

Developing sustainable career coaching in the workplace

Rob Nathan and Wendy Hirsh

This article is based on a conversation and so presented in the form of questions posed by Wendy Hirsh (W), NICEC Fellow, and answered by Rob Nathan (R), Managing Director of Career Counselling Services. We look at some of the particular tensions and opportunities in working with employers and how to anticipate some of the pitfalls in setting up services and also in framing individual career conversations. Rob also reflects on the theories and ideas which inform his practice as a career coach/counsellor.

W: In this article we will explore your views on

‘career coaching’ and some observations from your extensive experience. Let’s start by understanding the different ways in which you work.

R: At Career Counselling Services (CCS), which was started in 1978, we offer individual career support for people who come to us under their own steam and also for those who are referred by their employers. We also work within organisations to facilitate the development of effective career management and career support programmes and the training of people who will deliver them.



What’s in a name?

W: This journal issue is exploring ‘career coaching’, which seems to be an increasingly popular term in the UK. Do you find it a useful term for your clients?

R: Well, essentially what it’s about is having effective career conversations. I think that people are generally more comfortable with the term ‘career coaching’. Originally, I would put it at stage 5 of the career counselling process we use (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1: CCS Five Stage Framework of Career Coaching/Counselling

Stages	Possible Frame of Mind	Coach Skills / Tasks	Purpose
1. Contracting	Uncertain	Defining boundaries, ie time, confidentiality; assessing support.	Clarify expectations of the meeting.
2. Exploring	Confused, isolated, frightened, angry, calm, optimistic, shocked, pressured	Building rapport, Reflective listening, Open questions.	Understand the person, Define the issue.
3. Clarifying	More self-aware, Rational? Aha!	Summarising, using silence, presenting feedback. Identifying themes.	See situation in new way.
4. Visioning	Optimistic, Energetic, Fear of...?	Encouraging ‘dreams’. Out of the box thinking.	More motivation to promote vision.
5. Resourcing Action	Increased energy, Focussed, Fear of...? How resilient?	Funnelling options, addressing blocks and bridges. Goal setting. Accessing resources. Coaching. Encouraging feedback from network.	Choose options. Identify resources and obstacles. Reality test. Maintaining momentum. Plan for success.

(Nathan and Hill, 2006)

Counselling skills are key to get people to explore which then helps them think through options. Certainly people who have come to our training courses have often come away saying “I now understand the difference between counselling and coaching – counselling is something about going a bit deeper and not just working at surface issues.” However, having said that, I think there is now a really mixed use of the different terms: not just career coaching and career counselling, but also career support, career discussions or conversations, career development, career management, career consultancy, career guidance, career advice, career mentoring and so on. It seems that people will choose the terms that suit their context. In a chance conversation I had, the way the person said “I’ve got a career coach. I’ve seen a career coach”, suggested that it was much more comfortable for them to use this terminology. I think people might feel a bit reluctant, particularly in the UK, about going to see anyone with the term counsellor in their name. So in a sense, coaching has become sort of the acceptable face of counselling and there are many people now doing coaching who twenty years ago would have been considered highly effective counsellors.

W: I suppose my experience is that the nature of career issues is such that at unpredictable points in a conversation, the coach – even a line manager or HR person – can find themselves drawn into somewhat deeper issues.

R: I think that some coaches are well able and well trained to deal with the deeper issues. One of the things we talk about in our training is the difference between presenting and underlying issues. We say that wherever career issues are concerned – whether it’s a striving for achievement, a feeling of success or lack of success, a need for recognition, a need for inclusion, a feeling of loss in the case of redeployment or redundancy – issues and emotions can surface which go way back and can be quite deep and require a high level of skill to discuss. There are increasing numbers of highly trained coaches who are adept at noticing and responding to those issues without pushing people into a premature goal-setting activity.

Varied models of workplace career support

W: I know you have worked with employing organisations on different models of how they can set up career support for employees. Can you give some examples of what these models can look like?

R: We have developed models where volunteers inside the organisation are chosen and trained to offer career support as in *Oxfordshire County Council* (see Fig.2). In others there is a dedicated career support person or an independent but internal service (as in the *Ministry of Defence*). In some organisations, learning and development or HR professionals offer career support to employees. For example we are working with a very large private company in the UK and internationally. In this model we are training the HR directors of the different businesses as career coaches.

Some organisations use trusted outsiders to give career support who may be specialist career coaches or general coaches offering career support as part of what they do.

Increasingly we are working strategically with organisations through consultancy and training to tie in what they are doing on careers to their wider HR policies and hopefully to their business needs. That is more in line with our principle of sustainability – embedding if you like – an effective and professional career support service.

