

# Creating career coaching

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In this article, a series of general propositions are made concerning the nature and purpose of career coaching. These statements are designed in response to debates within the formal and informal literature and to flesh out the authors' distinctive approach to career coaching. The activities and settings in which career coaching can take place are described and it is proposed that the design of career coaching should be linked to career-related learning, career literacy and contracting. The importance of calling and career development is highlighted and a critical understanding of opportunity systems encouraged. Overall, a view of career coaching as a creative art is foregrounded. Constructive engagement with the wider community is welcomed in order to discuss and debate these claims.



## Introduction

Between 2010 and 2012, we undertook an exploratory literature review as part of our preliminary work for developing a new Master's degree in Career Development and Coaching Studies. It became increasingly clear to us that there was some ambiguity and confusion about the use of the terms career guidance, career education and career coaching. To a large extent this ambiguity was also present within the professional communities. We therefore developed a set of detailed statements in order to clarify our own position. These statements are reproduced here in order to stimulate debate and discussion about the nature and purpose of career coaching.

## The activities of career coaching

We take an *integrative* approach to the activities of career coaching. By this we mean that it *includes* a wide range of activities including informing, listening, advising, modelling, assessing, enabling, facilitating and feeding back. These can take place through one-to-one interactions or group working and in on- and off-line contexts. Further enabling activities include networking, advocating, peer training and systems change. Career coaching is relevant to all ages and stages of career development and involves understanding the career development of others as well as oneself. It can entail exploration of past experiences as well as discussion of the future. A range of career-related roles and interests may be addressed beyond the tasks of paid work. It may involve a single interaction, such as a one-to-one discussion or group work, or a longer term series of interactions over a period of months or years.

## Career coaching settings

We reject the idea that career coaching is purely for a particular group of people such as individuals employed in high status jobs in mid-career. Career coaching can take place in a *wide variety* of settings including the public and private sectors, small and large organisations and community contexts. It can take place at board level and on the shop floor and occur within the context of existing work or personal relationships. Within organisations, given the breadth of career coaching activities we identify above, coaching and mentoring schemes and other activities of employee training and development can include career coaching.

## Career coaching and word history

Serendipitously perhaps, the words 'career' and 'coaching' appear to share some meanings in terms of word history although their precise lineage is quite separate. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, career is derived from the Latin *carrus* meaning carriage or wagon and *via carraria* meaning carriageway (2002). It was particularly in the nineteenth century that career came to mean a person's course through life or part of a life. Coaching is derived from the Magyar *kocsi* meaning a large carriage or wagon. In the nineteenth century, coaching began to mean helping a person with his or her educational course and later this was extended to sporting activities.

Career and coaching appear to be linked therefore by the words carriage and course. This suggests to us that career coaching can be concerned with the *vehicles* used for our projects and goals. These vehicles are enabled and constrained by the availability of suitable routes and roads. This connects with the sense of career as a course or *learning journey*. It also highlights the social dimensions of career coaching. It is possible to design and build one's own vehicle and route system but generally we use vehicles and pathways built by others that vary in size, function, cost and availability. Following on from this, we propose that the careers of the coach, the client and others are interlinked. Career coaching is inevitably a *social* process as all parties are always 'in' the process of career development.

The above discussion foregrounds the role of language in both enabling and constraining how career coaching can be discussed. Career and coach are terms that come to us *already storied*. It is from this matrix of prior meanings that alternatives may be fashioned. This can also be applied more widely. As people in career development, we are also *always already storied*. We exist within a network of prior meanings and experiences and are sometimes able to recast these. Consequently, we argue that our work is a *creative art* i.e. that career and coaching are always in the process of being creatively re-imagined and re-interpreted by both ourselves and our clients.

## Career-related learning

We propose that the design of career coaching centres on *career-related learning*. In taking this position, we have been influenced by the work of Patton and McMahon (1998) on career development learning. We see all the activities of career coaching listed above as fundamentally *educative*. Education, both formal and informal, is being interpreted here as the *meta-activity* of career coaching. The *strategic* goal is to facilitate career development through learning. This demands a disciplined knowledge and use of learning theories in order to design career development learning experiences in relation to the many activities of career coaching. For example, it is not sufficient to simply administer a psychometric assessment, deliver career information or engage in a one-to-one discussion, the career coach must design each activity to facilitate the client's further career-related learning.

