

Careers Related Support Post Natural Disaster

**A qualitative report from Christchurch-based
Career Practitioners**

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Background

At 4.34am on 4 September 2010, Canterbury was struck by a 7.1 magnitude earthquake. It was a damaging earthquake, destroying homes, infrastructure and business premises and undermining the viability of the land in many eastern suburbs of Christchurch.

Since that time, the region has experienced 7638 earthquakes (Nicholls, 2011). The most damaging of these was a 6.3 magnitude earthquake striking at 12.57pm on 22 February 2011. This earthquake killed 181 people, destroyed a significant proportion of the central business district (CBD), and broke the back of parts of the city's infrastructure. Many thousands of people lost their homes, businesses, water, power and sewerage. A further series of major earthquakes (5.7 and 6.3) occurred on 13 June 2011 which compounded existing problems within the suburbs and CBD and further damaged the city's infrastructure.

There now exists in Christchurch an atmosphere of uncertainty, constancy of change and an ongoing layer of significant anxiety about the future. Four months on from 22 February, the CBD remains cordoned off. Many workers and businesses can no longer operate out of their premises. Some operations have ceased to exist while others have begun operating in make shift premises out in the suburbs.

Since September 2010, many people of Christchurch have been living and working with extraordinary challenges. There has been loss of business premises, forced relocations, limited sanitation services, broken homes and streets, the threat and reality of redundancy, lowered income, co-sharing of secondary school sites and the ongoing, and seemingly never ending, earthquakes.

The seismic activity in Christchurch is not over. GNS Science said at the beginning of June, 2011 that there was a 23 per cent chance of a magnitude 6.0 to 7.0 earthquake in the next year, dropping to a 10 per cent risk the following year (Gorman, 2011). After the series of earthquakes on June 13th, this figure had to be recalibrated and rose to a 30% probability of a significant 6.0 – 7.0 event within the next 12 months (Gorman, 2011).

It is within this context that this paper has been written and in which careers support is being offered. Christchurch is in the middle of a natural disaster with no finite end in sight. There are no parallels internationally for this event and little if any literature or discussion about practical strategies for effective career's interventions in such a situation.

Careers New Zealand

Careers New Zealand is the leading provider of career support services for New Zealanders. The cornerstone of every service delivery arm is to provide expert advice and support to people of all ages so they can make smart, well-informed choices about their work and learning. Support is delivered via a website and phone advisory services, with one-to-one guidance services delivered to New Zealanders with the greatest needs.

As the front door to Career New Zealand's range of national service delivery arms, Advice Line's 0800 service provided the initial response to Christchurch residents in the immediate aftermath of 22 February. The staff, based in Wellington, worked with upset and emotionally charged clients calling from Christchurch.

Careers New Zealand's Advice Line Manager, Tracy Clarke (T. Clarke, personal communication, 27 June, 2011) spoke recently about the pre-existing professional development strategies that continue to enable her staff to cope with the callers from Christchurch and from those who have moved to other regions. As well as standard business coaching, Advice Line staff regularly engages in self care coaching. Coaching is based on reflective practice, peer review and group supervision for team members. Tracy has always been mindful of the impact compassion fatigue can have on her staff and the self care practice within the team has minimised that impact. Because these practices were in place prior to the Christchurch events, the Advice Line team have been able to offer the best service possible for callers.

Advice Line receives around 50,000 phone calls per year. Pre earthquake, Christchurch/Canterbury accounted for around 7% of those calls. Call numbers from across the country reduced by over 50% in the week of the February earthquake and remained around 25% lower the fortnight after. The number of callers from Christchurch lowered to 4% in March but by April they had recovered to pre Earthquake numbers.

It was ten days following the February earthquake that Advice Line received their first 'client in crisis' call. The caller was extremely upset, with feelings of despair and hopelessness.

