

Developing Professionalism in Career Coaching

Public perception and understanding of what career coaching and counselling should be has been muddled by a proliferation of a wide variety of employee support services. Since the mid 1990s the a multitude of coaching platforms have arisen, including: life coaching, outplacement support, performance coaching, workplace coaching, career management coaching, coaching psychology and career coaching. The differing definitions of coaching, counselling and mentoring further confuses our considerations. So on what do organisations base their workplace, career management coaching and career transition supplier decisions?

Often the choice of provider is based on a previous relationship, a preferred supplier arrangement often negotiated off shore, a recommendation or on 'competitive' price, rather than knowledge of what to expect from a practitioner and their process.

Career development is a lightly professionalised industry and it is not commonly recognised that people working within it need relevant experience and qualifications to do this 'careful' work. Un-fortunately the diverse contexts where career work is practiced (including 'manager as career coach') and the vague understanding of what skills are required perpetuate the existence of wide ranging levels of competencies and qualifications. This not only poses a problem for user confidence but also for the industry itself.

Career work is complex work.

Career coaching is not, as many misconceptions would have it, simply the provision of a good CV or interview coaching, nor job transition training to groups of redundant workers (although it can include this work). At its fullest expression career coaching is a one to one process that facilitates an individual's understanding of self and the management of their life, learning and work potential. It is a process that enables an individual to explore their employment situation within the context of their life and to structure a way forward that suits their personal circumstances and aspirations. Edwin Herr, Distinguished Emeritus Professor of Education (Counsellor Education and Counselling Psychology) Pennsylvania State University said that 'Career counsellors will take on roles as planners, applied behavioural scientists, and technologists as they tailor their career practices to the settings and populations they serve.'

The increasingly changeable nature of employment since the mid-1980s has heightened the need for independent employee support. The workplace environment now calls for greater personal responsibility in career decision-making and confidence in navigating a changeable work environment. Providing external and neutral career support has become recognised as best practice in employment relations when situations arise that impact negatively on an employee. Career transition coaching, for example, was big business in the 1990s, however, more recently independent career practitioners are playing a greater role in this space. This further adds to the diverse styles, programs and price available for clients to choose from.

Added to the mix is a trend towards increasing numbers of individuals proactively engaging career coach independently of their employer. The support provides a structured process that enables the individual to deconstruct their situation with expert guidance and construct a renewed vision for themselves. This helps to make a career related decision easier which otherwise would have been difficult.

Career development coaches are often called upon to shift career behaviour in the individuals they work with. This requires considerable skill and a deep understanding of individual

relevance and context. Although a career coaching or counselling process can address a mix of work and personal issues it might also involve practical transition training, including CV guidance and interview skills to give the person the tools to make the changes they want.

The potential breadth and depth of the work is significant, yet career work does not enter the realm of therapy unless the practitioner is also clinically trained. Knowing these boundaries is critical, requiring the help of experienced and skilful practitioners. A trained professional practitioner is bound ethically to respect these boundaries. There is growing evidence internationally that a multidisciplinary approach in career coaching and counselling is best. Often practitioners have a mix of career specific qualifications and counselling, psychotherapy, NLP or coaching accreditations.

Qualified specialists

There are hundreds of people practising 'career work' within New Zealand who do not have qualifications in career development. Many have other aligned qualifications such as psychology, organisational psychology, business or teaching qualifications. Non-specialised practitioners often work in the outplacement industry, with agencies who work with youth, the unemployed or workplace development and training.

Historically most professions began as generalist professions and then became more specialised as the body of knowledge and research became more sophisticated.

In the United States, practitioners working in the career coaching or counselling space may begin their education with a general bachelor's degree in psychology or a related discipline and then complete a master's degree in counselling with an emphasis in career counselling. In Australia post graduate level study is essential to be a professional member of the Career Development Association of Australia (CDAA). There are a number of career specific study options in Australia and in New Zealand that are endorsed by the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA).

Career services in New Zealand have a long history, yet tertiary level career qualifications did not exist here until the mid 1990's. Prior to that time papers were available in areas such as guidance counsellor training for education. Career practitioners often had backgrounds in education, social work, human resources or psychology but not specific qualifications in a career speciality. Now, with the existence of several career specific qualifications available in New Zealand, practitioners wishing to specialise in career practice can access study options at levels six to nine NZQA assessed qualifications. These draw from disciplines including psychology, sociology, education and business management.

Competence in career coaching and counselling requires a sound understanding of modern career practice methodologies. Proficient career practitioners understand developmental theory, keep abreast of career research and labour market trends, and are qualified to administer career assessments. They are also well disciplined in coaching and counselling tools and techniques.

Unqualified or inexperienced coaches with poor practice disciplines may expose employees to inappropriate or insensitive support and ill-informed advice and guidance. Employers would be advised to engage practitioners who belong to a professional body that provides professional guidelines or standards, professional development, a code of ethical practice and a complaints procedure to ensure the client is protected.

When is career coaching called for?

Professional career coaches and counsellors support people with career-related challenges. External support is called on when organisational change or restructuring impacts on the security of a person's tenure or when there is a misalignment of person-fit with role. There is

almost always an emotional or psychological impact and often a self-management issue that needs addressing. In other contexts, career coaching is called on to assist the development of high potential staff.

The coaching process builds on the person's story and background, their qualifications, experience, strengths and weakness in a broad perspective while also considering what is important intrinsically, professionally and relationally.

Practitioners help people in gaining a better understanding of what really matters for them, help them make tough decisions and to navigate times of crisis and transition. Career practitioners not only support their clients in finding suitable placements/jobs, but also in working out conflicts with their employers, or managing the early stages of a promotion or other transitions requiring reflective and intelligent coaching and supervision.

The complexity of career coaching situations almost always calls for insight and understanding of organisational contextual matters, psychological matters, emotional impacts of change and transition, job market knowledge and the recruitment process. The meta-skills required include counselling, career development theory, coaching, training and mentoring - all over the course of a number of sessions.

What to look for in a career coach

The quality, qualifications, and backgrounds of career coaches vary widely. Many employers use career engagement or career transition agencies that will have standard processes or proprietary products and programmes. Independent career coaches may not have such prescribed processes but may offer more flexible and in-depth career counselling support and coaching to suit the client.

In order to achieve the outcomes desired and that are individually appropriate, a tailored, rather than prescriptive, career coaching process is preferable. It is important that practitioners have the credentials and experience to provide the services employers need. As mentioned earlier, career coaches should also be professional members of a professional body such as The Career Development Association of New Zealand (CDANZ), The Career Development Association of Australia (CDAA), or the International Coaching Federation (ICF) who offer quality standards and a code of ethical practice to ensure the emotional safety of the client.

The career coaching and counselling industry is quietly becoming a significant player in the people development field. Career coaches operate in a range of markets. Some work more with professionals and within corporate workplaces whilst others work with the general public or in youth and student services. Charge-out rates vary accordingly, whether the client is an employer or an individual and whether the service is charged by the hour or by programme.

The career coaching and counselling profession is developing its identity and importance. It is narrow in its platform in that it requires specialist expertise but more likely to be broad and deep in its process and framework of practice. Over the next few years, I believe there must be greater emphasis placed on engaging the use of well trained, professional practitioners with the foundation of expertise and competence necessary to provide the career development support that people deserve.

Kaye Avery is an independent career management coach and President of the Career Development Association of New Zealand (CDANZ), the professional body for career development practitioners in New Zealand. CDANZ has almost 500 members operating in a range of settings including corporate HR. Kaye is also a Member of HRINZ.