

## What Happened to Your Parachute?

Thirty years ago, hardly anyone understood the question, "What color is your parachute?" Today, it's the job hunter's mantra. Richard Bolles reckons with what has changed in the world of careers -- and, perhaps more important, what hasn't.  
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In 1991, the Library of Congress surveyed more than 2,000 readers and crafted a list that it grandly called "25 books that have shaped readers' lives." The list included many of the usual suspects: The Bible, of course. "Don Quixote." "The Catcher in the Rye." But there at the bottom, lodged alphabetically between "War and Peace" and "The Wizard of Oz," was a business book -- the only such book on the list, and the only volume, fiction or nonfiction, whose title poses a question: "What Color Is Your Parachute?"

Richard Nelson Bolles, now 72, offered up that inscrutable question 30 years ago when he wrote the first edition of "What Color Is Your Parachute?: A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters and Career-Changers" (Ten Speed Press). It was one of the first job-hunting books on the market. It is still arguably the best. And it is indisputably the most popular, measured by its status as one of the best-selling books of all time: 288 weeks on the New York Times best-seller list, 6 million copies in print, between 15,000 and 20,000 copies sold every month.

But as the Library of Congress list suggests, the book's impact reverberates beyond bookstore cash registers. Like few other questions ("What's your sign?" and "Where's the beef?" come to mind) "What color is your parachute?" has become a comfortable part of the American vernacular. What color is your parachute? Answer that riddle, and you've unlocked some fundamental secret about your work and your life. Well, not quite, says Bolles.

"The question was just a joke," explains Bolles. "I had no idea that it would take on all this additional meaning." He first posed the question at a meeting in 1968. Somebody told him that several people in his organization were "bailing out."

So to remind himself that he needed to discuss the topic, he scribbled "What color is your parachute?" on the blackboard. His colleagues chuckled. And that might have been the end of it -- another one-liner forgotten before the laughter subsided.

But as it turned out, Bolles himself was one of the bailers. As an ordained Episcopal priest, he was canon pastor of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. But he lost his job in a budget crunch. He then landed an administrative position with the Episcopal Church, meeting with campus ministers at colleges across the country. He discovered that many of these ministers shared his predicament: Their jobs were in peril, and they had no idea what to do. So Bolles did some research and wrote a 168-page guide to help the campus ministers he was supervising find jobs and change careers. Stuck for a title, he remembered his wacky question from two years earlier.

He self-published the book in 1970. The first pressrun was 100 copies, which Bolles toted to a meeting in Philadelphia and distributed free of charge. Then something extraordinary began to happen. He started to get orders -- first for 1 or 2 copies, then for 40 or 50. Before long, orders were pouring in -- not from other ministers, but from such institutions as General Electric, the Pentagon, and UCLA.

By 1972, a small publisher in Berkeley, California produced "Parachute" commercially. "Of course, nobody knew what the title meant," Bolles says. "I'd go into bookstores and find it in sports, with books about parachuting." In 1974, a recession rocked the country, and "Parachute"'s sales soared and have remained sky-high ever since. For all of the changes in the world since the days of the Nixon administration, the book's core advice hasn't changed much.

Finding a job is all about strategy. Choose the right strategy, and you can snare a good job even in bad times. Choose the wrong strategy, and even roads paved with gold will lead you nowhere.

And, over the past three decades, Bolles's preferred method has remained remarkably consistent: Sending out resumes doesn't work. Neither does answering ads. Employment agencies? No way. What does work is figuring out what you like to do and what you do well -- and then finding a place that needs people like you. Contact organizations that you're interested in, even if they don't have known vacancies. (Bolles actually coined the now commonplace term "informational interview.")

Pester friends and family members for leads. Once you get in the door of the employer of your dreams, show how you can solve its problems. To get this method across to his audience, Bolles adopts the voice of a twinkly uncle -- not a stern taskmaster. And let the record show that the author does not mention the fabled parachute on a single page. Bolles's 1968 throwaway line is now plastered on 6 million books -- it's just not in the book.

As the millennium approaches, Bolles is busily readying the 30th-anniversary edition of his book, which will parachute into stores in early November. Fast Company spoke with him at his home in Walnut Creek, California and asked for his help in reckoning with careers: What has -- and what hasn't -- changed in the years since his book was first published?

