

**the future of careers work**  
**propositions in search of professionalism**  
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**Bill Law**  
**www.hihohiho.com**

The lecture is based on a monograph addressed to trainers, policy makers and to the careers profession alliance. Here I've pulled out the practical tasks which that monograph brings to everyday work in this field. There are five propositions, each raising questions for our professional associations, the organisations that employ us, our trainers, our networks, and the students and clients we work with.

When I was a teacher one of the most frequently-asked classrooms questions was...

*'please sir, why are we doing this?'...*

I could think of two possible answers...

*...'because it could be in the exam'*  
*and*

*...'because it could be useful in your life'*

'Why are we doing this?' is still a good question for careers workers. What's our priority: fitting people for getting ahead in competitive selection - learning for academic achievement? Or enabling people to take charge of their own lives - learning-for-living? To think they are the same thing is to overlook the mess that the academically competitive can make of their lives.

Careers work has its answer to the question: I know of no field which has done more research-and-development on learning-for-living. We have a lot to go on in helping people to realise fulfilling and sustainable lives. That's what I argue in the monograph. But I also argue that we have been positioned by commerce and policy to do the competitive job rather than the enabling one. And it has curtailed too much of what career workers are best able to do.

So what are the tasks - and the propositions that call for them?...

- > **re-making the deal** - because independent professionalism needs comprehending support
- > **winning the credibility** - because credibility cannot be claimed, it must be earned
- > **enlarging the role** - because trained careers workers know more than they are in a position to use
- > **sharpening the image** - because careers work is in danger of being marginalised in its own field
- > **pushing the boundary** - because boundary setting can be a covert form of control

I'll try also to frame the questions - and, for me, to do so is realise that our future cannot be like our past. We need to do things differently.

**tags**

big society / boundary-maintenance / career coaching / career management / civil society  
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## 1. making the deal - protecting work-place integrity

The proposition is that independent professionalism needs comprehending support. It means being able to negotiate with shared understanding, rather than struggling with uncomprehending power. Making this deal needs people to know who we really are.

**personal commitment:** At the heart of that understanding is this: careers work professionalism is a *personal commitment*. It is grounded in who a teacher, adviser, mentor or coach is - as a person. These qualities are embodied - communicated in authentic demeanour, posture and tone. Clients and students sense it in the presence of that person. Without it disclosure is limited, and limited disclosure means limited learning.

I know of no readily verifiable performance indicators for this kind of commitment. And not all of our work-place managers know how to recognise and support it.

**institutional support:** But the people who run our training courses must know how to recognise that commitment, and support it. That understanding includes knowing that selecting for commitment is at least as important as training in technical expertise. Trainers are therefore part of an *institutional support* for careers workers - providing a professional framework, credible enough to set out how we are selected, how we are trained, and what we have it in us to do. Without that that framework personal commitment is too exposed. And without that personal commitment institutional programmes are futile. That's the deal: institutional support from the framework, personal commitment from the professional.

But, where the organisation's survival is made the prime driver of institutional management, those employers are poor guardians of careers-work commitment. Organisational survival sidelines professional independence. The record of both guidance and counselling tells of such counter-professional pressures. Both need an institutional framework for careers workers which is independent of their employers. In partnership with trainers, the professional associations - and their alliance - can frame and protect that commitment.

**versions of professionalism:** Being a professional is defined by that kind of independence. But there are *versions of professionalism*. Twentieth-century professions protected their independence with credentials. But this is not the twentieth century - and all forms of protectionism are under sceptical scrutiny. We would be rash to assume that careers-work is exempt from this kind of probing.

There is a professionalism which is widely respected - but it is 'professionalism' rather than 'professional'. There is a difference: while a profession was recognised by its claims to status, professionalism is recognised by its usefulness. If all the twentieth-century professions were to disappear tomorrow, working people in - all walks of life - will still take pride in that kind of professionalism. It has been characterised as what enables workers to say 'no' to their bosses. That's why we need to look, outside our employing organisations, to what the alliance can frame.

So here are practical questions...

*'what people do we need to attract into careers-work professionalism?  
'how do we negotiate that in our workplaces?'  
'... on the basis of what support for professionalism?'*

## 2. winning credibility - earning trust

The proposition is that credibility cannot be claimed, it must be earned. And that means being open to challenge from the very people whose trust we seek. It is not how we see them that matters, it is how they see us.

**culture and its enclaves:** We are not our clients' and students' only sources of learning for career management - they learn in other ways. That means that they do not come to us empty-handed - they come with beliefs, values and expectations, which they gather from their experience of *culture and its enclaves*.

