

Careers guidance and career coaching – what’s the big idea?

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Careers work is due for a new start. It will mean more than a realignment or reform of what it has been doing. It calls for an ability to imagine what it would do if it were starting from scratch. Such boldness is necessary because neo-liberal reliance on private-sector marketisation has fatally marginalised public-sector careers work. And, just as importantly, the fit between career-development expertise and career-management experience is increasingly askew. A product of these political and cultural shifts is the global prevalence of a private-sector career-coaching industry. The argument here is that, although careers work’s public-sector past is irrecoverable, an independent careers-work future is within reach.



Introduction

There is no shortage of ideas about what careers work is for. Dominant claims are for equipping people for employment in an increasingly competitive global economy. But there’s no educative resolution here. The examination¹ shows that employability fails both as a measure of readiness for working life and as an indicator that anything useful has been learned.

Some argue that falling for easy assumptions concerning the economic significance of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) fails to grasp the value to economy of the arts and humanities. And that is true enough, but – at heart – it’s no more than an alternative push towards another version of an

¹ this is the polemic - the ‘evidence’, ‘examinations’ and ‘arguments’ are set out, with links, at <http://www.hihohiho.com/newthinking/cafcoach.pdf>

instrumental but unreliable version of employability.

An able educator is capable of a bigger pragmatism, rooted in the culture of the society it inhabits. This is not a rehash of Matthew Arnold’s elitist plea for ‘the best that has been thought and said’. That is the kind of aloofness that still appeals to ‘education’ ministers, such as the UK’s Michael Gove. But, in the UK, we found during 2012 that – as a society – we have cultivated what all kinds of so-called ordinary people can enthusiastically embrace. We found more than we had realised – about who we are, what we can do, and why we value it. The director of the welcome to the 2012 Olympics gave us quite a moment.

To be able to think and say this is to be ready to tell every citizen, visitor and competitor what we can be counted on to do. Every culture has its own version. And it does not mean doing what you’re told, it means knowing what you’re doing. It’s not a passing-on of the past, but a reaching for a future. It’s argued here that it is what education can do for anybody claiming a stake in their own society.

There is no movement in that society more involved in these issues than careers work. At first sight careers work looks as if it is here to implement government policies for the maintenance of a competitive economy. But to look closer is to find that such talk masks another question...

‘Who gets to do what in our society?’

It’s not a comfortable question. But it is one which careers workers share with educators who see their professionalism as independent of both policy and

commerce. This argument develops and examines how that thinking enlarges professionalism. It is for bigger ideas.

Careers-work clamour

Careers work's history of openness to change has left it with a confusing vocabulary. What is now called 'career guidance' has been known as 'vocational guidance' and 'career counselling'. The movement has outfits working on what is variously called 'careers education and counselling', 'guidance and counselling', 'guidance studies' and 'career development'. The term 'careers work' was coined to speak of all these activities in the public service – and it's the term used here. But the term 'career coaching' is a relative new-comer – much of it operating in private-sector enterprises. These terms do not clearly map a territory – boundaries are breezily crossed and signposts nonchalantly re-aligned. A person can get lost. But it's a happy hunting ground for any group clamouring to capture a more favourable position.

The UK's Career Development Institute (CDI) has had some success in assembling much of this mix into a single professional group. There are two drivers. The one is to lay claim to an expertise in employability. It is set out in training and qualifications, and appears in textbooks as 'career development'. The other is to examine how that expertise translates into help for clients and students. And this is set out as the skills and practice which can be recognised by professional qualifications. The total package, drawing on economics and psychology, has been characterised as the 'science' of career development.

But well-trained qualification, based on expert knowledge, is not the whole careers-work story. There is a yet-more clamorous scene documented in day-on-day news of economic, cultural and political change. It challenges much of what we call professionalism. Indeed, it shows trust in professions to be irrevocably low. It is part of the culture of not doing what you are told, but knowing what you're doing. People have other ways of finding out what's going on, and figuring what they can do about it. It's argued here that the CDI (with such-like organisations world-wide) needs to take account of this global, volatile and radically re-

aligning scene.

There is a way forward. But it's going to need a more distinctive response than pushing employability expertise on behalf of economy and policy. It means calling to people's claim to a stake in their own society. The evidence shows the terms in which those stakeholders are students with their families and in their communities. And the business world is capable of acting, not just in shareholder, but in stakeholder interests. Also, although policy makers are weakened by global forces, their constitutional role is to represent stakeholder interests – both nationally and locally. But a complete stakeholder network extends into voluntary civil society, acting for the well being of people whose lives raise the 'who-gets-to-do-what?' question. The argument is that, in a clamouring past, some stakeholders have received little attention; and, in a stakeholder future, careers work needs to offer a deeper and wider connectivity.

