



Relationships and Work: The Twin Peaks of Life

Work and relationships have become more challenging as life grows more uncertain. We explore the overlap of work and relationships to provide career practitioners with ideas about how to support clients as they build a life of connection and purpose.

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Relationships and Work as Intertwined Sources of Meaning

Exploring the intersection of work and relationships provides an insightful lens to understand how people create a rich, rewarding, and meaningful life. Intimacy, friendship, survival, accomplishment, and purpose are each important, and, as we propose here, are intertwined aspects of life. In both relationships and work, people reach outside of themselves to find social connections, sources of survival, and the means to shape the course of their lives.

Blustein's 2019 book entitled *The Importance of Work in an Age of Uncertainty* explores the ways work and relationships intersect. This book is framed around a qualitative study on people's experiences with work in the United States after the Great Recession in 2007-2009.

The following quote by Matteo (a pseudonym), a 45-year-old white man who faced a rough period following a series of losses, captures the connection between work and relationships:

Bankruptcy - I felt like a failure in that I wasn't able to change and market myself well, or adjust to the changes in the recording industry. There was an emotional and mental impact on me that hit me, and it happened to be at the same time that my ex-wife was having an affair. So, the divorce was impending, the bankruptcy was impending...and my decision-making was deteriorating...That was probably the darkest time in my life, because... my identity is in my work - and you know, my marriage, and both those things were falling - my twin towers - were falling apart.

Matteo's moving description captures the essence of work and relationships—they are central in our lives and our experiences in one area can influence the other. Although often regarded as separate entities in Western cultures, it is the job of the career counselor to support clients in building bridges between these two life domains and help clients to navigate them when making career decisions.

In this essay, we explore how work and relationships are impacted by changing job markets, political instability, and other major challenges that create a sense of precariousness (or precarity). We define precarity as unstable and uncertain living conditions that unfairly impact the most vulnerable people in society. Poverty, climate change, health crises, and oppression contribute to precarity.

The Challenge of Precarity

The vulnerable and threatening experience of precarity can be understood as similar to living in a house with a fragile foundation. The entire structure could collapse around us at any moment. Therefore, as inhabitants of the house, we live in constant fear. Our relationship to time and our ability to make decisions is also harmed—if our lives could crumble at any moment, our time feels limited, stripping us of the ability to envision the future. In survival mode, without access to stable ground, we are prevented from taking steps toward cultivating a meaningful life through work and relationships. Writing from a critical perspective, we argue that some contributors to precarity include neoliberalism, right-wing movements, artificial intelligence, and climate change.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a philosophy that has shaped the political context within which most of us live. Neoliberalism splits economic policy from social responsibility, enhancing free markets while reducing social and economic support systems. Neoliberalism also tends to assume that individuals—not systems—are primarily responsible for their own struggles. This can lead to painful experiences of self-blame when things go wrong.

Right-Wing Movements

To reduce the painful experience of self-blame, some may find other people to blame for their experiences of precarity, which can lead to the adoption of right-wing beliefs. For example, a person who is unemployed may blame immigrants for “stealing” jobs they feel entitled to, rather than seeing issues of precarity as stemming from wider labour market structures.

Artificial Intelligence

The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) contributes to our shared sense of precarity. Over the past several years, AI has rapidly developed, generating fear among consumers and workers about how their lives will be impacted. Many fear their work will lose its value because of AI, which could lead to devastating consequences like unemployment and loss of identity. *If I can be replaced by AI, what is my value? If my work is stripped from me, who will I be? What will my future look like as a worker?*

Climate Change

The outcomes of climate change, such as more frequent and intense natural disasters, are universal. Climate change can contribute to precarity by destroying people’s communities and causing physical illness and injury. In other words, it can steal our sense of safety, connection, and longevity. *If the very planet we depend on to sustain our individual and species-level existence is in peril, how can we maintain a sense of stability? How can we trust that tomorrow will come? How can we engage in the future-oriented work of building a career or investing in relationships when the future feels bleaker and more impossible every day?*

Resilience in the Face of Precarity

While precarity can threaten our access to work and connection, relationships and work can also be used as resources to navigate the scary and painful experience of precarity. For example, a person experiencing precarity may take on more work projects to regain a sense of control or spend time with friends to feel less alone. Work and relationships, then, are threatened in times of precarity, but they can also be used to strengthen the foundation of our metaphorical “house.” In other words, they serve as sources of resilience in the face of precarity.

