

Research for Career Practitioners:

Optional Extra or Professional Necessity?

Thank you for the invitation to speak to you today, and especially at one of your professional development events. I have long held an interest in the professionalising of occupations in which I have been involved, and these include tertiary teaching and career development. I am aware of the significant steps which CPANZ has taken in recent times to foster the professionalisation of your work, and applaud you for the courageous steps you have taken. It is certainly not true that “anyone can do career development”, although, unfortunately, there are way too many people who think otherwise. Sadly, for such people it is their own inability to recognise what they don't know that causes them to hold such a view, and thereby to be blinded to the potential they have to do harm to their “clients”, or more importantly to not do them much good!

Several years ago I spoke to a CPANZ gathering in Auckland, and on that occasion proposed the thesis that to be taken seriously as a profession, the CPANZ membership needed to be qualified as a career practitioners. Today I am proposing another thesis: to be an effective profession CPANZ members must be engaged in research. I see this engagement at two levels. First, and the easier of the two, at the level of your practice being informed by research. Secondly, much more challenging and a prerequisite to the first – career practitioners should undertake research. In my view career practitioners must generate more and deeper understanding of career practice in New Zealand at both individual practitioner level and for career practice as a whole. Why? Because career practice in New Zealand, as an activity involving the lives of New Zealanders, must acknowledge the context in which we live our lives, and the cultural norms and expectations which guide and drive us.

In urging you to be engaged in research, what do I mean by research? Many people have preconceived ideas about research, and are often somewhat afraid of what it might mean.

This is certainly true of tertiary teachers and I suspect of many career practitioners. The word “research” can imply a preoccupation with cold hard facts, the search for “truth” (sounds scary) or an insistence on precision. We might picture researchers as people with greater minds than our own – preoccupied with statistics and speaking in numbers not words. It is not at all unusual for people to assume that they are not capable of doing research.

But I am not proposing that career practitioners become academics, nor that you should undertake large scale research projects. I am not proposing that you all become social scientists, in search of immutable truths about career practice. What I am proposing is that you become practitioner researchers, and that you use practitioner research as one of your primary tools for your professional development. And by practitioner research I mean a structured approach by which you undertake enquiry about career practice, reflect on your findings and make changes to your practice as a consequence of that critical reflection. It is essential to good career practice (just as it is essential to all forms of professional practice), to question what is happening in your engagements with your clients, to try out new strategies and innovations and to make informed decision about your future actions.

Of course, I am sure that as career professionals you are conducting informal research all of the time: you are thinking about why some of your strategies with clients work better than others, about how you can better help different client groups or why some people cope with career issues much better than others. What practitioner research does, as a professional development process, is to formalise that process of enquiry, critical reflection and purposeful action. When we engage in practitioner research we examine a situation or problem very carefully to find out “why” or “how”. We pose questions related to the situation – questions which open up our thinking about the possibilities, questions which will lead us to a deeper understanding of the issues facing our clients and the strategies we might adopt to assist them. Most important, they will be questions which will lead us towards a more profound understanding of career practice.

Career practitioner researchers begin with what is already familiar to them – their clients and their career issues. They then examine this context but more importantly they examine themselves as part of this context. Career practitioner researchers become skilful observers of their own practice. If the basis for meaningful personal development is deep understanding of oneself, so too the starting point for professional development is deep understanding of oneself as a practitioner, one's clients and the issues which clients bring.

The process of practitioner research is easy to understand:

- Identify a research question
- Collect data
- Analyse data
- Summarise your findings
- Share your findings

It is not my purpose today to conduct a practical workshop – suffice it to say that there are things to know and skills to acquire in each of these steps – but they are well within the capabilities of any career practitioner. And if I recall correctly there are a couple of workshops for you at this conference!

Is practitioner research really a valid form of research? I think so, although it has its critics. It is a form of research which is grounded in real life situations, and that is what underpins its validity. It is not a form of research which is concerned with replicability, but that is not the point. Its point is to help career practitioners better understand what works in their context and for their clients and why. Of course, for it to be reliable research it needs to be done well – but that comes with practice!

There is another plus arising from practitioner research – an enhanced understanding of theory and the relationships between theory and practice. If I have observed a weakness in the career profession in New Zealand, it is the apparent lack of respect that many

practitioners have for career theory – you know, that “meaningless jargon”. The truth is, everything we do is based on theory, although so often it is not explicit, and is not subject to critique and challenge. We all hold views about what we should do in particular situations, and we all make assumptions about what works and what doesn't. These views and assumptions are theories – personal theories. If we are prepared to engage in practitioner research we will make our theories explicit, and we will expose them to critique. We will form better theories, and we will be more open to exploring the theories of others.

To conclude, I have put forward the challenge that if you are to be serious about lifting your game as career practitioners, you need to embrace research as a normal part of your professional lives. This is a fundamental prerequisite to developing a greater understanding of the work of career practitioners and most importantly what will give better outcomes for your clients.

But wait, there's more: better informed practitioners will mean a better prepared profession – one more able to inform and shape the career agenda in New Zealand. It is an indictment of your profession that government career policy is largely uncontested, and in my view woefully inadequate. There is a much greater contribution for career practitioners to make to New Zealand's economic and social development – I hope you will rise to the occasion.

Thank you.