Contracting with employers

W: So as someone who works with individuals both inside employing organisations and those who just come to you themselves, what similarities and differences do you find in working in those two different settings?

R: The key difference in an employing organisation is that it may be more complex to know exactly ‘who is the client’. When an individual comes to you directly, it’s purer in a way. Having said that, we’re always aware of who the stakeholders might

Figure 2: Examples of career services inside employing organisations

The **Ministry of Defence Career Consultancy Service** was established in 2006. It currently consists of 3 full-time and 4 part-time consultants selected from MOD's workforce who between them have very varied career experiences in the organisation. CCS trained the team which provides a range of career interventions including workshops (on career development but also on CV writing, MOD job applications and interview skills) and one-to-one consultations with around 5,500 members of staff so far. The service is overtly independent and impartial and has also been accredited with the government Matrix standard for the provision of advice and guidance.

Oxfordshire County Council uses a volunteer career coaching approach. From across the workforce applications for volunteers were sought, sifted and selections made. Those chosen (initially 24 people) each received five days of training. A project manager has overseen the set up and implementation of this service, including case discussion, supervision and ongoing CPD for the volunteer coaches. Referrals are agreed by the individual's line manager and coaches and coachees are well matched, and from different parts of the organisation so they are not in any way the line managers or in the reporting lines of the people they see. The managers of the volunteers commit to their member of staff spending 6-8 hours a month giving career support to others. For more information see People Management (2010).

Success factors in these and other employer-based services include:

- integration with the organisation's career development policy
- strong support from the top and from line managers
- owned and managed by one member of staff with a team who are highly committed to it
- linked to and differentiated from other internal support services for employees
- clear information about the service for employees eg intranet and management briefings
- high emphasis on service quality supported by training, supervision and CPD

be and there's always somebody else in the room even when you are talking to somebody one-to-one. So the first question we might ask is "What has brought you to career counselling?" And the person says "Well, actually, my mother sent me", or "My partner said that I've got to sort myself out." So there is always the need to consider other stakeholders. But the employer is probably a more crucial stakeholder in the sense that they may have set up the meeting with the individual's consent or partial consent. There is probably a stronger need to contract clearly for accurate expectations with the individual client, but also to contract explicitly with the employer. This is not the case in the same way if a parent or spouse has sent someone to us.

W: What sort of contracting conversation do you then have with an employer?

R: The first thing would be to agree the level of confidentiality so that career coaching is not seen as a process by which the individual is feeding in information about what they really want which then goes back to the organisation. We won't write a report on somebody, but it is incumbent on the individual to go back to their line manager or their HR person, or whoever it is, and share what they are happy to share in terms of the outcomes, and invariably they are. We are probably better these days at contracting than we used to be in terms of fending off inappropriate enquiries from employers asking how it's going.

Impartiality and a clear service offer

W: I find that many career professionals who work

directly with individuals or in public services are very nervous about whether it is possible to offer 'impartial' career guidance when employers are involved. How do you tackle this issue of impartiality when you are working through employers or helping them set up their own internal career services?

- R: It is possible to create some guidelines, I think, to improve the chances of impartiality. We always ask ourselves "Who am I to the client? How impartial am I? How do they see me?" If there are two people in the room, one is the giver of coaching and the other is the receiver, and it's never going to be impartial. So I think it's a bit of a fool's errand to think that you can ever be completely impartial. However, we work very hard to increase awareness of the need to be respectful, to acknowledge the individual's situation, whatever it is, to respect diversity, to be aware of your own potential biases.

When working with employers, impartiality is more achievable where an internal career service is staffed by individuals who are not the line managers or in the reporting lines of the people they support. It is then part of the job of the organiser of the service to match clients with appropriate career coaches in this way. We try to increase awareness of any potential conflict where the same person can be called upon as a career coach and later to assess an individual in some way.

- W: Are there other guidelines or principles you find helpful when dealing with services produced or delivered by an employer?

- R: It is also important to help people understand what any career service is offering and where it sits. Guidelines can explain what the service is and what it isn't, how it differs from other services the organisation is offering (such as mentoring, general coaching or counselling support as part of an Employee Support Programme).

Sustainability and fit

- W: I've seen so many workplace career interventions get well set up only to be cut a few years later.

How can we improve the chances of employers sustaining their efforts to offer career support to their employees?

- R: I do think the volunteer models can be more sustainable as can those where HR professionals enhance their skills in this area but without setting up a separate and definable service. In these models, career support is more embedded within the people in the organisation and so is not a separate cost.

