The Changing Context of Career Practice: Guidance, Counselling or Coaching?

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In June 2005, Dr. Jenny Bimrose was appointed Visiting Professor of Career Research and Practice at the Centre for Guidance Studies (CeGS), University of Derby. She is a Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of Employment Research (IER), University of Warwick. Jenny's research at both a national and European level offers new insights to what constitutes effective guidance. She has also driven forward the development of a National Guidance Research Forum (NGRF) website and a European Guidance and Counselling (EGCRF) website, working closely with colleagues from IER and CeGS. This publication helps improve our understanding of how practitioners make sense of policy constraints on their practice and how they are able to reconcile these with the needs of their clients.
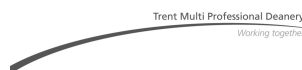
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1. Introduction

Over the past decade or so, career guidance services have undergone fundamental and rapid change. Much has been led by policy, with the rate of change demanded often resulting in training support for practitioners lagging behind implementation. The effect of this on practitioners working in different sectors of the guidance industry remains largely a matter of speculation, with only anecdotal evidence available to assist our understanding. The effect on practice in England is, however, beginning to emerge, with evidence becoming available from an on-going longitudinal case study.

The focus of this paper is on the consequences of constant policy change on the training, continuing professional development and occupational identity of the practitioners who deliver services in England. It begins with an overview of labour market changes and review of the careers industry as part of this broader context. The concept of occupational identity is then considered, together with the ways its formation interacts with the training and continuing professional development of practitioners. Finally, research evidence from an on-going qualitative, longitudinal case study of effective guidance is examined, since this provides rich and deep insights into 'practice in action'.

2. Labour Market Context

The career guidance industry is part of the service sector and an integral part of the UK labour market. In trying to make sense of what has been happening in this particular sector in recent years, it can be instructive to reflect on predicted, compared with actual, labour market changes, together with their impact on organisations delivering services.

Predictions of labour market change vigorously promoted ten to twenty years ago focused on a shift away from an industrial to an information society. With the opening up of the world market, a global economy would have primacy over national economies. These fundamental economic and social changes would demand a high-skill, knowledge-driven labour force, working out of paperless offices either as portfolio workers, or as employees in flatter, less hierarchical organisations. Where organisations employed 'core' staff, these would be learning organisations, espousing an ideology of lifelong learning to ensure the supply of knowledge workers. Routine use would be made of outsourced labour; leading edge working practices (like teamwork) would be common practice; and the rhetoric of competencies and skills would replace that of training and job descriptions. These changes heralded the demise of the traditional, organisational career in favour of more temporary, fluid career patterns. No longer could individuals look forward to a job for life.

However, this grand vision of labour market change, focusing on overarching trends, has fallen short in a number of respects. In 2000, for example, 96% of workers had one job in the UK; 94.1% of working men and 91.6% of women were in permanent jobs; and of these, 95.2% of men and 73.3% of women worked full-time. Instead of individuals working flexibly, performing tasks for different organisations, there is more multi-tasking within an organisation as individuals switch from one task to another for the same employer:

> *"One job per person has stayed the norm – permanent full-time employment remains dominant, workers are not moving more often from one employer to another and the 'career' – as a way of viewing work – has triumphed."*
> (Moynagh & Worsley, 2005, p.93).

In addition, the proportion of employees seeing themselves as having a career increased from just under half to 60% between 1985 and 2001. The biggest increase (from 14% to 34%) was amongst low-paid groups, like bus and coach drivers, packers and cleaners. This trend extends to young people, with research evidence revealing how young people also 'appeared firmly wedded to careers'. (Moynagh & Worsley, 2005, p.96)

So, most of us still work in permanent, full-time jobs in hierarchical organisations, where job descriptions are still written and training courses offered. In these organisations, it may be difficult to distinguish leading edge working practices from the survival strategies that have been developed by individuals in response to work intensification. Many of us can still only dream of working in paperless offices! Clearly, the impact of labour market changes on the employment patterns of many individual workers has not been quite as predicted.

