

THE IMPACT OF THE CHANGING JOB MARKET ON SERVICE TO THE MIDDLE-AGED JEW*

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THE phrase, "Too old to work, but too young to retire—too old to work, but too young to die,"¹ epitomizes the plight of the unemployed middle-aged

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¹ Harold L. Sheppard, Louis A. Ferman, and Seymour Faber, Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, University of Michigan and Wayne State University, *Too Old to Work—Too Young to Retire: A Case Study of a Permanent Plant Shutdown*, Special Committee on Unemployment Problems, United States Senate, December 21, 1959, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1960.

worker in twentieth-century America. Although the group comprised of middle-aged unemployed workers and entrepreneurs is relatively unpublicized and seemingly undramatic, it is the most vulnerable socio-economic group of all.

Usually people in this category are so completely committed to a standard of living and have assumed such obligations considered "normal" or "acceptable" in our status-questing society, that a radical disruption in a job or business profoundly affects and irreparably shatters, in many cases, a way of life to which they have become very much accustomed.

The need to liberate the latent energy and the creativity of middle-aged people so that they may share in the riches of America presents a highly dynamic and complex problem. It must be considered in the framework of our society within which overt and subtle changes are occurring in industry, in technology, and in methods designed to keep pace with scientific progress; necessarily, patterns of employment must be affected.

Therefore, with empathy for those middle-aged persons who must readjust to the essentially traumatic changes in their lives, and with awareness of this age group's future problems which can ultimately affect the economic, sociological, political, and ethical structure of our society, we have a responsibility to apply

ourselves to a study of the impact of the changing job market on vocational services to middle-aged people, and in particular to middle-aged Jews. First, however, one must consider an overview of the general problem of the middle-aged group.

Our economy for some thirty years now has been either a war economy or a quasi-war economy. Defense or war contracts account for a substantial portion of our employment stability, but cancellation of those contracts may contribute measurably to our future employment instability. It is an ironic truth that war triggers all-time high periods of employment, while the termination of war historically generates recessions and depressions. The price of peace, therefore, comes high in any economy.

A healthy society must be alien to complacency. For example, all of the security that had been achieved through the collective bargaining of labor—salary standards, seniority provisions, and other advantages for employees—crumbled in many instances under the impact of plant closings like that of the permanent shutdown of the Packard Motor Company in Detroit in 1956. In addition to permanent shutdowns, decreases in business volume and changes in the nature of plant productions have naturally dislocated many labor, managerial, and professional people.

Ben H. Bagdikian in an incisive article, "I'm Out of a Job, I'm All Through" in *The Saturday Evening Post*,² writes, "Only a person who has experienced the stunning blow of the old job destroyed can appreciate its force. It is a shock so profound that it damages the victim's will to recover. Sometimes the human destruction is apparent and measurable. Within a few years after

the 1954 closing of the Hudson Motor Car Company, 15 auto workers committed suicide and marriages of more than 300 workers broke up. When the Government announced that the Brooklyn Navy Yard would close in June 1966, on-the-job injuries increased 50 percent, off-the-job accidents went up, and the death rate rose."

Bagdikian in an interview with a recently dismissed, long-time employed 49 year-old auto worker quotes him as saying, "I saw men cry I'd never seen shed a tear. Grown men standing there with tears coming down their cheeks. Remember, these are tough bastards who'd been through the depression and the war, some of them two wars."

Bagdikian continues, "The most awesome instrument of change for the working man in our time is the computer that runs an automatic machine. Two years ago, for example, an electronics company bought two computerized devices that automatically wired circuits for radios. The company was able to reduce the circuit-wiring force from 17 men to 3. Today the company has doubled its production with the same two machines which now do the work formerly done by 35 men. But it still requires only three human beings. The rise of automation has been so swift that no one knows how many more human jobs it will eliminate. In 1954 there were fewer than 400 computers in use. Today there are more than 25,000 and most of their owners can't find enough work for them to do. Let no white-collar worker think he is immune. Already typists, filing clerks, bookkeepers and even management men who evaluate inventory and place orders are being replaced by computerized machines. Optimists continue to comfort themselves that the new machines ultimately will make enough jobs for all. They point reassuringly to earlier work changes seemingly as drastic as modern

² Ben H. Bagdikian, "I'm Out of a Job, I'm All Through," in *The Saturday Evening Post*, December 18, 1965, pp. 32-36.

ones—to the introduction of knitting machines into textile manufacturing, for example, during the Industrial Revolution; ultimately, they say, those machines expanded employment.

