

# The education and training of career coaches: a psychological model

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**The** educational and professional development needs of career coaches are changing. These changes are discussed within a psychologically and contextually informed model. The model identifies a spectrum of career activities in which coaches work. The skills which career coaches need to support them in these range of roles is also presented. An argument is made that the changing nature of careers and career provision demands a broader and deeper range of career coaching skills. This view is supported by a psychological and contextual approach to career coach education.

## Why I am writing about training career coaches

I train, educate and supervise career coaches who work in higher education, in private career consultancies, as internal coaches in financial services and pharmaceutical companies and in housing associations. I also work with career practitioners in outplacement services, social agencies and with coaches running their own career practices.

The common thread in all these settings is that clients and coaches are often unclear about what career coaching actually is. This confusion creates a considerable challenge to the different stakeholders in the career system: clients, coaches, service providers, organisations and therefore to the people who train them.

The confusion about the training needs of career coaches is related to wider changes in the world of work and in the career sector. Firstly, there is the

issue of deciding what “career” might mean in 2013 and then there is the new challenge of defining what a “coach” might or might not do with someone’s “career”.

The result of combining two hard-to define words in one go is that there is a great deal of room for interpretation of what to expect from your career coach.

Over the last 12 years, I have been developing a model, which helps me to understand what I am doing with my own clients. I offer this model to my students and supervisees as they develop their own practices. I am presenting the model in this paper in order to bring this view to a wider audience as we move as a sector into more professionalised and unified stage of our own development.

I am going to start from the very beginning by addressing the issues associated with defining career coaching. Then I will consider how a model underpinned by organisational and psychological theory can support this roving definition. I will then link the model to an understanding of the training needs of career coaches. I will conclude by considering what this means for training career coaches of the future.

## What exactly is career coaching?

Whether I start with new students on a two year masters programme or internal coaches on a two day career coaching workshop or indeed when I begin a client meeting, we always start out by discussing what “career” means. When we have worked out that career means mostly everything you do in relation to

your work, we have to stop and rethink about what that means about coaching someone to do any or all of those things differently.

I work with the John Arnold's definition of career as 'the sequence of employment related positions, roles, activities and experiences encountered by a person' (Arnold, 1997: 16). This definition covers most bases for the careers work I am involved in. This wider perspective of the 21st century career incorporates the protean (Hall, 2004) and boundary less career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). If career is to incorporate the subjective experience of work, study and life roles throughout life, then the work of the career coach becomes correspondingly wider ranging and potentially more demanding. As Herr suggested,

The changing nature of the problems being defined as career issues require a fusion of career and personal counselling to address the complexity of the emotional and behavioural consequences persons experience associated with such phenomena as work adjustment or unemployment.

(Herr, 1997: 86)

Pinning down the idea of a career is hard. On top of that, we need to question what coaches and clients understand about what coaching is too. The growing coaching sector is busy developing a professional identity and empirical base. In the meantime, the term "coach" is being used widely without a clear consensus as to what a coach may be trained to do (Briner, 2012).

We are helped by the work of career writers to identify the tasks and goals of career coaching. Chung and Gfroerer suggest that career coaching 'combines the concepts of career counselling, organizational consulting and employee development' (Chung and Gfroerer, 2003: 141). Whilst Herr writes more broadly of 'an interpersonal process to assist individuals with their problems of career development as well as their work adjustment and work dysfunction problems' (Herr, 1997: 89)

The range of skills and experience that a career coach might need to support a client with this range of career needs begins to look both demanding and sophisticated. If as Chung and Gfroerer suggest 'the general goal of career coaching is to assist client's

personal development within the context of work and career' (Chung and Gfroerer, 2003: 141), then career coaches need to be both flexible and skilled to coach clients effectively.

## Why do we need a model to frame career coaching?

As I worked more and more with clients and their coaches with this broader definition of career and career coaching, I realised I needed to communicate more effectively about the nature of career work. I had found the Ali and Graham (1996) Herr (1996) and Savickas (1995) spectra of career work helpful in orienting myself between the poles of vocational guidance, career counselling and personal therapy.

However, as my own work broadened out and my supervisees and students began to arrive from a range of different organisations, I realised I needed a broader and deeper understanding of who career clients are, what they are trying to do and what career coaches need in order to support their clients.

