over 20 years of military experience, where she has worked in a variety of full-time and part-time positions.