To date the calls have been a mixture of practical advice and career planning. In the early days clients wanted a face to face service that Careers New Zealand was unable to provide in Christchurch but found the phone service to work once they had gone through the process. What Advice Line staff are finding is that the people who have left Christchurch have not called as much as those who have stayed. Clients who have relocated are generally looking for course information. It is the people who have stayed in Christchurch who have used Advice Line the most.

An online tool, The Canterbury Job Matcher (Careers New Zealand, 2011) was developed by the Careers New Zealand's web development team in response to requests from colleagues living and working in Christchurch who needed relevant labour market information post earthquakes. This tool is found on the home page of Careers New Zealand's website and asks users to select their existing skill sets. Once the user has done this, a number of possible job ideas are generated from which an individual can select their preferences. Each of these job ideas will take

them to the current Canterbury Trade Me Job vacancies that are a direct match or related to each identified job.

The Canterbury Job Matcher went live on 18 April 2011. Since that time, the link has had 10,573 visits with 9,615 of those clicking off to view the vacancies in Trade Me Jobs (B. Gallen, personal correspondence, June 27, 2011). 63% of these visits have come from Christchurch. The top five skill sets chosen by users from the 30 skills available have been customer service, administration, managing and supervising, planning and organising, and caring for people. Skills that are directly associated with the practical rebuilding of Christchurch are currently lower in users' selections. It is, however, not possible to postulate what this might mean.

Careers New Zealand Christchurch Office

Following the first major earthquake on 4 September 2010, the Christchurch office of Careers New Zealand experienced a ten day period during which it was unable to operate due to a Civil Defence cordon around the central business district (CBD). Service delivery returned to pre-quake levels quickly once staff could return to their building.

After the more damaging February aftershock, things were very different. As a result of more significant and widespread damage to many buildings throughout the CBD, access to this area has been denied for safety reasons and much of the area remains inaccessible and cordoned off four months after the event. Like most other businesses, Careers New Zealand lost their offices and in order to re-commence business, faced the challenges of no location, no resources, staff who needed to prioritise their family needs, trapped cars, no cell phones, and no computers.

The effect on how services could be delivered to the greater Christchurch area was immediate and challenging. In common with many others from the CBD, Careers New Zealand talked with other organisations unaffected by the quake to find a place to work from. Businesses across the city have been generous in taking in 'Earthquake refugees' and this generosity was echoed by government colleagues. To date, Careers New Zealand has co-shared premises with the Ministry of Education for three months, before recently moving to a rented co-share with Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. Both these arrangements have been, and continue to be, temporary but have allowed the continued delivery of services.

The working scene in Christchurch is very different for many since 22 February. People are working from home, or from the boot of their car. A large number of people have a hub or central point to meet at and then work from their garage, someone's lounge, or as in Career New Zealand's case, an empty space with another organisation. The 'hub and home' model is commonplace and this is how Careers New Zealand in Christchurch has found a way to operate.

Such widespread dislocation has provided challenges in re-establishing contact with clients, organisations, service sites, and schools. It has provided practical problems in trying to liaise with other agencies to provide additional services to workers affected by earthquake related redundancies. Davison and Campbell (2011) also highlighted the ever present need for patience as staff tried to negotiate the

transportation issues resulting from the earthquakes. Major arterial roads are often not open and many through-streets still remain too damaged to use.

Once Christchurch staff had established their new working model, additional services were quickly brought on line including the provision of Job Search workshops targeting redundant workers. To achieve this meant overcoming the very real challenge of identifying safe, suitable and accessible sites throughout the city, but has met a very real need.

The Rapid Redundancy Response Team

A pre-earthquake service known as the Rapid Redundancy Response Team continued to play a particularly significant role following the major earthquakes and aftershocks. This team, established by the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) in the mid 2000s, consists of representatives from MSD, Inland Revenue and Careers New Zealand, with additional personnel from local unions and support services added as appropriate to the events attended.