They overlook two things. First, the early changes brought massive suffering, with riots and revolutions and wars. Second, these changes came to societies still largely wedded to the land, and the land guaranteed many of the unemployed a source of food and a place to live. Today the average worker is a city dweller who has many fixed expenses. Even if it were true that machines eventually produce enough jobs—and it has not been true for a long time—his family needs food, clothing, shelter, education, medicine, and a place in the working world not ultimately but now. These men are not too old to do their work. They are just too old to get a job. The American male at age 50 can expect to live 23 more years, but if he loses his job, he may never get steady work again. One reason for this is that at the employment office the older man out of work finds himself competing with the younger man. The younger men are better educated. Half of American fathers finished ninth grade, half of their sons, twelfth. Companies seldom fire an older man for lack of education, but once the employer has a choice, he takes the younger, better educated, more adaptable man.

The older worker out of a job finds himself in a cruel trap. He has often worked for years building up pension and insurance benefits that he loses when his plant closes. When he applies at a new plant, the boss knows that the older worker's pension and insurance will cost the company more. A common type of pension plan cost the employer \$76.00 a year for a 27-year-old man and \$497.00 a year for a newly hired 57-year-old man. A typical life insurance policy costs \$1.32 a month for the worker under

45 and \$9.65 for one 55. The age trap is worse in this generation because there are so many young. In the 1960s the labor force between 45 and 64 will increase 21 percent while those at the youngest end, 12 to 24 will rise 45 percent. The older man has to compete not only with his own contemporaries but with a surplus of younger men.

While men argue, shameful neglect continues in a country that prides itself on being practical. True, the government has not been idle. There is the United States Employment Service but it is run by local rules and deals largely with jobs voluntarily posted and sought, representing a tiny fraction of both jobless men and job openings. There are programs, to stimulate depressed areas, like Appalachia, but these will take years to bring large-scale results, and there is some doubt that even then the results will be substantial. The anti-poverty program has absorbed a few hundred thousand in one capacity or another. The Manpower Training and Development Act has absorbed still others in apprenticeships and retraining. Now educational programs attack one of the root causes of future unemployability. All of these together might eliminate unemployment though serious men doubt that too. But they will, at best, take time, and they will, in any case, turn their beneficiaries back to the labor market better educated and better trained but still looking for jobs. Unless there is a steady and improved growth of new jobs, we could be producing the best-educated idle citizens in the world.

There needs to be a rational and widespread procedure for moving jobless men to places where there are jobs. The best retraining is done while the man is still on a payroll, not after he has experienced traumatic idleness. Retraining for most men has meant worse jobs at lower wages than before—better than idleness but at best a fragile solution.

New pensions and insurance plans are needed to remove the burden on employers who might hire him. There could be for example, a national system of "portable pensions" that would follow the older worker to new jobs and protect him against forfeiting built-up benefits."³

In *The Detroit Free Press*, Samuel Lubell conveys his view of the problem with a touch of melodrama, but the point he makes must be taken with appropriate sobriety. "It is not a pretty picture, in the middle of the 20th century, to have younger workers expressing the belief that every worker over the age of 55 or 60 should be chased out of the mills, or if one saw a man over 65 dying of thirst, he wouldn't give him a drink of water, or hearing him boast of having razed [sic] a man a full year before he quit."⁴ Apparently it is unfortunate to have been born around the turn of the century instead of later.

In 1963, Irvin Sobel and Richard C. Wilcock presented the results of their survey of forty public employment offices in the United States in twelve communities in six states on the subject of unemployment in older workers.⁵ The states chosen represented major variations in public policies toward older-worker placement; the communities were illustrative of both large and small areas with varying labor market problems; the job-seeking applicants presented a random sampling of the traffic in the local employment offices with a deliberate 3-to-1 ratio of older to younger workers. Although the sample is not representative of all unemployed, its

distribution by sex and race is similar to the national average for all unemployed, and its distribution by occupational groups and level of education is comparable to that of the long term unemployed.

The patterns which emerged are applicable to the entire group of middle-aged unemployed. The age of applicants is the initial hazard in this era of the aggrandizement of youth; the greater the age, the longer the length of unemployment and the lesser the prospects for retraining and placement in a job different in nature from work done originally. Moreover, there is a prevalence of limited skills and inadequate educational training coupled with the desire to maintain accustomed pay standards despite continued unemployment and increasing age. Realistic and understandable is the problem of geographical immobility; this group of people has the desire to remain in local areas because of family ties, home ownership, and established patterns of living. Finally, slowness in acceptance of the existent condition and reluctance to make adjustment in a different type of job indicate the supposed inflexibility peculiar to the middle-aged and older people.

