

Marketing Guidance: Understanding our customers

by Duncan Bolam, Career Dovetail

In this article my aim is to reach out to guidance workers and challenge the status quo. I believe that as a profession we are at a threshold and we must strive to embrace change and work harder to lead the commercial development of career guidance to make it more relevant to our customers so that they can embrace the tangible benefits. I aim to provoke stark reflection and perhaps postulate why career guidance is not perceived to be definitive by either users, practitioners or policy-makers. Beyond that I will suggest some ways forward to unify and generate consensus in what is a highly fragmented professional community. Ultimately, I strive to catalyse new perspectives that might lead to growth in our market. I warn you that the word 'guidance' might even be obsolete.

We will focus upon two main points and why they both have very powerful implications for the marketing of career guidance:

- 1. 90% of the population are in the wrong job and the viscous cycle of guidance.*
- 2. The dichotomy of the career guidance community.*

The definition of a professional discipline

Career Guidance professionals often share similar values and it is these values which tend to govern our decision to deliver in the public or private sectors. Part of our professional make-up is that we care for others. Another key dimension to my stance is that I have witnessed the evolution of career guidance services in the public and, latterly the private sectors; or, as we have begun to call them in the UK, the independent sector and the public service sector. This is a subtle distinction but one that has very powerful connotations for marketing angles. I believe with absolute conviction that careers work not only contributes to the improvement of wellbeing of both the individual and society at large but I also passionately believe that career guidance also makes a huge contribution to economic wellbeing. It is a complex system but exists nevertheless.

For financial reasons I shifted into the private sector soon after qualifying and I found myself in the thoroughly consumerist world of multi-national, blue-chip outplacement with a far more aggressive marketing policy. In this semi-mystical new world I found that my rigorous theoretical insight and well tested guidance skills were invaluable and stood me apart from my peer group, who were predominantly semi-retired HR Managers, (this has been a traditional entry point into the private sector, bringing a quite different set of driving values). My grasp of theory often did the marketing for me because I was delivery results and hitting targets that did not exist in the private sector.

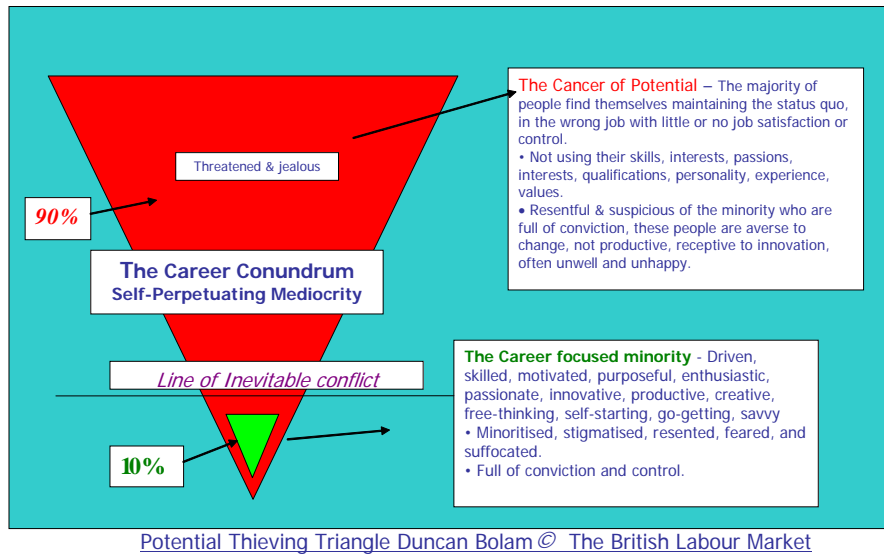
The Guidance Sector – a market, a dichotomy or a plethora of strands?

The main markets appear to be young people from school to 24 years in public sector provision. Whereas, in the private sector it is split into Retail, fee paying individuals, or Group Outplacement which is corporate – and the rapidly developing market of Talent Management & Employee Engagement, a hybrid of Career Development work delivered by non-HR career consultant; a massive opportunity for the commercialisation and crystallisation of career guidance to enhance marketability.

However, it still remains that very few people in the street know *how, who, what, why, where* to obtain guidance services in their lives. This is possibly due to the complexity of our public image. Life Coaches have succeeded in broadening their appeal because they are far more accessible in the publics' perception.

