Ethical Issues in the Design and Use of Online Career Development Counseling[1] Services

Adamantia Pateli
Lecturer, Department of Informatics, Ionian University
Eleftherias Square-Palaia Anaktora, 49100 Corfu, Greece
Tel: (+30) 26610 87714
E-mail: pateli@ionio.gr

Abstract

The Internet provides a new medium for interpersonal communication and information exchange that holds the potential for delivering forms of career counseling services that are appropriate to the medium. The challenge facing counselors lie in discovering what type of counseling services are appropriate to this new medium and in delineating the potential advantages and limitations inherent to this new communication format. This paper discusses the ethical issues which may impact the way in which career counselors design, and counselees' access and use the Internet. Recommendations are offered for improving the effectiveness and acceptance of Internet-based career counseling services. The ultimate purpose is that career consulting firms, human resource managers and employers as well as policy makers become aware of the issues involved and what they can do to maximize the potential benefits and minimize the potential problems associated with online career counseling services.

Keywords: career development, online counseling, ethical challenges, recommendations

INTRODUCTION

Career development and counseling, also called "career guidance" in several European countries, has emerged as an international phenomenon providing people with opportunities to develop their talents, make career choices that improve their life quality and also contribute to the improvement of the society (ACES/NCDA, 2000). For some people, the focus of career development is almost entirely on fitting into work and jobs, while others define career more broadly to also include other life roles. One of the oldest definitions of career development, provided by Super (1980), refers to it as "a lifelong, continuous process of developing and implementing a self concept, testing it against reality, with satisfaction to self and benefit to society". Herr (2000) goes further in conceptualizing career guidance and counseling as "instruments of personal flexibility and human dignity". In this paper, we have adopted the newer definition provided by NBCC (2007), according to which the term "career counseling" is used to denote "the application of mental health, psychological or human development principles, through cognitive, affective behavioural or systemic intervention strategies that address career development".

Technological advances in career intervention, focusing on computer-assisted guidance and the ubiquitous involvement of the Internet in career information dissemination, have called for enhanced sophistication in instruction and supervised practice. As result, a new term, "online career counseling", has emerged to denote asynchronous and synchronous distance interaction among career counselors and counselees using one or more of the following communication features of the Internet; e-mail, chat, teleconferencing, videoconferencing, and social web. Online counselors may involve Human Resources (HR) consulting firms, Human Resources managers of the company that has employed or is going to employ the counselee, as well as other managers

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[1] In the literature, the term "counseling" is commonly also worded with two "l" (see e.g. Robson & Robson, 2000; Hanley, 2004; Antony & Goss, 2009). Nevertheless, in this paper, we have followed the official wording of the term, including only one "l", as it is expressed by the associated professional bodies (e.g. NBCC, ACA, NCDA).

operating as external or internal coaches/ mentors of the employees. Online counselees include current employees, usually pursuing career development either inside or outside of their current organizational boundaries, and candidate employees, pursuing a career that matches as much as possible their interests and competence.

There is much debate among researchers and practitioners of career development services on the opportunities and risks incurred from the use of online counseling practices. The proponents of online counseling argue in favor of them referring to several advantages. First, online counseling services are extremely convenient, since most of the people do not have the time to commit to a pre-scheduled personal face-to-face session. Disabled people who may not be able to leave their home could also benefit from these services. Moreover, online consultation is much less expensive than seeing a counselor face-to-face. Unlike the face-to-face sessions, online consultation gives you the opportunity to reflect on the advice you receive, to think about it and ask further questions. Finally, online counseling provides anonymity, and thus counselees become more willing to disclose their private and personal information, which is a vital element for any successful counseling. Although these advantages appear to support counseling via the Internet, there are ethical as well as practical difficulties in establishing effectively these services (Robson & Robson, 2000). The primary limitation of online counseling services includes the loss of non-verbal social cues that provide valuable contextual information in conversation and can influence the interpretation of meaning in communication (Childress, 2000). Moreover, some counseling services delivered over the Internet are originally designed to be used within the traditional environment. If they are transferred as such in the online environment, then a number of problems may arise. The expected outcomes cannot be equivalent in the off-line and online cases, and the interpretation provided by the Internet version cannot be equivalent in validity to the interpretation offered by a counselor.

