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Photo: Colourbox

Career development and mental wellbeing

Little is known in a careers and employment services context about how best to approach potentially sensitive mental wellbeing conversations to support individuals who may be facing tough times, the topic of this article.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on the mental health and wellbeing of people around the world, including depression and anxiety (WHO, 2022a). In recent times the word “permacrisis” has been used to describe an extended period of instability and uncertainty that has seen people live through crises including war, inflation, increased cost of living, climate change and political turmoil. Transitions in and out of work, changes in physical and mental health, identity crisis, moving to another area, living with loss, disability, or feeling stressed about life are often real challenges. We know that education, skills,

health, relationships, finance, and location impact differently on people's lives depending on circumstance.

The World Health Organisation (2022b) highlights depression is one of the leading causes of disability. Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among 15-29-year-olds. People with severe mental health conditions die prematurely – as much as two decades early – due to preventable physical conditions. Despite progress in some countries, people with mental health conditions often experience severe human rights violations, discrimination, and stigma. This can reduce productivity, strain relationships, and for some compound cycles of poverty, disengagement and disadvantage. Conversely, when people have access to supportive environments, such as personalised career development services, they can contribute more to their communities and feel more confident to make decisions about learning and work. In this article, we explore the role the career development practitioner plays in supporting the mental health wellbeing of the individuals they work with vulnerable young people and adults.

Career development and mental wellbeing

Career development is the lifelong process of managing learning, work, leisure and transitions to move towards a personally determined, yet continually evolving preferred future. This encompasses the development of the whole person and is more than just simply deciding on a job choice. Theoretical work and longitudinal case study reviews have documented the likely value of career development practices to wellbeing (e.g., Redekopp & Huston, 2020; Whelan et al, 2017; Robertson, 2013; Bimrose et al., 2008).

Mental health and wellbeing have many different components. From a career development perspective, several possible direct outcomes relate closely to health and wellbeing such as seeing oneself as more capable (self-perception effect), possessing employability and career management skills (ability effects), and what opportunities one believes are open to them (opportunity-perception effects). Indirect outcomes also have important wellbeing links, as being well engaged in education, training, or employment can bring important benefits for self-perception, feeling valuable to society, social interactions, and potentially increased financial resources.



Career development is the lifelong process of managing learning, work, leisure and transitions to move towards a personally determined, yet continually evolving preferred future. Photo: Colourbox

Our collaborative research programme

Our twelve-month collaborative research programme with academics and practitioners from Canada, Wales and Scotland (Hughes et al, 2022) provides insight to adult perspectives on career development and wellbeing. Our experience concurred with other research about the need to tackle issues that threaten wellbeing and for this to be positioned the heart of career and employability-related decision making (Carnegie UK, 2022). For example, people with high levels of hope are better at coming up with multiple higher-quality alternative routes when faced with barriers than those with low hope (Peterson & Bryon, 2008).

Brief case studies in our project show real examples of challenges faced by individuals that arise in career guidance conversations, such as loneliness, boredom, feelings of worthlessness, the shock of redundancy, worries about finances and supporting the family, fear of change, anger, broken relationships, drug abuse, low self-esteem, and high levels of anxiety. For example, an unemployed 50-year old was emotionally open from the start of the career guidance interview, in tears and raising concerns about her mental health. She was embarrassed by being unemployed, distressed at not having money for basic social needs, and felt that her age held her back from future employment options. With mental

wellbeing issues apparent from the start, the practitioner use sensitive questioning to find out why she felt embarrassed. The practitioner explained that she could have as many sessions as needed to make progress, which she found reassuring compared to other services she had engaged with. Having made an action plan together, she reported an average gain in wellbeing from an initial scoring of 1.2 to 3.8.

Having recently trained 300 practitioners across Wales based on findings from our earlier study, we focused on ideas and techniques for 'skilful practice' that can be applied to improve career development and wellbeing outcomes for adults and young people.

The role of the career development practitioner

In our work, we took account of four 'e-cornerstones' underpinning effective career development and wellbeing practice that emerged from our study: (i) Environment, (ii) Emotional Steadiness, (iii) Exercises to support individuals' decision making, and (iv) Evaluation and impact.

- The importance of personal *environment* for physiological and psychological wellbeing is well documented (Suresh et al., 2006). Lighting, ambiance, noise and comfort all have a part to play in enabling people to relax, relate and communicate. Neurodivergent people may be adversely impacted by bright lights, noise, smells and textures. A further important consideration for many organisations is the reception area (online or offline) creating a welcoming environment.
- A key skill of a skilful practitioner is to reflect on and regulate their own emotions in order to ensure that their own anxiety and bias do not distort their ability to be present and effective i.e., *emotional steadiness*.
- The career guidance model adopted in Wales and Scotland has three key stages of career guidance commonly used by practitioners.
 - Stage 1: Preparing the Foundations for Guidance
 - Stage 2: Exploring and Identifying Needs
 - Stage 3: Resolving Need and Moving Forward.
- Of critical importance is practitioners having access to a wide-ranging toolkit of *exercises to support individuals' decision making* that can be deployed flexibly in the moment with different clients, according to their individual preferred learning styles and needs.

