

Career coaching in private practice – a personal view

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This is a personal account of how career coaching is undertaken by a career coach with a psychology background, drawing on a range of assessments. It includes establishing an effective working relationship based on agreed objectives and expectations and how assessments add depth to the counselling process. The approach taken is more than just a review of assessments; other activities are included such as values elicitation and creative exercises. Client examples are included to show some of the changes made following this career coaching process.



Introduction

Much is written about coaching and careers, but less on the practitioner experience of being a career coach. This paper will discuss the activities I undertake with clients, and why I choose them. I discuss how I take a coaching focus to the sessions, and whilst I share knowledge with clients, any decisions for career choice are jointly created, which helps to encourage acceptance by the client. In this article I put emphasis on the use of assessments as an effective part of my coaching practice. I do not see these as the solution for everybody but many of the people I work with seek to have increased self-knowledge to aid their career decision making. I always make it clear that assessments alone will not provide the answer but they, in conjunction with a sensitive feedback session add greater clarity to decision making.

The first meeting

Coaches talk of 'chemistry meetings' and if a coaching relationship will last for several months it is important

that both coach and coachee will work effectively together. For a single session a 15-minute enquiry call is a good choice, with both sides being able to ask questions and ensure expectations are realistic. For a more extensive programme a longer session will ensure that the coach gets a clearer idea of their potential clients objectives and to answer any questions. Part of my first meeting is to manage expectations. I explain that I can't promise that I will identify their dream job, nor that they will be successful in any career but I can help them to gain in-depth self understanding. They will learn much more about who they are, their strengths, abilities and more, and this information will be invaluable to review and adapt their current job and to use it to help in career decision making. The most important part of this session is to listen, to get the client to talk and help them to understand their current situation, we look back on where they have been and where they want to go. Whilst not assessed specifically I'm also seeking out information on their locus of control (Rotter 1954) as when clients have an external locus of control they may see any challenge as something outside of their control.

People seeking career coaching range from young people seeking help to make decisions on university choice, through new graduates to career changers at all ages leading through to approaching retirement. Many seek reassurance that other people also struggle to make a career choice. My approach to career coaching focuses on helping clients understand who they are and thus gain clarity in career decision making. Many career coaches will follow up with job search support; whilst coaching skills can help with this, for example, helping a client improve their interview techniques, much of career coaching focuses on the initial stage of deciding what to do. This goes beyond

a review of a CV, but to help a client understand themselves more deeply and thus help them gain career satisfaction. Career coaching skills can be an effective part of guidance and involve asking open questions, listening carefully and not being prescriptive in what is said.

Working in private practice

Working in private practice is very different than operating as an employee. As a private practitioner I have to charge for my services and business skills can be as important as professional expertise. I first need to find potential clients! I need to ensure that I make the most appropriate suggestions for a potential client, being mindful of their needs and budgets. I may not be constrained by having to work within the constraints of employer guidelines but I have to ensure what I provide meets the budgets of my clients. Decisions on what to include in the coaching sessions are decided taking both client need and budget into account. A substantial element of my coaching programmes involves assessments. These are not chosen to 'provide the answer' but to expand an individual's self-knowledge to help them make a decision based on a much broader perspective.

Much career coaching includes more exercises and assessments than in 'pure' life coaching. In career coaching people have an outcome in mind, to decide the career path they should take or get the job that they want. Most career coaches will include exercises and inventories and a good proportion will include assessments. Career coaches with a psychological background including chartered psychologists like me will use psychometric assessments to help a client understand themselves more.

I believe that too many people make career choices on the basis of what they are good at, and this can mean they fail to see options that would be much more fulfilling for them. We can learn a skill, but are we inspired to use the skills learned? We need to understand what we are good at, but also need to decide if we are fulfilled when using them. As part of my coaching process I help my clients to review their skills, an inventory can be helpful but is insufficient on its own. Some clients choose almost every skill, others

aren't sure if their skill level is high enough, and this takes us into possible work on self confidence and self belief. Through working together I ensure that my client take skills into account but makes sure they are skills they enjoy using.

There is much negative comment about assessments, but this is often based on the use of cheap or free services available online with short reports for someone to work through alone. Proper psychometric tests provide objective information and add structure and focus to a coaching session, they often uncover information that may not have been found otherwise. It is the information in the blind spot (Johari model – Luft & Ingham 1950) that will aid understanding. Reputable assessments include normative data so a standard comparison can be made against their self-evaluation. Tests are not used alone but in addition to coaching around values, ideal work environment and creative idea generation.

Many people use a personality questionnaire to make a career decision and alongside the official Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (Myers 1985) used by some career coaches, there are many variations of this available either free or as low as \$5. Many people are familiar with the MBTI which helps people to understand themselves through personal preferences and strengths across four dimensions:

- Focus of energy (internal vs. external);
- Information gathering methods (concrete facts vs. meanings and possibilities);
- Decision-making preferences (logical vs. feelings and values); and
- Lifestyle preferences (planned and orderly vs. spontaneous and less structured).