This paper explores some of the ethical and practical considerations surrounding career development counseling via the Internet. The next section looks at the primary ethical issues raised and the following section presents guidelines provided by official certification bodies as well as recommendations resulting from the information systems and human resources management disciplines.

ONLINE CAREER DEVELOPMENT COUNSELING SERVICES

Typical services in the category of online career counseling include; e-mentoring, e-coaching and e-assessment. Both coaching and mentoring are forms of another paradigm for learning that has its ancient roots in dialogue and interaction (Masullo & Tsangtis, 2004).

e-Mentoring

E-mentoring is a recent development in the field of mentoring and one which is already showing significant advantages over more traditional forms. An e-mentor is not recognized as a tutor or teacher but someone who provides guidance or counsel (Homitz & Berge, 2008). Traditionally, mentoring was defined as a dyadic relationship in which a mentor, a senior person in age or experience, provided guidance and support to the less experienced person, the protégé (Hunt & Michael, 1983). In general, mentors perform three major functions for their protégés. First, they provide vocational or instrumental support that directly enhances the career of the protégé and might include sponsorship, visibility, protection, and challenging assignments. Second, they may provide psychosocial support via counseling, friendship, and encouragement. Third, mentors may also function as role models to their protégés by demonstrating appropriate behavior either implicitly or explicitly (Ensher et al., 2003).

e-Coaching

Business coaches may perform many of the same functions as a mentor, yet often the relationship is more temporal or goal-based (Whitaker, 2001). The exchanges between online business coaches and their clients are often explicit, monetary, and transactional in nature. In contrast, the exchange between a mentor who provides a protégé with coaching is often more implicit, personal, and reciprocal (Ensher et al., 2003). Fee-based coaching offers clients real-world advice, often from people who have been in the same situation and can speak from personal experience (Harrington, 1998). Clients practice and develop skills in résumé writing, business plan development, and contract negotiation by sending their efforts to a coach who provides feedback. Today, most coaches apply traditional means (i.e. email, phone) but also advanced electronic means (i.e. instant messaging, teleconferencing, videoconferencing) to communicate with their clients, using the Internet strategically.

e-Assessment

Practitioners have continued to innovate over the past few years by offering remote self-help performance assessments to the employees and remote interpretation of assessments as one component of distance career counseling (Sampson & Lumsden, 2000). The Internet-based assessment applications may be used either isolated or to supplement a company's existing performance management systems. The e-assessment services examined within this paper include, apart from online performance appraisal forms provided by a typical e-perfomance management system (Evans, 2001), analysis of full-circle (360°) feedback and counseling on the type of learning programs that best suit the counselees' career development needs. An online assessment system may also allow users to track their own progress over a series of evaluations, and thus get even more targeted counseling services. This option works as an attractive means for employees to bridge the gap between feedback and development planning (Cardy & Miller, 2005).

ETHICAL CHALLENGES

The following ethical issues can be categorised into those that are associated with the design and those associated with the use of online career counseling services. In terms of design, features such as reliability and validity, and counselee-oriented interface design of the services are examined. In terms of use, computer literacy of counselee, intimacy of online communication, competence of online counselor, and equity of access are discussed. Finally, in terms of both design and use, issues regarding the confidentiality and privacy of information exchanged are examined.

Reliability and Validity of Service

Oliver and Zack (1999) consider it "unethical for career counseling practitioners to use online instruments without investigating the psychometric characteristics of the measures or the basis of interpretation". Such a notice applies not only for e-assessment tools, but also for e-mentoring and e-coaching services, where the need for psychometric data is high. Since e-mentoring and e-coaching services are provided on a personalised basis, the collection of psychometric data on the counselee has often a lead over the career counseling process.