90% of the population in the wrong job!

90% of population in wrong job!



In my '*Potential Thieving Triangle*' diagram above I make a very bold claim – I believe that only one in ten people are in the right job or engaged by their work. An even more frightening possibility is that many of the personnel who I have been working with in the outplacement process are the organisation's best people. It seems that good career guidance can sometimes stigmatise the person fortunate enough to have discovered their best career. In over nine years of helping British workers my findings are that 90% are in their wrong work.

[Box: According to the Gallup Management Journal article '*Great Britain's Workforce Lacks Inspiration*' (Flade, P, December 2003), he states 'More than 80% of British workers lack any real commitment to their jobs, and a quarter of those are "actively disengaged, or truly disaffected with their workplaces'. In Forbes Magazine, March 2007, the headline runs '*70% of Workers Are Not Engaged at Work and Consultants Are Not the Answer*'. According to global digital media and market research company, Ciao! GmbH, in '*The State of Engagement 2006*' engaging employees is the most fundamental challenge facing employers today and that only 13% of Britain's workforce are engaged in their work. Career professionals' time has come and it is about time we started taking ourselves more seriously. We have a lot to offer! The paradox of so few citizens enjoying a sense of job satisfaction or career development is that very few workers have positive feelings about career guidance.]

Building upon these controversial statements

According to Tony Watts (*'Rethinking Careers Education and Guidance'*, 1996), traditionally in the UK, as in many other parts of the world, the perception is that career guidance forms part of the state provided social welfare services. When the Conservative Government embarked upon the '*marketisation*' of the careers service in the early 1990s, this process was relatively successful and the resultant model would appear to have worked when supplied through a combination of partnerships between Training & Enterprise Councils and Local Education Authorities, not-for-profit organisations and private sector organisations. This model of provision was effectively dismantled by the Labour Government post 1997.

Much has been written about the failure in the UK to create a self-sustaining market in career guidance on the basis that society rarely understand the benefits of it and the majority of citizens tend to see career guidance as only vaguely relevant at transition points between school, college, training, university and work. Many teenagers in my local town have only had one hour long guidance interview in their final year at school. Perhaps as it is not seen as been valued as a free service, this initiates a lack of perceived value as a commodity? This effect rolls on into adulthood.

Very few adults, in my own experience, place any relevance at all in the *guidance* word, this is made much worse if the word stands alone without *career* in front. The career guidance phrase actually

alienates more customers than it attracts and it is seen as a wholly irrelevant descriptor by the majority of adults especially. Note that I say this having had my own life's course transformed by career guidance and I accept utterly that from a professional's perspective it remains a very important part of our vocabulary. It just so happens that we are delivering a perceived intangible at a time when change is shifting attitudes away from traditional guidance models. This is a watershed moment for career professionals. Perhaps it is time we embraced the *coaching* word as it is far more commercially viable?

Recommendations

Policy-makers desperately need to reflect upon a free market economy in career guidance and market it accordingly in a manner where the tangible benefits to all stakeholders are relevant and withstand scrutiny. The societal benefits are too profound to ignore. With the greatest amount of respect there is a very important conflict occurring between the market reality and the practicalities of making career guidance services viable. Guidance services will not be marketed effectively without a paradigm shift encompassing the market reality – career guidance is irrelevant in terms of marketability to a mass audience and must have terms of relevance addressed not just from the public sector but from a dynamic consensus across our field. Only in this way will the mass audience be helped to understand the net benefits.

- There are three significant barriers to developing a market in this way:
 - Language
 - Quality assurance
 - The Economic Reality.

The independent sector needs to embrace the rigour of guidance theory

Career Guidance theory is highly evolved and is proven to have helped guidance clients in a range of markets. There is a huge amount of data to support this where positive interventions have achieved measurable results. The National Guidance Research Forum website is a powerful receptacle of data supporting the argument for career guidance (see www.guidance-research.org and its European sister site www.guidance-europe.org).