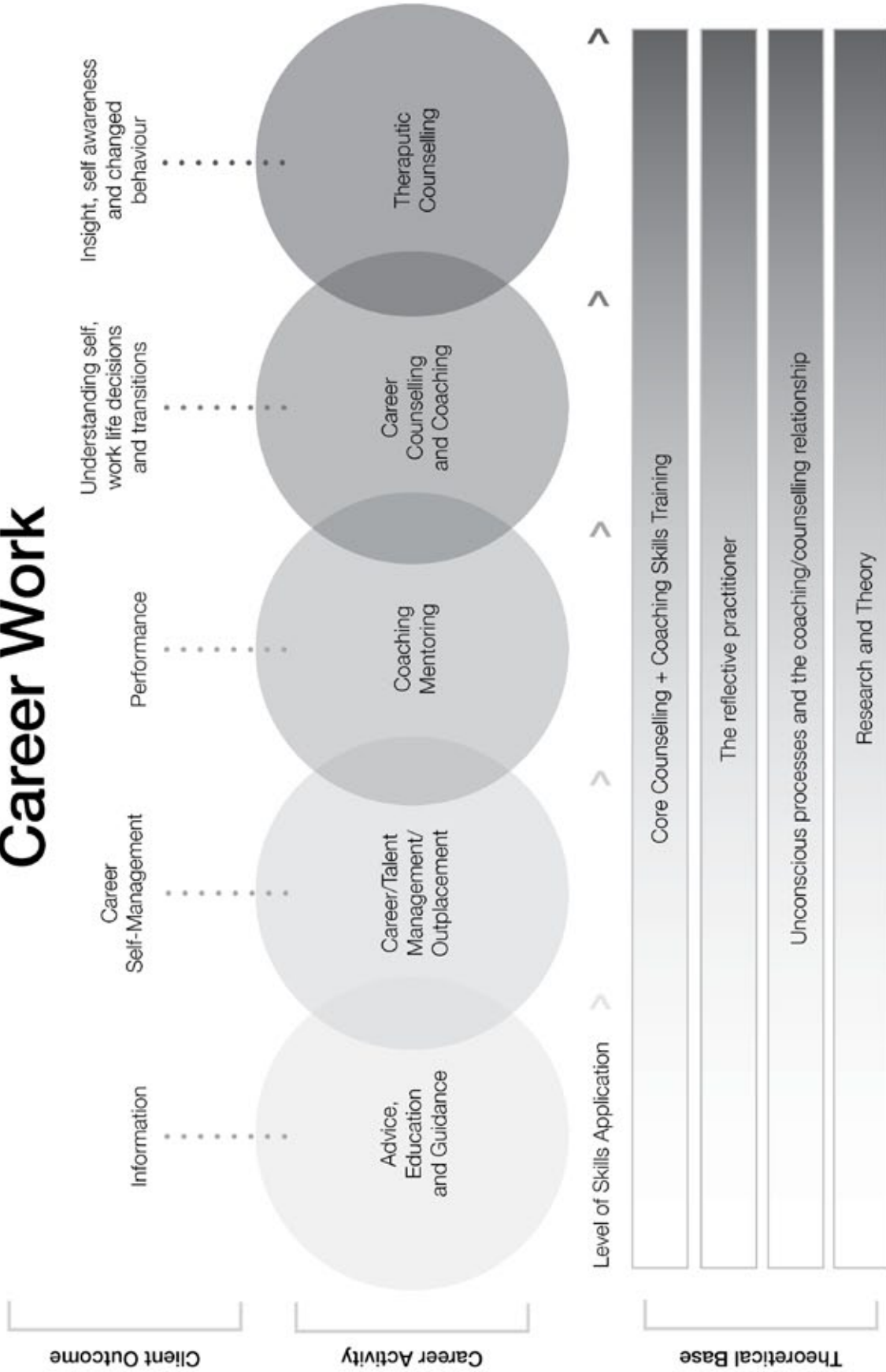
This is how my model of career work evolved. I now start each new programme with a discussion focused on the tasks and goals of the range of career work, which the model depicts. The model is also work in progress. I review the language and focus of the circles, lines and boxes each year to take into account the changes, which continue to redefine our work.