The primary purpose of the team is to provide support and information to groups of workers facing redundancy. Each representative shares key information on the services they offer affected workers, and typically stay after the meetings to talk informally to individuals or groups. Additional individual or group support services have been occasionally requested by management following these meetings.

This service was heavily utilised especially after the February aftershock. Key businesses that have used it include major hotels, food services and manufacturing operations. As a result of these activities, some affected staff contacted Careers New Zealand and / or attended the job search workshops mentioned above.

A key difference that this team noticed when talking to affected individuals at quake redundancy meetings compared to pre-quake meetings was that many attendees wanted to tell their “earthquake story” rather than focus entirely on the support services being offered. This relates well to Maslow’s Needs Hierarchy theory (Maslow, 1943).

Experiences of Other Careers Related Service Organisations

Job Connect offers targeted assistance of career and job search endeavours to clients with a mental health diagnosis. Similar to Careers New Zealand, they found themselves without a base following the February aftershock and had to look at how they could quickly re-establish services to their clients. They found this out in the suburbs. Allied to this, Workbridge, a specialist agency assisting job seekers with disabilities, lost their central city premises and now have their staff operating out of one remaining office with others housed within community groups throughout Christchurch.

The Ministry of Social Development delivers a wide range of services, including careers related services, to the general public through their Work and Income (W & I) operations. Prior to the February quake, these services were delivered at eight W & I offices throughout greater Christchurch.

Post the February quake, W & I found that not only were they unable to operate from a number of damaged sites, but that they also now faced a significant increase in demand for both existing and additional services. This included increased applications for emergency related payments (including Civil Defence payments), job loss cover, earthquake support subsidies and job opportunities for displaced employees.

In discussing the way W & I handled these challenges, Mark Challies from the Canterbury Labour Market Team mentioned that they had to initially move to a paper based system as a result of many computers being in buildings not able to be used and the need for those computers available to process emergency payments. Mark felt that this approach helped streamline responses and enabled staff to more quickly match clients to suitable available jobs.

Immediately after the quake three sites were operating with a further two sites within the two weeks of the quake. In addition there were a number of satellite mobile offices working in the most affected parts of the city.

To help manage continued high levels of demand staff also outbound called new applicants regarding their work situation, as well as outbound calling unaffected businesses who might have been able to offer employment. This generated a number of opportunities that may otherwise have been missed and connected a number of people in to employment.

Mark found that these approaches, in combination with the reintroduction over time to a simpler technology based system, helped ensure that clients moved from initial crisis assistance to potential job search support which for many resulted in their successful placement into new jobs.

Work Values Post 22 February

Work values are an intrinsic part of the career decision making process. Within the Christchurch context, those of security, work environment, location, and (minimal) pressure appear to be growing drivers in job choices. Job seekers have adjusted some of their considerations when reviewing whether to stay in a job or apply for a new position. Is the building safe? How hard will it be for me to get home in an emergency? Will the position bring even more stress into my already stressful life? Is the employer supportive and approachable? If I change my job, will there be any options for me in the current employment environment? For those with jobs, there also appears to be a real sense of 'hunkering down', deferring job change and trying to ride things out.

Since the Christchurch earthquakes Ryan Recruitment Ltd., (Ryan Recruitment, June 2011) have reported that there has been "...a real change in employees' wish lists'. *More than ever, people want to work close to home. Now it's not just a matter of convenience but an acute awareness that, in an emergency, they may need to reach family quickly.*" Ryan's has further observed that "...Employees are also actively looking for less stressful work environments and for colleagues who are kind and supportive. During, and after, the earthquakes fellow workers were often the first to help and comfort those trapped or in distress. Appreciative employers are also high on the list. Employees want to be rewarded not only in purely monetary terms but

with reassurance that their role is important and acknowledgement that their work is appreciated. In times of great uncertainty, it's vital that people have positive reinforcement." Crabbs and Black's research, (1984) confirms the significant importance of supportive employers in a post disaster employment scenario.

