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Occupational Inertia and Career Change

By: Jasen Walker, Ed.D., with contributions from Brooke Palma, B.A.

Inertia is a property of matter that remains at rest or in uniform motion in the same straight line unless acted upon by some external force. In that regard, inertia is resistance to change, one fundamental aspect of the physical world and biological systems. The two distinct states of inertia are defined in Newton's First Law of Motion, also called the Law of Intertia, which explains that "a body at rest will remain at rest, and a body in motion will remain in motion with a constant velocity, unless acted upon by a force."

These physical and scientific definitions of inertia have metaphorical application to the discipline of vocational rehabilitation, regarding employee performance and the behavior of individuals in work teams throughout most organizations. Inertia, resistance to change, also highlights the issues of being stuck in a so-called "career path." I previously coined the term "occupational inertia" and limited its application to describe the effect of injury/illness on employee return-to-work motivation. One of the more common reasons why an employee "in-motion" becomes an employee at rest is injury or illness. Occupationally significant medical problems can push the employee out of the trajectory of productivity unless some force is brought to bear that will restart or redirect that motion.

In other articles, Fred Heffner and I posit that disability management and transition-to-work strategy programs are keys to influencing the phenomenon of occupational inertia associated with injury and/or illness. A transition-to-work strategy, with or without job accommodation, is the necessary force that needs to be brought to bear to keep otherwise impaired employees productive. Simply said, employers must be the rehabilitation force in occupational inertia, as medicine alone is not sufficient.

The notion of occupational inertia has broader application to the world of work than absenteeism following employee injury and/or illness. All of us, regardless of our age or the stage we occupy in our career paths, are subject to inertia. I have discovered that some psychotherapists and job coaches speak of "career inertia," which undoubtedly has greater application than occupational inertia, especially if we limit the metaphor of occupational inertia to "being stuck" vocationally after the onset of injury and/or illness.

"Being stuck" has been wonderfully elucidated by [Sidney B. Simon](#) in his many seminars and in a 1988 self-help book, *Getting Unstuck: Breaking through Your Barriers to Change*. Simon leads his seminar participants and readers to change, the antithesis of inertia.

In career inertia, only an effort to "self-actualize," to borrow [Abraham Maslow's](#) concept, will prevent us from becoming and remaining stuck. So-called self-actualization, the "unreachable star," seems to be a real

challenge for most individuals. After all, *we're only human*. However, our human nature leads us to find striving and creative change both appropriate and rewarding. Although few will completely “self-actualize,” we must realize that it is not the destination, but the journey that is most important on a career path. Being human means that we have the capacity to plan and execute change.

Maslow classified human needs and human motivation into five levels, in what could be fashioned geometrically as a pyramid. From base to apex, the hierarchy of needs is physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and finally, self-actualization. According to Maslow’s hierarchy, an individual must first achieve certain levels of comfort and personal success before feeling fully and individually content. However, functioning at some levels can satisfy multiple needs.

According to [Amy Wrzesniewski](#), professor of organizational behavior at the Yale School of Management, and her colleagues, workers are generally divided into three distinct categories. In one group, workers see their employment as only a *job*. For them, the primary focus is on the financial rewards of the work being done. They have little interest, pleasure, or fulfillment in the work they are performing. In the second group, individuals view work as a *career*, with the main focus on advancement. Rather than financial motivation, these individuals are more motivated by prestige, social status, and the power that may be associated with their work. The third category perceives work as a *calling*. These individuals perform work for the sake of the work itself. They see their work as meaningful, having a higher purpose, and making a contribution to society. Curiously, we could potentially find each of these types of workers employed in our local, state, and national governments.

Are there personality characteristics, virtues, or traits that make one’s movement towards creative change and self-actualization easier for some than others? The simple answer is “yes,” but more controversial and perhaps less certain is the identification of those particular characteristics. Moreover, once identified, what can be done to facilitate individual development in those who possess the vital characteristics to reach self-actualizing? Perhaps more challenging, what will be the potential plight of those who do not possess the requisite for achievement of so-called “self-actualization?” Are there blue-collar workers who choose to see their employment as a calling? Absolutely. And conversely, do so-called “professionals” show up every day for no more than the paycheck? Indeed.