Counselee-Oriented Interface Design

Psychologists should keep an active role in the design of online career counseling services, since they have better knowledge of the features that may influence positively the counselee's attitude towards the use of such services. For instance, practitioners of psychometric tests have set a number of user interface characteristics that every e-assessment system should have. The most important include consistency, recoverability and control over the system's data flow, as well as extended user guidance and assistance.

Computer Literacy of Counselee

For individuals who have low computer literacy, using an online career counseling tool on the Internet may create some difficulties, as it is often delivered as a self-help intervention. There may be no avenue for the individual to ask questions, clarify directions, obtain support, and otherwise get personal guidance. It would not be uncommon for individuals with low computer literacy, while using an online career counseling tool, to encounter some difficulties in answering questions and to feel frustrated and confused.

Intimacy of Online Communication

The primary disadvantage of using the Internet for counseling includes the loss of the non-verbal communication level (Robson & Robson, 2000). The majority of communication between a counselor and a counselee is taking place unconsciously by body language and paralinguistics, such as tone of voice (Argyle, 1983). Using computer communication runs the risk that the 'space between the two parties' becomes filled with hardware.

Competence of Online Counselor

Practitioners need to develop competencies in (a) identifying the unique Internet features that could guide the design of qualitative and effective career counseling services, (b) recognizing potential ethical issues associated with the use of these mechanisms and taking appropriate action; and (c) receiving or providing remote supervision and support in the use of online career services. Also, practitioners interested in developing online career counseling services need to be equipped with instructional design competencies as well as web site design skills.

Equity of Access

There is a concern that access to Internet-based services is not equitable. Clients with limited financial resources may have difficulty gaining access to the Internet (Sampson & Lumsden, 2000). More affluent individuals often have Internet access at their place of residence and/or their place of work, therefore resulting in greater access to career resources and services that are available on the Internet. Limited Internet access could increase the income disparity between well-educated, affluent groups and less-educated, less-affluent groups in society (Harris-Bowlsbey et al., 1998).

Confidentiality and Privacy

Counselors working with clients through Internet should be aware of the potential threats to confidentiality and privacy of counselee's personal or career-related data and use appropriate security methods for their online transmission and storage mechanisms (Sampson et al., 1997). It is imperative that appropriate security methods are used to hamper any malicious action. Moreover, it is important that clients of these services, current or candidate employees, are informed of the privacy policies followed by the counselor, so that they are able to determine the risks involved in the delivery of online counseling services.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING ETHICAL ISSUES

Recently, there have been a number of nationwide initiatives to develop principles for guiding the evolving practice of Internet counseling. The most important one is the Practice of Internet Consulting developed by the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC). In addition to the NBCC (2007) work, other national professional bodies, such as the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2005) and the British Association for Counseling and Psychotherapy (Antony & Goss, 2009) have also incorporated standards for the Internet counseling within their Code of Ethics. While the above initiatives concern any type of online counseling services, the NCDA (1997) has developed guidelines for the design and use of Internet-based career counseling services, which are examined herein.

Following, we present the main concerns of these Codes of Ethics that address the ethical issues that emerge for the Online Career Development Counseling services. Moreover, based on research conducted not only in the web counseling area (e.g. Bloom, 1998; Robson & Robson, 2000) but also in the human resource management area (e.g. Walker & Perrin, 2001; Gueutal & Stone, 2005; Philips et al., 2008), we provide several recommendations for counseling organizations and counselors regarding policies and procedures that may be effective in reducing the risk associated with the above discussed ethical issues.