In the '*for-profit*' career guidance community, usually referred to as the fields of career management or career development, there seems to be a tendency to shy away from academic rigour, yet overtly seek to embrace quality assurance, professional certification and accreditation (Plant, 2001; see <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/35/47/2698228.pdf>). Professional accreditation and quality assurance go hand-in-hand with the standards inherent in meeting academic distinction. Yet for some peculiar reason in the careers field there is a reluctance to cross-pollinate best practice. A key point is higher standards win business.

Re-inventing the wheel

There is an incessant re-inventing of the wheel when it comes to competency-based frameworks of professional training matrixes the world-over. Here I include the majority of the EU, Canada and the USA. The reality is that with very little adaptation the '*not-for-profit*' sector has ready-made, proven and highly evolved professional competency-based training programmes that could easily be migrated into the private sector. There are limitless benefits to standardising professional training frameworks in that quality standards become universal, *standardised*, tangible, recognisable and rigorous. How:

Currently there are a number of international profile bodies that offer professional accreditation to the private sector, these include: Institute of Career Certification International, Career Partners International and the European Mentoring & Coaching Council. I hasten to add that the latter has little actual career content but symbolises the breadth of the spectrum of closely related fields.

There is an apparent disparity between these qualification frameworks and those available in the public sector through full time training courses such as the Qualification for Career Guidance and, the now defunct, Postgraduate Diploma in Career Guidance in the UK.

One very powerful vehicle for spreading professional competency is to embrace respected methods of accrediting prior and experiential learning (A.P.E.L.); thereby encouraging professionals from related sectors, with complementary skill-sets, to readily cross-train into the career guidance profession. An

excellent bi-product of this development would be to strengthen the theoretical 'gene-pool' by bringing into play proven techniques from adjacent fields such as HR, psychotherapy and counselling; whilst bolstering career guidance in the process. As an example executive coaching is a highly credible field, drawing upon psychotherapy, NLP, Transactional Analysis, mentoring and counselling practices.

The public sector needs to embrace the commerciality of the private sector:

There are many of my 'not-for-profit' associates who will shudder at my next sentence! But the stark reality is that one characteristic that I see made gapingly apparent in the public sector is a singular need for commerciality and business insight. It strikes me that academics have a tendency not to do or even spurn the profit motive. (The reasons to support this would make for an interesting study by itself!). It may well be value driven. This does not mean that public sector organisation managers are not capable leaders or lack management skills. It merely suggests that there is a distinction between running a business that is dependent upon profit to survive and those that allocate Government funding to specific public service contracts in the distribution of policy.

Whatever the reasons, the two characteristics inherent in each constituency of the dichotomy are almost certainly mutually exclusive. This is the greatest singular barrier to the evolution of the career guidance landscape and the singular greatest reason why an effective marketing strategy for career guidance can only ever be based upon a holistic approach borne out of consensus and convergence; a singularity of purpose and a coming together. The paradox is that that the career guidance community, public and private in persuasion needs career guidance itself.

Making products and benefits tangible

Developing marketing strategy for intangible products with unquantifiable benefits is incredibly challenging, especially where many stakeholders are competing for scarce resources. In practice, there are many different functional units striving for excellence in isolation and not succeeding in growing the market – whether profit is or isn't the driving force. Results from this existing model are usually disappointing.

In making a cast iron case for career guidance – how do we broaden our appeal? Bringing about consensus on what really constitutes career guidance and what are the actual benefits to society. It is widely accepted that the Top 100 companies in the UK are measured on whether their human resource – their people – have access to a defined career development infrastructure encompassing lifelong learning, continued professional development and a nurturing culture where life/work balance are closely aligned with productivity initiatives and strategy. Evidence is mounting that good career guidance actually underpins good health, as decision latitude (the degree of control an individual has over work and opportunity for use of skills and the amount of variety present in work) is seen as a key factor in such indicators as coronary heart disease, alcohol consumption and stress related illness. This provides a hugely powerful marketing angle for career guidance (*'Work Environment, alcohol consumption and ill-health, The Whitehall II Study', Head, J, Martikainen, P, Kumari, M, Kuper, H, Marmot, M – University College London and Health & Safety Executive 2002*)

It is becomingly increasingly passé to hold the view that an empowered and career orientated workforce spells higher turnover figures and a drain of talent. Far from it, a workforce empowered to take control of their own career development are more strategic in their thinking and far more likely to deliver to the bottom line than those languishing in unfulfilling careers with no intention in their lives. Workers with intent in their hearts and minds are possibly the world's most valuable commodity.

