



## Career Development International

The search for meaning and career development

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### Article information:

To cite this document:

George Schultze, Carol Miller, (2004) "The search for meaning and career development", Career Development International, Vol. 9 Issue: 2, pp.142-152, <https://doi.org/10.1108/13620430410526184>

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# The search for meaning and career development

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Received May 2003

Revised August 2003

Accepted August 2003

**Keywords** *Career development, Factor analysis, Job analysis*

**Abstract** *This article discusses the importance of existential meaning in career counseling, provides a case study of its application, and relates it to career development theory. Career development and counseling professionals will find existential analysis useful in their service to others. Using logotherapy, a counseling professional living in a pluralistic society can assist individuals with distinct worldviews in their search for meaning. Given our lives and careers, we can find meaning by creating something or doing some good, by experiencing something or someone, and by our attitude towards unavoidable suffering.*

Economic uncertainty and political tensions around the globe make this a particularly worrisome time for many working people, whether they are highly educated professionals or faithful and productive men and women with limited education or skills. Our co-workers, relatives, and friends (young and old) are looking for meaning in their daily efforts in the classroom, at the local shop, or on the global assembly line. During insecure and troublesome times, toilers around the world and from every socio-economic background will sometimes feel despondent, anxious, or frustrated. Career counselors need to remind these otherwise healthy individuals of the consolations still found in all of our efforts and the search for meaning that they must always nurture in their lives. Frankl's existential search for meaning continues to offer understanding and more importantly assistance in such cases. Career development theorists and practitioners will benefit from a revisiting of logotherapy as it relates to work. Logotherapy offers a common language for career development counseling in a multicultural world with multiple worldviews.

Recently, an academic colleague and friend had become weighed down with the woes of the world and personal dissatisfaction, which left him listless and at times anxious. He was a tenured professor who had achieved some success but the spirit, which had animated his career and home life, was flickering out. His energy was low and his attitude was negative with a "Why bother?" disposition. This humanities professor was increasing his time learning computer programs for online teaching and decreasing his time with students. He frequently spoke of the students as undisciplined and bothersome; another generation that expected a lot and gave too little. Co-workers heard him say that he felt tired, dull, and emotionally empty. His free time was spent watching videos while alone. He was divorced, his children were now grown, and he spoke of himself as just another pebble in the universe. He was struggling to



find new meaning in his work after having achieved, in his opinion, moderate success as an academic. He had set aside any aspiration of becoming a renowned scholar and after having failed to receive support from the university administration, he stopped applying for university-wide administrative roles. He questioned his life and work as a college professor and he saw retirement and an empty house looming on the horizon.

In the case of this colleague one could readily see what Frankl called the existential vacuum that at times occurs in life and work. He needed to discover new meaning with logotherapeutic support. As participants in the global community, we are all preparing for our work lives, living them out, or seeking meaning in non-work capacities. Given the greater individual freedom found in the modern world, men and women must necessarily take greater responsibility for their careers and the directions of their lives. The existential vacuum occurs because too often human beings disconnect their freedom, which they often fear, from their social and individual responsibility. They are anxious and distressed because the modern person has commonly become overly introspective and retrospective instead of attempting to discover meaning outside of one's self. Frankl explained that meaning was found through creative activity, other people, or a positive attitude toward unavoidable suffering. By not discovering the meaning in their lives, men and women begin to experience existential frustration. The vacuum of meaninglessness (or nihilism) takes hold and existential neurosis sets in.

### **Logotherapy: a common ground position for a pluralistic, multicultural world**

Career counselors have defined career development as "the total constellation of psychological, sociological, educational, physical, economic, and chance factors that combine to shape the career of any given individual over the life span" (McDaniels and Gysbers, 1992, p. 138). We can make this definition and others like it more complete by drawing greater attention to the noetic element of the human being – that is, the human spirit. While attention to the psychological, physical, and sociological elements of career guidance are essential, counselors who include existential analysis in their guidance counseling can help a person recognize the role of the human spirit in finding meaning in life. The human spirit is unique in that no person or event can harm it. While an individual may experience psychological illness, physical ailments or social estrangement the human spirit by its nature remains indomitable. The human spirit's resistance to assault makes it vital to helping people who have experienced or will experience disappointment, hurt, or loss in the "constellation" of factors that combine to shape their careers.