Those people have other sources of learning – both formal and informal. And so, extending its acquisitive history, careers work now needs to coin another term. If 'career development' is how we refer to careers-work expertise, then what do we call the punters' experience? The missing term is 'career management'. The CDI pushes career-development expertise, the new term acknowledges career-management experience. It's not what careers workers do, it's what their students and clients do – with or without expert help. It belongs to them, and it may be less vulnerable to capture.

There are three recent events where careers workers voice these issues...

- an ESRC-sponsored seminar – concerned with the future development of careers work
- a meeting of the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling – examining private-sector practice
- an on-line social-networking conversation – probing professional responses

Between them, the events engage academics, researchers and practitioners. A lightly-edited collection of those quotations appears below. They voice much of what careers workers believe, the values

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that they attach to those beliefs, and the ideas they have concerning what might be done about them. Those voices rate a hearing. They speak up in five phases, ranging from a defence of what careers-work professionalism has been in the past, to the development of a distinctive careers-work narrative for the future.

Inside the box

This section examines how a conventionally-established careers work defends its professionalism. The argument shows how some of this is theory based – largely imported from psychology and economics. It argues that this is too narrow a basis for contemporary conditions, and it points to the particular usefulness of ethnographic sociology and the philosophy of ethics.

The section examines how the thinking appears in both private-sector career coaching and public-service careers work. It finds some shared belief in market forces. To some careers-work professionals such influences appear irresistible. A test of effectiveness then becomes how many people are stably placed in work. Although fundamentally unreliable, we have no better indicator of marketable employability.

Alongside theory, such beliefs lead to the importing of business and policy influences for economic gains and market forces. Such influences have also been taken onboard in some schools and colleges. And that education-careers assonance favours the formation of bi-lateral partnerships – joining ‘careers education’ to ‘career guidance’.

But not all educators have conceded to market forces, neither have all careers workers. The evidence shows why market forces in careers management can, and should, be resisted. It also shows how that realisation leads to an enlargement of professionalism. It prompts an expansion into multi-lateral partnerships, calling on a greater depth of thinking, serving a wider range of stakeholders and – so – achieving a more inclusive connectedness. It’s bigger.

Some quotations from the events express interest in the emergence of private-sector career coaching,

but some recognise a different role for public-sector careers work. There is no single dynamic inside the careers-work box...

- all public services are expected to show their impact in economic value
- one of our jobs is to look to the needs of the work-force
- the CDI will have clout at the highest level
- it will demonstrate comparability between public, private and third sectors
- are more ex-public-sector people working in private practice?
- a unified, professional, forward-thinking body learns from mistakes and fights for better recognition
- the CDI is the only independent voice of the career professional in the UK
- we need a rethink – nothing is convincing anyone that careers work makes a difference
- what difference would it make considering how little anyone in government listens?
- employability is determined by the opportunity structure not careers work
- there has, from the beginning, been a tension between placement and guidance
- some will leave education with an understanding of their discipline – they will be high flyers
- there is something about graduate-ness which is the exact opposite of employability

There is no consensus here. In whatever way it is resolved, there must be some letting go of what some careers workers are trying to save. Following sections show how clinging to a conventionally-established position means that boxed-in thinking mostly needs saving from itself.

Out of the box

This section wonders if any movement can be understood wholly in terms of its own claims. Would that not be propaganda? Anyway, careers work

can usefully be understood in other-than-careers-work terms. It means looking at what careers work does not much look at itself. In particular it means understanding the leverage on much of our lives now exerted by global commerce. That influence reaches into neo-liberal government policies, which take private-sector markets to guarantee both the volume and quality of any service. The evidence shows how careers work is on the receiving end of these trends.

Careers work inhabits a world, also documented here, in which an increasingly wealthy sector finds that global markets are an opportunity, and neo-liberalism is an ally. That same world is inhabited by low-waged workers in low-growth work places. The argument shows this to be a zero-sum reality – one person's gain is another's loss. When some life chances are purchased, others are curtailed.

This is the who-gets-to-do-what question; and it is hard to ignore how access to opportunity is increasingly polarised. Students and clients find answers in their own and other people's experience. There is evidence that students want to take account of the impact of labour markets on other people and their communities. This is a social, not an economic, commitment. And it is exercised both world-wide and locally.