## Relationship with career studies

Career coaching is a specialised area of career studies. This is a *transdisciplinary* field of knowledge that has emerged formally over the last 100 years and continues to evolve (e.g. Weber 1908/1970; Shaw 1930/1966; Hughes 1937/1958; Becker 1963/1966; Goffman 1961/1968; Arthur, Hall & Lawrence 1989; Collin & Young 2000; Brown & Associates 2002; Gunz & Peiperl 2007). Career coaches should be familiar with the key contributions to this literature and able to recognise significant debates within it. For example, debates concerning the role of work within career development and contrasting perspectives on life course development. They should recognise that disciplines such as education, psychology, sociology, philosophy, organisational studies, psychoanalysis, literary studies and creative studies have all got something to contribute to a fuller understanding of career and that any one discipline is unlikely to enjoy a monopoly on the 'truth'. Career coaches should be familiar with common claims made in relation to career within academic circles and the popular media. They should be able to understand the epistemological basis of such claims and arrive at a satisfactory position in relation to their own practice. They should be able to *critically* evaluate these claims and enable their clients to do so in congenial ways.

## Career literacy

Career coaches should also be skilled at reading and interpreting their own career development and the career development of their clients. This demands a very specific way of using career development theories to engage in *multiple readings* of career (Mignot 2004; Reynolds, in press). This *career literacy* can be enabled by developing familiarity with key concepts derived from career development theories to enhance the vocabulary one uses to understand and discuss career development. Thus equipped, the career coach is able to understand both surface and below-the-surface narratives of career. This entails using career development theories, not as a distancing mechanism, but to understand people more deeply, more fully and more wholly. One of the central benefits of using career development theories in this way is to get a better feel for one's own career beliefs and those of the client. There is a consensus in contemporary career development thinking that an understanding of *personal career theories* is fundamental to growth and further learning for coaches and clients alike (e.g. Krumboltz 1996; Holland 1997: 205-6; Patton & McMahon 1998: 167-8; Law 1999; Miller-Tiedeman 1999; McCash 2006; Frigerio 2010). A high level of career literacy, therefore, drawing from a range of career development theories, represents part of the distinctive and specialist knowledge base of the career coach.

## Contracting

Given the statements above about the activities of career coaching and the importance of career-related learning and career literacy, we believe that skilled contracting is fundamental to the process. Contracting entails all participants sharing their positions and priorities and developing an agreed way to proceed. It involves checking and re-contracting at appropriate points to ensure that psychological contact is being maintained. Contracting in career coaching should be informed by career literacy and designed to facilitate client career-related learning in all activities. It is through skilled contracting, and thereby staying close to the client, that one *learns* what the client is *learning*. Contracting should inform a wider range of

support activities around career coaching including the marketing and management of the service. It is more important than any particular interview structure and provides a means of modelling ethical career behaviour. In organisational settings, careful contracting is required to ensure ethical practice in terms of confidentiality and impartiality and to develop services informed by an understanding of career-related learning, career literacy and opportunity systems.

## Meaning and purpose

We conceptualise career as life-wide and life-long and believe that career coaching is concerned with questions of how clients construct meaning and purpose in their lives (Bloch & Richmond 1997). This may be expressed as *calling*, whether referring to theistic notions of a higher power or a wider spiritual understanding of destiny and values. We should be skilled at helping people engage with these issues and encourage clients to explore these aspects of life satisfaction, commitment and motivation. This means working from a standpoint of openness to the clients' frame of reference and exploring internal solutions to the problems they identify in their meaning-making.

## Opportunity systems

Career coaching is nested in and shaped by a series of discourses concerning opportunity systems (e.g. the employability and skills discourses). We believe that the mainstream coaching literature (e.g. Palmer & Whybrow 2007; Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck 2010) has to an extent neglected these dimensions of career development. Understanding opportunity systems and the discourses involved are key competences within career coaching. Through this, coaches can help themselves and their clients understand, interpret and plan responses. This does not mean engaging in didactic or directive practice. It may involve, for example, helping clients to identify, evaluate and make responses to labour market intelligence. For the career coach, this represents a move away from parroting labour market 'messages' towards facilitating the client's own research and decision-making.

## Creative integration of theory and practice

Some career guidance, career education and career coaching traditions have been bedevilled by the simplistic application of theory to practice and the uncritical use of models, tools and techniques. We believe that career coaching entails the *integration* of theory and practice rather than the application of theory to practice. This involves rejecting an objectivist distinction between theory and practice. Career coaches should be able to *creatively* design and agree their own models of action and enable their clients to do the same.

## Concluding remarks

These general statements paint a broad picture of the landscape within which we see career coaching operating. We fully expect career coaching will continue to develop in several directions and the breadth and strength of professional interest is evidenced by the range of papers submitted to this edition of the journal. We offer the statements above to the wider community for consideration and to stimulate collaborative exploration of this emerging and exciting terrain.

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