First, let us start by further inspecting the outcome of our efforts to progress to the top of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. If someone is moving forward, the type of inertia that we are considering, perhaps nothing needs to be done to quicken or alter the progress. However, if the inertia of concern is characterized by an object at rest (and it will stay at rest unless altered), then we need to create an action plan that will be equal to, if not greater than, the forces keeping us at rest. The outcome of our efforts should be to create forward motion toward chosen objectives and ultimately worthwhile goals.

Of course, this is all about change and how we might facilitate that in ourselves and others. In *Getting Unstuck*, Simon writes, “Stuck is not a comfortable, satisfying place to be. When you are stuck you do not feel content. You do not think clearly. You doubt your abilities and dislike yourself. Most notably, you cannot move forward toward your goals or out of [the] unpleasant, unhealthy situations.”

On the other hand, in the world of work, occupational inertia as a concept allows us to understand that (1) change and adaptation are often necessary and (2) self-induced change is far more rewarding than an external, precipitating event, like being told by your employer that you no longer have a job. Obviously, workers can lose jobs for multiple reasons. However, it is a fact that for the worker who takes “response-ability” (who has the ability to respond) for creating and managing change, the potential outcomes are substantially more rewarding and “self-actualizing” than for the worker who is more or less the “victim” of circumstances, including organizational downsizing or an intimidating boss.

Characteristics of Creating Change

Part of managing occupational inertia and creating change, rather than being subject to it, is recognizing that we have choices. After all, mental health is having choices, as the late [Leo Buscaglia, Ph.D.](#), was fond of relaying. In reality, the vast majority of us have at least some choices. It is the realization of that single fact, that we have choices, that could give us the requisite mental health and courage to overcome occupational inertia. What are those personal characteristics or attributes that allow us to create change and manage inertia? Well, here is my list:

Self-esteem: The feelings and attitudes associated with “self-worth” were first recognized by [William James](#) (1842-1910), who is considered by many as the “Father of American Psychology.” James established the initial doctrine of humanistic psychology, a branch of psychology that formally began in the mid-1900s. Humanistic psychology, yet another branch, rejected behaviorism, which assumes that the so-called learner is essentially passive, responding to environmental stimuli. Humanistic psychology is based on the understanding that human beings are unique among living beings. Humans, at least it would appear, have consciousness, free will, and the responsibility for making choices. Human beings are intentional and seek meaning in existence. These are some of the characteristics that separate us from the animal world and indeed lay the foundation for “self-esteem.” Humanistic psychologists believe that we can increase our self-esteem.

According to Maslow, self-esteem is often found through achievement, mastery, recognition, and respect. Self-esteem is both qualitative and quantitative. That is, self-esteem is not only how you feel about yourself (qualitative) but the degree to which you have these feelings (quantitative). One can possess a pervasive self-loathing or have subtle, temporary feelings of dislike for one’s self. What is clear is that self-esteem is variable and within our power to change, especially if focused on our individual behaviors and not essential value. Our attitudes toward ourselves require our application of other characteristics and behaviors.

Achievement Motivation: According to [Scott T. Rabideau](#) of the Rochester Institute of Technology, “Achievement motivation can be defined as the need for success or the attainment of excellence. Individuals will satisfy their needs through different means, and are driven to succeed for varying reasons both internal and external.” [David C. McClelland](#), an American psychologist, is credited with creating and researching the idea that people are motivated by needs, and one of the key factors of all human behavior is the need to achieve. McClelland (1961) outlined the characteristics and attitudes of achievement-motivated people:

Achievement is more important than material or financial reward; achieving the aim or task gives greater personal satisfaction than receiving praise or recognition; financial reward is regarded as a measurement of success, but not an end in itself; security is not a prime motivator, nor status; feedback is essential, but it enables measurement of success, not for reasons of praise or recognition (the implication here is that feedback must be reliable, quantifiable and factual); and achievement-motivated people constantly seek improvements in ways of doing things better.