The trends are socially located, working differently in different locations. The locations can increasingly be characterised as 'enclaves'. They are small. Their inhabitants may place more trust in each other than risk trusting outsiders. Enclaves are home-made cultures of social connectedness – in the family, on the street and on-line. And, though social, they do have survival value.

Reports of such trends may not count as career-work literature. Preoccupations with inside-the-box issues can understandably sideline the bigger story. But they are of urgent importance to careers-work. They make the case for a more developed programme of education. And conventional careers work has not needed to understand curriculum in any depth – until now.

The event quotations reflect the resulting range of issues, stretched between trying to locate existing

interests in careers work, and reaching for what else careers work can do for who else...

- we must satisfy client expectations
- policy has sought to introduce a wider range of providers operating in market conditions
- how do political and organisational issues impact public-practice careers work?
- careers work is based in occupational psychology
- employability is a function of supply and demand in the labour market
- employers see careers work as a nice-to-have – better to have it than not
- have employers lost their ability to engage with young people?
- mixed messages to policy, parents, friends, colleagues, managers – any wonder we're sidelined?
- send us solutions that we can put in front of a minister
- we fail to communicate our worth outside our own community – we're easy picking for this government
- the CDI is a commitment to the individual not to commercial targets
- our strategy should focus messages to parents and schools rather than our own conferences
- the school-autonomy agenda overrides everything
- the only freedom that is given to schools is the freedom to drop careers work
- it is not possible to show impact in the economic value of what we do

Resolving these issues needs a broader appreciation of psychology, a more critical examination of economics, a wider grasp of social forces, and a sharper appreciation of ethics. Not all branches of careers work will take the trouble to do this. But whichever does so will develop a distinctive voice.

A distinctive voice

This section starts from the position that no educator can assume students and clients know nothing about what's going on in the reported world. Indeed, students invariably know something significant that their helpers don't know – particularly concerning the locality. Useful learning starts with educators finding out what that is. And it is invariably complicated.

But the issues it raises are bigger than student-with-teacher. We all need all of our people to be educated. And this section shows how an enlarged careers-work professionalism engages with all who have a stake in how people manage their careers. Those stakeholders also have a sense of the trends, the experience of them, and their consequences for people's economic and social lives. And their point is...

'How is careers work helping us to deal with all this?'

What we know of the economic and politics of these trends does not encourage public-sector careers education to answer in competition with private-sector career coaching. But the evidence documents how a well-stocked education can answer the question with useful, unfamiliar and surprising responses. It also shows how the kind of careers coaching which looks for an immediate pay-off cannot.

There is some career-metaphor thinking here: education opens a gateway to what seems like a journey; while coaching is what is needed to compete in what seems like a race. Contemporary conditions require careers work to be up for the journey.

The journey may start in a some privileged or deprived enclave, but it need not end in either. Careers work can enable a career-management journey to open gates to what is new, unexpected and transformative. The argument probes the distinctiveness of that position.

The quotations map careers-work beliefs, attitudes and expectations – stretching between what is competitive and what is distinctive...

- we have a better careers system than Germany – but Germany has a better economy
- we haven't been able to separate our voice from others who lay claim to the profession
- how do private-practice services differ from public-practice?
- in a low-growth, low-wage, zero-sum economy the competition for places is an incentive to cheat
- what is the unique selling point of the CDI?
- the CDI doesn't represent employers, isn't funded by government and is best at professional support
- we need not worry about our independence from government which hasn't helped or listened to us
- one level of management is to support the learning of others
- the next level is to change the way of working
- career guidance is more effective in a personal-development setting – a more holistic joined-up approach
- careers work is an introduction to the richness of life
- we need to make a new start

A distinctive narrative cannot afford to be contained by some tightly-bound, ready-made framework – assigned to it by interests which are at best marginal to the priorities that it seeks most to hold onto.

A credible narrative

The CDI and similar organisations need narratives that connect with people's experience. This section shows how such narratives are within reach. It provides a map for moving on. It is explicit about what conventional careers workers must let go. And it identifies what, at heart, they must hold on to. It means understanding how working from psychological diagnosis to economic information is too linear to enable people in what career management now means. But there is career-development expertise which is strong on stage-by-stage career-learning. And this

section argues why and how careers work must call on it – now more than ever.

People are nowadays readily connected to diagnostic and labour-market sources – notably through careers coaching, commonly on-line, sometimes through trusted contacts. But we know how, these days, that knowledge can be quickly out-dated. The case here is that sources are rarely well-enough interrogated. And that realisation offers careers work a credible narrative, recounting how a person is enabled not only to find out more of what is going on, but also to figure out which finds rate being taken seriously.