- Practitioners have all sorts of competing pressures on their time and workload. With this in mind, if *evaluation and impact* assessment is to succeed long term, it must be constructed in a way that becomes a natural and integral part of a practitioner's work, i.e., a regular part of one's professional practice and personal development.

In the next section we offer some practical ideas about how you can engage effectively in supportive career development and wellbeing conversations.



Self-reflection and discussion with colleagues reviewing 'critical incident' case studies can help to guide appropriate boundary management. Photo: Colourbox

How best to approach potentially sensitive wellbeing conversations

Read the practical toolkit for tips and ideas

Career development practitioners need to feel confident in themselves that they know something about definitions of mental health, mental illness, and wellbeing, the link to their practice, and where the boundaries can be drawn between careers provision and clinical work. This can equip practitioners to act as a 'conduit' for advocating on behalf of their clients and engaging with other professionals in a wide range of settings.

Consider what is in your toolkit and any gaps in techniques or resources

Differing tools such as supportive questioning techniques, prompt cards, and visuals can be used in sessions to engage young people and adults to increase levels of understanding of circumstances and areas of concern. It is also helpful to have to hand general wellbeing questions that can be introduced at an appropriate stage in the conversation. Coaching and cognitive behavioural techniques that enable the person to reflect and share their feelings in a safe and caring environment, alongside alternative visual techniques such as the 'circle of support' – all explained further in the free [Career Development and Wellbeing Toolkit](#).

Encourage goal setting

Hambly & Bomford (2019) cite research that highlights “people who set goals tend to perform better, exhibit increased confidence, are happier with their performance, and suffer less stress and anxiety.” It can be a temptation, particularly when time is tight, to rush into action planning, without really developing a clear goal that the client or customer has committed to.

Complex issues around professional and personal boundaries

Self-reflection and discussion with colleagues reviewing 'critical incident' case studies can help to guide appropriate boundary management. Practitioners working with young people and adult customers should consider cultural, social and economic factors in their formulations and responses to individuals' needs. This may involve spending time liaising with employers or community organisations, as well as seeking expert advice where needed.

Supervision

Some organisations, particularly those in 'helping professions', have in place supervision for employees and practitioners to download worries and stresses and to alleviate anxieties. This is often built into 'critical incident case review' sessions. However, some practitioners, such as school advisers, are often working alone in difficult circumstances, sometimes compounded by Covid-19 concerns. Careful consideration is needed in these cases on what support mechanisms can be put in place. As a practitioner, a proactive rather than reactive approach to responding to challenging scenarios is essential.

We hope this article will encourage reflection and enhanced practice so that more individuals can be supported to maximise their talents, interests and skills.

Guest editor Dr. Emma Bolger, lecturer and the programme leader of the [MSc in Career Guidance and Development](#), at the [University of the West of Scotland](#), has processed and edited this article.

A final word for practitioners

Build resilience and establish supportive environments for career development and wellbeing conversations for young people and adults. Interventions can be designed for individuals, specific targeted groups, or whole populations.

For practitioners working independently, perhaps self-employed or engaged in short-term contracts, being part of a professional body and/or community of interest can assist in providing a 'safe place' to share ideas or concerns and find strategies for looking after one's own wellbeing, as well as that of the client or customer.

There is also a further opportunity for practitioners to draw on key reflections from 'Don't Dis-MyAbility®' and 'Living with Loss' [expert international webinars](#):

Don't Dis-MyAbility® - This webinar focuses on careers work with neurodivergent individuals and families. The recording highlights key challenges and opportunities in working with special educational needs young people and focusing on what this actually means. Three key contributors along with Deirdre Hughes reflect on implications for policy, research and practice.

Living with Loss - This webinar examines differing forms of bereavement as an important and meaningful learning process that needs to be respected and welcomed. The contributors discuss writing for wellbeing (i.e., writing the self) as a way in which to respond to grief and make meaning of what has happened to us. They each reflect on ways loss can affect our working lives and how we may respond in ways that go beyond coping, facilitating our ability to articulate loss to ourselves and others.

Fact File - Career development and wellbeing

In 2021, The Norwegian Government announced that it will develop a new national strategy for wellbeing.

The announcement by the Government of Norway states that:

- A good life is about much more than financial and material goods
- GDP is an insufficient metric for good lives, as it does not say enough about how people feel
- There is a need for wellbeing to become a supplementary measure of societal development.

<https://weall.org/norway-announces-new-national-wellbeing-strategy>

In Wales, seven wellbeing goals are set out by government to improve the social, economic, environmental, and cultural wellbeing of Wales. They are contained in law under the 'Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015'.

<https://gov.wales/well-being-future-generations-wales-act-2015-guidance>

In Scotland, a national set of adult mental health indicators, commissioned by the Scottish Government, was introduced in December 2007.

<https://www.healthscotland.scot/health-topics/mental-health-and-wellbeing/adult-mental-health-indicators>

In Canada, the Mental Health Commission of Canada, an organization funded by Health Canada, and leads pan-Canadian research through the Positive Mental Health Surveillance Indicator Framework (PMHSIF).

<https://health-infobase.canada.ca/positive-mental-health/>

Links to further reading

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