



Parachute Revisited

An interview with Rev. Richard Nelson Bolles

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ONE OF THE BEST-SELLING BOOKS of all time is *What Color Is Your Parachute?* by Richard Nelson Bolles. First published in 1971, this work has influenced almost everything written since then on the topic of the job search. There are few people who haven't heard of this marvelous book that has sold nearly 20 million copies in its various annual editions.

I first met the author back in 1990, when I had responsibility for finding speakers for a career fair being held in San Francisco. It was a real stretch to invite this fellow—motivational speakers sometimes require fees of thousands of dollars, and my budget was less than minimal. But, Mr. Bolles (actually Reverend Bolles, as he is an ordained Presbyterian minister) proved to be very interested in the careers of young scientists and engineers. Dick's interest in pharmaceuticals and biotechnology goes back to his college days. He was a student of chemical engineering at M.I.T. and also earned a degree in physics from Harvard.

Recently I had been going through some of my notes from that meeting, when I ran into an interview with Dick Bolles that I had done exactly 10 years ago. At the time, the pharmaceutical industry was going through a tremendous upheaval, and every other day there were notices of new downsizings. As I re-read my notes from this interview held in early 1995, I realized how very appropriate Richard Nelson Bolles' comments remain for *today's* job market. I hope you enjoy reading this interview as much as I enjoyed doing it!

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Jensen: Dick, there are some really unique aspects of a career in an entrepreneurial startup company. What advice do you have for the scientist facing the decision of going into either the "security" of a *Fortune* 500 company, versus the excitement of a fast-paced startup? How does one choose between being comfortable in a secure environment versus being in a less stable but possibly more exciting career situation?

Bolles: There are no generalizations that you can make here, as it is a completely personal decision. Some people need adventure and constant challenge more than they need food and air to breathe. For those individuals, the one counsel we can give them is that they have to be skilled at the job hunt. If they feel that becoming entrepreneurs and taking these chal-

lenges is what they want, then they have to become better than the average person in the skills of the job hunt. It's been said before, but the people who get hired are not necessarily those who will do the job best, but those who know the most about how to get hired. Consequently, the scientist or engineer who wants to take the route of the young startup must take a better-than-average interest in developing these talents. Remember, job hunting is a learnable skill.

Jensen: One of the false lines of thinking that I hear in this business is that big companies are somehow more secure and stable. We know this is not true because of the number of people and programs that have been stripped away from major corporations over the last few years, companies who just lost interest in certain research. Do you think that this will change in the future, or are we in for more of this?

Bolles: More of the same, for the rules that companies have to run by have not changed, and won't. No matter what aims they might also have, companies are run to be profitable. In order to be profitable, they have to take into consideration a number of factors. Unfortunately, the way the world of work is constructed it tends to be that the well-being of an individual employee is not one of those factors that is taken into account when making these decisions. If they can pare down some of the fat in the firm's expense account by discharging 54 scientists and still keep a viable company, then the fact that this may be a life-altering decision for some of those individuals is not taken into account.

Jensen: Dick, one of the major companies in the business has recently announced that they would be "trimming back" over 6,000 employees this year. *Parachute* is a very upbeat, positive book that makes a good point of how important it is to have the right attitude during the job search. Tell me, however, does attitude really help in a market that has turned soft, when companies like the one I mentioned have "right-sized" to the point of making the competition for certain jobs quite intense?

Bolles: Let's go back a minute. Let's suppose that you are a

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15-year-old tennis player and you want to be a world-class tennis star. How do you get these skills? You would go and hire a coach and ask that person to teach you everything he knows and has experienced. It is the same way for a person who really wants to learn the skills of the job hunt.

Jensen: Use O.P.E., right? Other People's Experiences? Whether it's first-hand or via books.

Bolles: Right—and when certain job markets turn soft as you have suggested, and there are a lot of people released into the market, the things that seem to separate the winners from the losers are how well the individual studies those job-hunting skills and how much time they put into it. The average job hunter spends an average of five hours a week on the job search, and visits with two employers a month. We know that if you take that little time and see that few people, than the job hunt can take a long, long time. What we tell people when markets turn soft is to make a better-than-average time commitment, and to study and find a “coach” for job-hunting skills. That's what *Parachute* is, a distillation of the experi-

ences of other successful job hunters—in effect a “coach” for the inexperienced. Remember, the essence of the job hunt is competition, and what you want to do is to increase your ability to compete.

Jensen: But that ability to compete also has a lot to do with that person's skills, doesn't it?

Bolles: Sure, and when a person has been let go from a company or is experiencing great difficulty in their job hunt, they should remember that their skills are not being stripped from them like the epaulets from the shoulder of a dishonorably discharged soldier. These skills are in demand and it may require a broader look at the market than just their specific, narrow field.

Jensen: You mean that skills are transferable, into other segments of the industry and into other industries.

Bolles: That's right. There's a little homework here that any technical professional should go through when looking at his or her career development. First of all, they should be able to research the various segments of their technology well enough to know where the best potentials lie, and where they could get the most excited. No one else can do this exercise for them. Asking someone for their advice on which field is best would be like asking a friend to go out and find someone for you to marry. It's just not an issue that someone else feels well qualified enough to help you with! And for many, there are probably lots of potentials outside of their industry niche as well.

Jensen: What do you think of résumés or CV's as a tool to get jobs?

Bolles: Résumés, in general, are one of the least successful methods of job hunting that a person can use. A few years ago a scientific publication did a survey of companies who received résumés, and how often the résumé led to someone being hired for a job. In this study, it was found that one job was offered and accepted for every 1470 résumés that were received. In other words, 1469 résumés did not get their sender a job. I've often asked people who believe strongly in résumés or Curriculae Vitae if they would go up in an airplane if they knew that only one flight in 1470 would ever reach its destination! The résumé may be a fine instrument to leave behind you after a successful interview, but there are other, better ways to get in front of people. ■