



What difference did we make?

Careers New Zealand Evidence Project

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Careers New Zealand

Presented at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT) and
Career Development Association of New Zealand (CDANZ)
Career Research Symposium, 8 July 2011

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Careers New Zealand The Northern Area Evidence Project – What face-to-face career guidance clients told us about their career development, influences and actions immediately and 6 months after a career guidance appointment.

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Abstract

Historically the career industry in New Zealand has had a limited evidence or research base to inform our practice. Careers New Zealand has responded in gaining greater evidence in the design and implementation of new modalities such as phone and web guidance and also with the development of an Evaluation Guide for the organisation. The Northern Area Evidence Project was initiated to add to our research base concerning face-to-face guidance. We gathered initial information using a client questionnaire in October 2010. Forty two clients were surveyed and agreed to take part in the follow up. Twenty three were interviewed predominantly by phone six months later in April 2011.

The focus of the project was on gathering evidence on the effectiveness of face-to-face career guidance. We wanted to explore the difference in clients' career development as a result of the face-to-face career guidance intervention. Also explored were the factors which clients believed had impacted on their careers and the things that had "got in the way" for them in making progress with their career action plans.

Executive Summary

The predominant themes resulting from the evidence project regarding the impact of the career guidance intervention are as follows:

- The career guidance intervention did "make a difference"
- There was an increase in confidence and competence in career self management
- Careers New Zealand website was used for research and information as a result of the career guidance
- Clients' perspective changed for the better as a result of the career guidance
- Clients took action
- There was an achievement of momentum and outcomes
- Clear attribution of progress with career plans to Careers New Zealand career guidance interventions
- The complexity of influences on clients' career development was highlighted
- Further contact with Careers New Zealand was indicated as a desirable future outcome

Introduction

Attempts to provide evidence of the outcomes of career guidance activities have faced a number of recurring issues. There are a range of factors which influence career decision making and which can impact on outcomes, and there are no agreed outcome measures or common methods of gathering outcome data. While career guidance clients and career practitioners tend to be convinced of the value of guidance interventions, policy makers need evidence to justify government funding of such services. It is presumed that benefits are expected to flow from career services, but this has not been well tested either globally or here in New Zealand. The full benefits from effective career guidance may take years to emerge, but the more time that passes the harder it is to differentiate the effects of the guidance from the increasing range of other influences. When assessing the degree of reliability of evidence it is not a clear cut process to differentiate the effects of the guidance from a range of other complex influences on the individual. (Maguire & Killeen, 2003).

When attempting to gather evidence of the effectiveness of career guidance interventions it is worthwhile thinking about what can be reasonably viewed as outcomes from career guidance. Outcomes for individuals may be *immediate* such as improved knowledge of skills, including action planning; attitudes and motivation; *intermediate*, such as sustained job search strategies and exploration activities; implementing action plans, making applications, managing obstacles; and *longer term*, for example starting, continuing, and successfully completing learning opportunities, entering, re entering, changing employment; changed role/promotion; increased salary and increased employability. (McCarthy 2011).

There has been one comprehensive study of the evidence for positive outcomes of career guidance in New Zealand. This involved a review of the international literature and concluded that “although there is little hard evidence to back up the proposition that career guidance has economic and social benefits, the rationale behind such a proposition is sound”. (ACNeilson, 1999). In this earlier study 400 clients were followed 12 months after a career guidance intervention, with quantitative and qualitative interview techniques being used.

The purpose of the **Northern Area Evidence Project** was to gather information that would help Careers New Zealand measure what difference the face-to-face guidance meeting made for the client in their career development, what action was taken and outcomes achieved.

The rationale from Careers New Zealand for this project was as follows:

- Evidence helps build on our credibility as industry leaders and creates a greater understanding of what our users want
- Evidence is important in understanding how users are benefiting from our products and services
- It enables us to measure the improved capability of users to self manage their careers/increase their career literacy (Career Services Statement of Intent, 2010)

Objectives

The objectives of the Northern Area Evidence project were:

- To explore the *difference* in the client's confidence in their ability to take next steps in managing their career
- To gather data about age, ethnicity, services sought/services received and shift in career confidence
- To *follow up* respondents after 6 months regarding actions, outcomes and shifts made.

