

## **A Careers Bible Stays on the Job**

*Liz Wolgemuth*

Author retools Parachute for second-career seekers and hard times

Nearly four decades ago, author Richard Bolles asked young baby boomers a strange question: What Color Is Your Parachute? To answer that question about careers, readers had to make their way through pages of exercises that demanded self-examination. It was hard work, and while the immediate objective was to find a job, the ultimate goal was to find your calling.

Today, Parachute is one of the all-time bestselling careers books, with more than 10 million copies of 37 editions snapped up since 1970. It ranks--along with War and Peace and the Bible--among the top 25 books that have "shaped readers' lives," as compiled by the Library of Congress. Bolles could be kicking back and killing time. He's 81, after all, and he makes his home in San Francisco's East Bay--between ocean and wine country--traveling frequently and living comfortably, particularly for a guy who once poured concrete. By now, the book's interrogations and exercises are reaching generation Y, but Bolles is not done with baby boomers yet. As this group popularizes the "second career," he wants to help boomers find work once more.

Nervous. Bolles rewrites sections (sometimes big ones) of his book every year to keep up with Twitter and LinkedIn and the economy, and Parachute's rehabbed 2009 edition is now in bookstores. It's called the "Job-Hunting in Hard Times" edition--with good reason. Unemployment rates are at their highest in five years, and the financial services industry has been torpedoed by the mortgage meltdown. Nearly half of working adults say they are worried about layoffs where they work, according to a recent survey by Decision Analyst, a market research and consulting firm.

Baby boomers, in particular, are concerned. They've watched the value of their investments diminish and the promise of pensions dissolve. AARP reports that 27 percent of workers 45 and older are postponing retirement. As many older workers take on marginal second careers for pittance paychecks--or "jobs that don't require job search skills," as Bolles calls them--he is convinced that better gigs are to be found. "There are some people who demand that if they're going to continue to work, they're going to have to have it be worth it," the author says. "And they're willing to do the hard work that it takes in order to find that. But there are other people who, by that age, are just feeling incredibly overwhelmed--and let's not forget the human nature factor called 'laziness'--so, sometimes they just say: 'Oh, that's too much work.' I've heard that so many times." (Bolles's principles are not for the faint of heart. The author thinks that three fruitless interviews are insufficient for a job seeker to be defeated. He'll ask: "You're basing your assumptions on that rich body of data?")

Indeed, readers who have most benefited from Parachute have been those willing to put in time and energy. David Petersen, 60, first read the book two decades ago. Trained as a mechanical engineer and founder of a high-tech firm in Austin, Petersen discovered that "making multimillion-dollar decisions was not very satisfying." With his wife's encouragement, he headed down to North Padre Island, Texas, for a week with a copy of Parachute in tow. "I said, OK, I'm going to do this," he recalls. "I didn't cut any corners." As he worked his way through the book, Petersen discovered his transferable skills and found they would fit into a career that had recently piqued his interest--fine woodworking. "I hung out my shingle as a furniture guy," he says. "I've been in business 18 years."

Turn-ons. The fundamentals of What Color Is Your Parachute?--finding out what turns you on, what you're good at, and then devising a strategy that gets you a job that fits--have left their mark on many. Patrick Lencioni, author of The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, read Parachute after a disillusioning stint in a much-vaunted job doing data analysis for a management consulting firm and learned that he needed to work with people. Today, Lencioni consults on organizational development and writes business bestsellers. "I would trace back a lot of my accomplishments to doing [the work in Parachute]," he says. G. L. Hoffman, chairman of JobDig (and a contributing careers blogger at usnews.com), invited Bolles to Minnesota to

speak at a major job fair. "People over 45 were almost catatonic around him," Hoffman says. "Honest to goodness, people had tears in their eyes."

But while the book enabled Lencioni and Petersen to find their passions, today's baby boomers often have more complicated expectations. Once they may have sought work that satisfied their souls; now they may seek jobs that fit into their lives as grandparents or snowbirds. "What they're looking for is flexibility," says Patrick Rafter of RetirementJobs.com, a site for older workers. The pursuit of flexible hours may motivate them to take lower-paying service jobs--often filling the kinds of positions that were once the domain of teenagers--but their hope for more meaningful work that suits unusual schedules may not be lost.

The talent shortage that will result from boomers retiring has a growing number of employers redrawing their human resources strategy. AARP, which recently released a list of the year's best employers for workers over 50, says corporations and nonprofits are increasingly introducing policies to keep and recruit older workers. Bolles, for his part, says ageism is real but not universal. "If they keep looking, they'll find out that there are employers who value experience and are willing to pay for that," Bolles says.

Job engines. The Internet has changed the job search process dramatically since 1970, and Bolles suggests plenty of helpful job engines and career sites in newer editions of his book. But many searchers labor under the misapprehension that they'll find jobs more quickly online. By the time they realize the Internet alone won't solve their problems, they've wasted precious time, Bolles says. Again--it's all about hard work.

A 2006 MetLife Mature Market Institute study found that 43 percent of workers ages 60 to 65 were still motivated by the desire to do meaningful work. To find that kind of work, the ideas in Parachute may be even more important now, as employers hire older workers with energy and workers bring vitality to jobs they enjoy. Figuring out your favorite skills and ideal locations will bring natural energy, Bolles says. (He also recommends sitting forward in your chair and keeping answers brief during a job interview.)

In large part, Bolles's ideas have served the highly mobile American workforce well, as corporate loyalty has given way to a flank of free agents. "I think the job market has come back to him," Lencioni says. "If anything, his book just becomes more relevant in time." So, no more excuses, boomers.

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