

BULLETIN

Adult career progression & advancement: A five year study of the effectiveness of career guidance

Introduction

This *Bulletin* presents the findings from a five year longitudinal qualitative research study into the nature of effective career guidance, undertaken at the Warwick Institute for Employment Research (IER). It summarises findings from the fifth and final year of the study, presenting evidence on the role of guidance in the process of career development and progression, and follows on from previous *Bulletins* (No. 78, 84, 87 and 90).

Background

A qualitative, longitudinal study into the effectiveness of career guidance in England was conducted by IER (2002-2009), funded by the [then] Department for Education and Skills, Access to Learning Division. The aim of the research was to evaluate the effectiveness of guidance by tracking the career trajectories of adult guidance clients over a five year period.

Fifty in-depth case studies were initially completed (2003 to 2004). Forty-five of the clients who participated in the first phase of the investigation were contacted by telephone (2004-2005) approximately one year after their case study interview. Two years on, 36 clients were contacted with an analysis of their progress presented in a third report. The fourth report, based on data from the 30 clients contacted three years after their case study interview, focused on clients' career decision making styles, plus the barriers and influences on career choices and decisions. The final report from the study presents an analysis of data collected from 29 of the original 50 participants who were tracked four years after their case-study interview.

Longitudinal, qualitative research into guidance

The study was designed to build on the recommendation that insights already gained from quantitative data, should be complemented with those gained from qualitative research (see Hughes, et al., 2002). It focused

on clients' perspectives, the primary consumers of guidance services. In the first year, 50 face-to-face guidance interviews were recorded and survey data collected. The follow-up interviews were undertaken by telephone and focused on tracking clients' progress and trajectories. These trajectories have shifted, reversed, remained static and have sometimes transformed beyond recognition as clients have progressed and changed. Clients were questioned about their perception of the guidance received and its role in their career development over time. The follow-ups also investigated the barriers and influences, together with clients' views of their career choices and decisions. (Details of the methodology and findings from each phase of this study can be found in the final reports.)

Data collected over the five year period illustrate how adults moved between and within both job roles and occupational sectors and also show movements into and out of education, training and paid employment.

Key findings – Year 1

The research methodology was successful in capturing the distinctive features of career guidance provision. All but one of the 50 clients who participated stated that they had found the guidance they had received useful immediately after the intervention. Similar understandings of the nature of 'useful' guidance were found amongst both clients and practitioners. A key finding from the first year of investigation related to the

model of guidance in action that emerged from the interviews. This consisted of four main phases, which typified the characteristics of useful guidance, namely: building a working alliance; exploring potential; identifying options and strategies; and ending, follow-through.

Key findings – Year 2

Ninety per cent of the original 50 participants were successfully contacted one year after their case study interview and additional evidence of the positive impacts of guidance was found. Five reasons for its usefulness emerged, when it: gave access to specialist information; reduced confusion; motivated or provided new insights; confirmed ideas; and built confidence. Four barriers to career progression were identified: financial constraints; childcare commitments; health issues and local labour market conditions. A key finding from this phase of the study related to how the measurement of the impact of guidance needed to take account of ‘distance travelled’ by clients, in a way that focused on the process of effective guidance, as well as its quantifiable outcomes. This raised issues relating to the ‘soft’ outcomes from career guidance interventions.

Key findings – Year 3

Seventy-two per cent of clients interviewed at this stage still regarded their guidance interview as useful, with 14% unsure and 14% no longer recollecting the guidance they had received. Four distinct decision making styles started to emerge from the data: evaluative, strategic, opportunistic and aspirational (these are detailed later). The qualification level of clients was found to have risen and many clients attributed the acquisition of competencies to their guidance practitioners.

Key findings – Year 4

Sixty per cent of clients from the original sample were interviewed and evidence suggested that clients still valued their guidance interviews. The proportion of clients entering full-time employment had increased from 22% to 53%. The fourfold typology of career decision making was found to have been stable. Barriers to career progression were still evident (i.e. ill-health and outdated skill sets) and supporting individuals to overcome these represented a major policy challenge. There was evidence that guidance both effected and supported the process of re-skilling/up-skilling the labour force, and made a positive contribution to personal development and fulfilment.

Methodology – The final year of follow-ups

Twenty-nine clients were tracked throughout the study, their situations and circumstances were found to have changed as a result of both external and internal factors. The overall aim of the final follow-up was to explore client transitions during the fourth year after their case

study interview and consider how this related to influences and barriers, life changes, career decision making and career management skills. The final follow-up also sought to understand any gains made in knowledge development, skills and qualifications.