You've always preached a certain amount of career self-reliance -- or at least career self-direction. How much has the need for that intensified since you first wrote "Parachute"? Thirty years ago, the idea of doing a lot of pen-and-paper exercises in order to take control of your own career was regarded as a dilettante's exercise. Today, it is a survival skill. If you don't take time to figure out what you want to do with your life, you will be at the mercy of all those forces out there today.

Has the concept of "career" changed over the past 30 years? Not as much as people think. When I started writing "Parachute", the word "career" didn't mean what people now say it means. Few people thought that it meant a step-by-step career ladder, where you would start out as a clerk and move up to become ceo of the company.

Even back then, most people's careers were an unplanned jumble of stuff, thrown into one basket, and that was called a career.

Some things are different, though. Haven't the rules that guide careers changed? Yes. Four areas, in particular, have changed. First, jobs today are temporary. You don't know how long your job is going to last. Thirty years ago, before the onslaught of downsizing and such, you could count on spending your working life at the same job. Second, jobs today are really seminars.

Change is happening so rapidly that you've got to pay close attention and learn. Third, today's jobs are essentially adventures. You never know what's going to happen next. And fourth, you must find job satisfaction in the work itself. Your self-esteem must come from doing the work rather than from some hoped-for promotion, pay raise, or other reward -- which may never materialize.

Fortunately, that dim outlook is not universally true: Some organizations appreciate, praise, and celebrate their employees, but not as many as there once were -- especially not when an organization has more than 50 employees. Those four changes are pretty profound. What do they add up to for most people in the workplace?

Altogether, people today are much more insecure and apprehensive than they were when I first wrote the book. The contract that they imagined existed between employer and employee has been terminally split -- permanently rent asunder. But I feel that the view that there was loyalty between company and worker back then was also a myth. Even then, the conditions that produced the workplace realities of today were very much in place.

These trends always exist in embryo before they start to grow and people begin to notice. How do you advise individuals to respond to all these changes? When people change jobs so frequently, their learning curve accelerates. They get the chance to learn more -- and in less time.

If I have one job for two years, and I get bounced out of it, or I decide to leave and go to a new place, I have to start learning new stuff -- a whole new set of skills that I didn't need in my last job. This makes me a more valuable employee, wherever I go.

All this bouncing around sounds like a typical day in the new economy -- half-terrifying, half-exhilarating. Are these changes for the better or for the worse? That very much depends on individuals and their coping skills. The old wisdom, "One man's meat is another man's poison," is still true. Some people eat up change; others get eaten by it.

A lot of people say that this tumultuous kind of environment is great for the well-educated and prosperous, but it's disastrous for everybody else. Do you agree? Absolutely not. Anybody can survive and prosper in these times, provided that their attitude is positive. In another book I wrote (*The Three Boxes of Life and How to Get Out of Them: An Introduction to Life-Work Planning*, Ten Speed Press, 1978), I tried to do away with the "victim mentality."

There's a sense in which all of us are victims at one time or another: Events happen that make us feel powerless. But the victim mentality goes beyond that and says that I will always be powerless and that my life will never be any better.

I've gotten a lot of mail from people with all kinds of handicaps who combat that view. Just the other week, I met a young woman who had previously written to me. She is 17 and has Down's syndrome. She used my book in a paper she wrote for school, and while other kids were writing things like, "I just want to keep busy," she wrote, "I'm going to identify a job where I can make money, so that I can be self-supporting." I truly believe that absent the victim mentality, everyone -- regardless of background, education, or ability -- can carve out a good path for themselves in this tumultuous workplace.

What about changes in the work climate itself? Well, I've seen lots of changes over the past 30 years. For example, I'm astonished by how easy it is now for employees to get time off -- to pick up their kids or to deal with other personal matters. Today's employers are much more flexible about that than they used to be. That's not true everywhere – not by a long shot. But it's true in many places where I never would have expected to see it. Another big change is instant accessibility. With cell-phones, email, and pagers, workers are now expected to be available at almost any hour. I get phone calls at home at 3 am, and people expect me to answer! Despite all the things we've discussed so far, you're not totally sold on the idea that the world of work is awash in change, are you? No, I'm not.