Because of the nature of the Jewish vocational services, the repercussions resulting from what has been discussed thus far and the needs thereby engendered must be focused primarily on middle-aged Jewish men, and to a lesser extent on Jewish women in the same age group. We are dealing with men, approximately forty-five and older, who have been displaced from their jobs because of business reorganization, automation, merging companies, technological change, geographical relocation of job sites, and the growing awareness of the lack of additional job training and/or schooling. A poll of opinions elicited from several directors of Jewish voca-

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Samuel Lubell, Series of Articles in *The Detroit Free Press*, May 1959.

⁵ Irvin Sobel and Richard C. Wilcock, "Job Placement Services for Older Workers in the United States," in *The International Labour Review*, Volume LXXXVIII, Number 2, August 19, 1963.

tional services⁶ corroborates the view held in Baltimore that the middle-aged Jewish group does indeed pose problems in terms of relocation which must be considered by vocational counselors.

As exemplary of small companies which continue to be displaced because of business reorganization in this country, David Dobson of the Louisville, Kentucky Jewish Vocational Service cites the small store owners who have been hit by the new trend toward one-stop, one-shop marketing centers.

Similarly, Irving Joffe, a wholesale distributor of Baltimore, Maryland, states that today there are only about 550 Jewish-owned grocery stores in Baltimore as compared with 1,000 to 2,000 Jewish-owned stores 25 years ago. The majority of private grocers were "chain-stored" out of existence and sought to earn a living in other businesses or as employees of corporate grocery chains. The few small grocery shops left today are owned mostly by foreign-born new Americans whose economic fates undoubtedly will follow those of their predecessors.

The generalized job market of small businesses offers a contrast to the narrower existing job markets of large corporations which are structured and classified. Job-seeking and employing become more systematic in terms of formalized interviews, examinations, applications and resumé's thus placing a premium on specialized experience, education, and skills. Big business, with its large capital investment, automation, and heightened employment standards pushes the decline of small enterprises and a general shift towards service occupations.

Although there is certainly a range in the scale of income earned by the middle-aged men with whom we are concerned, one fact is common to all: their stan-

dards of living have been adjusted to their accustomed annual income. Consequently, as their income declines, family problems, economic, emotional, and social, arise. For example, people who may have earned \$10,000.00 to \$12,000.00 or more yearly because of duration of employment and seniority on the job rather than because of any special skills, have pursued a way of life compatible with their incomes. With children in college in this day of upward-spiralling costs of higher education, expenses entailed in suburban living, and membership in temples and clubs, the effects of the onslaught of economic insecurity are obvious.

Ideally what is needed by all victims of occupational dislocation is not merely a new job but one which will permit them to continue the patterns of life with which they are familiar. After exhausting their own contacts, many of these people come to the Jewish vocational service for help. Some, however, come immediately as they are too embarrassed to ask former associates for employment. It is true also that these associates will not offer jobs to them at reasonable salaries.

Some J.V.S. clients make an effort to solve their own problems by going into a business of their own; others, after a six- to twelve-month period of fruitless job-seeking, attempt to lower their living standards and finally accept available jobs at a considerably reduced income. In many cases, wives of dislocated men become Jewish agency clients with the need to enter into or return to the labor market after many years of inactivity. Difficulties are compounded as these women must have supplementary schooling and/or refresher courses to revive skills formerly acceptable in jobs which they had maintained.

The problems created by the changing job market are manifold and complex,

⁶ See acknowledgments p. 228.

and their psychological and social ramifications extend beyond the economic level. If Jewish vocational services are to provide optimal aid to those caught up in occupational vicissitudes, these problems must be viewed in depth, and the duties and responsibilities of guidance personnel plus their techniques for rendering assistance must be seriously reassessed. At this point it is reasonable to ask whether there is truly a need for examining existing methods of job counseling and for formulating auxiliary approaches in terms of the middle-aged Jew who is out of a job. Is the number of people in need of assistance great enough to warrant a concerted output of time and energy? It is the opinion of this author that the answer must be a most emphatic "Yes"! However, before the reasons behind this affirmative opinion are expounded, a paradox must be explored.

