

E-mentoring: Providing Online Careers Advice and Guidance

RUSSELL BOOTH
CAREER SERVICES RAPUARA
NEW ZEALAND

CAREERS AND THE INTERNET The number of career Web sites has grown rapidly over the last few years, and increasingly career assessments and career planning systems can be found online. The result is that the delivery of career services has been changing in the same way the Internet has affected other sectors (retail, banking, and health services). We can therefore assume that a growing number of individuals are using online career assessments and seeking online career information, advice, and guidance. Individuals may now be electing to visit a career advisor only when it is practicable (location and time) and where they see the visit as adding value (Watts, 2002).

The advantages and disadvantages of delivering career services via the Internet have been well documented (Oliver & Whiston, 2000; Oliver & Zack, 1999; Reile & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2000; Sampson, 1999; Sampson, Kolodinsky & Greeno, 1997). One clear advantage is that it can free up the client and practitioner in terms of location and time. However, we do not know enough about which clients access or want to access Internet-based career services; when and why they want to access them; how they can be supported online; the level of support they require; and ultimately how effective the online delivery of such services is. Clients may be doing

this independently from, or in conjunction with, a career practitioner (Sampson, et al., 1997), but the chances are that most are not being supported by a practitioner online. In fact we also know very little about which career practitioners are incorporating the online delivery of career services into their practice, how they do it, with which clients, and whether it is indeed effective (Oliver & Zack, 1999).

The career decision-making process is complex. It is reliant on the individual being able to process information about themselves and occupational information, make a well-informed decision, and implement a plan regarding the decision they have made (Mau, 1999). Evidence suggests that individuals "usually lack the cognitive capacity to process information about self and occupation" (Mau, 1999, p. 262). In terms of acquiring and processing information, "Most people don't know what information they need, what information they want, and can't use what information they have" (Katz, as cited in Mau, 1998, p. 26). Individuals also expect computers to be faultless and accurate, and may not be able to evaluate the information and answers from assessments to discern whether they are reliable and valid (Sampson & Lumsden, 2000).

For those who are using Web sites to help with their career decision-making, operating in a remote, self-help mode may mean the results from the assessments and the related career information can become a liability and hinder them in making a well-informed career decision (Sampson, 1999). Each individual will approach the career decision-making process in a different state of readiness, and will therefore need different kinds of personal help from a career practitioner depending on their level of readiness (Sampson & Lumsden, 2000). If the role of the career practitioner is to help a client acquire the tools and skills to become an independent decision-maker (Gati, Saka, & Krausz, 2001; Mau, 1999; Sagiv, 1999), then many of those clients working online will probably need more guidance and assistance than online career programs typically provide (Oliver & Whiston, 2000; Prince, Chartrand, & Silver, 2000).

To assist clients to effectively use new communication technologies in the decision-making process, the challenge for career practitioners is to adopt more innovative ways to deliver career services using the channels available. These can be divided into synchronous (same time) communication channels, such as videoconferencing, phones, chat lines, and chat rooms, and asynchronous (not at the same time) channels such as e-mail, discussion forums, and message boards. Pathfinder currently offers only the latter. New techniques will need to be developed to incorporate the technology into the delivery, as the traditional hour-long, face-to-face interaction has previously been the preferred, and often only available, means of benefiting from peer interaction and collaboration in careers work.

Using an asynchronous communication channel enables a client to record their ideas and decisions through writing. The process of writing these down can have significant cognitive benefits and learning opportunities for the client (Harasim, 1990). "Writing is thinking that can be stopped and tinkered with" (McGinley & Tierney, cited in Harasim, 1990, p. 49), where "the process of articulating thoughts into written speech involves a deliberate analytical action" (Vygotsky, cited in Harasim, 1990, p. 49). The end process is that the clients will often discover what they think, and the action of being forced to articulate their thoughts helps them to examine and defend their own reasoning process (McCabe, 1998). For individuals involved in the career decision-making process this would be incredibly helpful, especially when it is "apparent that most of the career development process takes place in our heads in the way we process information" (Reardon, Lenz, Sampson, & Peterson, 2000, p. 20).