Those sources of learning are massively expanding through globalisation and its technologies. Everyone has plenty of informal ways of finding out what is going on, and working out what they can do about it. And they find those sources in both friends-and-family, and on-line. But this is learning in enclaves - it increasingly belongs to post-coded attitudes reflected in googled urls. Those geographically located cultural backgrounds are becoming better markers for work-related attitudes than any twentieth-century definition of social class can any longer show us. Different groups, in different positions, with different experiences, learn different things about career.

**contested claims:** And, so, there is always more than one way of thinking about working life. Ideas about career are constantly reorganising how we understand what people do. Words like 'skill', 'employability', 'confidence', 'experience', 'allegiance' and 'motivation' crop up differently in different accounts. They express *contested claims*: whatever anybody says about career, somebody else can say it differently. If you've ever compiled a career-management essay or case study, you may well have wondered how to be sure that you have covered the ground.

But my reading of the evidence is that there is something like a consensus about the value of careers work. However much they may vary in other ways, in certain conditions students and clients agree about us. They approve of us when...: they know what they want to do; they are facing short-term action; and they are looking for hard information. We shouldn't be too surprised by the modesty of these accolades. In work as complex and dynamic as ours, the best we could ever reasonably have hoped for is that we help some people, on some issues for some of the time. And that is pretty-well what the evidence shows.

**enlarged expertise:** The evidence shows something else: when it comes to reflecting on why to move on in one direction rather than another, that's when people go to other people for informal help - not to us. They turn to people they know, and who know them - people they feel they can trust. And it is on that 'why' question that they look elsewhere. We increase our credibility by working with people, not just on how to do things, but on why to bother. It means being strong both on career and on the causes of career. And it's not that we don't have that understanding: we are expanding our career studies continually - drawing on psychology, economics, and sociology.

The term 'career studies' is useful, because it speaks less of some wholly-owned careers-work discipline, more of an examination of rigorous disciplines which expand our understanding. The history of careers work is a history of that kind of intellectual exploration and importation. It brings us an *enlarged expertise*: constantly taking us into unfamiliar pathways, collecting from emerging sources, and discovering new ways of understanding what is going on. A recent example is how culture and neurology interact. It expands our scope for evoking possible selves in possible futures. And that offers people a deeper and wider hold on working life. We will know that it has earned credibility when more people, from more backgrounds, want to discuss more of their lives, with more of us, for more of the time.

Practical questions for winning that kind of credibility include...

- 'who collates our understanding of career - and the causes of career?'*
- 'how do we best connect that expertise to client and student experience?'*
- 'how do they know us - and become known by us - enough to trust us?'*

### 3. enlarging the role - integrating learning for integrated lives?

The proposition is that careers-worker professionals know more than they are in a position to use. Enlarged career studies means that careers workers are constantly becoming more able to help. That's good; what is not good is that time- and target-constraints give them little opportunity and freedom to put that ability to good use.

**learning space for useful action:** Career studies is applied learning - what is learned is intended to be used in people's lives. It requires transfer-of-learning - acquired in one setting, used in another. And that means that people's learning reminds them of their lives, so that their lives remind them of their learning.

But it does not come easily. It needs *learning space for useful action* - big-enough that learning can be probed, tried out, adapted and embedded. Applied learning is not like academic learning - useful transfer-of-learning needs more than acquisition, record-making and assessment. And it will not fit into the marginal slots that an academic curriculum reluctantly concedes to 'careers education and guidance'.

**finding meaning and purpose:** As a species we look for meaning: long ago, when the leaves rustled, we wondered 'what's that - predator or prey?... mate or competitor?... us or them?'. It ascribes meaning, and an ascribed meaning is a basis for purpose. We wonder '...so, what shall I do - move or be still?... run or hide?... approach or avoid?'. There have always been versions of this in career-management: what-to-do? and why-bother? - a purpose, and an underlying meaning, giving the purpose its point. Learning-for-living is *finding meaning and purpose*,

And what people informally find may not be misleading - even gossip can offer useful and authentic exchanges of experience. But not all of informal learning is like that - some borders on superstition. There is nothing that professionals can do - or should do - to displace such experience-based learning. But they can help in two ways. They can expand the experience to make more comparisons possible. That means making new contacts - we could call that thinking 'community-interaction theory'. And they can enable the probing, scrutinising and interrogation of what people find. That means engaging people in critical thinking - we could call that thinking 'career-learning theory'. Those two activities - widening the perspectives on meaning, and enabling the interrogation of purpose - are what careers workers do best.