That argument shows how such critical thinking is enabled in a stage-by-stage career-learning process. It is a narrative, recounting how a person navigates a career-management path through change, confusion and dispute. Credibility needs a narrative that belongs to people thinking for themselves. Careers work has that narrative. It is to enable people in usefully probing, interrogating and questioning what they find.

This is critical thinking for a hazardous journey – learning-for-living. In the clamour of careers-work claims, no other careers-work position convincingly enables such transfer-of-learning, from where learning is found to where it will be used, both life-wide and life-long.

Some of the event quotations seek to hold onto a conventionality already lost to other providers. But a few let go – moving on to a more distinctive professionalism...

- careers work makes a difference – I know it intuitively
- being the professional is the most important thing
- what are the consequences of public-service careers work for the public sector?
- in what areas is public-service careers work practice expanding?
- careers work is about more than getting a job – but try telling that to a student piling up debt
- having adaptability to whatever comes is what gives people hope

- students need to know how to manage a knowledge-base – it is a transferable skill

Long-term exploration is not a negation of short-term coaching, it is the bigger framework. The ability to interrogate one's own narrative is applicable and re-applicable – indefinitely and without limits. Career coaching cannot effectively function without it.

A new start

A new start is not the introduction of new blooms to an otherwise undisturbed garden. It uproots, replaces and re-aligns the entire cultivation. And, all metaphors aside, careers work is not the only activity needing such a treatment – our high streets, our banks, our diets, our on-line lives, our pair-bonding and our ageing are all being re-aligned as you read this. Those consequences of change reach into some people's religious beliefs. The term 'paradigm shift' comes to mind; and there is such a careers-work claim – but it proved to be not a shifted paradigm but a redecorated convention. A paradigm shift is a big idea which changes everything. This is a change in everything which needs a big idea.

Careers work is not exempt. The complexity, subtlety and dynamism in what people do about career is as unbounded as all the narrations and analyses of what people do in any area of their experience. The argument shows how the more careers work can take on board that reality, then the more possibilities it will find for future development. It enlarges professionalism.

This is not an argument for canvassing government on behalf of some adjustment of conventionally-established careers work. The evidence is that neo-liberal policy does not welcome that advice, and shows little sign of recognising the public-service professionals who canvass it. A new start means escaping that boxed-in position, and abandoning that disdainful audience.

There are uncomfortable challenges to face. They include the possibility of making false claims in defence of good causes. The evidence on this cites some branches of careers work. It can mean acknowledging that we cannot credibly claim to be an arm of

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economic planning. It might mean being better at understanding the flakiness of market forces. It might also mean being better aware of the interests they best serve.

The section also argues that what is needed is too big to fit into the time-and-space available to conventionally-established careers work. It examines a wider range of thinking, learned over time, in a stage-by-stage learning programme, calling on multilateral partnerships, seeking a special kind of partner, and serving a broader range of stakeholders. Made to work, this trend will be a distinctive declaration that careers work is abandoning the recycling of twentieth-century answers to twenty-first century questions.

There is a question for positioning the new start. The argument examines the case for escaping arbitrary pressure by prevalent forces. It means thinking of careers work as a feature of civil society – where professionalism can make fruitful links to voluntarism. That argument is for tenable positions and workable strategies, connecting with a wider range of partners and stakeholders. Such a professionalism would be in a position to say either ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to hegemonic interests.

Start-again thinking is not easy. It needs to be bold but careful, in both mapping the causes that demand change, and specifying the practices that respond to change. Neither is this short-term thinking. It calls for tenacity and patience on the part of careers workers. The life and interests of a parliament will not cover it. But the evidence examined here is that it is, willy-nilly, already happening.

Nonetheless, we should not be surprised to find that some event quotations hold on to less radical thinking, while others show signs of being able to let go and move on...

- the CDI has a thousand members – all fully trained
- they are ‘la crème de la crème’
- impartiality is a bigger issue than careers services can solve
- we want to belong to something that is not government dependent

- the foundations for gaining maximum returns on careers work are laid in schools
- what people do about work is done outside the curriculum
- there has never been a time like now

In helping professions no analysis or narrative can be bigger than the questions and issues it is brave enough to raise. It needs to be able to penetrate flabby abstractions, like ‘transparency’ and ‘openness’, which obscure as much as they expose. It must undermine claims to ‘accountability’ which camouflage everything until they are predicated – accountable for what? and to whom? More importantly, no programme of help can be bigger than the people it calls on for answers to those questions. Clients, students, partners and stakeholder need to be able to find a careers work big enough that they can count on it.



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