Some career practitioners believe however that visual cues and nonverbal communication are superior to written text, especially in developing affective and cognitive relationships (Boer, 2001). It has also been acknowledged that a practitioner just *being* with the client goes a long way to achieving this—where clients enjoy and cope with the spark, speed, and energy of discussions and where facial and hand gestures add to the meaning and feelings of the speaker. However, recently the telephone has become accepted as an effective alternative in the delivery of careers information, advice, and guidance through the development of Learndirect in the United Kingdom (Watts & Dent, 2002). In a face-to-face environment there could be issues for some clients around

the speed of conversations and the way they can quickly change direction. This coupled with a facilitator who may dominate "air time" means that the ability to participate regularly, contribute effectively, and ask for clarification in a verbal conversation can be difficult for some clients (Meyer, 2003).

Other practical advantages of using asynchronous communication include the fact that the client and career practitioner do not need to be in the same place at the same time. This can be a welcome, effective alternative to phone tag, parking problems, and the scheduling and re-scheduling of appointments for busy clients and career practitioners. However, the collaborative nature of the intervention and relationship can still be maintained. Using an online mentoring tool allows a skilled helper to question a client's reasoning process and help them to develop new (and possibly previously unrecognised) ideas, insights, self-awareness, and career life themes, which are critical in the career counselling process (McMahon & Patton, 2002; Sagiv, 1999). In addition, as the communication channel in this medium is relatively restricted because no visual or verbal cues are available, the need for clear and explicit articulation is required by the client and practitioner. Meanings can be clarified and misunderstandings can be minimised. For some clients, there may be real value in working in this medium. KiwiCareers Pathfinder offers this alternative form of delivery for career counselling.

KIWICAREERS PATHFINDER

Career Services *rapuara* is the government agency responsible for making available career information, advice, and guidance to all New Zealanders through a range

of integrated access points. These include the Web sites for KiwiCareers (<http://www.kiwicareers.govt.nz>) and Career Services (<http://www.careers.govt.nz>), the free 0800 contact phone centre CareerPoint, and Career Centres in 16 locations throughout New Zealand.

KiwiCareers Pathfinder was launched on 1 July 2004. It is a free online career guidance and education programme that has recently been developed to help New Zealanders make and implement their career decisions and to complement the KiwiCareers Web site. Pathfinder allows users to register their details and create an individualised career profile. Registered Pathfinder users have the opportunity to:

- Identify their interests, skills, knowledge, etc.,
- Identify and explore relevant career ideas,
- Identify and explore relevant programmes of study,
- Develop a personal career pathway,
- Develop a set of career goals and actions,
- Monitor their progress against the plan, making adjustment as required.

All New Zealanders can now gain universal access to free career guidance, 24 hours a day, in a variety of venues such as homes, libraries, educational institutions, marae, cyber cafés, and any other location with an Internet connection. Pathfinder is interactive and allows users to customise the information and activities to suit their needs. Intended key user groups include:

- Unemployed people seeking realistic work options,

- Employed people seeking to change careers or make other career-related adjustments,
- New migrants to New Zealand,
- People returning to work,
- Young people making subject or further study choices,
- Young people in transition from study to work.

Users can also re-enter the site at any time to access and update their profiles as their skills develop or interests change.

MENTORING AND PATHFINDER

A feature built into Pathfinder that is not publicly available at the time of writing is a text-based messaging system. The system allows a registered user to nominate a mentor who can access and view the client's career profile as they complete it. Pathfinder also allows the client and mentor to send and receive messages as the client works through it. In effect it is similar to an e-mail system, but accessible only to the client and mentor, and only within Pathfinder. The client can construct their profile whenever and wherever they want. The mentor can also view the client's profile whenever and wherever they want to. One important feature is that even though the mentor can view the client's profile remotely, they do not have the ability to change information.

The client can contact the mentor when they have reached a particular decision point in the programme and seek clarification or assistance when selecting the self-assessment exercises or in generating career ideas. Likewise the mentor can send a message commenting on the progress being made, suggesting other assessments to complete or another section to move on to, or asking a client to comment on any results. Messages are

sent on whatever seems relevant to each student. A "Contact My Mentor" link is located at the bottom of pages in Pathfinder that allows a message to be sent to the mentor from that specific page. When the mentor receives the message they can click on the message subject line to view the page the student is commenting on, such as "Career Ideas." This allows the mentor to quickly view the activity or result related to the message.