Recommendations for the Design of Online Career Counseling Services

Regarding the reliability and validity of online career counseling services, the following recommendations are provided for online counselors:

- Discuss the possibility of technology failure and provide alternate methods of service delivery, if that failure occurs;

- Use and recommend sites that have been investigated and which are considered as appropriate to the employees' needs;

- Regularly check that electronic links provided are working and are professionally appropriate;

- Review the content of a website or other service offering career services to determine its appropriateness to the medium. When a website offers a service which has not previously been extensively tested, this service should be carefully scrutinized to determine whether it lends itself to the Internet. More specifically, in case of e-assessment, the assessment tests must have been tested in computer delivery mode to assure that their

psychometric properties are the same in this mode of delivery as in print form. If not, then the client must be informed that they have not yet been tested in this same mode of delivery;

- Finally, to increase reliability and validity of online career development services, utilize the online counseling services in conjunction with traditional systems (e.g. online assessment and face-to-face test administration).

Regarding the interface design of online counseling services, the following recommendations are provided:

- It should be such that the services can be utilized by all employees without extensive training, including those having minimal computer skills, experience and education;

- Information and services should be presented in an appealing and friendly manner. To achieve that, graphics and other multimedia should be added.

Recommendations for the Use of Online Career Counseling Services

Not all employees can benefit the same from the online counseling services. The services' effectiveness and employees' satisfaction may vary a great deal depending on their competence in using computers and readiness to decision making (Sampson & Lumsden, 2000). Online career development counseling services are usually offered in self-help mode. However, some individuals may not benefit from this mode of service delivery. Instead, an individual with high computer literacy and high readiness for decision-making is more likely to benefit from self-help interventions. To increase usefulness of the online career counseling services, the following recommendations are provided for online counselors.

- Make the clients aware of the typical circumstances where they may need counseling support in order to effectively use the career information provided online;

- Host advanced help features in career counseling sites;

- Create the profiles of the targeted clients, in terms of competence and knowledge in using career development tools and online services, before releasing the online career services;

- Ask a clear statement by clients of their career planning or career counseling needs;

- Conduct an analysis whether meeting those needs via Internet exchange is appropriate and of whether this particular client can benefit from counseling services provided in this mode. A judgment about the latter should be made by means of a telephone or videophone teleconference designed to specify the client's expectations, how the client has sought to meet these through other modes, and whether or not the client appears to be able to process information through an Internet medium;

- Inform the clients about the level of profit that they can gain from the provided online counseling services, and indicate means with which they can increase this level (e.g. getting training on computers, asking the help of an expert, etc.).

Hanley's research findings (2004) have suggested that individuals who are competent at using computer-mediated communication (CMC) means can develop relationships of an appropriate quality to receive counseling online. Practitioners need to be aware of the relationship's co-constructed nature, particularly in heightening their sensitivity to the 'reality' and transferential elements to it. However, it does not appear necessary to develop new theories of counseling to cater for online practices. Instead, the following recommendations are provided for online counsellors in order to increase intimacy provided by the online medium.

- Define several items in writing to the client in a document that can be downloaded from the Internet or faxed to the client. This document should include at least the following items: (a) The counselor's credentials in the field, (b) the agreed-upon goals of the career counseling Internet interchange, (c) the agreed-upon cost of the services and how this will be billed, and (d) where and how clients can report any counselor behavior which they consider to be unethical;

- As part of the counseling orientation process, explain the clients how to cope with potential misunderstandings when visual cues do not exist.

- Explain the clients the procedures for contacting online counselors when they are off-line and, in the case of asynchronous counseling, how often e-mail messages will be checked by them;

- Should the counselors determine that little or no progress is being made toward their client's goals, they have the ethical responsibility for the periodic monitoring of the client's progress via telephone or teleconference or face-to-face discussion;

- In the case of e-assessment, if there is any evidence that the client does not understand the results, as evidenced by e-mail or telephone interchanges, then refer the client to a qualified career counselor in his or her geographic area.

While the computer literacy of counselees is desired to increase effectiveness of online career counseling services, the computer literacy as well as experience of online counselor in using computer-mediated communication (CMC) means for providing its advice and counseling support is of upmost importance. For this reason, a set of recommendations are provided for HR departments and career counseling organizations that wish to provide such services.