Methodology

The evaluation strategy used in this project combined both qualitative and quantitative methods with the use of questionnaires in both the initial data collection phase (October 2010) and in the follow up phase six months later (May 2011). The month of October was chosen as a discrete time period which could act as a snapshot in time for researching the effectiveness of the career guidance intervention.

There were two separate questionnaires developed, using some questions in common and some different questions formulated to specifically collect information relevant to either the time immediately following the career guidance intervention or to the follow up period six months later. Questionnaires were developed using a consultative approach with input from Policy and Planning and Service Development team members in the Careers New Zealand National Office, as well as from career consultants within Careers New Zealand. They were tested and amended as appropriate to take into account relevant feedback.

The first questionnaire was completed by career guidance clients immediately after their appointment in October 2010. It was administered by the career consultant who had worked with the client, using clear guidelines prepared and set out by the researchers. All career consultants involved in the research had attended a training workshop facilitated by the researchers to ensure that systems followed were understood and consistently adhered to. The second questionnaire was administered predominantly by telephone, with one of the researchers, Jennifer Ross, conducting all interviews.

The questionnaires used questions including attitude scales, with the respondents being given the opportunity to elaborate on the reasons for their answers. This opportunity was included as it tends to improve the validity of results. By explaining their response on the attitude scales, respondents are more likely to reveal their true feelings and not just express socially acceptable responses. (Connexions, 2001)

Qualitative research tends to explore how people think about things and what issues are important for them. The researchers were interested in incorporating personal accounts, which although subjective in nature can provide contextualized information relevant to the issues being investigated.

Interview data was captured with in-depth notes taken by the researcher and a thematic analysis was subsequently carried out of the narrative content. The responses on the attitude scales were calculated, compiled and captured in a comprehensive table of results.

Findings

In October 2010, 42 questionnaires were completed by career guidance clients after having an appointment with a Career Consultant in Auckland, Whangarei or Kaitaia Offices of Careers New Zealand. Of those, five participants did not want to be followed up. 60% of respondents were from Auckland, 21% Whangarei, 12% Kaitaia, 7% did not specify where they were from.

The stated reasons for visiting Careers New Zealand were to explore career options, for help with CV or job search, to research study options.

When asked immediately after their guidance appointment “how much of a difference has this career guidance meeting made”, 79% *said that it made either quite a difference or a big difference to their career development*. Only 1 client said that the intervention made only “*a little difference*”.

In May 2011 clients who agreed to be followed up and who were able to be contacted were interviewed. This follow up group comprised 23 career guidance clients. These results were analysed resulting in the following themes being evident.

Representation from key groups

The initial sample was made up of 34% New Zealand European, 21% European Other 14% Māori, 10% Asian, 5% East Asian and 2% Pasifika.

In the follow up phase of the project there was an under representation from key groups such as youth, Māori and Pasifika. Though they were very much part of the initial group they were difficult to follow up six months on. This was due to changes of address, telephone number and in some instances moving to another country (Australia). This says something about the fluidity of certain populations and / or their willingness to participate in follow up research. As a result we did not derive significant knowledge around this group who are a key target group in the Careers New Zealand Statement of Intent. This may be an issue worth further research in the future if Careers New Zealand is to make a positive difference by offering services appropriate to the needs of our target groups. In terms of demographics, there was a pre-dominance of participants in the 30-34 and 45-49 age group.

Key Themes

Career guidance did “make a difference”

Clients were surveyed as to the difference the career guidance meeting made to their ability to take the next steps in managing their careers. The resulting data from both the attitude scale and the narrative confirmed that the guidance made a significant difference to their career development. What is critical is how we explain the difference. It is interesting to note that where there was no movement or change to their situation, participants dropped their evaluation on the attitude scale of the difference that the career guidance made. Their narrative clearly indicated that they did not attribute the lack of outcome to Careers New Zealand; rather they valued the input but indicated that there was no outcome for a variety of other reasons.

Participants also evaluated how much of a difference the career guidance had made for them differently, depending if the outcome has been by happenstance; an unexpected opportunity or unexpected event such as a phone call offering a position, or if there had been a timing issue. These participants still valued the service provided but didn't see a correlation between the career guidance received and the result that has been achieved.