In his teaching of logotherapy, Frankl (1986, p. xii, 1984, p. 142) insisted that this human spirit and the will to meaning, "logo" being defined as "meaning," were not dependent on religious thinking, although a person's religious faith

could be a means for living out one's will to meaning. Frankl's philosophy of psychology continues to offer us an approach to helping others in their career and work choices in a postmodern pluralistic society. Whether one is a passive believer or non-believer in the transcendent, or a person who vigorously views the world through a secular lens or religious one, logotherapy can fuel the human spirit that leads men and women to embrace their circumstances, attributes, dreams and work so as to experience life more fully. By focusing on a search for meaning, a worker can integrate work and non-work life and live the life that upholds that worker's values. The individual's purpose in life is therefore always unique to the individual's circumstances (Frankl, 1984, p. 131). As Ludwig Wittgenstein and other linguistic philosophers have shown, language is dependent on culture and context, and in a similar fashion every global worker's search for meaning is dependent on his or her culture and context.

Many readers are undoubtedly familiar with the life and work of Viktor Frankl, an Austrian physician and philosopher, whom the Nazis interned in more than one concentration camp during the Second World War. Frankl, the writer who coined the term "existentialism," despite the violence and tragedy of his wartime experience, found that under all circumstances life continues to have meaning. When women and men begin to lose hope in the most adverse of circumstances, one needs to see that even in hopeless situations one can find dignity and meaning in the struggle. Frankl (1984, p. 104) and other concentration camp counselors reminded their fellow detainees that they had a responsibility to others – spouses, friends, children, parents, people living or dead, or perhaps God – to have courage in the face of death.

After the war years he wrote and lectured on logotherapy around the world. Existential analysis should continue to have a place in the lexicon of career development and career advising professionals. When students, workers, or others express frustration with their present situation or future opportunities, when they are in conflict with the direction of their lives, a counselor can raise up a will to meaning in this conflict. For instance, one might discuss a "meaning contract" that sketches out a career plan that focuses on the ends in one's life and highlights the meaning in the person's present work and non-work life. Such a contract would identify the important relationships, experiences, and talents of its writer.

Why is existential career counseling important and needed? First of all, existential frustration arises from moral conflicts, not being what we as individuals in community can be. In one's youth, goals and aspirations may be seen from a mountain top perspective – working for peace, a cleaner environment, a healthy family, a comfortable life, or any number of moral goods. And with time we sometimes see our lofty hopes and dreams from a valley perspective of limited opportunities, inadequate capacity, or insufficient effort. In our mortal lives, human beings will inevitably feel some frustration in

their experience. There is a tension between their being and meaning; roles conflict with personal values. Clearly frustration occurs when one's work life does not mesh with one's values – burnout and apathy are signs of existential frustration. Layoffs and unemployment also create this state of tension because apathy sets in, especially if the unemployed see themselves solely as victims. This frustration is not an illness; it is a reality of life, which most people will face at some point in life.

Second, people who experience existential frustration are searching for a means to fill an inner void, an existential vacuum – they are seeking meaning. A person feels incomplete in life and work. A student might ask: "What is the purpose of a life or a career in an era of global warming, terrorism, and Third World poverty?" A worker might ask: "Why am I working so much for so little and feeling empty at the end of the day?" A job cannot be a vocation, literally a "call," if I am only responsible to myself. Someone or something calls each person out of excessive introspective and retrospective views of the self to provide a meaning that gives purpose to life. Employers have tried to address this vacuum by filling it with job enrichment, job enlargement, quality circles, training and development, and many other empowerment initiatives for employees. While these initiatives are surely in the right direction, unless these initiatives touch the values of the workers and their managers, the vacuum remains.

Third, existential frustration and the existential vacuum can lead to existential neurosis. While psychological neurosis may have physical or psychic causes, perhaps a conflict between the id, ego, and superego or some similar explanation, existential neurosis occurs at the level of the human spirit when a person is grappling with values that are at odds with each other: e.g. family values and career values. As postmodern men and women living in a culture of multiple worldviews, individuals may face this grappling in their distinct circumstances or existence, but the counselor can share with certainty the presence of some objective meaning in everyone's life. The fact that meaning is not invented or created but found in a person's life led Frankl (1967, p. 73) to assert that it exists outside the person, giving meaning its objective nature. For this reason, our attempts at self-actualization or self-realization cannot occur without actively engaging the world, in other words, participating in a community of meaning. Serious existential neurosis occurs when people give up hope and slip into despair. Frankl (1984, p. 152) reminded his students that nihilism did not deny being; it mistakenly denied the meaning of being.