Currently, no severe general problem exists in the relocation of the middle-aged into new jobs; indeed, government statistics on unemployment are rosier than ever. As recently as six to twelve months ago, an excellent labor market, the most favorable job market in fifteen years, has eased the pressure on middle-aged people in finding jobs; even the market in unskilled labor has opened somewhat. The scarcity of qualified job applicants has relaxed the age barrier considerably. The Detroit and Philadelphia Jewish vocational services present a picture of a favorable job market with sufficient job openings for applicants. Why then, is there a need to do more than guide the job-seeker into his proper niche?

For, although there is at present no significant increase in job-seeking among the middle-aged group, according to selected statistics, the problem of finding suitable employment still exists for those caught up in the vocational search. The prevailing excellent economy has mini-

mized this problem many times over. At this time the Associated Placement and Guidance Bureau in Baltimore is in the contradictory position of attempting to investigate the problem of the middle-aged in a changing society when at this very moment there are orders and openings in our offices for members of this age group which are not able to be filled for lack of enough qualified applicants. Therefore, one must speak alternately in a retrospective sense and then prognosticate about this group when and if peace returns in our time. Notoriously memorable are those years between World War II and Vietnam, when the middle-aged who lacked marketable skills were, for all practical purposes, "over-the-hill" as long as there were younger applicants from whom to choose.

After World War II, the middle-aged represented a fairly substantial portion of the case load in the offices of the Baltimore agency; this necessitated making provisions for trade schooling or on-the-job training for those who possessed no skills. Retraining programs were initiated for the semi-skilled who were automated out of their jobs or whose firms failed or moved out of town. Advisory business councils were set up for the entrepreneur who was "chain-stored" out of existence, and attempts were made to channel his merchandising knowledge into other related areas.

This post-war program met with moderate success; most significantly, younger employees were usually preferred when a job opening was finally found. In the author's personal experience as a practitioner, young people have been adjusted vocationally with varying degrees of ease or difficulty, and to a lesser extent, service occupations have been located for the elderly; the most frustrating encounters, however, have been with the multiple difficulties

posed by the middle-aged victim of changing patterns in the economy.

Again it seems reasonable to question the value of probing an issue when statistically the demand for services devoted to it seems not to call for it. Why give attention to revising techniques to aid in placing the middle-aged Jewish unemployed when existing techniques seem adequate to deal with the number of people in this category today? Therein lie the paradox and contradiction which must be resolved.

It is incumbent upon professionals in any discipline to abhor self-satisfaction and to counter limited vision with foresight and long-range planning. Judging by *a posteriori* evidence based on actual occurrences in the job market after a war, by our own observations, and by the increasing rate of job loss following in the wake of steadily burgeoning automation, as cited, for example, by Bagdikian, it seems obvious that in the readily foreseeable future there will be a pressing need for counseling among middle-aged Jewish unemployed persons. For this reason the technique and approach of counseling must be revamped and expanded; when the problem hits us in terms of quantity, we must be prepared to meet it with equanimity.

The role of the vocational counselor must be scrutinized carefully, and his responsibilities to the requirements of the Jewish middle-aged person must be redefined. A middle-aged or older person needs the steering services of a mature counselor with extensive knowledge of the labor market but also with a more than token acknowledgement of the numerous emotional and psychological problems posed by sudden joblessness. The need for greater emphasis on the human factor cannot be underestimated.

Initially, the counselor must be fully aware of the ethnic values and tradition and their ultimate effect upon Jewish

people. Of prime importance is the concept of *tzedakah* or the giving of charity. For a Jew, being a bestower of philanthropy even in the smallest degree is part of his cultural heritage; however, unemployment threatens him with the possibility of eventually being a recipient rather than a giver of charity which in turn attacks his pride as a Jew and his dignity as a man.

Those people whose way of life is cut off in their middle years register strong emotional reactions of bewilderment, frustration and despair about meeting their financial responsibilities and finding work. Work is necessary as a life function especially for men and contributes immeasurably to their sense of worth and feelings of masculinity as potent providers and competent heads of their households. Loss of a job is accompanied by feelings of social and emotional degradation and a loss of social prestige. Deprivation of a job often is equivalent to figurative castration, activates latent anxieties, and intensifies overt anxieties. He may feel, and in actuality be, demeaned in the eyes of his family. Loss of financial security may evoke hostility and additional anxiety in the wife and children whose feelings will contribute to the panic already felt by the man.

