

# “The Space between the Career Practitioner and the Client”:

## Supervision in the NZ Careers Industry

By

Lynette Reid and Don Gooder

AUT University, Auckland.

### **INTRODUCTION**

We are all painfully, sometimes shamefully, aware of the space between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in our society, either from our own observations or if not at least from the media who insist on feeding us reams of statistical data on rich lists, CEO bonuses, average incomes, unemployment figures, child malnourishment etc. However in the society of our career industry where do we find the figures to show the space between the practitioner and the client, not in terms of the income gap but in terms of the knowledge gap between what is known about supervision in our industry? What are the spaces between those practitioners who embrace supervision with enthusiasm, those who are led to it reluctantly, and those who shun it altogether? What is also the space between those practitioners who really know what Supervision is all about and those who really have little to no idea?

### **LITERATURE**

Most career practitioners have come across the notion of ‘Professional Supervision’ during the term of their training, when for many it becomes an integral and compulsory element. From then on the practitioner has a choice, but we have little data on what the figures are as to who continues to engage in supervision, how often, with whom and why? A national survey was undertaken for the New Zealand Association of Counsellors by Payne & Lang (2009), but that was for school guidance counsellors’ supervision. Research in the New Zealand career field context has been very limited.

In 2003 Mary McMahon, from Queensland University of Technology, wrote a paper published in the British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, entitled: “Supervision and

career counsellors: a little-explored practice with an uncertain future”. In the intervening seven years little other research has been attempted in the field of supervision for Career Counsellors, within the NZ setting at least. CDANZ has however revised their membership criteria to include Supervision as: Recommended to a maximum of 12 hours per annum, for Professional Membership, and Strongly Recommended for Associate Membership. Also there is now a place on their website where one may source potential supervisors, indeed an innovative measure.

The supervisor’s perspective has mainly come from the broader health discipline, or from the general helping professions (Corey, Hayes, Moulton, Muratori, 2010). The authors of this paper decided to explore what supervisors of practitioners in the career industry are currently saying in the NZ context, rather than what the practitioners themselves have to say about their supervision.

There are a variety of definitions for Professional Supervision available in the literature. NZAC Code of Ethics states that “the purpose of professional supervision is for counsellors to reflect on and develop effective and ethical practice. It also has a monitoring purpose with regard to counsellors’ work....(it) includes personal support, mentoring professional identity development and reflection upon the relationships between persons, theories, practices, work contexts and cultural perspectives. ..(It is also seen as) a partnership. It is a contractual, collaborative and confidential process, based upon informed consent ... (which) may take a number of forms, including individual or group supervision and may involve telephone, email and letters. It may be live or may be based on personal recall, notes, videotapes, audiotapes, transcripts or client’s creative works”.

The Supervisor Accreditation Committee of NZAC, buoyed by the impending accreditation process, has released the results of a 2009 pilot study (2010) that sought to ascertain the “standing” of an Accredited Supervisor of NZAC. The results showed that there could be some advantage for a member seeking to become an Accredited Supervisor

A quick search of Codes of Ethics for Career Associations in developed countries shows that the norm for membership is for supervision to be recommended, whereas the norm for Counselling and Psychotherapy Association membership is for supervision to be compulsory, especially for counsellors in training, although less commonly for qualified clinicians.

Brocklehurst (1999) makes the point that good supervision is to ensure safe practice, encourage personal and professional growth and offer support, Barker (1992) offers that Professional Supervision is to provide “protection to both clients and professionals”, whereas Gazzola and Theriault (2007) refer to supervision as skill acquisition, counsellor professional identity and supervisee competence development.

There would seem to be agreement in the literature that the focus of supervision should be on the supervisee’s professional development rather than personal concerns (Corey, Corey & Callanan (2011). However they did find that there was a lack of consensus and clarity as to the degree to which supervisors could work ethically with the supervisees’ personal problems. Stebnicki (2008) however, believes it is incumbent upon the supervisor to address issues of supervisees’ personal growth and self-care needs. These differing principles do make a difference to the supervision contract, and to the qualifications of the supervisor chosen.