Nor has much progress been made towards creating a high skill, knowledge driven economy. The United States of America, arguably the model for a knowledge driven economy, is not currently showing many signs of developing a labour market where the majority of workers require a high level of skill. What does emerge is an economy where there are:

> *"….islands of high skill (geographic clusters, sectors and a few occupations…..) set amidst a sea of low skill (and often very poorly paid) service work."* (Keep and Brown, 2005, p.14).

Rather than the development of a high skilled labour force, trends indicate an increasing polarisation, with a

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growth in high skilled professional and managerial occupations existing in parallel with high demand for labour in lower skilled occupations at the bottom end of the occupational spectrum. An image of an hour-glass economy conveys how this trend towards the polarisation of the workforce is strengthening (Moynagh and Worsley, 2005).

This is, of course, not to deny that in some sections of the labour market, the grand vision may have been realised, but there are significant deviations and extensive variations. How, then, can the failure to realise this vision be explained? A post-structural analytical framework helps us to make sense of the complexity underlying change by breaking down over-arching narratives into a series of smaller ones. Applying such a framework to the careers industry, is it possible to discern overarching trends in the career industry – or does a highly complex picture, with multiple strands, emerge? To start to answer this question, we need to consider the policy context of guidance.

3. Policy Context

It is something of a truism to state that the contexts in which guidance is delivered in the UK have undergone rapid, perhaps relentless, change over the past decade or so. For example, devolution has brought with it four separate country models of service delivery. The 'massification' of higher education has seen an increase in student numbers with a widening access agenda and the implementation of student fees. The Connexions service in England brought with it an emphasis on the NEET (Not in Education Employment or Training) group as part of a social inclusion agenda. The policy framework for adults in England distinguished information from advice and guidance for resource purposes and introduced eligibility criteria for some services that depended on qualification level (that is, pre-level 2). Finally, a radical re-organisation of careers education and guidance in compulsory education in England is in prospect with the publication of the Youth Matters Green Paper (DfES, 2006). Many of these policy changes have brought with them extended periods of uncertainty and instability, followed by change.

For service providers, there has been: a shrinking resource base; a target culture with an emphasis on quantitative outcomes; competition for resources, alongside pressure to collaborate and form partnerships; an increasing expectation to generate evidence of impact; higher levels of scrutiny and accountability; and an expanding, perhaps more discerning, client/customer base. There have also been competing

policy priorities. For example, the Connexions service in England was mandated to deliver a holistic service to the NEET group, alongside specialist career guidance to all young people.

This brief review of the changing policy context for guidance by no means does justice to the full picture. However, even from this cursory examination of policy developments, it quickly becomes apparent that no one overarching trend is identifiable in the recent development of career guidance services in the UK. What emerges, rather, is an extremely complex picture, from which a key question emerges: what effect has this had on the practitioners who deliver services to their clients?

4. Forming an occupational identity

Each of us has multiple identities, which are social as well as individual since they locate us within society and mediate our interactions with others (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Our occupational identity is one of the most important. It is the one we build through work and it mediates not only the ways we relate to the work organisation and work process, but critically, how we develop our skills and knowledge over time (Brown, 1997). These identities are typically formed within 'communities of practice', which have a strong sense of joint activity with shared goals and shared practices (Attwell & Brown, 2003). Whilst broad communities of practice may exist at sectoral or occupational levels, they are also likely to be associated with particular work organisations, or within particular education and training institutions. The influence of an individual's occupational identity goes beyond formal employment to other forms of social identity – especially the self-governance of communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It also frames the ways individuals cope with the pressures and stresses of work (Brown, 2002). This is particularly important during a time of rapid change, such as that currently being experienced by practitioners working in guidance organisations.

Understanding the process by which individuals form their occupational identity is highly relevant for career guidance. The broad community of career guidance has always been somewhat fragmented and as a consequence, there has been an absence of any unifying professional identity. Membership of one of the various professional associations illustrates the way in which practitioners demonstrate their occupational identity through allegiance with a particular part of the guidance sector. At the beginning of the 1990s, four professional associations had been established by guidance practitioners: the Institute of Careers Officers (subsequently renamed the Institute of Career

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Guidance); the National Association of Careers and Guidance Teachers (subsequently renamed the Association of Career Education and Guidance); the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services; and the National Association for Educational Guidance for Adults (Watts, 1991, p.232). Now, other associations have started to develop membership, such as the Association of Career Professional International for the private sector. This fragmentation has been further exacerbated by recent policy developments, like the introduction of the Connexions service in England that brought with it the new role of Personal Adviser (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999), some who have qualifications, experience and interest in career guidance and some who do not.