But there are no easy solutions. What works in one organisation may not sit well in another. It makes all the difference if you are working with someone who can navigate the politics to introduce something in a way that is palatable and acceptable to that culture, to that organisation.

Training different kinds of people as career coaches

- W: I'm interested in the skills people need to acquire if they are going to act as career coaches. We know that many career coaches also work in other related areas of people development. How far do you think people who are not primarily career professionals, but maybe work in HR or L&D, can go in offering improved career support to individuals?

- R: A long way! We often find people are already having career conversations but they don't feel that confident or competent to deliver this. One of the things we teach is a framework, a structure that gives them a beginning, a middle and an end and that gives them immediately more confidence. We also find that the skills people are developing in our training programmes can be applied across a number of activities that HR and L&D people are involved in such as mentoring, coaching or training line managers.

- W: What are the learning needs you see in people already working as highly professional as coaches or counsellors, but who want to strengthen their ability to deal with career issues?

- R: They can find that clients coming for development

or performance-related coaching raise career issues that they don't feel equipped to deal with. So often their initial request is around career coaching tools. For this we use some of the exercises we've developed which are designed to increase the effectiveness of focused conversation. Such conversations may cover what people are really passionate about, what they are interested in, when they function at their best, what might be their transferable strengths and skills, their values, and so on.

Underpinning Theories

W: Could you say something about any theories or ideas that you have found increasingly relevant and useful working in the careers area?

R: There are several models and ideas which I find useful:

- The core model we use is built from the well-known ideas of Rogers (1967) *On becoming a person* and Egan's (2002) *Skilled Helper*. We have evolved these into a 5-stage model of the career counselling/coaching process and the skills it requires (Fig 1 and Nathan and Hill, 2006).
- More recently we are drawing on the *solution-focused approaches* of Jackson and McKergow (2002) and their OSKAR model. For example we have adapted our use of 'scaling'. Many practitioners would invite someone to flesh out their vision of the future and then say "On a scale from 1 to 10 I'd like you to say where you think you are now" and people will say something like "4 or 5". One might then say "Oh, you're 4 or 5 – how do you get to 10?" Using more positive psychology, one can change this to "You're 4 or 5 – you're 40 or 50 per cent of the way there. How come? What tells you that you are already at a 4 or 5?" This approach helps someone to notice what they're good at and what energy they have, rather than what they haven't got or what their deficits are.
- Narrative approaches are useful and

relevant because many of our clients see themselves as having a non-linear CV which they are not able to integrate into their self-concept. That has an implication for how they see themselves and how they see possibilities, as well as how they might project themselves to a potential employer. And so we help people create a narrative which brings together the different elements of who they are in all parts of their life.

- The idea of *planned happenstance* (Mitchell, Levin and Krumboltz, 1999) we see as a way of helping people acknowledge the uncertainties, chaos, and complexity of today. Rather than focus on trying to identify the perfect or right career, we should be encouraging our clients to develop an attitude which is far more experimental and open to opportunities, rather than one which is fixed. So we use the familiar career timeline exercise to help our clients notice the shape and pattern of their ups and down and how they have made decisions. But we ask "What role has chance played in the development of your career?" "How many times have you actually made a career move on the basis of a chance meeting?" I asked someone that question the other day. She looked at me, astonished, and then said "You're absolutely right – I have never made a planned move in my life. It's happened to me."

W: How do you avoid people feeling disempowered by these ideas about chaos and happenstance?

R: Taking advantage of chance conditions can be a positive thing. I like Kahneman's distinction (2011) between the experiencing self and the remembering self. In career coaching people can post-hoc rationalise their experience into some sort of false linear pattern which is not necessarily the way it was at the time. By getting somebody back in touch with the reality of what was happening we can enable them to realise they were actually quite powerful and used a lot of strength and skills which can give them the

confidence to negotiate those uncertain events in the future.

W: Is there a message about career coaching you would particularly wish to convey to our readers?

R: I think the principles of setting boundaries and contracting are crucial. We are very up-front with our clients from the word go, making sure clients are aware of what is and what is not on the table.

I think above all career coaching is about being clear. In coaching there's a mnemonic ABC – Always Be Contracting. This means always being clear about what it is you are trying to achieve both overall and within this particular conversation and within this bit of this conversation.

We need to be aware of who we are to the client, the limitations of our role, and the limitations of our skills for that matter. What is our responsibility in the career coaching and what is that of the client? We need to be respectful of the client's need for an answer, but to resist the pressures that clients or third parties may put upon us to pretend that we can give answers.

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