What then is indicated as necessary in the vocational counselor's dealing with the problem as it exists now and may develop in the future? Ideally, the vocational counselor should be a member of a two-pronged team composed of an occupational guide to deal with realities of job-seeking and a social worker to handle the emotional aspects of unemployment and job relocation. Realistically, this is not feasible at present, and the burden of relating satisfactorily to a client, communicating an understanding of and empathy with the client's predicament, and putting forth the effort to solve the problem rests

solely with the vocational counselor. Consequently, it behooves the counselor to utilize techniques borrowed from the disciplines of social work and, to some extent, psychotherapy, in order to provide effective aid. For example, the counselor must be prepared to handle and positively counteract the hostility resulting from despair and frustration which will be directed at him as it would be toward a therapist. He first must provide roborant support to enable his client to relate to him with openness and a minimum of apprehension; once this is accomplished successfully, the counselor should attempt to fulfill the following tasks: realistic appraisal of the existing job market and resources for possible retraining, reorientation of the client's and his family's attitudes toward himself and his situation, motivation of the client to explore new areas, reeducation of the client both in attitude and skill, education of prospective employers regarding the potential of the middle-aged person, and, hopefully, successful placement of the client in a suitable occupation.

In assaying the reorientation of an individual, middle-aged Jewish male, a counselor must make every effort to restore self-respect, dignity, and a genuine feeling of virility. Together, counselor and client must search for other skills or talents possessed by the client and must then explore, with the possibility of making a discovery of something which will yield financial remuneration. For example, a former burlap bag dealer with a talent for wood-working might be directed into skilled carpentry if his resistance to change could be overcome.

There is an urgent need for developing counseling techniques to help a man and his family adapt to a probable lowered annual income and necessarily altered standard of living without a concomitant loss of self-esteem. Here it seems reasonable to mention the double

standard in occupational role expectation. Women returning to work are usually not overly concerned with the place of their job or the prestige ladder; once they agree to some retraining and are able to overcome employer resistance, they are more adaptable to new occupations than are men. It is to be noted, however, that less is expected of them vocationally than is expected of men. Rigidity, fixed habit patterns, and a feeling of failure if a new job falls below preconceived expectations on the prestige scale must be dealt with. Involving the spouse on this level of counseling is of great value. Both husband and wife must be convinced of the benefits accruing from retraining and/or additional schooling if such resources are available.

Employers must be educated to realize that middle-age is not synonymous with physical decrepitude; moreover, psychological research has documented the fact that the ability to learn new things is not consigned exclusively to the realm of the young.⁷ If competent counseling can crumble the barrier of inflexibility, richness in life experience and sincere dedication to one's assigned task can more than balance biological youthfulness which, although possibly exuberant, may also be callow. This is not to advocate a rejection of the young in the job market. Rather, what is suggested is to borrow a tenet from oriental philosophy in which the aged are venerated, to adapt this concept to suit current social needs, and to adopt an attitude in which all age groups have a place in today's society and economy.

Effective public relations must be enlisted for several purposes:

1. To inform the community of the availability of vocational guidance services for those Jewish people in need of it thereby providing a

⁷ Cf. work of B. F. Skinner and E. R. Mowrer.

source of some reduction of anxiety.

2. To stimulate the community to develop expanded training resources and financial aids to be used for such purposes as scholarships when additional schooling is required.
3. To encourage undergraduate college students to prepare for eventual communal work and to alert them to existing problems during their student years.

In summation, what has been proposed is a multiform approach for dealing with the middle-aged Jew ensnared by shifting trends in the job market and a statement of the responsibilities which must be accepted by a vocational counselor in a Jewish communal service. Inherent in the proposal is that existing counseling techniques be reviewed and others formulated. The purpose of this paper, then, is to stimulate collective

thought and effort in the hope of moving toward a fresh and ever more efficacious program to be applied to a very real problem with optimal results.

Vocational counselors provide a liaison between an available job market and people in need of occupational relocation. As professionals, however, they must constantly guard against complacency; must not be guilty of a form of dehumanized automation which ends with placing a human automaton in the matching job. They assume the role of part-time social worker and full-time educator along with the position of counselor. Only by the continuous exercise of flexibility, unceasing broadening of scope, and when necessary, by re-evaluating and overhauling of their role in the light of demands posed by constantly fluctuating trends can they function as a vital arm of society and render intelligent, far-reaching service to the community.