Decision Making since 22 February

As a result of working with many earthquake affected job seekers within a workshop context, it has become increasingly apparent that major career shifts are, for the most part, not being considered particularly by mature workers. Individuals are seeking to improve their job search techniques so that they can replace their lost position with one requiring similar skill sets. The majority of people attending the Job Search Skills workshops have identified that they have a background in administration, middle management, unskilled/semi skilled work and caring roles.

While Christchurch is still experiencing significant aftershock activity and residents are facing the practical difficulties of living in the city, there are heightened levels of stress. Ideally, career change and career growth are best done when stress levels are held at a more moderate level. (Elby and Buch, Sept, 1995). With little certainty reigning over where people will live, and what shape the new Christchurch will take, clients feel they are in a kind of limbo. It is hardly surprising that they are deferring major career decisions in the interim.

Trades Training in Christchurch

Individuals who have a preference for more hands-on trades' oriented work, have been pursuing opportunities in trades' related fields in response to the media information indicating that there will be a significant shortage of skilled workers to assist with the rebuilding of Christchurch.

Further to this, there are growing educational opportunities in Christchurch for youth interested in pursuing trades training. The New Zealand Minister of Education, Anne Tolley (CPIT (May 31, 2011) formally launched the Canterbury Tertiary College (CTC) at Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT) in May. The CTC launch came in the wake of the Prime Minister's announcement of a \$42m Government-funded development to strengthen the capability of Canterbury's trades. The Minister indicated that initiatives such as this one would ensure that young people stayed in education and gained the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the future.

Established builders in Christchurch believe that it could take up to 18 months for new construction in the city to gain momentum. (Wood, Alan, 27 June, 2011). Decisions are only beginning to be made about the viability of some residential suburbs and it will be some time before land and home buy-out payments are made. Currently 4% of Christchurch houses have been earmarked for demolition and further tracts of houses and land will undoubtedly be added to this total. Wood also quotes ANZ economist Mark Smith who says that: "... *the residential rebuild process would be driven by cash payments to households in the red zone ... Assuming 5000 houses and an average price of \$300,000-\$355,000 – based on 2007 sales – this would equate to \$1.5-\$1.8 billion invested in the building sector.*"

There is optimism that Christchurch will have a building boom and that most types of workers within the industry will have more than enough work for many, many years. The presence of a number of yet to be determined variables such as changing building codes, compliance requirements and the price of local and overseas sourced product, however, make it difficult to predict when and in what format that boom will flow through to providing significant employment opportunities.

The Current Labour Market: Are there any Jobs in Christchurch?

To date no clear picture has emerged about the reality of employment opportunities in Christchurch nor have definitive numbers about the actual rate of unemployment emerged.

Media reports offer conflicting information and it is based on media information that Christchurch people are gaining the perception that employment opportunities are severely restricted. Marta Stern (Stern, 6 May, 2011) indicated that: *"Business leaders say thousands more Cantabrians are likely to be unemployed after the devastating earthquake than the 22,600 in official statistics at the end of March."*

In contrast to this, the NZ Herald (NZPA, 13 Jun, 2011) reported that: *"...Earthquake-hit Canterbury was the only region with a rise in job adverts on employment site Seek in May ... the growth in demand in Canterbury continued to be driven by reconstruction work, with structural engineers among the most in-demand positions in the region."*

The Ministry of Economic Development recently released information (Radio New Zealand News, 1 June, 2011) stating that: *"More than 1300 businesses have left the Canterbury region since the February earthquake and unemployment has risen almost 20%"* and figures released by the Ministry of Social Development on Radio News (Radio New Zealand News, as above) suggest that: *"... the unemployment rate {has} risen by 18%, when elsewhere in New Zealand it has declined."*

While there seems to be some evidence of post recession job recovery, the negative effects of job loss as a result of the earthquakes suggests that this recovery is specific to certain sectors, with one of the more obvious being the movement of workers in the service and hospitality industry from the city centre into the suburbs.