A finding from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) cross-country review of guidance was that training has a dominant effect in establishing a professional identity (McCarthy, 2001). The process of becoming and remaining skilled, as part of developing an occupational identity, is complex. A central assumption of a static model of occupational identity is that once skill needs have been identified and measured, all that remains is for the requisite training to be delivered. In reality, it is rarely that simple. Brown (1997) argues for a dynamic model of occupational identity that recognises the changing nature of employment, the role of the individual as an active agent in the process of becoming skilled and the evolving context in which that occupational identity is acquired. This model helps us to understand the central role of training and continuing professional development (CPD) in developing and maintaining an occupational identity. It also seems particularly apposite for career guidance today. Not only are the broad policy and organisational contexts in which services located constantly shifting, but the boundaries of the associated professional roles are also subject to constant change. These shifts and changes inevitably have an impact on practitioners, emphasising the need for robust systems of both initial training and CPD as central to the definition and re-definition of occupational identities.

5. Initial Training

Career guidance is seen as pivotal by policy makers for up-skilling the economy (for example, see: HM Government, 2005). It is not unreasonable, therefore, to expect the industry to lead the way in both skilling and up-skilling its workforce, with a coherent training structure and strong ethos around CPD. What actually emerges is a fractured, fragmented, rather ad hoc system of both initial training and continuing professional development. Take, first of all, initial

training. In tandem with policy changes to service delivery have been changes to initial training. There has been:

- the introduction of work-based training routes to accredit competence at levels 3 and 4, through largely employer-based assessment centres;
- changes to off-the-job training in higher education, predominantly at post-graduate level, with an emphasis on learning outcomes;
- the rapid introduction, followed by an even speedier demise, of the Diploma for Personal Advisers in Connexions, in England, at academic level 2;
- the development of supervised practice in some sectors (like Connexions), but with an apparent emphasis on managerial rather than other forms of supervision; and
- the emergence of other, related forms of education and training, like Foundation Degrees and the National Occupational Standards for 'Learning Support and Development Services for children, young people and those who care for them'.

The work-based route, originally designed to assess and accredit competence in the workplace, has been widely used to train, and then accredit, inexperienced staff in the career guidance sector. Whilst examples of excellent practice undoubtedly exist, inconsistencies are evident, with the length of time required for successful completion of a relevant vocational qualification varying, as well as the nature and amount of training provided.

Neither is the off-the-job route without its difficulties. It has suffered long periods of instability and uncertainty because of the need to update the curriculum and changes to the funding regime. Course centres have closed as a consequence. Others are left vulnerable. Criticisms of this route to qualification from employers are not uncommon: it is accused of not being 'fit for purpose' and is not regarded as meeting the needs of some employers. These criticisms, however, overlook how the content of both the Qualification in Careers Guidance and its predecessor, the Diploma in Career Guidance, were determined largely by employers. However, a key problem more recently has been: whose responsibility it is to update the curriculum? Attempts to revise content have been bedevilled by policy change and uncertainty. Initially, the Local Government Management Board had responsibility for the Diploma in Career Guidance qualification and controlled grant allocation. With the introduction of Connexions in England, management of the qualification shifted to the Department of Education and Skills (DfES). More recently, its management has been sub-contracted to the Institute of Career Guidance (ICG). These changes have contributed to a delay in

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the revision of the qualification to meet the changing policy context.

A review carried out by the OECD concludes that whilst the qualifications and training structure in the UK is very diverse and highly developed compared with many other countries, a new, more coherent structure is necessary that would rationalise the many qualification routes and provide clear progression paths (United Kingdom Country Note, 2003). So, if this is the current situation with initial training for career guidance, what of continuing professional development?

