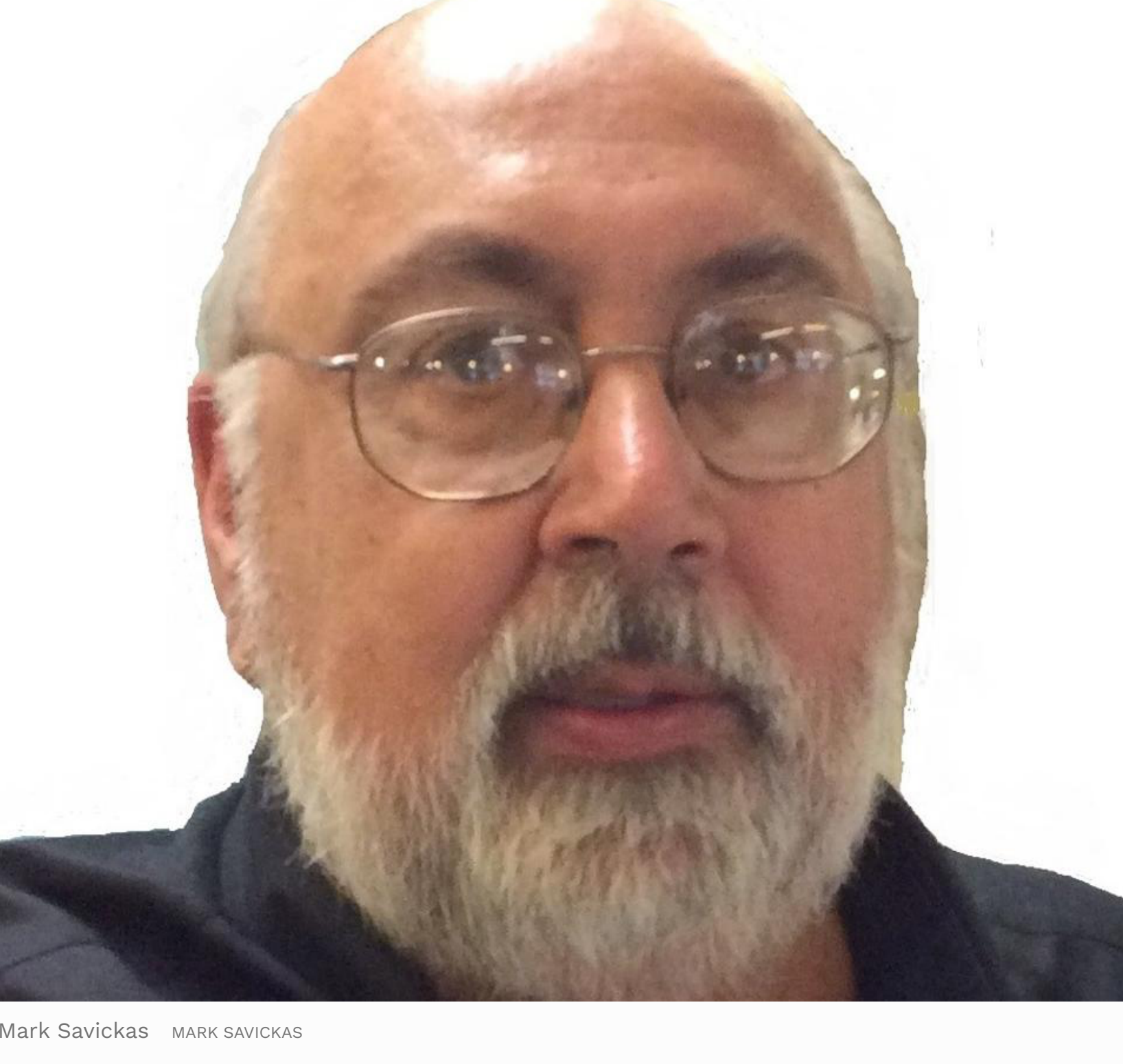


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Don't Let The Virus Make You Lose Your Story! So Says Eminent Career Scholar Mark Savickas

Michael B. Arthur Contributor @ Careers
I share expertise on career ownership.



Mark Savickas MARK SAVICKAS

Mark Savickas is a leader among career counseling scholars. As a long-term editor of the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* he guided his field to change its approach to take on rather than neglect employment mobility. In his private practice he has pioneered what he calls a “narrative paradigm” toward career ownership, where you need to face disruption yourself rather than relying on your current or any future employer. Given the disruption so many people are facing right now, this seems like a good time to hear him out.

Q: Can you say more about your narrative-based approach?

Mark: During the 20th century, we relied on a person-environment fit (or P-E fit) approach to career counseling. We gave people tests about what kind of career to choose, then left them to anticipate a long-term “organizational career.” We simply assumed the organization took charge of a worker’s career after the P-E fit approach helped make the initial connection. That doesn’t work any more. We’ve now moved to a “story model” where we help people tell their career stories and support them to [write the next chapter](#).

Q: A “story model”?

Mark: There’s a widespread shift to a new social theory of work. It’s one that’s sweeping the professions, so we now have, for example, narrative medicine, narrative ethics, narrative law, narrative psychology and more. The old P-E approach assumed stability, the narrative approach assumes continuous change. I tell people it’s no longer an *organizational* story (which your parents lived) its *your own story* (which you are living)!

Q: How is the story model different from the organizational model of career?

Mark: The meaning of career from Middle French is a course or path. The organizational career sets a path for you to traverse. The meaning of career from Latin is carriage, cart or chariot. Today, your story is the cart that carries your career. Whether you are managing a traditional organizational career or a non-traditional sustainable career, a livable story produces meaning and mattering.