Finally, the tension and conflict that students, workers, or retirees may feel in their lives need not become a stumbling block to healthy attitudes and meaningful activities. This tension and conflict should move people to search out and discover the ultimate meanings in their lives. In fact, this existential neurosis is in a sense a "happy fault" because to recognize that one is never absolutely secure is a sane realization that leads to development (Frankl, 1986,

p. 194). This is different from an acute psychological illness. Frankl (1984, p. 126) often wrote that builders would add weight to the top of arches so that the remaining blocks held firm; in other words, an awareness of our values and the tension sometimes caused by them can make us stronger.

Logotherapy can help counselors describe a world of meaning potentialities in this postmodern era. During this moment of multiple worldviews, and given the reality of cultural diversity, counselors can give a person significant and real information about the nature of human existence. In a postmodern world, logotherapy's beauty is that it does not hold any truth as absolute, and it requires us to recognize our freedom to make choices given our circumstances. Frankl (1984, p. 132) was wont to say that the logotherapist was neither a teacher nor preacher, but acted more like an ophthalmologist who helped his patient see the world more clearly. This analogy can be particularly helpful for a counselor who encounters individuals with belief systems that are very different from the counselor's own. By helping employees, students and others to understand existential frustration, to self-identify values, and to raise up meaning potentialities, the counselor guides them in the discovery of their meaning and mission.

Counselors who assist others with their career journeys by sharing some understanding of logotherapy do much to advance our common human dignity. Since freedom of the will is an essential element of logotherapy, we can never reduce the life of a human being to physical elements or social/psychological conditioning. The behavior and attitudes of people can never be reduced to their environment, genetic make-up or any other conceivable single cause (Frankl, 1984, p. 153). The freedom of the human person does not permit such simplistic reductionism. Moreover, the work world cannot provide meaning and the ancillary result of happiness, if workers reduce each other to labels and, therefore, fail to pay proper attention to the greatness of the human spirit. Human beings are not created equal in talents, physical attributes, or good fortune. Rather our equality lies in our ability to try our best given our individual existence – again, touching the centrality of values in our search for meaning. Students and workers will know they are doing their best at school and in their careers when their will to meaning helps them discover their meaning in life.

Similarly, students, workers, retirees and career counselors should be wary of pandeterminism and nihilism. Pandeterminism is a perspective that sees our actions and attitudes as being determined by our past or others, in other words, in some way completely outside of our control. We can point to Alcoholics Anonymous or any number of community supported self-help measures that constantly prove this perspective wrong. A trusted advisor can also point people away from nihilism, which is often a feeling of futility, by reminding them of their commitment to others. Human beings are spiritual, they are free,



and they are responsible. Commitment to something outside of ourselves is what gives meaning to our lives and permits us to transcend ourselves.

An individual finds meaning in one of three ways:

- (1) by creating something or doing some good;
- (2) by experiencing something or discovering someone – e.g. the awe realized in an epiphanic moment or loving someone;
- (3) by our attitude towards suffering (Frankl, 1984, p. 133).

The third way to discover meaning is sometimes misunderstood because readers mistakenly believe that Frankl is saying that suffering is good. Suffering can only have meaning when it is unavoidable (Frankl, 1984, p. 172). With a moment of reflection, we realize that no life (or career) avoids moments of failure, loss, or other obstacles. If workers occasionally suffer individually or together, a return to mission and values – their values – will animate them.

A career development professional can assist others by using existential analysis to find meaning in life and work. Some counselors clearly already use this framework for discussing life today without naming it as logotherapy. Viktor Frankl's contribution and a closer reading of it, however, are particularly useful in our pluralistic world because the lexicon of logotherapy can be understood by anyone and it resonates with career development theory.

Super *et al.*'s (1996) life-span, life-space approach to careers connects with logotherapy in two important ways:

- (1) recognizing the role of values in career decision-making in addition to interests and abilities; and
- (2) promoting career adaptation once a person has found a sense of purpose.