An increase in confidence and competence in self managing careers

From the information gained in the first part of the project, it was demonstrated that after the career planning appointment clients were significantly more confident in managing their career. When asked about their level of confidence in managing their careers before the face-to-face career guidance appointment 24% said they were either not at all confident or a little confident. Whereas after the appointment 81% stated that they were either quite confident or very confident, (an improvement of 57%). After the career guidance only 2% were not at all confident or a little confident.

The narrative from the follow up also indicated the value gained from working with a career consultant in terms of gaining competence in managing their own careers with statements such as: “*The consultant gave me the skills to research and make decisions, these are good skills*” and “*They helped me learn how to plan for my career in the future*”.

Information research skills and use of Careers New Zealand Website

A theme was evident regarding clients gaining the career self management skills of researching and information gathering, particularly by using the Careers New Zealand website. “*I have looked at CSr website, especially the job descriptions quite a lot and it was very helpful*” and “*I have used the website a lot since. The website is great. It has good up to date information and helps people be realistic*”.

Clients' perspective changed for the better as a result of the career guidance

There was a clear theme of improved self confidence, clients having the ability to position themselves better and take intentional action as outcomes from the career guidance intervention. This is significant in that most of the meetings were only one hour

in duration. Respondents' narrative showed that they were more hopeful, had greater clarity, were able to see their own situation differently and had an increased desire to be intentional. *"The appointment helped point me in the right direction, helped me get on track" and "The Careers New Zealand meeting made me more proactive...."*

Clients took action

Respondents were asked what actions they had taken as a result of their career guidance meeting. The majority of participants, 78% did take action after the career planning with Careers New Zealand and some of these actions led to career outcomes. Actions completed as a result of the appointment varied from very in depth to a just a couple of action steps being taken.

Where there was no action or outcome the narrative pointed to entrenched personal issues, (such as being a single parent, long term unemployment or addiction issues). *"I am slowly making progress, exploring my options - taking into account my personal situation as a single parent with 3 children"*.

In some cases unexpected events or happenstance either got in the way of outcomes in participants' career development, or opened up employment outcomes which clients did not connect directly to the career planning they had done.

Achievement of momentum and outcomes

The achievement of outcomes was quite significant with 65% of the follow up group having achieved a positive outcome, while there was either no change or no positive outcome for the other 35%. The biggest movement in people's career development was from unemployment to employment or training outcomes. Some of the change was dramatic, including people moving country to find work, or returning to study after long periods of being out of education or the workforce.

As stated above where there was no significant outcome, respondents stated that this was not linked to the assistance they had received from Careers New Zealand. Rather it was evident that these clients faced in-depth issues or challenges, for example long term unemployment, age, financial or location issues.

Attribution of progress with career plans to Careers New Zealand career guidance interventions

Clients did attribute their career development to the career guidance that they had with Careers New Zealand. Along with the highest level of attribution on the attitude scale were statements like the following: *"My career consultant was particularly helpful, I really valued his assistance. I have recommended other people to see Careers New Zealand"*.

There was a lower attribution when client's situations had not changed or if external events have impacted on peoples careers. Even in these situations the participants still valued the intervention from Careers New Zealand. *"It gave me skills and hope. I went hunting, I did everything on my action plan and it clarified things for me. It is no reflection on Careers New Zealand that my situation has not changed"*.

There was an acknowledgement that Careers New Zealand could only do so much for them and a lot was up to them. *“There’s only so much my career consultant could do for me, she has offered her help – she can’t hand me a job on a plate”.*

People really appreciated the chance for their story to be heard by a career practitioner and having the chance to review their situation and make plans for the future.

Complexity of influences on clients’ career development

People’s careers are influenced by a number of complex and at times intertwined factors. The follow up interviews demonstrated the diverse and complex range of influences on individual’s careers. Some of the influences were helpful and positive, whilst others were barriers, getting in the way of their career development.

Influences commented on by clients included family and personal relationships, their financial situation and the economic climate, their level of skills or qualifications, personal networks and contacts, health or disability and their own level of self confidence. People’s lives exist within a context.

Of interest was the fact that self confidence was noted as a predominant influence within their career development for a significant proportion, 65% of the respondents, particularly around the change in level of self confidence when they had moved from unemployed to finding work – *“I have much more confidence now that I am in work”* and *“my confidence has improved dramatically now that I have found a job.”* Timing was also cited as an influence: *“The whole thing is a matter of time ...in the end the right thing came along to me”.*

However, claiming positive effects for the impact of the career guidance on self confidence and other attitudinal factors must be done with caution, as there is a multiplicity of complex factors which may influence outcomes. It is very difficult to separate out the impact of the career guidance alone. However the rich narrative gained from the interviews in this study tend to add support to the extent of the positive effects from the career guidance on clients’ self confidence.