- Employ HR specialists and counselors who are knowledgeable regarding the CMC services, so that they can assist employees with access or use of online counseling services. These specialists should also be able to handle technological exceptions and special circumstances as they arise;

- Online counseling services should clearly state the qualifications and credentials of the developers not only in the content area of professional career counseling, but also in the development of interactive online services.

Finally, in order to assure equity of access to and use of online career counseling services, the following recommendations are provided for online counsellors by both NBCC (2007) and ACA (2005) Codes of Ethics.

- Make clients aware of free public access points to the Internet within the community for accessing Internet counseling or Web-based assessment, information, and instructional resources;

- Within the limits of readily available technology, make the career web site a barrier-free environment to employees with disabilities;

- In case of multinational companies, be aware that some employees may live in different time zones, and have unique cultural perspectives. Thus, local conditions and events may impact the client's behaviour towards online counseling services;

- Provide translation facilities for clients that have a different primary language, and also address the imperfect nature of such translations.

Recommendations for Confidentiality in Online Career Counseling Services

Nevertheless, the most important issue underlying both the design and the use of online career counseling services concern the security methods deployed and the privacy policies established for assuring privacy and confidentiality of employees' data. Almost all the above-mentioned Codes of Ethics (NCDA, 1997; ACA, 2005; NBCC, 2007) include several confidentiality and privacy recommendations for online counselors. Such recommendations are also provided in the human resource management bibliography (Stone et al, 2006; Philips et al., 2008).

The ones corresponding to the services discussed herein include:

- Develop privacy policies related to the online counseling services and be sure that these policies are published to employees either through websites, intranets, e-mail, or newsletters;

- Establish a method for verifying the employee identity. In situations where it is difficult to verify the identity of the Internet client, steps should be taken to address impostor concerns, such as by using usernames and passwords;

- Use encrypted Web sites and e-mail communications to help ensure confidentiality when possible;

- When the use of encryption is not possible, counsellors should notify clients of the potential hazards of unsecured communication on the Internet and limit electronic transmissions to general communications that are not client specific;

- Inform clients if, how, why and how long session data as well as archival data are being preserved;

- Follow procedures regarding the release of information for sharing employee information with other electronic sources;

- Inform clients of all colleagues, employers as well as IT administrators that might have authorised or unauthorised access to electronic transmissions;

- Provide electronic links to relevant state licensure and professional certification boards to protect consumer rights and facilitate addressing ethical concerns.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Since the use of the Internet is new for the delivery of career development and counseling services, it is mandatory that the career counseling profession gain experience with this medium and evaluate its effectiveness through targeted research. The capabilities of Internet delivery of such services expand rapidly as the use of sound and video becomes more feasible due to the availability of broadband networks. Nevertheless, the risks of providing counseling services via the Internet medium are still high, resulting in low rates of acceptance and growth for these services.

This paper includes an attempt to identify the main ethical issues associated with the design and use of online counseling services. The existing literature has provided guidelines and recommendations for online counseling services, usually examined in the context of a psychotherapeutic intervention, and career development services in isolation. This paper combines existing research and guidelines provided by a number of certification bodies in the counseling area with research conducted in the emerging electronic human resource management area, in order to define the primary challenges in the online career counseling domain. Building on this research body, it provides a set of recommendations for improving the effectiveness of these services and increasing employees' satisfaction from them. These early recommendations need constant monitoring and revision as research data become available and additional technological capabilities become cost-feasible.

Practitioners of online career counseling could apply these recommendations to check the quality of their current online counseling services or incorporate them to the design or future online career services. Within this stream, further research could be directed towards delineating the herein discussed suggestions to develop a roadmap for the development and operation of online career counseling services by human resource departments and counselors. Such a roadmap would include, apart from proposals on measures and policies to be established, a set of advice for addressing problems and difficulties that may arise from either the counselor or the employee side, such as persuading employees on the necessity of e-coaching and e-mentoring practices or decreasing employee's mistrust on e-assessment's results.

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