As mentioned above, Frankl did not believe that traits alone determined our lives. Freedom, responsibility, and the human spirit play critical roles in our human experience. He called his psychology "height psychology" as opposed to "depth psychology," which he characterized as retrospective and introspective (Frankl, 1986, p. 8). While Frankl valued the various forms of psychotherapy, he focused on a person's aspirations and, consequently, his theory has an affinity with Super *et al.*'s (1996, p. 138) life-span, life-space approach to career development by underscoring the importance of values in giving each of us purpose in our work. Logotherapy points to the role of creative, experiential, and attitudinal values in our search for meaning and asks us freely and responsibly to live them out given our particular circumstances. While Super *et al.* (1996) outlined life span and life space stages in terms of both maturation and adaptation, logotherapy primarily lifts up adaptive responses to work changes. Frankl does not describe life stages that would correspond to Super *et al.*'s periods of growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement (see Super *et al.*, 1996, pp. 131-5), but nothing in his writing suggests that he would oppose such categories. How then does one find

meaning once the creative aspects of work life have reached their plateaux? Frankl's (1986, p. 42) focus on experiential and attitudinal values will help a worker who is evaluating an objective or subjective self-concept:

How often one of our patients bewails his [*sic*] life, which he says has no meaning since his activities are without any higher value. This is the point at which we must reason with him, showing that it is a matter of indifference what a person's occupation is, or at what job he works. The crucial thing is how he works, whether he in fact fills the place in which he happens to have landed. The radius of his activity is not important alone; important alone is whether he fills the circle of his tasks. The ordinary person who really masters the concrete task with which his occupation and family life present him is, in spite of his "little" life, is "greater" than and superior to a great statesman who may decide the fate of millions with the stroke of a pen, but whose decisions are unscrupulous and evil in consequences.

In addition, logotherapy complements Gottfredson's (1996, p. 179) theory of circumspection and compromise because both theories highlight the greater freedom and responsibility that people have today in making career and life decisions. Although circumspection and compromise are also responses to both sociological and psychological factors, Frankl's use of experiential and attitudinal values zooms in on the psychology of the individual and primarily the human spirit. He is not a developmental theorist; nevertheless, his suggestion that logotherapists are like ophthalmologists – improving their patients' vision of life – supports Gottfredson's (1996, p. 190) admonition that at times people need to see how they have eliminated career options or are gradually circumscribing vocational choices. The use of logotherapy in guidance counseling serves this role. Logotherapy will help a guidance counselor who encounters a counselee who is compromising on career aspirations because of external factors – family, health, educational opportunities and so on. Logotherapy champions a realistic understanding of one's limits in capacity or fortune and "dereflects" (Lukas, 1984, p. 39) an overly inward gaze to a focus on the needs and importance of others in one's life. Careers take on new purpose when career consultants and others lead people to a better understanding of the meaning of their efforts in the larger schema.

After some 25 years of use, logotherapy has achieved empirical validation for its therapeutic value. Ascher (as cited in Guttman, 1996, p. 175) found significant improvement in people suffering from sleep disorders by using the logotherapy technique of "paradoxical intention" (helping a person to imagine and actively take on – sometimes humorously – an anxiety-provoking phenomenon). Meshoulam (as cited in Guttman, 1996, p. 176) discovered that paradoxical intention helped stutterers overcome obstacles due to their stuttering. Logotherapists have also developed psychometric tools to determine the degree of meaning in a person's life. Hablas and Hutzell (as cited in Guttman, 1996, p. 192) developed the Life Purpose Questionnaire, a simple paper-and-pencil tool that has proven useful in judging purpose in the lives of the elderly and substance abusers. In a study by Majer (as cited in Guttman, 1996, p. 193), the Purpose in Life test, the Seeking of Noetic Goals Test, and the



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Life Purpose Questionnaire, all written logotherapy tests, showed that meaning-in-life scores were significantly higher the longer a person's involvement in a 12-step program. Logotherapy tests help people ascertain the level of meaning in their lives and will hopefully lead those experiencing the existential vacuum to discover their meanings.

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### **Counseling the dispirited academic**

Knowing that our university colleague had unconsciously accepted a deflated sense of the meaning in his life, we began to help him in his search for meaning. Lukas (1984, p. 11), a clinical psychologist, logotherapist and researcher, has developed a meaning symbol that divides a person's existence into four quadrants with meaning and despair opposed on the *y*-axis and fate and success opposed on the *x*-axis. Using this guide, we directed our colleague from existential emptiness to existential meaning by using the techniques of Socratic dialogue (Lukas, 1984, p. 48) and dereflection. The goal was to transform existential frustration into existential meanings. With individuals like our friend, one can help transform their existential frustration by four sequential methods: self-distancing (Lukas, 1984, p. 56); attitude modification (Lukas, 1984, p. 33); reduction of the problem(s) (Lukas, 1984, p. 56); and the discovery of new meanings in work (Lukas, 1984, p. 71).