There is a basic truth about what a human needs in order to survive; our culture seems unable to understand that. Human nature survives and has survived through the ages by being able to hold on tenaciously to two concepts: What is there about my life or world that has remained constant? and What is there about my life or world that has changed or is changing?

I have always argued that change becomes stressful or overwhelming only when you've lost any sense of the constancy in your life. You need firm ground to stand on. From there, you can deal with that change. Observing the constants in your life gives you that firm ground. The thing about the great faiths is that they talk about what's constant in the world: God, grace, prayer. But our culture, in general -- and the profession of career counseling, in particular – gets absorbed with a single question: What's changing? Nobody remembers to ask the other question, What's remained constant?

All right then, for the record, what has remained constant? Human nature. It doesn't change. Rejection. People don't like rejection, never have, never will. And the job hunt is still basically done in the same way as it was done 30 years ago, despite all of the technological changes. For "Parachute", I created a diagram called "Our Neanderthal Job-Hunting System."

It's a large pyramid, segmented by different job-hunting techniques. Employers start at the bottom of that pyramid. They try to fill vacancies by looking internally and hiring from within. Only after that do they go up the pyramid to other methods, such as contacts, employment agencies, unsolicited resume, and ads. But the job hunter takes exactly the opposite direction -- exactly the opposite! The job hunter starts by mailing resumes and looking through ads, and only then moves down the pyramid to the strategies that employers prefer. The job hunt hasn't changed one whit in 30 years. It's just as Neanderthal today as it was then.

Hasn't the Internet and all its job sites made job hunting easier? Outwardly, yes. Inwardly, no. It's the same old ineffective system in a new dress. Everyone is hypnotized by the job postings and resume. But, in fact, they're the least effective ways for job hunters to use the Internet. If we step back a moment and look, we see that the Internet can help job hunters and career changers in five ways: They can search job postings for vacancies, post resume, find career counseling, make contacts, and research companies and professions.

Of those five, research is the Internet's primary value for job hunters. I can get on the Internet and find out almost everything I need to know about a company. On the other hand, the least valuable use of the Internet is searching for job postings. As I said: The job hunt is just human nature in action. That is, job hunters are afraid of rejection. So they typically dislike the face-to-face stuff. It's much easier to send a resume and be rejected by an employer than to stand in front of that employer and be turned down in person. The Internet is just a new way to avoid rejection.

So the Web doesn't change the job hunt much. Well, are there any other cherished myths you'd like to explode? Aren't we all free agents? Should companies not be fast? As I said previously, I have no problem with people noticing and talking about all the changes that have occurred. But I'd like them to talk about the constants, too. Yes, a lot more of us are free agents.

And yes, a lot more companies are fast. But not everybody's become a free agent -- and not every company has become fast. We mustn't overdramatize our present time, as though everything is change, change, change.

My wife, Carol, has a great saying about marriage: "You shouldn't have to work at your marriage. But you do have to pay attention." Many changes in the workplace aren't so dramatic that you have to work at them. But you do have to pay attention. Why has "Parachute" endured? Why is it still going strong? In the past, I've explained it this way: "'Parachute' is a book of hope, masquerading as a job-hunting manual." People want hope. They also want a book to be different. Mine certainly is: the illustrations, the diagrams, the exercises. Also, some of my impudent humor is in the book. If you can't laugh at something, no matter how difficult and serious it seems, you've lost a precious part of your humanity.

But I must admit, after all is said and done, I'm still astonished that a book published 30 years ago is still a best-seller today. What about generational differences? Do they play a role in how people respond to the book? I don't think so. I was in Los Angeles recently, having lunch with a friend. I learned that one of the hostesses at the restaurant had just moved to la from Connecticut. So I got a copy of my book and gave it to her. Another hostess was on the phone, and when she saw the book in my hand, she said, "I love that book,

I love that book! Why are you giving her that book?" I said, "I'm the author." She hung up the phone, and with great excitement she told me that the book was part of her family's history. Her grandfather had read the book. He then gave it to her father on her parents' wedding day. And her father has now given it to each of his children, including her. Every age can use it, it seems. You mentioned that it's human nature to avoid rejection. Over the last 30 years, what else have you learned about human nature, as it relates to work or the job hunt? People don't just want to keep busy at work.

