CAREER COUNSELLING BY EMAIL
GUIDELINES FOR PRACTITIONERS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carole has worked for more than 20 years
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She has managed a university careers centre,
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For several years Carole worked as a careers
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recently has been engaged by the Australian
National University to develop a graduate
training programme for career development
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Her recent research into the field of e-
counselling was prompted by a desire to
explore career development work in a new
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THE POWER OF EMAIL

*"Email may be the most
important, unique method
for communicating and
developing relationships
since the telephone...
it creates a psychological
space in which people
interact... a context and
boundary in which human
relationships can unfold."*

John Suler, The Psychology of Cyberspace

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CAREER COUNSELLING BY EMAIL
– WHY WE DO IT AND HOW IT IS DIFFERENT

Responding to new technologies

Increasing use of Internet technology has over recent years led to a range of new responses in the delivery of career development services, offering clients greater access to these services without time and location constraints. The emergence of career and employment sites offering self-assessment tools, on-line resume databases, vacancy search engines, advice columns and forums, chat rooms, email counselling and videoconferencing facilities are examples of the major impact the internet has had on career development.

Increasing and changing demand

Inevitably and increasingly, career practitioners are assisting clients through email with services ranging from specific and functional assistance such as a review of a resume or reference to career information sources, to advice about networking and job search strategies. In addition, practitioners are venturing into the more complex arenas of on-line career coaching and counselling, in response to client demand and in order to offer a more comprehensive and flexible service.

Developing new methodologies

How can career practitioners offer meaningful and ethical career counselling and advice in the absence of visual and auditory information? As an emerging area of practice career counselling by email (e-counselling) offers opportunities for practitioners to extend their skills into a new modality. While this can be both exciting and engaging, it also poses challenging ethical and methodological questions.

This guide aims to assist career practitioners to work successfully and confidently in the delivery of career counselling from an email platform. In particular, the focus here is on techniques and strategies to facilitate the establishment of a professional career counselling relationship to deal with more complex career

development concerns. It aims to provide guidance to practitioners about how to work with clients to assist them to clarify, assess and understand their needs, skills, interests and motivators in relation to learning and work, to identify opportunities and to make realistic and informed decisions that are right for them.

FLEXIBLE, FOCUSSED AND MODERN – THE APPEAL OF E-COUNSELLING

Benefits for the client

From a client's perpective, there are several advantages for engaging in e-counselling which relate in particular to the flexibility of access over time and space. It appeals to people who are unlikely to come for face-to-face counselling for reasons such as geographic location, sickness or disability. For those with time-pressured work, family and study commitments, the convenience of accessing counselling through the Internet at a time and location that suits them, has strong appeal. Some also simply prefer the perceived anonymity that this medium offers.

Benefits for the career practitioner

For career practitioners, the advantages are also apparent. E-counselling offers more options in service delivery by allowing us to engage with clients out of 'real-time', be flexible when we are unable to meet face-to-face, apply new counselling methodologies and potentially utilize web-based career development tools more effectively. We can grow and broaden the depth, range and texture of our work.

E-counselling also offers the opportunity for continuity in the provision of service, for example, when people travel or re-locate or whose work and life commitments alter and make face-to-face counselling difficult to access.

Time to reflect and consult

The contemplative nature of writing an email enables appeals to some clients and counsellors. The a-synchronous nature of email communication provides for a 'zone of reflection' - time to think before responding without the immediate pressure that some feel in face-to-face counselling. It also allows time for clients as well as practitioners to engage in some research and prepare considered responses.

Record of exchange

E-counselling provides a convenient, comprehensive and compact written record of exchange, an archive, that both the client and counsellor can refer to as the counselling relationship develops. Both clients and practitioners report finding this enourmously useful in tracking progress, identifying important themes and ensuring issues and questions are satisfactorily responded to. In addition, this written record can enhance evaluation of services by providing specific recorded insight into what has worked well for the client and the counsellor and what hasn't.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are specific ethical considerations to take into account with e-counselling relating to the confidentiality of client records, the security of computers and networks, screening of potential clients, clarity of contract with the client and ensuring the efficacy of web-based resources used in the counselling process.

Security and confidentiality

Ideally, e-counselling should be conducted through encrypted and/or password protected systems. Become aware of the security capability of the system you work with, ensure every effort is made to protect the confidentiality of counselling records and explain to clients the measures that are in place to address this.

Screening of potential clients

It is important to ensure that potential clients are screened for compatibility with the use of computer applications and on-line interactive career development services. A pre-inquiry questionnaire or on-line registration form can allow you to establish:

- name, age, address and contact details

- if the client has access to private and reliable computer use and has a reasonable level of comfort using email and the internet.

- if the client has a reasonable level of writing competence

- if the enquiry falls within the scope of the services you offer

- an understanding for the client of the way the counselling service works

- acceptance of the terms and conditions of the counselling service including agreement to honestly represent their identity and personal information

You may of course need to request further clarification or additional information prior to counselling commencing.