Another facet of the value of Supervision was postulated by Freudenburger (1974) that it prevented and managed counsellor burnout, often reframed today as “vicarious trauma” or “compassion fatigue”. This theme was further advanced by Meyer & Ponton (2006) who offered to counsellors and supervisors suggestions to achieve a personal goal of work life balance. They used the “metaphor of a healthy tree” in professional supervision, where “the vibrant branches of professional and personal activities, the nurturing soil of professional and personal relationships and the deep roots of professional and personal ideology” are what keep counsellors healthy and well functioning.

Adding further to our understanding of the value of Supervision is an article by Michael Carroll (2006) entitled “Key Issues in Coaching Psychology Supervision”, where quoting from Bolton (2001), King and Kitchener (1994) and Moon (1999) supervision is detailed as being based on the assumption that “reflecting on work provides the basis of learning from that work and doing it more creatively”. Also Carroll himself (2005) distilled from meeting with 50 Maori Counsellors / psychologists / Social workers during his time in New Zealand that this group devised their own definition of Supervision as “gathering the treasures of the past into the competencies of the present for the wellbeing of the future”, thus developing a place for the spiritual aspects of supervision to rest.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

As the authors could not find in the literature any research that had targeted the supervisors of New Zealand based career counsellors themselves, as distinct from the supervisees, they therefore set out to research those who were providing supervision to practitioners in the NZ Career Industry, by a semi-structured interview via a face to face or phone-call process. Approval was gained from AUT Ethics Committee for the research, and participants were found from advertisements in the respective publication and websites of NZAC and CDANZ. The interviews set out to discover these supervisors' opinions on the purpose, process and influences of their supervision stance.

### **Participants**

In total 13 participants were interviewed. The main centres of NZ, namely Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Palmerston North, and Whangarei provided these volunteers, with all of them being women, in the "mature stages of life" between 45 and 65 years of age. Twelve were of New Zealand/ European (Pakeha) extraction and one identified as Pasifika. In terms of the main activity of their day to day work, one was a teacher, two described themselves as coaches, three identified as counsellors, three as career consultants, and four as career counsellors. The length of time that they had been providing supervision services varied greatly from "just started" to over 20 years of service to the career industry. Also qualifications in Supervision were thin on the ground with just 5 identifying a particular qualification from a recognized source, whereas most referred to their qualification as longevity in the industry.

## **RESULTS**

What has emerged from the data is what we tentatively offer up as three themes about supervision in the NZ career industry:

1. Personal perspectives of the supervisor
2. Professional perspectives of the supervisor
3. New voices in the shared space

## **Personal perspective of the supervisor**

A critical factor for each supervisor was the influence of their own personal experiences. These experiences, positive and negative have contributed largely to shaping and defining supervision in the NZ career industry. Understanding their influences, motivations and experiences were therefore an important feature of the results. A subtle shift has occurred from the space of practice wisdom to more formal training in supervision. Each has its merits and ultimately it becomes the decision of the career practitioner as to which will be more effective.

This study revealed that the majority of participants described their motivation for becoming supervisors as demand-driven, typically by the career industry and other related disciplines, i.e. social work and counselling. For example, there was a need for the service in their specific location or using a particular type of philosophy, model or approach. However, three participants claimed their motivation was self-driven. Each believed they were ready to become supervisors as a step-up from their role as career practitioners. Supervisors driven by self-motivation were typically those who had completed formal qualifications in supervision but did not have the length of experience in the career and counselling fields as those participants responding to the demands of their profession. What we perhaps detect here is a shift in emerging supervisors in the career industry toward supervision becoming a profession in its own right.

When asked to describe what supervision meant to them, all participants believed the primary focus to be the career practitioner. The supervision setting was to provide the career practitioner with opportunity to reflect, check and debrief. The major influence for all participants on supervision was personal experiences, followed closely by training in supervision. Supervisor's personal experiences were generated from their own positive and negative experiences in supervision. What this result signals is how much the supervisor's personal insights and knowledge shape supervision in the NZ career industry. This perhaps corresponds to the reasons why people are attracted to the helping profession as having been in the situation themselves and a willingness to share these experiences to assist others.

Competencies for supervisors were similar to that of a counsellor. These included, listening, communication and knowledge of ethical standards. Two of the more experienced supervisors rated knowledge of the career industry as a key competency. This once again reveals the impact the counselling profession has on supervision in the NZ career industry. It also raises the question, where is the line drawn between supervision and counselling?