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Q: What can you say to the millions who have been laid off by the coronavirus?

Mark: Whatever you do, don’t let the virus make you lose your story! Do not let it “de-story” you. Write it down and use *autobiographical reasoning* to figure out what comes next. In other words, reconstruct the meaning of your career. That means having a vision of the future, something the P-E approach does not address. Do not look to your employer for security, those days are gone. You and your family are your only security - it’s a case of *family first*. At the very least make room for your story in your leisure time. Lots of research says that people who tell their story better are more successful in their careers. So, if you are at home, out of work, get going now with the reconstruction of your story. In turn that will lead to “flexicurity,” meaning your security rests in your flexibility and adaptability

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Q: Can you guide people and their families how to go about that?

Mark: In my work with clients I ask five questions:

Who did you admire (who was your role model) when you were young? (Character Actor)

What’s your favorite TV show? (Agent directing yourself to a occupational stage)

(Both of the above help answer the old P-E question of where would you fit in?)

What’s your favorite story? (Introducing the idea of narrative, leading to authoring of your own life)

What’s your favorite saying? (Asking, how do you instruct yourself? Leading to authoring how meet change and challenge.)

What’s your earliest remembering? (This is important because it has stayed with you and now provides a perspective on your current situation.)

Next, arrange the elements of the small stories into a larger story about yourself as an *Actor* in your story, an *Agent* directing the story, an *Author* plotting the next chapter, an *Advisor* on when to move to the next chapter, and on the overall *Arc* of the story’s theme.

Q: For example?

Mark: For example, I worked with a man who had always wanted to be a firefighter. He scored points toward that by joining the military and becoming an EMT. He wrote his firefighter exams the day before he went to a baseball game with friends and got into a scrap with some guys in the row behind. He got escorted out and convicted of a felony, which meant he could never be a firefighter. However, he worked on his story and determined he really wanted to be a “hero” by doing good in his community, like his uncle who had once saved his family’s lives. That made the EMT career more attractive, and a nice fit with volunteer work coaching the neighborhood kids on the sports field and bringing dinners to shut-ins.

Another example is of a woman who had the awful early childhood experience of coming to find her mother in the act of committing suicide. She could do nothing but wait for her mother to die. She reflected on this and came to appreciate she at first “stood by helplessly,” yet was now able “stand by helpfully” when people were approaching death. She then successfully re-directed her career toward hospice work. The arc of her story went form helpless to helping.

Q: Do people need a career counselor for this?

Mark: Not necessarily, you can keep re-visiting your narrative and adding more to it. It can also be helpful to have a family member or trusted friend to be a good listener. That means someone who really listens to you, and helps you say more, rather than piping up about their life and breaking your train of thought. This means they listen “for” the story not “to” the story.” I believe deeply in the “[unthought known](#)” – what people know but just haven’t expressed yet. You can discover what you know if you keep on playing back the story. You can deconstruct your previous narrative if you keep going through the five questions. You can put what comes through into the new narrative. You can re-story your career!

Q: Thank you very much.

Mark: Thank you, and the best of luck to your readers.

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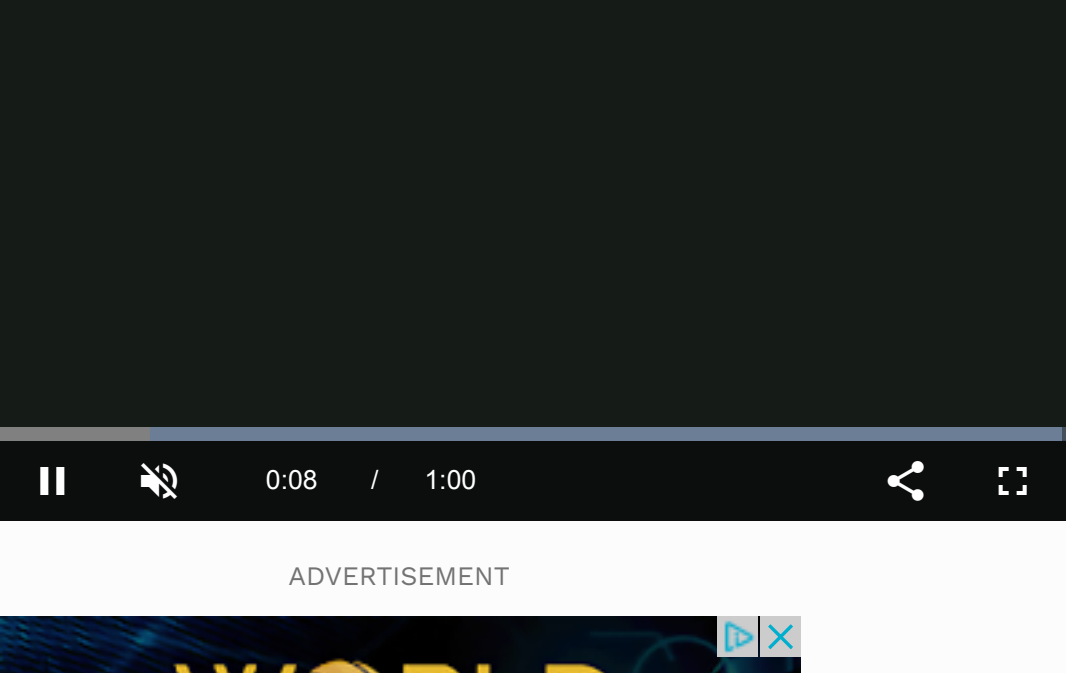
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