6. Continuing Professional Development

The arguments for the economic benefits of 'lifelong learning', promoted and supported within 'learning organisations', are increasingly accepted by policy makers. These arguments, however, seem not to have been embraced universally by the career guidance community. A recent review of policies for career information, guidance and counselling services in fourteen countries, commissioned jointly by the OECD and the European Commission, included an examination of the training, skills and qualifications of guidance workers. It found that this aspect of guidance was: 'very much under-researched' (McCarthy, 2001, p.7). It did, however, highlight worrying trends regarding continuing professional development. Specifically, participation rates varied considerably – from 100% to 10% (p.14). Furthermore, 'recurrent training' for continuing professional development was found to be optional in most countries, including the UK.

For employers of guidance workers to capitalise on their employees' knowledge, it is vital to provide opportunities for reflection. A key issue is often not whether employers recognise the value of this, but whether they can protect time for employees to do this in practice (Brown, 2002). It is, perhaps, somewhat ironic that a profession that concerns itself with the career progression and development of its clients does not give more of a priority to the very activities that would secure the development and progression of its own practice. There is, indeed, still much to learn about the role of learning in career guidance practice: what exactly is undertaken; by whom; how often; and the types of learning that are most effective. There is also work to be done in convincing some employers and policy makers that supporting lifelong learning for guidance practitioners should be given a higher priority.

With occupational identities that are fragile, a training system in need of reform and CPD that needs

strengthening, what, then, are the implications for career guidance practice?

7. Guidance-in-Action

In a complex labour market, the need for high quality career guidance has never been greater:

> *"Put simply, in the absence of adequate advice and guidance, increased complexity leads to a concomitant increase in the likelihood of a substantial proportion of individuals reaching sub-optimal decisions, which in turn lead to a significant level of sub-optimal outcomes."* (Keep & Brown, 2005, p.16)

Yet one could be forgiven for regarding current arrangements for the delivery of the service in England as fragmented, inconsistent and confusing. Many are exasperated by the failure even to agree a clear definition of career guidance for the UK – though it could be argued that the lack of clarity evident in the broad community of career guidance practice reflects the lack of stability created by a volatile policy context. An example relates to the word 'career', the use of which was generally discouraged in England with the introduction of the Connexions service. The content of the Connexions' Diploma for Personal Advisers emphasised an approach to working with young people that required counselling skills and an holistic approach. This need to adopt a counselling approach to practice was reinforced by the promotion of on-going supervisory support for practitioners delivering the service. Not only was practice determined by policy in this instance, but so was the use of language used to describe practice.

Another example of the way in which policy has both framed and constrained practice relates to the introduction of 'skills coaching' in selected districts in England by **next**step organisations. Many practitioners delivering this service have a career guidance background, but how the service is delivered and exactly what it comprises is being largely determined by policy. Again, practice is circumscribed by policy, together with the language used to describe the service. This has the potential to create a level of role confusion for the practitioner who might one day be required to operate as a skills coach with one set of clients and the next provide advice or guidance to a different set. How, then, do practitioners manage to reconcile the varied demands of fund-holders and managers with those of their clients in delivering services?

A five year research study is currently underway in England, which provides us with some insights. It is

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examining the nature of effective guidance and the impact is has on clients' lives. Fifty in-depth case studies have been completed (2003/2004) and clients are being followed up over a further four year period (2004-2008), to track progress. The professional contexts in which the case studies have been carried out included: further education, higher education, charitable/voluntary organisations, adult guidance organisations and the workplace. Case studies have examined: the client's perceptions of the guidance episode; the practitioner's perceptions of the guidance episode; the perceptions of an 'expert witness' of the guidance episode; together with the structures and operation of guidance services. Additionally, the strategies and skills used by guidance practitioners have been scrutinized (Bimrose *et al*., 2004; Bimrose *et al*., 2005).

'Effectiveness' is defined in this research as what clients found useful (Bimrose, *et al*., 2004) with the majority (98%, n=49) participating in the initial phase of this research evaluating their guidance interview as 'useful', immediately after the event. A typology of the guidance interview has been generated from a detailed analysis of practitioner interventions across the forty-nine 'useful' interviews with four discrete categories of activities identified. These are:

- building a working alliance:
  scene setting/orientation; contracting; rapport building and maintenance.
- exploring potential:
  hard and soft data;
- identifying options and strategies:
  information, advice and influencing.
- ending and following-through.