Remember to continue to monitor for effectiveness of the counselling process as it proceeds. If, in your professional judgment, e-counselling does not appear to be an appropriate methodology to work with a particular client, offer alternative methods such as telephone, videoconferencing or face-to-face counselling or refer the client to another qualified career practitioner or other forms of assistance.

Professional Codes of Ethics

Further guidance regarding the ethics of on-line service delivery are provided by some career development professional associations, notably the Australian Association of Career Counsellors – www.aacc.org.au and the National Career Development Association - www.ncda.org

DEVELOPING A MODEL FOR E-COUNSELLING

A variety of approaches

Many combinations of service delivery are possible and offer exciting opportunities to meet the diverse needs and preferences of our clients.

Begin by thinking about the role you would like email to play in your counselling or coaching practice and develop a model of delivery that is going to work best for you and your clients.

Some alternative approaches are:

- using email to complement and support face-to-face practice. Currently this is the most common practice where email is used once a counselling relationship has been established through face-to-face meetings. Typically email is used to offer additional advice and information, often in short snippets and/or to facilitate more functional services such as a review of a resume

- using e-counselling as part of a suite of other technological interventions such as texting, on-line forums, telephone counselling or videoconferencing. Often these services are facilitated from career development websites

- delivering counselling solely through email. This usually involves several extended responses over a period of time integrated with assessment tools and activities and reference to links for information

As in all counselling practice, your particular approach to e-counselling will evolve over time, but it is important to develop a methodology that meets your immediate goals and requirements.

Initial contact

Prior to counselling commencing and/or in response to initial enquiries, encourage appropriate expectations by explaining how the process works. Explain to the client what can usually be expected including a guarantee of response times, how the

service is delivered and the kinds of questions and issues that may be appropriate. Offer examples of questions and issues or use case studies of e-counselling exchanges to illustrate the process.

Because of the potential for working with people in diverse geographical and cultural environments, become as aware as possible, as soon as possible, of local conditions and socio-cultural factors relevant to your clients.

Establish your credentials (perhaps include a photograph) and the professional code of practice that you adhere to. Because counselling in an email environment requires an enhanced set of skills, inform clients about your credentials and/or experience in working as a counsellor in an on-line environment.

Communicate protocols for technical glitches and for referral to face-to-face, telephone or other forms of assistance. Inform the client about privacy, confidentiality and other ethical issues. Where applicable, fees and payment arrangements must be clearly stated.

Time considerations

Don't expect e-counselling to take less time than face-to-face counselling. In the early stages of practice in particular, as you get used to working in this different modality, it can take considerable time to craft responses and decide upon appropriate interventions. However, it generally becomes easier and quicker with greater experience.

In most cases expect multiple exchanges - as in face-to-face counselling it may take some time and several emails to clarify issues and concerns and to work with clients effectively. This is something to alert clients to in the initial briefing about what to expect in an e-counselling process.

Managing the flow of email exchange in order to develop and maintain an effective counselling relationship can be problematic. Client response times and expectations can be enormously variable, ranging from of a few minutes to several weeks. Where possible guarantee a response time that you feel comfortable in delivering – for example within 24 hours or 2 business days. Importantly, respond as far as possible to the client's pace. Without being too prescriptive, negotiate

reasonable expectations for response times in the early stages of counselling. You might explain that in the case of extended gaps between contact, you will check in with them from time to time.

If keyboarding becomes an issue, consider using voice-activated software. 'Speaking' your responses may in fact suit your style and may align better to face-to-face work.

Career Information and Assessment Tools

E-counselling is often best supported in a career development context with the use of key information and assessment resources. Develop a "tool-kit" of preferred websites and information and assessment tools. These of course should be of a high quality, produced in respect to professional standards and be well "road-tested" in an electronic environment.

Tools and information that work well in face-to-face sessions may not be as effective through the web. Think about how you might use these resources, in what sequence and depth, and how they will blend with and complement email exchange. Initial screening and ongoing dialogue with the client will allow you to assess the usability and suitability of such resources. Be aware of the size of files and download requirements and avoid sending large files or referring to websites that may stretch the download capacity of some users' systems.

As in face-to-face work, also avoid overwhelming your client with information. Rather, adopt a counselling model to promote effective use of career resources through initial screening, follow-up and evaluation. Encourage the client to take action by providing and suggesting access to resources accompanied by guidance about how to use them. Allow the client to do the work through the counselling process that will enable their empowerment.

Frequently asked questions

Building a data base of frequently asked questions leads to greater efficiency in e-counselling. Examples could be:

• How can on-line vacancy sites help me?

- What are the career advantages of doing an honours year?

- Where can I find information about apprenticeships?

- What qualifications are needed to become a teacher?

- How do I get a job in the public service?

- How do I know if my overseas qualifications are recognized in Australia?

Don't forget however that apparently simple presenting questions may come from more complex issues and that an FAQ response may not be adequate – be prepared to explore further.

TECHNIQUES FOR E-COUNSELLING

Adapting your skills

E-counselling uniquely requires the practitioner to integrate writing and technology with counselling techniques. While it challenges career practitioners to apply and further develop their skills in a different context, many of the approaches applied in face-to-face counselling are also valid in an email environment.