**employability a by-product:** Both activities are process driven - not so much about what people learn, more about how they learn it. But there is no process without content. And keeping up with content is becoming a serious problem: the understanding of facts and factors influencing career has expanded beyond our reach. We need, more than ever, to turn elsewhere for reliable and up-to-date content. And there is no part of any curriculum which is incapable of finding that content and applying it to life. There are educators who know more than we can know - ranging from the dynamics of encounter to the reliability of probabilities. It needs teachers - for example in drama or maths - who are ready to start a scheme with 'this will be useful in your life when...', and to wind up with '...let's go over life situations where you can use this learning'. Transfer-of-learning needs that kind of embedding. And, so embedded, it is a life-wide and life-long gain.

It is integrated learning for integrated lives. It is not cross-curriculum infusion: it does not seek a lot of, often half-hearted, curriculum links. Instead it looks for a few able partners - maybe in drama, and - if not welcome there - maybe in maths. What we most need is not comprehensive coverage, which is unattainable anyway. We need to find genuine expertise and experience which can deal with any question, from whatever direction it comes, and who can fire up curiosity - developing the habit of seeing learning as a map, not a hurdle. We need those people to understand the importance of enabling ready-for-anything flexibility. To enable learning in these terms makes *employability a by-product*. An able educator, helping students to find meaning and purpose in life, does not need to see this in any other way. The best of educators do not care to see themselves as setting in motion a procedure to be completed by recruitment and selection. Education is intrinsically valuable - it is not an agent for other people's interests.

Practical questions include...

- 'is a what-to-do gain all that is asked for - or needed?'
- 'how do we best help with seeking meaning and purpose?'
- 'what can we do about negotiating an integrated curriculum?'

## 4. sharpening the image - developing a narrative of what we do

The proposition is that careers work is in danger of being marginalised in its own field. Agents who offer short-cut answers to urgent questions will attract plenty of clients. Careers work is talking about a more demanding task - both for ourselves, and for our clients and students. We can work with bigger, and more challenging, ideas.

**the 'race' is only part of the 'journey':** Here's a challenge: 'career' is not a thing, like a slice of chocolate-fudge cake; it's an abstraction, like marriage. Abstractions are harder to define in a way that everybody accepts. Metaphors can help, by appealing to visual imagery. And 'career' is already a metaphor - actually, it's two metaphors. In its origins the word spoke sometimes of 'a race', sometimes of 'a journey'. It's not so hard to visualise either.

But try this: can you see a person interrupting a race to take part in a journey? Probably not. So try visualising a person interrupting a journey to take part in a race. If that's easier, it makes journeying the bigger idea, and the bigger can contain the smaller. It means we can say that *the 'race' is only part of the 'journey'*. A journey can be life-wide and life-long. It is not surprising, then, to find that students are more interested in the race. But there are indications that educators are at least as likely to see learning as a journey. Journeying is the stronger image for conveying the causes of career. And, if we are to avoid being marginalised, we need to do more with it.

**a person, encountering others, in a sequence:** What we do with the imagery needs to connect with what people do with it. It means facing up to distinctions - between 'career development', 'careers work' and 'career management'. Career development is our facts-and-factors expertise. Careers work is what we do to help students and clients with what expertise shows. Career management is what they do about it - with or without our help. We need, then, to find the careers-work *activities* which connect career-development *expertise* to career-management *experience*.

Experience is best set down as a narrative - in a story the images are of *a person, encountering others, in a sequence*. People are not short of career-management narratives - communicated in peer-group and face-book gossip, recounting both direct and on-line experience. Exchanging those stories is a place to start. And we have plenty of narrative-based careers-work activities to engage it - ranging from constructivism to narrative-based websites.

**re-balancing face-to-face and stage-by-stage learning:** Inviting people to exchange their stories is a place to start. But it is only a place to start, because narratives are anecdotes - they are not expertise. No story can speak for everybody, each is one-person's experience. So narrative is not a well-sampled diagnosis, it is a living impression. It is not labour-market information, it is labour-market experience. And there are aspects of career management that only narrative can recount: stories can show different points-of-view, things going well and going badly, attributions of meaning, turning-points, the consequences for me and others, and change-of-mind. Such a well-rounded narrative has an authenticity and a spontaneity which facts-and-factors can't convey. It is why a well-rounded narrative draws people in.