Courage: In the field of [Positive Psychology](#), which I consider an extension of humanistic psychology, [Christopher Peterson](#) and [Martin Seligman](#) published a handbook of *Character Strengths and Virtues* (2004). In that book, Peterson and Seligman write of courage, “Strengths of courage entail the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, either external or internal.”

Creativity: This is another of the character strengths that Seligman and Peterson identify as key to human development and, in my opinion, critical to overcoming inertia. We often think of artists as creative, but all individuals can be creative provided that they are in environments that are supportive, reinforcing, open, and informal. A great deal of creativity is said to take place in group settings, such as scientific laboratories or research and development teams. “Brainstorming” and the “nominal group technique” are methods used in facilitating group creativity. Individual creativity need not be in isolation; families and teams can create settings for individual creativity, and individuals can find “places” where they are more creative than not. In

our electronic information society, individual and group creativity is reflected in many new technologies, including “apps” that allow us to access information, learn new skills, and solve problems as never before. Creativity is found in art, science, and many forms of everyday ingenuity, such as TED talks.

Flow: Closely linked to creativity is the concept of flow, otherwise known as the “zone,” which was conceptualized by [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#), known for his study of happiness and creativity. Flow is the state that we reach when totally absorbed in an activity or task, whether it be enjoying a shower or playing a game of chess. Flow is both a verb and a noun, and because it is a state that we can achieve or create with understanding and commitment, it is, in my opinion, a behavior that we can all attain.

Emotional Intelligence: [Tony Robbins](#), the self-proclaimed leadership “psychologist” and motivational speaker, has talked incessantly about managing one’s *state*, the emotional filter that we choose and affective way in which we mold and tell our stories. Robbins believes that people can manage their states to be more productive, creative, and ultimately happy. Emotional patterns or moods have significant impact on the way we relate to the world and others around us. Emotional intelligence is a term that gained national prominence through the writings of [Daniel Goleman](#) who had been a student of McClelland at Harvard University. Goleman authored an internationally acclaimed bestseller, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (1995). Since that time, the concept of emotional intelligence has become an industry or movement in and of itself, and the concept seems to have merit. How to recognize, understand, and manage your own emotions, and how to do the same with the emotions of others are equally, if not more, important in career change and getting occupationally “unstuck” than traditional IQ.

I believe that we all possess these characteristics or potentials and can call upon them. However, in my opinion they are important elements in erasing the roadblock of occupational inertia. No one reading this should believe that they do not have the capacity to energize and utilize these attributes. There are some specific exercises that would help one realize these personal characteristics and take the necessary steps to change occupational movement or move away from stagnation.

Tools/Techniques in Managing Inertia

If occupational inertia is being stuck in a job or stuck in unemployment, only the person stuck can change that perception and/or reality. Having the requisite personal characteristics to make the change may not be enough. Specific tools and techniques will help. Here are a few:

Mindfulness: Mindfulness is “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally,” according to [Jon Kabat-Zinn](#), who brought the practice of mindfulness to the University of Massachusetts Medical School in a Center for Mindfulness. For a complete appreciation of his pioneering work in the area of mindfulness, read his 1990 publication: *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. However, the practice of mindfulness is not relegated to dealing with pain and/or illness.

Mindfulness is a method of cultivating awareness, stabilizing attention, clarifying intention, and strengthening self-regulation, all extremely important objectives in personal change, particularly the change required to overcome occupational inertia and career stagnation. Mindfulness allows one to live in the moment and make better decisions about the future. With clear intention and strong self-regulation, we can figure out where we are going and how we can get there. For the practice of mindfulness, we can turn our anxiety into excitement. Neuroscience has begun to show that the art of mindfulness can be the necessary and sufficient experience to change brain structure.