### **Professional perspective of the supervisor**

The supervision space provides a window into the practice environment the supervisee functions in.

All participants were asked to determine key issues being raised by their supervisees. The top two issues alternated between specific techniques for clients and issues within the workplace. Issues within the workplace suggests that supervisees felt they had very little direction and guidance within their roles. This coupled with the demands of new client groups, made their roles seem even more overwhelming. Participants also claimed supervisees were looking to them for new ideas and techniques on how to work with clients. This may raise questions about the role of the supervisor or are we witnessing a gap in professional development within the career industry?

The expectation of employing organisations is perhaps indicated in the almost ‘hands-off’ attitude organisations have of supervision, as reported by some participants. The reaction of participants is that the responsibility of career practitioners’ safe and ethical practice is seen as a private one between the supervisor and supervisee. While employing organisations are prepared to place limits on frequency of supervision by their staff, they also appear unwilling to be actively involved in evaluating the supervisory role as suggested by one participant. Perhaps this lack of clarity is seen in the responses participants gave to what motivated supervisees to seek supervision? The only response was a resounding “a requirement by my organisation” rather than a personal choice. Once again, there is strong expectation by employing organisations for staff to be engaged in supervision, yet with limited responsibility for the outcomes of this relationship.

## **The space between the supervisor and supervisee**

It is clear from this study that the space between the career practitioner and client is listened to and understood by the supervisor. However, other voices have emerged as critical within this space, that of the employing organisation and the professional association.

For the majority of participants when asked how might supervision be enhanced, all commented on the need for specific guidelines and policies on what supervision is for the careers industry. A specific example noted by one participant was the issue of frequency of supervision. Some supervisees felt that supervision was an intervention only when things were going wrong, rather than an ongoing reflection of overall practice. What this implies is that some career practitioners are perhaps more reactive rather than proactive to their own practice. Further, who is the career practitioner relying on to determine concerns within their practice? The issue of supervision being compulsory was also questioned alongside a need for people to understand what supervision is!

This statement is perhaps supported by responses to the question, how would you determine/measure your effectiveness as a supervisor? Once again, a common response was feedback from supervisees. However, if supervisees are not clear on what supervision is, how are they establishing what could be achieved? This is perhaps a principal need for professional associations such as CDANZ, to establish shared guidelines on this aspect of supervision.

## **DISCUSSION**

This research has created an opportunity to explore supervision in the NZ career industry. Results have revealed insights into the influences of the supervisors and their perspective of the career industry through their supervisees. Finally, the supervision space has brought to light two further voices which have an intrinsic influence on supervision, the employing organisation and the professional association, CDANZ.

A common call from all participants in this research was the need for career practitioners to be better informed about what supervision is. The NZ career industry is made up of diverse

member backgrounds, needs and roles and it is perhaps more practical to provide a range of models and approaches to supervision.

Participants involved in this research indicated that they have either responded to the needs of the industry or detected a gap in the industry for the type of supervision they are providing. The researchers are of the opinion, that this should be encouraged and supported, particularly by CDANZ. While supervision in the NZ career industry appears to have been transported from the counselling field, new perceptions and influences have since been established. One example is that of coaching. As an industry we can ill-afford to maintain a one model 'fits-all', in an already complex field. A range of models and approaches should be supported, albeit with raised awareness and information on what these are.

The complexity of the careers industry is reverberated within issues raised during supervision. Employing organisations appear to treat supervision as a domain only for the supervisor and supervisee. Yet issues brought to supervision raises the question, are these best addressed in supervision or elsewhere? The researchers are of the opinion that such issues are more appropriately addressed as professional development needs to avoid the role of the supervisor being perceived as the 'teacher'. Such information is why employing organisations need to take more than just a financial overseeing role.

In conclusion, the space between us has become distorted! It is clear that some guidelines are needed from all who occupy the space; the career practitioner, the employing organisation and the supervisor. The role of CDANZ is perhaps that of a collection AND dissemination point for these agreed guidelines. A starting point is robust, debate from within the NZ career industry of what supervision is, and is not, in the NZ career industry.

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