Using a Work and Relationship Lens in Career Counselling and Guidance

Career counselling emerged from diverse sources, but shares many of the values, approaches, and practices of personal counselling. While many career providers are not trained to conduct personal or mental health counselling, and many psychotherapists are also not trained to provide career counselling, the reality of career counselling is that clients will often experience their lives in a more seamless way. It is therefore important that while not straying into mental health counselling (unless trained and working professionally in this area), career counsellors are able to navigate the role of personal lives and relationships in an individual's life as they are relevant to their career decisions.

Numerous career scholars have advanced theories that seek to integrate relationships and work/career. Underlying these theories are a number of themes which we outline below, with some brief tips for counseling practice:

- *Work and relationships are closely intersecting spaces in our lives.* How these spaces intersect varies across individuals, life spans, and across different life challenges and the resources we have to address them. For example, a client may present with the stress of not being able to regain work in their field due to AI. This situation may overlap with an emerging new and exciting romantic relationship, which could serve as a buffer from the pain of unemployment.
 - *Counselling tip:* Explore relationship context as well as work context to identify intersections and give a more holistic understanding of a person's situation, and insights into patterns and themes that may be useful to discuss with clients.
- *Explore historic experiences of both relationships and work.* As an example, consider a client who is having challenging interactions with their supervisor, evoking anxiety and stress. The client sometimes feels overwhelmed by these episodes, which are similar to problems that they had with their parents.
 - *Counselling tips:* Explore the client's history of work and relationships to identify their expectations and emotional reactions. Counsellors can support clients in developing awareness about the shadows of emotional interactions that might be stirring up feelings from previous and concurrent relational struggles. Counsellors can gently explore these feelings to identify parallels that might help to explain the reactions that the client is struggling with at work.

- *People make decisions in the context of their relationships.* Culture and relationships can inform the decisions we make about our careers, which can come with both benefits and challenges. People can understand who they are through their connections with loved ones, friends, mentors, teachers, and guidance professionals. At the same time, some relationships can negatively influence career decisions. For example, family members may hope that their adolescent daughter goes into medicine or dentistry, which would offer excellent income and social status; however, the daughter may strive for a career in the arts, thereby evoking conflict in the family.
 - *Counselling tip:* Identify the important relationships in a client's life which may provide important sources of support or create barriers to career decision-making.
- *Social support can be just as critical as oxygen in sustaining a person.* An illustrative example of the importance of social support is the way in which family members support young adults who struggle to launch their careers because of a lack of decent jobs. These family members could provide financial resources, unconditional love, and ideas about ways to use periods of unemployment productively (e.g., obtaining more training).
 - *Counselling tip:* Help clients reach out to loved ones and supportive friends who can help them cope with work-related stress.

Building Resilience Through Work and Relationships

The intersecting threads of work and relationships are essential to the quality of life. While work and relationships are not necessarily congruent, they overlap in ways which vary throughout our lives and provide important pathways to both support and struggle. By attending to the space shared by work and relationships, career counsellors are better equipped to help clients manage the challenges of living in a precarious world. Optimally, clients will be able to tap into their past experiences of managing work and relationships to pursue meaningful connections and careers. This can support clients in leading decent and dignified lives.

Relationships in Career Guidance

In the «Relationships in Career Guidance» series, we explore contemporary research into the ways in which relationships influence career development, and the implications for career guidance practice. Guest editor Rosie Alexander, postdoctoral researcher at Aarhus University, has edited and prepared the texts in this series.

This text was commissioned by [Veiledforum.no](https://veiledforum.no), an online resource for career guidance professionals managed by the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills.

Related Resources

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