The Pilot Programme

A short e-mentoring pilot programme was undertaken in a high school in Hawke's Bay, New Zealand, with five Year 13 students over a six-week period. The traditional delivery method of careers information, advice, and guidance, especially in schools in New Zealand, is face-to-face and one-to-one or in groups through career education programmes. It was explained that the aim of the study was to understand how the text-based mentoring activity helped the students. It was clearly stated that face-to-face support was also available should the student or mentor indicate this was needed. To help with data collection, each student attended a short face-to-face interview to answer questions regarding their experiences and thoughts after the e-mentoring sessions finished.

The students were nominated by the school's career adviser, on the basis that they had not clearly indicated their career ideas or plans at the end of the last year, their Year 12. The students were able to access the Internet through sessions booked in the school computer room for one hour each week. The students were also informed that once they had logged into the e-mentoring activity in Pathfinder, they had the

option of working on their career profiles at home or in any environment where they could access the Internet. During the pilot the mentor was the same person for each student—a career consultant with Career Services and a registered professional member of the Career Practitioners Association of New Zealand (CPANZ).

Outcomes of Using the Online Mentoring Activity

Advantages for the students

All of the students reported they had enjoyed working through Pathfinder and interacting online through the messages. They commented that it had been useful to them in terms of improving their self-awareness and in identifying their career options. They also commented they had no problems using the e-mentoring activity or navigating Pathfinder.

In the mentoring activity, all of the students posted the same number of messages as the mentor and were usually in reply to a message posted by the mentor. Only one student posted messages without any prompting from the mentor. The messages from the students indicated they were not surprised by most of the career options suggested by Pathfinder, which is interesting as they had been chosen to participate because they had not indicated any clear career ideas previously. Having time to reflect on their career ideas and discuss these with a career practitioner were seen as very advantageous by the students. The students focussed on the relevance of the suggested career ideas, their thoughts on why particular careers had been suggested, and their career preferences or favourites. Many of the messages were quite long and detailed, which allowed the mentor to see if the students were

making connections between the results of their assessments and the career ideas proposed by Pathfinder.

For some, but not all, the text-based interaction allowed them to articulate their personal thoughts, ask themselves questions, and “rationalise” their career ideas and future plans. Comments such as, “This has helped me firm up my career ideas. . . . Yeah, it made me think more and actually it made me weigh up things quite a lot” and “This way you can think about your options more and it makes you think more about what you want to do—it made me question myself more” were common with the students.

When asked what specific advantages being able to read and write asynchronous messages had, one student mentioned not having the pressure to give an instant reply and the time to think first: “Sometimes you feel pressured to say something, anything in a careers interview . . . sometimes just to make them shut up!”

Another student said she did have more time especially when thinking about her options at home. When a particular idea or question came to her she had the opportunity to log on and post a question or comment, knowing that it would be read and answered. Even though she knew the response would not be as immediate as in a face-to-face discussion, she mentioned that it was important for her to write down her question, comment, and thoughts and know that her message was “captured, recognised, and would be replied to.”

She also mentioned that in previous interviews she felt under pressure to come up with ideas or comments as she only had a limited amount of time in

an interview with the careers advisor—in lunchtime or if someone else was waiting to see them. This way she did not feel rushed, that her online mentor was rushing, or that she was “hanging around outside the office in a queue or trying to catch them around school.”

It seems that students respond well to opportunities when they have the time to work through the career decision-making process and when they feel the person they are working with also has the time to work with them.

Advantages for the mentor

For the mentor, there was far more flexibility around accessing the student’s profiles, reviewing their progress, and replying to or posting new messages. Having the time to look at each student’s profile or read a question posted by them allowed the mentor to carefully consider an appropriate response, depending on what the student wrote, the context in which it was asked, and the perceived ability of the student to understand the answer. This was extremely beneficial. It is interesting to consider that the possible extra time taken to work with a student online may be no more than the time taken to arrange, meet, and discuss issues with a student face-to-face. In fact, it was felt that working online first can clear many issues and add more value to a face-to-face meeting for both participants.

The messages the students posted gave the career practitioner an opportunity to assess what awareness they had about their interests, skills, abilities, and values and how these related to the career ideas suggested. The practitioner was also able to ask considered and structured questions or make observations to seek clarification or provide information to help the students increase their self-

awareness. The students’ comments gave varying insights about their career directions, how these had been reached, and what options they were considering. Some of the students were able to explain why the different career options had come up for them when asked by the mentor. For one student, hospitality-related careers were prominent: “Hi, yes, I do want to work in the hospitality industry. I would love to be able to travel with my job but also get time to stay in New Zealand. I do love working with people, at the moment I work in a dairy and have got to know the regulars that come in and enjoy it.”