To contact the clients, the same variety of methods were used as in previous years (such as emails, letters, telephone calls). Clients were happy to respond to questions, share their career narratives and plans, as well as experiences of advancing their careers. Interviews ranged in length from 15-81 minutes, longer than in previous years. In the final year of data collection, it was evident that clients valued how researchers remembered their stories, which helped establish trust and rapport encouraging free discussion. The research team had remained unchanged, ensuring continuity for clients.

During the study, the number of clients in the sample registered as unemployed had decreased and the proportion who had entered full-time employment had increased. The proportion of those in part-time employment had also increased over the period of the study, with the number of clients in full-time education and/or training decreasing (mainly a reflection of clients completing their courses and moving into employment).

Career decision making styles

Career decisions are amongst the most important people make throughout their lives. Risk and uncertainty are prominent characteristics of contemporary society and people can no longer depend on continuity and stability, but increasingly have to accommodate uncertainty and change. Barriers frequently arise that impede individual progress. Nevertheless, it is assumed that individuals are able to exercise choice. At the most basic level, it can be argued that all individuals constantly exercise a degree of choice around whether to remain unskilled, unemployed, or under-employed. In the careers context, this raises fundamental issues for practice – are individuals actually able to navigate their way effectively and ‘choose’ their career biographies, or do the social structures within which they make decisions constrain freedom to determine their own destiny? Following from this, should career guidance limit itself to ensuring that clients have information about the advantages and probable difficulties likely to accrue from any career move, or should it involve itself with canvassing suitable employment on behalf of clients?

Four distinct styles of career decision making emerged from the data collected during the third year of this study:

Evaluative careerists – focus on self-appraisal through the identification and evaluation of individual needs, values and abilities. A degree of uncertainty and ambiguity is characteristic of this style, because there is the possibility that the process of critical self-reflection might indicate a different future.

Strategic careerists – more focused decision-making, based on cognitive processing. An individual bases their choices on an assessment of options and formulates plans to achieve a focused goal that maximises their benefits.

Aspirational careerists – focus on distant career goals and career decisions, which are inextricably intertwined with personal circumstances and priorities.

Opportunistic careerists – take opportunities when they are presented, often unexpectedly, and turn them to advantage. Individuals exploit available opportunities rather than make conscious choices. They are likely to appear vague, undecided and uncertain.

What might clients have done differently?

As part of the final year of investigation, clients were asked to reflect upon what they might have done differently. Strikingly, clients using an ‘evaluative’ career decision making style responded reflectively, recognising that they would be in a better employment position if they had not made certain choices. They were more likely than others in the sample to think about their current situation in terms of whether opportunities not taken up could have been more suitable.

In contrast, those using a ‘strategic’ career decision making style did not believe that they should, or could, have done anything differently. As expected, plans had been made and followed, with career trajectories as expected. Most of the ‘opportunistic’ career decision makers talked about missed opportunities, delays in making decisions that had impacted negatively and a feeling that they should have been ‘more positive’.

‘Ideal’ jobs

Clients were asked what job they would like to do, given a completely free choice. Again responses seemed to resonate with career decision making styles. For instance, strategic career decision makers were perfectly happy with their current choice. For aspirational career decision makers, their ideal jobs were generally ‘fantasy’ jobs and clients were tenacious in working towards their ideal, even though this was likely to be hard to achieve. Evaluative career decision makers had ambitions linked to personal likes, dislikes and skills. The majority of opportunistic decision makers had what might be regarded as slightly unconventional ideas about their ideal jobs, which ranged from wrestler to chocolate taster, to football player – in complete contrast to their current employment.

Although these data represent tentative findings, they do appear to indicate that there is a strong possibility that career decision making styles have profound implications for the ways in which individuals both approach a whole range of career-related behaviours and form their perceptions about career-related issues.

Challenges/implications for practice

Evidence from this research supports the view that practice in England is dominated by a ‘matching’ approach. This, now over 100 years old, was developed in a very different labour market. Career decisions are not necessarily quick or simple and career practitioners need to allow for less certainty in outcomes from interviews. The challenge for effective career guidance practice is to ensure that frameworks guiding work are sufficiently flexible and responsive to varied decision making preferences of clients and the contexts in which they are making their labour market transitions. Further investigation may well reveal that decision making styles are not fixed, but could be changed or modified as a result of training.

Bringing about fundamental change to practice will involve reconciling constraints placed by the increased scarcity of resources, with the real needs of clients. There is an urgent need to justify the investment of public funds into guidance services. Such pressures, however, have tended to place an emphasis on the quantifiable outcomes of guidance, whereas research evidence suggests that these alone are insufficient as indicators of the effectiveness of career guidance.