But narrative is not quick-and-easy work - the useful recounting of, and reflection on, experience needs interactive stage-by-stage learning. So how do we work with people on linking the story of their experience to the story of our expertise? At our best, our story is engaging, provocative and dynamic. But making the connection means *re-balancing face-to-face and stage-by-stage learning* - guidance works with a face-to-face agenda, curriculum is a stage-by-stage progression.

Practical questions call for a re-thinking of the partnership between guidance and curriculum...

*'in how many ways is career management a life-wide life-long journey?'*  
*'how do we use narrative to connect our expertise to that experience?'*  
*'what does that mean for re-balancing face-to-face and progressive learning?'*

## 5. pushing the boundary - managing control and finding space

The proposition is that boundary setting can be a covert form of control. It is true that setting limits on what we do is a practical necessity, but it is also true that the way those limits are set can circumscribe our independence. It curtails our basis for knowing what to support - and what to oppose.

**the personal and the planetary:** If students-and-clients are to narrate what they learn from experience, should there be limits to what they relate? Probably. But what links are appropriate and what are not? Everybody links working to shopping - the one permits the other. And the work that a person takes up is linked, not just to their own life chances, but the lives of any dependents they have - or ever will have. And people increasingly voice concerns for work-life balance. They also see the impact of work on quality-of-life as it links both to local neighbourhoods - even to African villages. Indeed, those impacts are seen as linking to the survival of species and the habitability of the biosphere - work has a carbon footprint. The links that people make to working life extend between *the personal and the planetary*.

They extend well beyond limits set by recruitment-and-selection interests. And also beyond the market thinking of neo-liberal policy.

**students and clients pushing back boundaries:** Influential interests set limits on career talk. And that goes against wide-spread contemporary personal-to-planetary interests. The trends are well-documented by political commentators, sociologists, counselling-advocates, labour economists and behavioural psychologists. And our own research accords with the trends, it finds *students and clients pushing back boundaries*. It also finds people who see child care as a form of work, and who are wondering about work that endangers the planet.

None of this means that careers are boundaryless - if 'career' means everything then it means nothing. But that is not what happens: people directly relate their concerns to labour-market experience. To pre-empt the expression of these concerns would limit the disclosure's they make, the extent of what we learn from each other, and the help we are - therefore - able to offer. They would also curtail the interests we feel able to support - and resist. It would diminish us.

**whether the big society is big enough:** Such thinking re-locates careers work in other-than-commerce and other-than-government alliances. Does that leave anywhere worth going? The big society is urged as a way of taking on group action which government is not able, or not willing, to take on. The idea is much derided; but there is a more robust concept - 'civil society'. Civil society is characterised as social action which is neither commercial nor political. Voluntary agencies, charities and bona fide non-government organisations are - in varying degrees - examples. So are family, local, social and religious affiliations. There are tensions, take-overs and changing alignments: association football was once part of civil society. Professional associations still may be. Together the agencies and affiliations of civil society weave a social fabric which supports the way we live together - locally and on the planet. And so, it should be possible to say 'yes' to a question about *whether the big society is big enough*. Is it a natural position for careers-work professionalism? Probably.

What are called 'bottom-line' interest in careers work are actually commercial interests of shareholder. Civil society represents stakeholder interests. And all of the agencies and affiliations concerned with the social fabric have a natural interest in what careers workers do. It calls for multilateral, rather than bilateral, partnership agreements. Multi-laterality comes as no surprise to committed careers advisers and socially alert educators. The mapping of their links is as diverse as any in civil society. We need that independent positioning institutionalised. And a natural home for the institution is not the employer of careers workers - who may well defer powerful policy and commercial interests. The natural home for the institution of careers work is in civil society. Because the future is multilateral.

Practical questions for that reality are...

*'who has a stake in careers work?'*  
*'which of their interests should be our interests?'*  
*'how do we manage those boundaries on what we do?'*

Late twentieth-century careers-work has been a story of repeated crisis. The crises have usually been on the back of head-lined events. And the events have usually been outside our control. Headlines aside - the hyper-active manipulation of how we live together by commerce and policy is becoming widely suspect.

Along with many others, in all kinds of societies across the globe, we can think of re-positioning ourselves in relation to policy and commerce. The careers profession alliance is well placed to work on this. If not through the alliance, then I believe we will do it - belatedly - in some in some other way.

We need to do things differently. And it will take time. The task is innovation deeper and wider than careers work has ever taken on. It is for careers workers to take charge of their own future.

Who better?

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