### Career Activities

The circles in the centre of the diagram represent a range of career activities, which career coaches undertake. These circles are a development of the model which Ali and Graham proposed in 1996 (Ali and Graham, 1996). The language of these activities has changed since then and continues to change. Edwin Herr made a clear link between the context of career activity and the way in which the language of career work changes over time.

The terms vary in meaning across time and across cultures as the language of individuals and the language of the profession respond to the ever changing dynamics of the economic, political

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and social environments in which persons attempt to negotiate their self and career identity and translate it into personal action.

(Herr, 1997: 81)

As with all models, the circles can reduce the complexity of real world career work. In reality, a career coach is likely to find themselves moving back and forth across the different activities and different stages of career work in whichever setting they base their practice.

A further skill of career practice is in assessing a client's presenting issue and adjusting ones interventions across the different tasks to meet specific client needs at these different stages of the work.

On the far left of the model the activity circles describe the most pragmatic and active aspects of career work. The first circle contains the work of the original vocational guidance specialist. i.e. a career adviser in school, HE or a social agency working with a client on their occupational choice. Practitioners at this end of the spectrum are working in settings where the primary focus is on advice, information and career education.

Alongside this is the work of organisationally based career coaches. This circle includes the work of both internal and external career specialists. They may be deployed as career or talent managers within HR or are brought in as external consultants to manage career development programmes. Outplacement coaches also figure in this circle as their work is closely allied with organisational career development. All of these activities involve career coaches in developing the career self-management skills of people in organisations. Career coaches in this arena work closely with organisational and system knowledge and context and therefore often with complex organisational contracts.

Coaching and mentoring appear at the centre of the model. This circle recognises that at times career coaches may move into a broader developmental role with their clients. This might involve them in dealing with performance or relationship issues in the workplace. As Super wrote when considering the

range of areas of work, which career counsellors might address, 'the best counsellors are those who have sufficient training and flexibility to help a counsellee deal with whatever combination of developmental and adjustment problems he or she confronts' (Super quoted in Herr, 1997: 90).

At times, the internal career coach role may merge more with a mentoring role. At these times, it is wise though to have Kathy Kram's very clear definition of mentoring in mind to differentiate the particular nature of the mentoring relationship as one in which 'a senior, more experienced person in an organisation helps a younger, less experienced employee develop an organisational role' (Kram 1985: 2).

The penultimate circle holds the activity of the "pure" career coach or career counsellor. The distinction between career coaching and career counselling feels less critical than it did three years ago when the master's course on which I teach was clearly identified as a career counselling course. The majority of alumni of this programme identify themselves as career coaches in their professional profiles. The career counsellor role is even harder to explain to clients. However I would continue to locate the professional development of career coaches in the theoretical tradition of career counselling, which Jenny Kidd has defined as:

A one-to-one interaction between practitioner and client, usually ongoing, involving the application of psychological theory and a recognised set of communication skills. The primary focus is on helping the client make career-related decisions and deal with career-related issues

(Kidd, 2006: 1).

The focus of career coaches working as independent practice or as career consultants is on supporting clients to understand their working worlds, make work life decisions and to manage career change.

Therapeutic counselling appears on the far right of the model. This is not because career coaches work as therapists but in order to identify the edge of career interventions and to recognise the proximity of personal therapy to the work of career coaches.

This proximity of a deeper personal component to career is linked to a central idea, which underpins the circles model. What is core to the model are the overlapping spaces between the different career activities. These grey overlapping areas are often where the confusion can arise for clients and their career coaches. It is here that the work of boundary and role management is key for career coaches. Bordin's work on the importance of contracting on tasks, goals and bonds is foreground when coaches find themselves straying across a task boundary into a different area of career work (Bordin 1979).

This grey space is particularly critical when a career coach finds themselves in the overlap between career coaching and therapy. It is this space where a sound theoretical base and more advanced psychological skills are clearly needed.

### The theoretical base and skills for career coaching

The model is underpinned a set of skills rooted in psychological theories. The skills appear below the surface of the career work spectrum. This reflects the idea that career coaches need to be aware of what is going on below the surface of career work. Coaches need to understand where their skills come from, how to reflect on practice, how the relationship with clients is working (or not) and they need to locate this understanding in career and counselling theory and research. The rectangles are shaded light to dark from left to right to indicate the greater degree of theoretical support and psychological understanding which may be required across the spectra of career activities.