The career decision making styles discussed above demonstrate the irrelevance of imposing an approach to guidance that assumes all clients are going to be ‘rational’, ‘strategic’ or ‘planful’ in their decision making. Moreover, a significant proportion of clients are likely to react negatively to this type of approach. If an approach to guidance is imposed on clients, services may run the risk of alienating them.

‘Useful’ guidance and its impact

Gathering evidence of the impact of publically funded services is essential, yet the form that this evidence takes, the sources and time frame from which it is gathered, are all contentious issues. Different types and sources of evidence serve different purposes. Clients’ views of guidance provide a crucial part of the overall evidence-based for effective guidance. The term ‘useful’ was selected in this study as the most appropriate for probing clients’ perceptions of effectiveness. By the final year of the study, 66% of clients still regarded their guidance as ‘useful’. For some, its impact had been profound.

Many adult clients, who had originally lacked the motivation to pursue possible career options, reported how guidance had been successful in providing the momentum and direction to move them forward. Many reflected on how they had changed and some felt that guidance had given them the necessary confidence to progress and had provided a valuable opportunity to increase their self-awareness. Another feature of guidance valued by clients is the way in which an

intervention can give an adult a safe space in which to reflect on their current circumstances and possible futures with an impartial professional.

For those clients dealing with significant barriers to entering or progressing in the labour market, identifying the form that guidance should take was a difficult question. Some believed that guidance should be more than a one off intervention and that there should be more opportunity for follow-up. Some felt that guidance needed to be more supportive and play more of an advocacy role.

Career guidance for adults

Data analysis from this research has also explored: the role of action plans in longer-term career development; barriers that have proved insurmountable to career progression; and the development of career management competencies.

In the final three years of the study, clients' recollection of their action plans sometime became vague, so analyses were focused on plans that they were actively pursuing. By the final year, the percentage of clients still following their action plan had decreased from 86% to 41% for a variety of reasons (e.g. change of circumstances, further guidance leading to revision of plan). Where action plans were not directly implemented, clients were able to identify positive benefits that had accrued from activities pursued as a consequence of guidance.

Of the 29 remaining participants in the study after five years, four talked about major barriers and constraints to their progression, which included circumstances they saw as beyond their control (such as chronic ill health, age and local labour market conditions). They had become disengaged from the labour market and two had not been able to get a job during the five years of the study.

The development of career management competencies had been an integral part of clients' learning and development over the last five years. Some clients felt that these were developed as part of the guidance they received initially. Others had been acquired by exploring employment and training opportunities, or through talking to family, friends and colleagues. In the final year of the study, the proportion of clients feeling that they had a career had increased to half of the sample. Clients' perceptions of what career means remained largely unchanged over the study period.

In terms of guidance support required for future progression, evidence from the study indicates that clients seek advice and guidance from a range of sources, including: professional guidance practitioners, family and friends, colleagues, mentors and tutors. Whilst a high proportion had received advice and help from informal sources, only 38% of clients had received further guidance and/or professional help from formal sources.

What is effective guidance?

The original brief for this research study was to evaluate the effectiveness of guidance in England over a five year period, from the perspective of the client. Defining precisely what was to be evaluated, measuring this appropriately and determining from whose perspective, were key challenges for the research design. The longitudinal nature of this study has enabled data to be captured over an extended timeframe and so highlights the way in which individual evaluations of guidance impact are prone to change over time, with the benefit of hindsight.

Findings are particularly timely, given the implementation of the new National Careers Service, planned for 2012. The policy commitment to this new service marks the formal recognition of a need to support individuals in transition in an increasingly complex and volatile labour market. This research provides clear indications of the precise nature of the guidance that is valued by clients and the workforce development needs required to ensure a world class all age careers service.

Final reports

All of the reports from the study can be downloaded from www.warwick.ac.uk/go/ier/research/eg, including:

- ❖ *Adult career progression and advancement: A five year study of the effectiveness of guidance* (Bimrose, Barnes, & Hughes, 2008)
- ❖ *Navigating the labour market: Career decision making and the role of guidance* (Bimrose & Barnes, 2007)
- ❖ *Developing career trajectories in England: The role of effective guidance* (Bimrose, Barnes, & Hughes, 2006)
- ❖ *Effective guidance one year on: Evidence from longitudinal case studies in England* (Bimrose, Barnes, & Hughes, 2005)
- ❖ *What is effective guidance? Evidence from longitudinal case studies in England* (Bimrose, Barnes, Hughes, & Orton, 2004)

References

Hughes, D., Bosley, S., Bowes, L., & Bysshe, S. (2002). *The Economic Benefits of Guidance*. Derby: Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby.

Further information

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