Coaching as part of a feedback discussion will help a client to understand personality and in particular their preferred working environment, but I recommend that it should not be used alone to make a career choice. Just because a number of people with a particular personality type report that they are satisfied in a particular job it does not mean that someone else with a similar type would want to work in the same job, (Pittenger 1993). Personality inventories are only modest predictors of job performance against

job families (Novack 1997) so personality type alone should not be used to make a career choice. I find the MBTI helpful as a means to raise self awareness on the type of working environment to best suit a client personal style. I do not give much weight to a list of careers identified for a particular type. My preference is for the MBTI Step 2 (Myers & Myers 2004), which goes much deeper, taking each of the dimensions and breaking them down into sub scales. For example Extraversion and Introversion is made up of these scales.

EXTRAVERSION (E)	INTROVERSION (I)
Initiating	Receiving
Expressive	Contained
Gregarious	Intimate
Active	Reflective
Enthusiastic	Quiet

Someone may have a moderate preference for Introversion, may also have a clear preference for Expressive, one of the facets that are part of extraversion. For example, Simon is someone who gets most of his energy from within and needs to recharge after spending too much time with other people but he is open and will talk about feelings and inner thoughts with others, more typical of an Extravert.

Another popular assessment is the Strong Interest Inventory (Harmon, Hansen, Borgen & Hammer 1994) based on the vocational choice theory of John Holland (1973). Responses are compared to a representative sample of occupations followed by people who enjoy their work, have worked in that area for at least three years, and undertake typical work in this career. People tend to search out those environments that match their interests, and an environment attracts people who share similar interests. Whilst the Strong is a quick way to get a snapshot of career interests, the highest interests may not be the most appropriate career for a client. I personally have high interests for the arts, but alas little talent and am unlikely to follow up their suggestion of fine artist. That's why I use it in conjunction with other assessments.

Both personality assessments and interest inventories are self report, in coaching sessions we need to make sure that any self report is accurate. There can be a need for careful coaching, people may have a self concept that is at odds with what is seen by others and challenge needs to be done carefully, with the use of open questions to explore.

In one sense, I find it easier to work with ability assessments as they provide 'hard data' by comparing the client's answers against norms. Probably the most popular in the UK is the Morrisby (2013). Similar but different is the Highlands Ability Battery (HAB) (Highlands 2013). This American assessment is based on the work of the Johnson O'Connor Research Foundation (2013) and the underlying methodology is used in an online assessment making it easy for people to complete from their home computer. The HAB is a set of 19 tests, which measure strengths, and weaknesses of certain abilities as well as other characteristics important for career and life decision-making. This results in clients knowing their natural abilities - the talents that make some things easy and others more difficult.

The 19 tests are work samples which include:

- **Classification** – to assess the ability to see relationships among seemingly unrelated events, situations, or information. This is the relative ability to move from the specific to the more general, to detect a common thread that joins individual objects into a pattern.
- **Idea Productivity** – measures the number of ideas that spring to a person's mind over a particular period in response to a set of new facts. It is the quantity of ideas, not the quality that is measured and may be evidenced by the relative contributions of individuals who participate in a brainstorming session.
- **Spatial Relations Visualization** – measures the ability to 'see' and follow in three dimensions an object that is represented in two dimensions. The ability is related to the relative preference for hands-on work and experience and the satisfaction in achieving tangible results.
- **Observation** – the ability to focus on and

remember visual details and to detect changes and irregularities as they occur.

Each ability is measured through a work sample. The work sample is specially constructed so that only one ability is being assessed. Being timed eliminates the possibility of substituting another ability or extra time to accomplish the task. Whilst measured individually the results are then considered together, in different combinations. One combination of aptitudes for example, makes the accomplished salesperson, another combination describes a person who enjoys network administration, and another combination explains why a person enjoys one part of management but not the rest.

A client will complete all assessments at home, thus freeing up time that was previously spent in test administration. A coaching programme involves discussions of assessments and more open coaching sessions. For example at least 90 minutes is spent discussing the HAB and an hour to go through the MBTI Step 2. The coaching sessions are focused on expanding self knowledge and later used within decision making.

Many people have experience of completing an ability battery from school, with a report and limited discussion, the temptation is to focus on the list of career suggestions. My approach provides much more time for discussion, so a client gets to understand the reasoning behind the suggestion. For example with the HAB the results are presented in the form of a bar chart where their score is compared to a database of well over 11,000 people. A high score is not necessarily better than a low score. For example while a high score on classification is needed for success in quick problem solving (such as needed by a surgeon), a low score is better for someone who needs patience to work with people at their own pace, such as a career counsellor. Whilst the client will already have read a report, downloadable on completion of the assessment, my objective is to bring the report to life and to make it meaningful, answering any questions they have. The MBTI and Strong Interest Inventory are also discussed in depth, each supported by written reports. Assessments are helpful but other elements are also included, looking at skills, values, motivators, impact of family background and more.