Creating and Maintaining a Timeline: Time is all we have and it is fleeting. This reality can make us anxious or can encourage us into planning and acting on the reality that “life is short.” Personal timelines allow us to

review the past, recognize where we are today, and plan for future realizations, accomplishments, and experiences. For a greater appreciation of both mindfulness and creating a personal timeline (also known as a lifeline), see the 2014 Summer edition of the *New Worker* located on the [Media](#) page at cecassoc.com.

Make Gratitude Our Number One Attitude: We have often heard the exclamation, “He has such an attitude!” In addition, of course, this is usually a reference to someone whom we fear, dislike, or disrespect. We all have attitudes, which are often the antecedents of our behaviors. An attitude is “a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols,” (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005).

It is highly recommended that you re-evaluate all of your attitudes except one – try making gratitude your only attitude for a day, and see what happens. By adopting gratitude as your only attitude, you will find that the experiences you have that day will enrich your moment-to-moment living and make it easier for you to create the timeline necessary to get unstuck and potentially make tomorrow even more rewarding. [Robert Emmons](#) and [Robert McCullough](#) are psychological and social researchers who have investigated the relationship between gratitude and happiness in their 2003 article, “Counting Blessings Versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life.” According to these researchers, gratitude can produce greater happiness by 25 percent. Being grateful, perhaps for what we do have rather than resentful for what we do not, can help provide the emotional foundation to face challenges, including occupational inertia, and the perspective necessary to execute career change.

Occupational inertia or career stagnation (i.e., being vocationally stuck) is not unlike other life challenges. Perhaps you have already realized that the psychological constructs and life skills referenced above have application to far more than overcoming occupational inertia. Practicing mindfulness and making gratitude your number one attitude are potentially life-changing under any circumstance. Having an appreciation for concepts found in humanistic psychology and adopting behaviors associated with those concepts can help us adopt and use the necessary tools to become “unstuck” and more satisfied in our career paths.

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Your Career Needs:

What Can You Do for Your Planet?

In her book, *Open Heart, Clear Mind: An Introduction to the Buddha's Teachings*, [Thubten Chodron](#), an American-born Buddhist nun, identifies the "culprit" to blocking many human endeavors, including career change and job satisfaction. Chodron describes "selfishness" manifested by the self-cherishing lifestyle to which many of us aspire. After all, there is a little too much ego in all of us.

When we realize that goal attainment and career aspirations are actually secondary to living an altruistic lifestyle, then we can focus on important things such as "loving thy neighbor" and "saving our planet." We need not give up pursuit of personal, professional, and career achievements. On the contrary, we need to carry out these objectives with zest, and at the same time, realize that there are bigger issues in the world. We need not be completely satisfied professionally in order to advocate for planet Earth, the home for future generations.

How to Get Unstuck:

Fighting Negative Occupational Inertia

"Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time." These words from [Thomas Edison](#) ring true for workers fighting occupational inertia.

"[3 Ways to Get Unstuck in Your Career](#)," by career coach [Kathy Caprino](#), suggests to get in touch with your creative side, disengage from the one outcome you are desperate for, and try new things. If you're passionate enough about something to do it on your "down time," there is at least a chance that it could become more than just a side project. Your creative efforts could include: writing a blog, learning an instrument you've always

wanted to play, volunteering for a non-profit, or taking a continuing education course in a field you always wanted to know more about.

Additionally, by embarking on a creative endeavor, you may also be tackling the other above-mentioned tip to “disengage.” To foster growth, it is essential to be open to change. Believing that your life will only be fulfilled if you land a certain promotion or get chosen for a specific project is bound to lead to disappointment and anxiety. Welcome opportunities as they arise. As Caprino writes, “It’s a myth to believe you must be or do one thing only in order to be happy. You’re much more than you think you are.”

Another seemingly obvious, but useful tip, is to hone and tailor your résumé. You can seek out mentors and see if they can offer any insight into improving your résumé.

If you make sure that you’re always learning and trying, your résumé will remain fluid, relevant, and useful. Consider your particular talents, interests, and skills, but remain open to change, which will allow you to move forward and fight the occupational inertia holding you back.