Further contact with Careers New Zealand

The evidence shows that Careers New Zealand does make a difference with a short intervention and the majority of clients had not contacted our organisation again within the 6 months after their career guidance appointment. There were several clients who had received help from Careers New Zealand through a number of contacts over the years, although they had not needed further assistance after they gained employment. Some respondents stated that they would like further help from Careers New Zealand as they worked through their action plans and found themselves at critical points in the future. There was narrative to support the finding that further contact immediately or over time does bring benefit to clients, with a theme coming through that clients value multiple contacts over time.

Discussion

Maguire and Killeen (2003) cite Watts (1999) who identified three main areas for looking at outcomes from career guidance - the individual, where the outcomes may be immediate or more long term, the organisational, (such as benefits to learning institutions) and societal comprising economic and social benefits.

The Northern Area Evidence findings, although based on a much smaller sample, told a similar story to that reported in the former New Zealand study (ACNeilson, 1999). That research, in which clients were followed up 12 months after the career guidance appointment found that 28% had found a job which matched their aspirations and skills; 27% had embarked on relevant education or training and 36% suggested that their self esteem and confidence had been improved, especially around job search. As noted there are some interesting themes around self confidence in the current evidence project, but not enough data to provide information on the extent and type of impact of these influences on people's lives. This could be a focus for future research. It does indicate that attitudinal shifts and changes in motivation are outcomes from career guidance interventions.

A challenge or dilemma with this type of evidence collection is the question of how to differentiate or unpick the specific impact of the career guidance from other influences.

The lack of representation of youth, Māori and Pasifika, particularly in the follow up phase of this project, may highlight the need to focus attention on gathering evidence from these important target groups for career guidance services.

Conclusion

In summary, the evidence gathered suggests strongly that there was action taken and forward movement that can be linked back to the career guidance clients received and that the face-to-face guidance was valued highly by clients

Both the narrative and the data from the attitudinal scales in October 2010 and from the follow up phase six months later support the conclusion that the short career guidance intervention which clients received "did make a difference" and at times a critical difference on individuals' career development outcomes.

This project was an attempt by career guidance practitioners in the Northern Area of Careers New Zealand to draw from the rich context in which we work, and gather evidence as to the effectiveness of the work we do, to investigate the "gut feeling" and strong belief practitioners have that face to face career guidance results in positive outcomes for our clients. The project built on and extended the outcome and evaluation which has been a focus for the work in evolving new services for Careers New Zealand, with the projects including the evaluation of phone guidance, web chat guidance online evaluation and the ongoing client evaluation by the research company Synovate.

It is recommended that learning from this project be taken and evidence continues to be collected to analyse the effectiveness of Careers New Zealand guidance work. Further it

would be advantageous for the three critical players - policy makers, researchers and practitioners, to work together more in the future in setting criteria for the measurement of evidence and outcomes in career guidance. It is necessary to have a clear idea of what might be regarded as sufficient evidence of outcomes from career guidance, so that future research studies can be designed to meet the needs of the policy makers.

Careers New Zealand has an important opportunity to lead or coordinate evidence based practice within the careers system in New Zealand in order to contribute to policy development, to feed back into the professional development and practice for career consultants and thus to nurture the environment of continuous improvement and quality service provision for our clients.

The Northern Area Evidence Project is an example of practitioner based research which adds a different perspective and makes a valuable contribution to this integral area of our work within the careers field.

Acknowledgements

Pat Cody and Jennifer Ross would like to acknowledge the valuable insights contributed by Julie Urbahn (Practice Advisor), the support from Dale Bailey (Northern Area Manager) in assigning the project a high priority and allowing the time for the development and analysis work to be carried out; the organisational skills of Dianna Leenhouders and Kyle Whitfield (Administrators) and not least our heartfelt thanks to the Career Consultants in the Northern Area whose commitment and professionalism in working with Careers New Zealand clients provided the rich material gathered for this project.

Finally, thank you to the clients who agreed to participate in the survey and gave their time so generously.

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