A clearer picture is likely to eventuate following the release of labour market information over the next few months from the Department of Labour.

Careers Education in Schools

There are 25 secondary schools in the Christchurch metropolitan area including private, integrated, specialist and state run. After the February aftershock, five of these schools with a combined roll of 4,260 were deemed unsafe. As a result, there are now 10 schools co-locating on five school campuses offering schooling to 12,445 students in total (Numbers compiled from individual school websites).

The school day begins at 8am for the host school and they then vacate the premises in time for the displaced pupils to begin their school day at 1pm. 40% of secondary school pupils in Christchurch are affected by this arrangement. This presents some

issues especially the “second shift” students which include getting home in the early evening and the resulting challenges around maintaining part time jobs that were previously undertaken from late afternoon.

According to Terry Bligh, a member of the St Thomas of Canterbury’s careers team at a co-located school (T. Bligh, personal communication, 28 June, 2011), some of the key challenges faced are how to make the best use of less room space to house careers resources, seeing students individually and completing the necessary administrative tasks. Terry has appreciated the flexibility of tertiary trainers to come and meet with students at unusual times, and also finds that the opportunity to work in with the careers staff of the other school has the potential to ensure that the best possible careers related services are provided for both sets of students.

Murray Bartlett, Careers Advisor at Burnside High School, another co-located secondary school, (M. Bartlett, personal communication, 28 June, 2011) said time seems to absolutely fly each day and it is particularly challenging to catch up with students in the reduced time they are in the school. He is also finding that his sessions with students need to be briefer and more focussed. Murray is increasingly asking some students to complete some of the careers related research activities at home in order to ensure he can assist as many as possible. Murray also indicated that the careers team is looking closely at the value of all career related events to ensure that the time students are being taken out of class is used wisely.

The Coca-Cola Careers Expo normally hosted in Christchurch early in the second term of each year has been rescheduled to August. This event has always been a pivotal point for secondary school students to gain information about possible career pathways and training providers. Given the constraints on the careers programme delivery, this will take on an even greater importance for Christchurch in 2011.

In Conclusion

Greater Christchurch has changed. The provision of careers related support to the Christchurch population has changed. Over time, however, along with other careers related social service organisations, Careers New Zealand is rebuilding and reconnecting with its Christchurch client base.

The resilience and dedication of Cantabrians is to be admired. The “lets get on with it” attitude of people as they dig out liquefaction for the third time, or empty the chemical toilet for the 140th time, is beyond amazing. Sadly however the ongoing cumulative outcome is both wearing people down and killing what normally would be viable businesses.

Throughout all of this, Careers New Zealand’s work in Christchurch has been strongly supported by colleagues in other geographic locations. The senior management team and other managers have continued to provide active emotional and professional support. This began within hours of 22 February 22 and has been ongoing and extensive. The website team created a page with dedicated content to support redundant and dislocated workers, and the addition of their innovative Canterbury Job Matcher tool has been a resounding success. The Advice Line team is still fielding telephone calls and liaising with clients on behalf of the Christchurch team. The Information Systems team spent endless hours ensuring the viability of

replacement IT systems and equipment. Colleagues throughout the country have sent resources, messages of ongoing support and heart warming gifts.

Louise Campbell, Practice Leader for Careers New Zealand in Christchurch says (L. Campbell, personal communication, 28 June, 2011) that the "...whole of Careers New Zealand nationwide is determined to support the people of Canterbury". Their combined actions continue to lift the morale of Christchurch staff."

Careers New Zealand is making every endeavour to continue to provide a high quality, focussed and needs-specific service to the people of Canterbury as they try to rebuild their lives. However the ongoing seismic activity and the changed face of Christchurch city means Cantabrians will continue to live in extraordinary times.

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