Not all these activities of guidance are evident across all interviews, nor did any particular combination or sequence emerge. Some factors that influence the nature of the guidance intervention came from outside the immediate boundaries of the interview itself (for example, interview time available, access to ICT, opportunities to offer follow-up support to clients). There is, however, evidence from this research that the traditional trait-and-factor 'matching' approach, derived from differential psychology, is still greatly influential on career guidance practice. This is illustrated by the large proportion of interviews (about three quarters) that were primarily concerned with assessing different aspects of their client's background with a view to matching the client to an appropriate course or job, and/or included recommendations for, or actual usage of, various resources that were based on this paradigm (e.g. computer-aided guidance; interest inventories; and psychometric tests). For example, varied dimensions of the client's background and present circumstances were

probed, including 'hard' factual client data, which was collected in 54% of interviews. Work-related history; educational and training background; influences and constraints; skills and abilities; and personality traits were systematically assessed. An example follows:

> *Practitioner: Can we go back a couple of steps really? I mean, the degree that you did…., can I ask where you did it?...Can I ask, before you went on and did the degree, had you done a…. foundation course at all?...How had you got through to that?...What subjects did you do your A levels in?...Can I ask what grades you got?...didn't you expect to do better in any of them?...When you chose your 'A' levels, you chose (subjects). What made you choose to study those particular subjects at 'A' level?*

In addition, softer, attitudinal data was explored. This included the exploration of client preferences (about courses, jobs, strategies, options, etc.), which was undertaken by 94% of practitioners (n=46) and assessed motivation, feelings, preferences and awareness. Two illustrative examples of different practitioner interventions follow:

> *Practitioner: ...there's quite a lot of pressure to deliver, often against deadlines...Are you comfortable with that? Personal pressure?…somebody requiring you to come up with the goods…Are you comfortable with that side of things?*

> *Practitioner: Can you pin-point what it is about a job that keeps your interest, that keeps you feeling buzzy like that, stops you getting bored? Do you know?*

The continued popularity of the matching approach to career guidance can be explained, partly, by its practical appeal. It provides practitioners with a clear rationale and framework for practice. Their role is clearly defined as an 'expert', possessing specialist information and knowledge of the methods needed to assess individual suitability and capability for the labour market. Additionally, and importantly, the underlying philosophy of a differential approach has suited policy makers since it lends itself to the servicing of labour market requirements. People perform best in the jobs for which they are best suited. It can also be achieved within a relatively short time span. It is assumed that a one-off intervention will suffice. Perhaps most importantly, the outcome from this approach is the matching, or placement, of the client into the 'best fit' employment, education or training opportunity – of paramount importance when resources often depend on meeting particular, quantifiable targets of placement

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into jobs or courses. Consequently, the matching approach has been embraced enthusiastically by policy makers and it seems has barely questioned by practitioners.

The theory contains, however, serious flaws. Scharf reminds us that:

"There is little research supporting or refuting trait and factor theory itself as a viable theory of career development. Rather, the research that has been done, of which there is a large amount, has related traits and factors to one another or has established the validity and reliability of measurements of traits and factors." Scharf (1997, p.26).

Mitchell and Krumboltz (1996) criticise its usefulness in current labour market conditions. Matching assumes a degree of stability in the labour market. The volatility of many occupational environments, together with the increased pressure on individuals to change and adapt to their circumstances makes:

"Trying to place an evolving person into the changing work environment .... is like trying to hit a butterfly with a boomerang." (Mitchell and Krumboltz, 1996, p.263).

Other researchers highlight the failure of the theory to address the issue of change in environments and individuals. They also draw attention to problems inherent with the theory's associated measures for gender, but regard the most serious limitation to be its failure to explain the process of personality development and its role in vocational selection (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996, p.104).

Research designed to evaluate Holland's theory for particular client groups also reveals weaknesses. Mobley and Slaney (1998) suggest that although extensive empirical and theoretical investigations have explored the use and relevance of Holland's theory, 'considerably less attention has been devoted to investigating the implications of the theory from a multicultural perspective' (p.126). For example, Leong *et al*. (1998) studied the cross-cultural validity of Holland's (1985) theory in India. Whilst its internal validity was found to be high, results regarding external validity were 'less than encouraging on several fronts' (p.449). They concluded that their findings suggest that culture specific determinants of occupational choice should be studied as alternatives to the 'Western assumption of vocational interests being the primary determinants' (p.453).