I find that not everyone is creative, and some people don't want to get involved in exercises that involve drawing or developing ideas, but we do need to widen thinking. It's important to recognise what works best for a particular client. For example some will love to create a vision board, collecting images that appeal, this touches the right brain and thus could open up things that are less a part of their conscious thinking. For clients who like to write they may choose to answer the question 'I would love to...' and undertake 10 minutes of free writing. An alternative is to ask a client to write their obituary or a newspaper article set in the future. Thinking about where they want to be, looking at more than just their career, can help people to think about what type of career path will enable them to achieve that goal, but it also helps them to take a realistic view. From this my client can decide if the costs, of time, effort, study commitment and impact on their life is worth it for them.

I help a client to identify their interests through the Strong Interest Inventory, but it can also be helpful to discuss interests and passions. Just because someone has an interest in dogs, music, cooking it doesn't mean they should base a career around this as it may be preferable to keep a passionate interest to be something they do to relax, but it may be useful to take account of interests whilst in the exploring phase.

Values are considered in both career and life coaching as these are underlying principles that affect our beliefs, attitudes and actions. They give us direction and help decide on priorities, paying attention to these can lead to people having greater life and career satisfaction. Values could be found through looking at a list and picking out the ones with most meaning to a person, but I believe that a better approach could be the one I use, using a pack of values cards. From an initial sort my clients take the top 15 or so and then compare each card with each other, thus being forced to put them in order and the top 5-8 being listed. Once we know our top values we can look at both our current role and possible future roles and see how well they match up.

I've described many of the tools used, but my approach to career coaching is much more than a selection of tools, it is an approach focused on helping someone help themselves. Through open questions, listen and

challenge a client moves beyond what they know to how they can make use of this to take action.

My coaching will usually include an intensive and extensive 2 hours session, helping my client bring together a range of information about themselves to draw up a short list of jobs to explore further. This is certainly not looking at a computer screen or a report and leaving a client to decide alone but time spent looking at the results from the assessments, looking for how it relates to our coaching discussions and the results from other elements (skills, values, etc.). With some clients the outcome will confirm a career that interests them, for others it will identify new options.

Each assessment can lead to a list of jobs, contained within the report with the Strong Interest Inventory, or indicated via books and websites with the MBTI. Others are based on analysis personally undertaken by me. For example looking at the results from the HAB and consulting with manuals I may identify someone as a 'Creative Communicator'. This is someone who scores high in both Idea Productivity and Concept Organisation. A high score in Idea Productivity means that someone will find it easy to quickly generate a large number of ideas. A high score in Concept Organisation means that someone will find it easy to take these ideas and organise them into a logical grouping or sequence. When combined together it suggests career satisfaction through careers that involves communicating ideas to others. This includes journalist, public speaker, advertising copywriter, 6th form teacher, lawyer, psychologist and researcher.

It's not always going to be the case that all 3 assessments, if taken, will point to the same job, although if they do it is certainly a career worth pursuing. Assessments can lead to different job titles, and also the jobs are based on combinations of personality/ interests/ abilities that mean that not every job will be listed. So when a job appears through an assessment, or indeed a client has an interest in a job the details of the job are considered, and compared with the data from the HAB to see the extent their abilities support a job role. I would never tell someone not to do a particular job, but would want him or her to be aware of the reasons why it is going to be difficult. (For example, to get through law school you need high scores in classification and verbal

memory to deal with the volume of material to read and to make quick decisions in new areas). Specific patterns of abilities may strongly suggest working in an area that has never been considered, such as a 'hands on' practical role where there is a clear product produced rather than a purely abstract role.

For others the results can lead to expanded thinking beyond what they had ever considered, this can lead to radical changes. From my own private practice I have had a 'magic circle' lawyer move to become a golf pro; an unhappy finance director set up a property management business; and an 18 year old choosing to work for an accountancy firm rather than go to university. The options are wide; however, realism is important but rather than start at the very realistic level which can be too constraining I check with my clients if they want to look at all possibilities before we narrow things down to what they can choose based on experience and background.

Clients will leave me with a 'medium list' of perhaps 6-10 jobs that are likely to offer career satisfaction. They then need to be proactive to find out about them – would they be willing to make sacrifices for the training? Would the money be sufficient to meet their financial needs? At this point, many clients are ready to start their job search unaided. Recently I had an email from John, a few weeks after completing a coaching programme; he was getting ready to move to Australia to pursue training to be a nurse, one of the ideas he left with. Others want to continue career coaching with a further session or two where we focus on clarifying what they are going to do, and then job search involving CV writing, interview coaching, sharing job search techniques.

There are different approaches to career coaching, and this article has focused on one of the approaches I'll take with clients. It's intensive and involves the client in work too, they don't just take away the top three jobs to apply for, they have to undertake research as well. Clients respond to different approaches and this approach is well suited to clients who like a structured and logical approach. It can lead to confirmation why someone is unhappy but also gives many the confidence to move into a new career. There's still work to be done. Even once someone is clear they want to move from, for example, accountant to social

media consultant, they have to have a plan for how to get there and that may include an interim position. The very best feedback I receive is from clients who now have the confidence to make the move to a new area, and excel at interview. They can explain why they want the job, how they match up and how specifically their background will enhance their role in the job using information gained through in-depth self knowledge and understanding.

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