Maybe that was enough when they were younger, but not as they grow older. They want a sense of mission in life -- and a sense of mission about their work.

What stands in the way of people finding their mission? Prior agendas. For example, my wife, Carol, is a well-known career counselor in her own right. She was meeting with a client who worked in the rubber industry -- let's call him George. George told her in their first session, "I've got to get out of the rubber industry." So she gave him some homework to do before their next session. He came back the next week, and he hadn't done a lick of the homework.

My wife, rich with intuition, asked him, "What will happen if you don't get out of the rubber industry?" George said, "My wife will divorce me." Carol said, "Do you want your wife to divorce you?" He couldn't keep the smile off of his face. She knew then that he would never change his job until it had given him what he wanted: a divorce, with his wife taking the initiative -- and the guilt. Based on his behavior, my wife named this "the doctrine of the prior agenda." You can't help people change or find their mission when they have a conflicting prior agenda.

You're a religious man. Some people have criticized you for including religious references in your book. What do you say to them? I'd like to say to them, "I've been an ordained priest for 45 years! Why should you be surprised that I talk about God?" But I prefer a more practical answer: I point out that religion, God, or faith is mentioned on only five pages in the book, except for an appendix at the end. Those who find that to be "too much religion" need to look elsewhere for guidance in the job hunt.

Besides, even in the new economy -- perhaps especially in the new economy -- aren't there many connections between work and faith? Yes. And so it has always been. "Vocation," for example, means "to be called," which implies that Someone has called you. "Mission" means "to be sent," which implies that Someone has sent you. The implied Someone, of course, is God.

To explore the job hunt deeply, in its language and its history, is to end up in the land of faith.

**Contributing Editor** Daniel H. Pink (dan@freeagentnation.com) is finishing a book on the free-agent economy. You can reach Richard Nelson Bolles via the Web ([www.jobhuntersbible.com](http://www.jobhuntersbible.com)).

**Sidebar:** Here's how to Pack Your Parachute: The following adaptation from Richard Bolles's "What Color Is Your Parachute?" demonstrates what has changed -- and what hasn't changed -- in the art and science of looking for a job that suits your interests and skills.

### **The Five Best Ways to Find a Job**

1. Ask for job leads from family members, friends, people in the community, and staff at career centers. Ask them this one simple question: Do you know of any jobs in my field? That method has a 33% success rate.
2. Knock on the doors of any employers, factories, or offices that interest you, whether or not they have vacancies. That method has a 47% success rate.
3. Use the Yellow Pages to identify areas that interest you in or near the town or city where you live and then call the employers in that field to find out whether they are hiring for the position that you can do -- and do well. That method has a 69% success rate.
4. In a group with other job hunters, implement method #3 (above). That method has an 84% success rate.
5. Do thorough homework on yourself. Know your best skills, in order of priority. Know the fields in which you want to use those skills. Talk to people who have those kinds of jobs. Find out whether they're happy, and how they found their jobs. Then choose the places where you want to work, rather than just those places that have advertised job openings. Thoroughly research these organizations before approaching them. Seek out the person who actually has the power to hire you for the job that you want.

Demonstrate to that person how you can help the company with its problems. Cut no corners; take no shortcuts. That method has an 86% success rate.

### **The Five Worst Ways to Find a Job**

1. Randomly mail out resumes to employers. That method has a 7% success rate. (One study revealed that there is one job offer for every 1,470 resume floating around out there. Another study puts the figure even higher -- one job offer for every 1,700 resumes.)
2. Answer ads in professional or trade journals appropriate to your field. That method also has only a 7% success rate.
3. Answer ads in newspapers in other parts of the state or country. That method has a 10% success rate.
4. Answer ads in local newspapers. That method has a 5% to 24% success rate. (The higher the salary, the smaller the chance of finding a job using that method.)
5. Go to private employment agencies for help. This method also has a 5% to 24% success rate, again, depending on the salary you want. (In a recent study, 27.8% of female job hunters found jobs within two months by going to private employment agencies.)

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