Another student was asked about the career ideas he had thought about before and wrote, “I am kind of interested in working with my hands, operating machines, painting, etc., but at the moment I’m more interested in the technical drawing side of things (CAD, animation). At the moment I’m working towards a career in computer animation as I’m doing a course in AutoCAD which is giving an insight at what it’s like, and it will help me decide if I want to do the diploma next year.” Another student was asked the same question and replied, “Hey electrician would be my first choice. Um I would rather be an electrician because it’s more working with your hands. I thought about being an electrician about a year ago.”

These messages clearly show that some of the students have an awareness of their interests, abilities, and values and they are connecting these with specific career themes and ideas in a very active way. By writing them down they have recorded publicly their career ideas, which they may not have articulated so clearly previously. This gives the career practitioner an opportunity to discuss

these ideas further to ensure they are making well-informed career decisions.

Discussion

Several issues were raised during the pilot that focussed thinking around the appropriateness of this intervention, in terms of the activities done online and preferred learning style of participants.

One student in particular had more time than others allocated to support him through the pilot. In completing the assessments, he had to be directed to particular sections more than other students so he could build his profile. He posted the least number of average and total words per message of all the students, which often made it difficult to understand his thoughts, comments, and ideas. He also consistently changed his mind in prioritising his preferred career ideas, based on the educational information related to each option. While this can be quite a normal and expected behaviour in the career decision-making process, the changes did not seem to be rational. After a period, it was decided to meet with the student face-to-face and clarify the situation and seek additional information from the school.

It was decided that the online mentoring programme was not seen as the best environment to continue assisting this student. This was probably not due to literacy levels and IT skills, which were proven to be at a high level, but more to do with his personal preference for a face-to-face careers interview. In discussions afterwards, it was clear this student placed a lot of value on face-to-face interventions, as he said visual cues helped him understand what was being said in interviews and he also stated that he preferred to get instant answers on the questions he asked.

This issue also partly surfaced when the students were asked about their preference for a totally online intervention, such as the e-mentoring activity, as opposed to a face-to-face interview. They all thought the idea of a blended format, with a mix of online work and face-to-face interventions, seemed a good idea, even though they did not think that the online discussions had disadvantaged them in any way. At issue here is the importance of providing choices for students, of enabling them to take control of the means by which they seek and obtain information and advice about the career options available to them.

The pilot demonstrated that supporting students online with a text-based messaging system does have advantages for all participants in terms of time and location, which in turn can improve the ability for those involved to gain insights and develop learning regarding their career decision-making skills. We need to be able to assess new criteria such as a client's learning style, literacy and IT skills, and readiness in the career decision-making process to understand the effectiveness of online practice. This pilot showed that the suitability of this type of online support for some participants needs closer consideration, as does the clarity of the exercises and instructions in online sites.

CONCLUSION Within the careers industry there is a possible fear that using computer-mediated communication for careers advice and guidance may lead to "simplistic, quick-fix, information-based approaches" (Watts, 2002, p. 149), where the human interaction is minimised or non-existent, rather than one where effective relationships can develop. However, there are some clients who

will prefer this medium and not the traditional face-to-face interview. By not accommodating the needs of these clients we are determining the intervention method, not the client (Farthing, 2003).

As a profession we need to start extending our own actions, ideas, and thoughts around embracing technology. A first step in the right direction would be a move away from directly comparing face-to-face and online interventions and deciding which is best or which one we as a practitioner prefer. What we should be doing is considering how the new methods and techniques we develop for the online delivery of career services can affect and improve how we conduct traditional careers interviews. The convergence of methods could result in new and improved practice.

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Russell Booth was a secondary school teacher in England for eight years before moving to New Zealand and working with Career Services rapuara in Wellington. He spent several years working in different areas of career guidance in both New Zealand and the United Kingdom before leading the project to develop Pathfinder, the free online career guidance programme. Booth is currently the President of the Career Practitioners Association of NZ and runs Career Change Ltd. in Hawke's Bay.