In their study of gender differences in Holland's occupational interest types, Farmer *et al*. (1998) found

limitations for the practical applications of the theory for women, concluding that 'counselors may need to re-evaluate Holland *et al*.'s advice on consistency and job stability' (p.91). Sexual orientation is an aspect of Holland's theory that Mobley and Slaney (1998) consider overlooked. In particular, they suggest that the relationship between Holland's concept of congruence and gay and lesbian development need to be carefully researched. Yet another relevant aspect neglected in Holland's ideas is homophobic tendencies both in the workplace and society at large (p.131).

The corollary to the finding that a matching approach to career guidance is still dominant in the UK is that there was little evidence from the longitudinal case study research of newer approaches to guidance. For example, the social learning theory of career decision making (Krumboltz & Nichols, 1990; Krumboltz, 1994; Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996) or narrative approaches to career guidance (e.g. Savickas, 1997; Cochran, 1997; Peavy, 2000). In these approaches, which typically take longer than a brief, one-off intervention, more value is placed on the softer outcomes of the career guidance process, like the development of career decision-making skills or helping the client to achieve a higher level of personal self-awareness and understanding of recurrent themes in their lives. This raises important questions about why practitioners are not using these newer approaches, what actually constitutes good practice and how this can be supported.

Moreover, evidence from the case study research reveals how introductions to interviews and to a lesser extent, conclusions were strongly influenced by specific policy requirements to collect particular information about clients and to record the outcome of the interview. The way in which the collection of data needed to be carried out for auditing purposes (that is, to complete a pro-forma to record detailed client information) caused discomfort on the part of some practitioners. A final observation about 'practice in action' from the research is that the time taken for a guidance interview was typically under one hour, though this varied according to the professional context in which career guidance was delivered. Managing a complex guidance agenda within (what for the most part is) a strict time limit places considerable demands on the skills of practitioners. A number of practitioners struggled with these limits.

Overall, it is evident from the on-going longitudinal case study that current career guidance practice is heavily constrained by policy. The extent to which practitioners feel that they have the discretion to exercise professional judgements about how they should operate in the best possible interests of their clients seems to be severely restricted. In consequence,

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the ability for practitioners to deliver evidence-based practice (that is, practice developed from recent, robust research and related theory) is limited. New thinking and new approaches are difficult to implement. To keep themselves up-to-date with developments in research, practitioners have to overcome a number of barriers relating to available training and CPD. Where they are successful in this endeavour, operational constraints restrict what they can do and how they can do it.

8. Conclusion

Recent populist visions of macro change in the labour market and employment practices have not come to pass in quite the ways predicted. Instead, what is evident is an increase in the complexity surrounding the ways individuals navigate their way into, and through, the labour market. This emphasises the need for high quality career guidance. However, evidence suggests that practitioners are still heavily reliant on traditional approaches to guidance with little attempt to integrate new approaches to their practice. In view of this, the careers profession needs to review, critically, both its practice and training for practice. The types of supporting frameworks and strategies required for effective careers work should be made explicit and training strengthened and supported. Suggestions of practical ways forward include:

• Learning more about the impact of differing types of career interventions on individuals' lives. This requires a more active commitment to gathering, and disseminating, evidence about 'what works' through, for example, practitioner forums and practice-orientated publications.

• Building 'communities of interest', whereby practitioners from different sectors of the career guidance community are supported to work together to improve specific aspects of careers work (using, for example, the National Guidance Research Forum (NGRF) website[1], designed specifically to bring research and practice closer together).

• Strengthening initial training for those entering the careers profession as well as broadening the range of continuous professional development opportunities for those already working in the field.

• Presenting the business case to employers and policy makers for investing more time and energy in driving up expertise and credentials.

• Linking practice more closely with the labour market so that this unique selling point of careers work is fully understood by employers and other key stakeholders.

A key challenge for the career guidance community and policy makers is to support practitioners in the formation of clear occupational identities, through robust training systems, so that they can navigate the changes in their own industrial sector and help others navigate theirs. The cost of failing to do so has far reaching consequences, not just for the careers profession but for society as a whole.

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[1] http://www.guidance-research.org

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