First, career coaches require a set of core counselling and coaching skills. These are the skills outlined by Ali and Graham (1995) in their pyramid model and include empathic listening, understanding and challenging skills. These building blocks of the helping relationship also need to be located in their theoretical origins i.e. within the humanistic, psychodynamic, cognitive behavioural or narrative tradition. These are the skills, which we know to be valued by the clients of career practitioners (Kidd, 2006).

Equally important in managing the complexity of

career coaching work are the skills of the reflective practitioner (Schon, 1983). Career coaches in training need to develop the capacity to reflect on their own work, to use supervision and to begin to self supervise in order to develop their professional practice. This is an essential skill when working in complex organisations, with heavy caseloads or when coaches find themselves in the overlap between career and personal work.

This reflective capacity is developed in conjunction with an understanding of the unconscious process implicit in all (professional) relationships. Studying to be a career coach requires an understanding of how transference and counter transference impact on the coaching relationship. This understanding will inform the coach about how the client operates in the world of work and about the impact of the client's unconscious in their working lives. Working with counter transference will also serve to support the coach in understanding how the client may impact the coach. This is a core part of ethical practice.

All of the skills which career coaches need to work safely and effectively also need to be rooted in a sound theoretical base, supported by career counselling and/or psychological research. Educating career coaches requires a wide range of theory across different disciplines:

- Career theory
- Counselling theory
- Career counselling models
- Organisational behaviour
- Career management
- Systems theory
- The developing coaching literature
- Supervision

The task of career coaching education is to integrate this theory with practice in a way that equips career coaches to respond to the range of clients and contexts in which they may work.

## What will career coaches need in the future?

As career coaches find themselves working with adult clients in a wide range of settings, at different life stages and in more challenging labour markets, they may need a correspondingly wider range of skills.

As Mark Savickas puts it 'Individuals who must cope with unstable occupations and frequent job transitions may request substantially more help from career counselors and I think a different kind of help' (Savickas 2012: 13) Savickas identifies this as meeting the "life design needs of citizens in the information societies". Working with clients who are managing redundancy, career change or career crisis means working with client's life stories, their identity, and supporting them to construct new futures.

Career intervention is simply a form of psychological intervention designed to affect vocationally related feelings, attitudes and cognitions and behaviours. Thus it is a form of psychotherapy and should be viewed as a method of behaviour change and tied to psychotherapy theory.

(Rounds and Tinsley 1984  
quoted in Herr, 1997:88)

Career practitioners who are transitioning from working with young people or HR career specialists are likely to be working closer to the boundary between the personal and the professional than their original training prepared them.

If career coaches are indeed responding to a fusion of personal and career issues then they will need more support based in a psychotherapeutic theory.

'For those career counsellors who wish to broaden their interventions in the non career domain an equally critical task for them is the development of skills and knowledge in psychotherapy' (Blustein and Spengler, 1995: 322)

In addition, career coaches are going to need an understanding of the changing contexts in which they and their clients are working.

At the outer edges of the model, the focus shifts

outwards to take into account the wider contexts in which career coaches work. Career coaches need to be aware of and respond to changes in the wider economic, social and regulatory systems of which they are a part. This reality is ever more relevant in 2013 as the profession adjusts to changes in the statutory provision of careers services, an economic recession, new ways of working and demographic changes.

The inner boundary of the model identifies the role of the organisational context in shaping the work of career coaches. Career coaches need to understand and flex their career provision to the demands and realities of their home organisation whilst maintaining ethical practice. Career coaches may need supervision to support and manage their client caseload in complex systems (Copeland, 2005).

## Conclusion

As the world of career coaching changes, so the tasks, goals and role of career coaches change too. Equipping career coaches to take up roles in the new world requires career coach educators to look beyond the immediate task of supporting clients to make career-related decisions. Career coaches also need the skills to work with a wide range of clients with a correspondingly wide range of needs. This may mean working below the surface of a client's career and looking inwards to reflect on practice. Career coaches also need to look outwards to the wider economic and organisational worlds, which they are navigating alongside their clients.

In conclusion Ellen Lent's words from 1996 still capture the task ahead for career coaches as we step into the new world of career development coaching. Lent proposes that career practitioners need to 'support [ing] the convergence between the scientist and the practitioner in each of us and between career theory and practice... as our field develops a more holistic perspective of individuals and their career behaviours' (Lent 1996: 119)



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