Career questions and issues can be identified and explored through open and insight-giving questions, empathic responses, creative suggestions and by responding to written expressions of attitudes and feelings. Such written dialogue can be skillfully supported by assessment tasks, information, resources and referrals appropriate to client questions and with an appreciation of their context and world views.

Again, as in face-to-face counselling adapting as a professional to individual client needs is essential. Some clients present with more complex issues than others, have differing expectations of the process and very different ways of responding in writing.

Engaging with the client

Once counselling commences, respond within an agreed time. However, avoid rushing as e-counselling offers opportunities for both client and counsellor to reflect, consult with colleagues and others, engage in some research and prepare considered responses.

Be prepared to respond to multiple questions, issues or themes that emerge sometimes in one paragraph. Unpack these and respond to each individually.

Dialogue can be made more effective by inserting replies into text, using different colours or fonts (if in html format) or preceding each paragraph or section you write with your name. Your "voice" and tone can be accentuated through underlining, bold or coloured text, font size and style and through the use of emoticons. Trailers, such as " ....mmm", can suggest a pause or thoughtfulness. Give an individual 'signature' that expresses to a client that you are listening to *them* at that time. Experiment with various techniques to develop flexible approaches to meet the range of needs of your clients.

Being "present"

Use language and techniques to bring both you and the client into a shared comfortable and pleasant space. For example, "It's a pleasure to meet you in cyberspace", "Hi Jane, I'm sitting in my office reading your email with great interest", "I'm very pleased to meet you".

The absence of non-verbal or auditory information can be partly compensated for by bracketing the emotional content behind your words – for example, (feeling concerned for you), (smiling), (laughing with you), (feeling curious about what led you down this path).

In addition, the use of stories and metaphors can greatly enhance meaning through writing in the e-counselling process. They can enable a richness of expression and can provide excellent starting points for exploring career issues:

- "I think I'm on the right path, but the path is made of gravel not smooth concrete"

- "Interviews are about building bridges between you and the employer"

- "I feel like my brother when he goes off excitedly for a day's fishing at the local river, and comes back with nothing."

Structuring responses

Avoid stringing too many emails together especially when the exchanges are long. Often it is more effective to start each new email by offering the client a summary that acknowledges progress so far, identifies key issues or questions discussed and suggests the direction for the current exchange. Embedding brief quotes from earlier exchanges can help to focus the dialogue for the current email and ensure continuity. Also communicate meaning through the careful use of subject line, greeting and sign off – these are components of emails that are often unconsidered. And of course, continue to ask and check with clients if their needs are being met.

Archiving and organising

Ensure you set up efficient processes for archiving email exchanges including a separate folder for each client. This can be categorized into specific topics or issues. This becomes particularly important with longer e-counselling relationships and as the volume of clients increases. It also facilitates the ethical storage of information.

Writing for on-line empathy

The content and tone of emails affects counselling relationships, and in turn the relationship influences the quality of the writing. Dialogue tends to advance when people feel safe and ready to explore and regresses when they feel threatened, hurt or angry.

Give careful thought to how your tone and content is best expressed by taking into account the age, cultural background, local conditions and socio-cultural factors relevant to each client. Adopt a writing style that you feel comfortable with but be mindful about adapting this to reflect the client's approach. For example, create rapport by to some extent "mirroring" the length of sentences; the organization

of the email; the flow of ideas; the content and the visual "feel". Be positive and empathic and write for your audience.

The 'mechanics' of expression

Use plain English and pay attention to spelling, grammar and lay-out. Errors create a distraction from what you want your client to 'see'. Make your emails easy to read and they will be better received. Create emails that are visually pleasing through the use of white space, short paragraphs (in preference to longer ones); sub-headings and/or bullet points.

> *"Empathic people … construct their messages anticipating what it will be like for the recipient to read it. They write in a style that is both engaging and readily understood. With appropriate use of spacing, paragraph breaks, and various keyboard characters (….////****) to serve as highlights and dividers, they visually construct the message so that it is easy and pleasing to read. They estimate just how long is too long. Essentially, they are good writers who pay attention to the needs of their audience."*
>
> John Suler, The Psychology of Cyberspace

FURTHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Career counselling by email requires new approaches and a willingness of the practitioner to adapt existing skills and learn new skills. Sometimes it is the case that clients seeking assistance are less sceptical than counsellors about e-counselling.

While some practitioners are comfortable working solely through this medium, others prefer to adopt an integrated approach with other approaches such as on-line chat rooms or forums, mobile text messaging, video-conferencing/streaming and telephone and face-to-face sessions.

Advancing your skills in this area can be done formally through training programmes such as those offered by Therapy online – www.therapyonline.ca and the National Career Development Association – www.ncda.org

At a local level, initiate practice and discussion sessions with colleagues. Without breaching confidentiality, work on case studies together, discuss alternative approaches, check that you aren't missing key points. Such work can also inform the evaluation of your e-counselling work.

I encourage you to consider the part email counselling may play in progressing your delivery of career development services and trust these guidelines assist you as a starting point to work more confidently and effectively in this environment.

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