In our conversations with our friend, we confirmed that he had acquired extensive computer skills. The subsequent question was: "How might you use these computer skills to serve yourself and others?" In addition, the logotherapeutic technique of dereflection entails some discussion of attitude modification and reframing of one's circumstances; not spending time reviewing past history, but looking at the opportunities of the present and trying to help any client to discover alternatives to boredom. Rather than reviewing the past and concentrating on self-analysis, we asked this colleague: "Have you considered the needs of less computer literate people, the importance of supporting students who need to become excited by their education, or the ways you can help your own family because of your love for them?" Since he had considered the students a serious burden at the beginning of our meetings, a request to teach one less class relieved some frustration and provided a space for the productive development of computer-aided teaching tools, something the department needed, and a new source of meaning in his work.

We take a warm and positive approach to those who come to us for advice. As counselors we have always discussed the physical, psychological and spiritual (noetic) aspects of life with our students and co-workers. In the case of our listless co-worker, we suggested that he join a fitness club to feel better, walk in the neighborhood on a regular basis to meet new people, and even eat new foods at new restaurants. With regards to the psychological dimension, which includes one's social and cognitive life, an academic could: design an online course (which our colleague did), join the college in raising up and

celebrating old and new courses and publications, work with students via distance learning, mentor new faculty, and/or share talents with any grown children or grandchildren. At the dimension of the human spirit, we have often counseled others to see life as an hourglass that is periodically turned over creating new time and new meaning. In the case of our peers, life transition seminars have sometimes enkindled the will to meaning, and the sharing of skills with charitable organizations has created a sense of mission. Since our colleague like most people had suffered career and personal setbacks in his life, we helped him to recognize that the right attitude had helped him find meaning before and suggested that developing similar attitudinal values would help him in his present experience of desolation. Recognizing suffering and acknowledging the role of fate in one's life can lead to meaning given the right attitude. Frankl understood the essential and indomitable nature of the human spirit and a career counselor can help others to recognize this spirit in their lives. Logotherapeutic techniques will help others to continue to develop no matter their occupation, cultural background, or stage of life.

The good news about the professor is that he realized that he had overcome some major hurdles in his life. Within three short discussions, he understood how he had used adversity as leverage for success in the past, not measuring success by how much he had achieved but by the obstacles he had overcome to get to where he was. Through our questions and answers he acknowledged that life was a task, it challenged people, but with a mission, it became fulfilling. If his life and work had meaning for him before, he could overcome his existential frustration by discovering his source of meaning in the present. Our explanation of paradoxical intention even freed him from his fatalistic view of unmotivated students. He easily imagined all the students finding him boring, refusing to do any assignments, and not attending class. Paradoxically, any such meltdown in the classroom would have led to more time to pursue his personal interests. His fear of under performing students and his self-described lackluster teaching left him smiling – the world would not end! He simply needed to try his best. He continued teaching with greater motivation and peacefulness, and the students responded to his efforts. Overtime he would come back from the classroom saying he had more energy than when he left.

Our friend also sketched out a meaning contract for himself based on his personal values and the mission and values of the university. He realized that his institution, which happens to be religious-based, not only promoted the education of its students, but also promoted the well-being of its faculty and staff – characterized by fair compensation, lifelong learning opportunities and faculty governance. He acknowledged that others on campus had less compensated and recognized roles than himself, and yet they had found meaning and value in their work lives. He came to understand that workplace fulfillment is not task dependent but meaning and values dependent. People who see their efforts as valued, that feel they are engaged in meaningful

activity, and find that others respect them for belonging to an enterprise with worthwhile goals, will find meaning in their work lives. It is ultimately this meaning that has the ancillary effect of producing happiness and fulfillment in one's career.

The search for meaning in a person's life is a key part of all career development work. By discussing the presence of the human spirit in the lives of all men and women, counselors will help individuals see that they, too, possess this spirit and the wellspring of strength that it provides. This noetic characteristic is found in everyone no matter the nature of the "total constellation" of factors that impact any given person. Whether one is poor or rich, educated or unskilled, a person of faith or a secular humanist, native or foreign born, Viktor Frankl's understanding of freedom, responsibility, and the noetic enables us to observe and turnover our hourglass lives.

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