

Second Career Re-visited

By Anne McDonagh

In the last issue of Learning Curves, I wrote a fairly positive article about the Ontario Government retraining program, Second Career, urging our readers to take advantage of this generous program. I received several letters, which were very critical of Second Career. So I decided to dig a little deeper and talked to a number of people who are involved in Second Career from various perspectives.

I talked to people who had applied to Second Career but were not accepted, people who applied and who were accepted, career counselors with Ontario's Employment Assessment Centres who help applicants apply and providers of training for Second Career. The criticisms seem to be that unsuccessful applicants were not told why they were not accepted; that there was too much "red tape"; that the career counselors at the Assessment Centres have too much control; and finally, that the whole thing is another government "boondoggle."

I think we can dismiss the final complaint. Unfortunately, such cynicism about government is widespread sometimes for good reason. In this case I think such cynicism is misplaced.

Unsuccessful applicants said they were told they were not eligible but given no reason why. According to the career counselors at the Access Centres, if you are applying for Second Career, to be eligible you must be on Employment Insurance or have been on EI some time since January 1 of 2005. (There is short-term training, up to six months, for those not eligible for EI.)

Also most important for eligibility, in Block 16 of your Record of Employment (ROE), the reason for dismissal must not be an M. When filling out your ROE your employer must indicate the reason for terminating your employment. Block 16 gives a list of reasons in letter code. An A, *shortage of work*, on your ROE goes a long way to making you eligible for Second Career. However, you will definitely not be eligible for Second Career if your employer ticked the letter M on your ROE which means *dismissal*. It may very well mean *dismissal without cause*, or it is possible your employer dismissed you because there was no work but ticked an M instead of an A on your ROE. It doesn't matter. If the reason for leaving the job on your ROE is *dismissal*, that is, an M, you are not eligible for Second Career.

Clearly a simple explanation to applicants about this requirement would prevent misunderstanding, disappointment and time wasting. If they are turned down for other reasons, their counselors should explain clearly and tactfully. If a reasonable explanation is not given for rejecting an applicant, the process seems to be arbitrary and capricious.

Another frequent complaint is that there is too much “red tape”; and indeed the process of being accepted takes some time and a lot of work. One provider of training said that the process can take up to seven months. “Ridiculous”, said one career counselor. “Someone wasn’t doing their job.”

However, the whole process can take several months. As Minister Milloy said in our interview last month, the Ministry wants to be sure the candidates are motivated and realistic about the training they want to take.

The “red tape” begins with an interview with a career counselor at one of Ontario’s Employment Assessment Centres. If clients are eligible, they attend an information session. Their next task, likely in consultation with their career counselor, is to identify the field they wish to pursue. If they already know what they want to do and it fits with their previous experience and their aptitudes, they will already have done some of the required tasks. Then they have to research the labour market demand for the work they want to retrain for and where the training is offered. They need to show that they have been or would be accepted into this program and that their “second career” is in demand in the labour market. This is serious legwork and takes time. They document all this information in the lengthy application form which also asks for detailed financial and personal information. Then they present the results of their research—the application form—to their counselor still not knowing if they have been accepted for the Second Career program despite all the work they have done.

Who makes the decision to accept or reject applicants after they have done all the research and legwork? It is the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. However, the decision is based upon the recommendation of the career counselor. I think we can conclude that in fact the counselors have a lot of control over who is accepted and

who is not. It is a lot of responsibility to give one person who, for a short time, must seem very powerful to the applicant.

Second Career is for people who know how to do research and who aren't afraid to phone complete strangers, as they investigate the labour market and their new career. It is for people who have already been successful in one career and, therefore, are likely to be successful in a second career. It is designed not so much to help laid-off workers, though it does help them, as it is to prepare a skilled labour force for the new economy that will emerge from the recession.

Minister Milloy seems determined not to waste money; hence, the laborious application process and the rigid eligibility requirements. Besides, with 300,000 unemployed in Ontario and just 22,000 training opportunities with Second Career, the government can afford to be selective. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that this approach by the Ministry has left so many hurt feelings and shattered hopes. To apply for Second Career, visit your local [Employment Ontario assessment centre](#). You can also call the Employment Ontario hotline at 1-800-387-5656, or 1-866-768-1157 for the hearing impaired.

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