The careers field would benefit hugely from promoting, publicising and further codifying the latest thinking on career development and the effectiveness of inculcating career guidance into organisational development and the irrefutable correlation with profit and the Government's skills agenda.

The benefits of a consensus would be:

- More definitive career profession
- Recognisable & Tangible markets & outputs
- Sharing best practice
- Image make-over - society improving initiative, ultimately helping people find their truest work

The career guidance community needs to develop new horizons in the way that Governments, organisations and business managers influence corporate and societal wellbeing through realising the power of incorporating a career-development-embracing culture into everyday life. The bottom line here is about proving that dovetailing more people into their dream careers is beneficial for employees, employers, trainees and society at large. It is a win/win all round!

The most outstanding output of generating greater understanding of markets is that the customer in the street will stand a far better chance of understanding how to manage their career. In essence, this will be down to having a clearer language with which to self-diagnose career satisfaction and then a set of reference points that can help turn citizens on to more rewarding careers and more fresh, verifiable, relevant and progressive career management theory. We need to be more accessible in every way.

The career profession makes for a confusing landscape, not only for those in need of careers advice, but for the professionals within it. This is exemplified by the fact that no one really seems to know what to call it. Career Guidance turns off many people as for some reason the 'G' word proves unattractive. Career advice does not say enough and Career Coaching has only recently entered our vocabulary and some see coaching as too heavily sales orientated and not sufficiently rigorous. Anybody can call themselves a coach in most disciplines. The confusion is perpetuated by the veritable alphabet soup of professional bodies in the world, all claiming a specific relevance to a particular target group of citizens. There is an unsustainable number of professional bodies and agencies with a stake in career's work. This also switches our customers off.

Defending our brand and our intellectual rights – market growth potential

An incredibly powerful marketing consideration when contemplating how best to market our services is that of professional certification. There are many distinct professions who defend their provenance very aggressively because it is the source of their professional identity and their livelihood. Career Guidance practitioners do not do this well. We seem to be afraid of being accused of elitism from within our own professional community if we strive to develop and professionalize our work. The beauty of having a significant differentiation to other disciplines from a marketing perspective is a powerful one, the main one being that people outside – those uncertified – could not promote themselves in our market. International efforts in terms of the NBCC & IAEVG developing a credential for the Global Career Development Facilitator, however, seem to pave a way forward on this issue (see http://ccdf.ca/ccdf2/cms/documents/ccdf_newsletter_2005.pdf)

In Summary

All is not well in the world of career guidance. We desperately need to bring about convergence across all sectors, disciplines and institutions with a stake in careers work. By confronting, profiling and rebalancing the dichotomy that separates the field we would make marketing our services far easier. A fantastic indicator of getting the recipe right in the future would be that more commercial organisations would turn to quasi-public sector career companies for assistance in the career challenge and rectifying the state of engagement in their workforce. This is a goal worth striving for.

I recently spoke with my own career mentor who gave me an excellent angle on selling career guidance. The average salary in the UK is roughly £40,000. The average house in this area is roughly £200,000. The average car is about £20,000. If we work from 20-70 years of age and our career progresses along an average curve of pay rises and inflation we will earn in the region of £2million. If our career is the vehicle that will pay for each of the important commodities in the above list, how come we are happier to pay our Volkswagen or BMW mechanic than we are to pay for our careers guidance?

We need to win over business managers who would benefit from career guidance and help them see our profession as a natural partner. Success would be defined by seeing a lot more enterprising companies looking to the quasi public sector for assistance in developing career development programmes. This can only result from a great cross-sector dialogue and a sharing of best practice.

Right now in the UK we have all kinds of Government initiatives to keep young people in education until they have a degree education or keep them in training until they are 18 or 21 years of age. There are some terrifying statistics to establish that career guidance is either not being taken seriously or not

being delivered at all to mainstream students because up to 60% of training apprenticeships are not completed and some degree courses are losing up to 40% of students before the end of the first term.

Perhaps this is due, in part, to the Governments preoccupation with the disaffected minority and a lack of fairness to students in the mid-range majority who no longer benefit from a full-blown guidance curriculum. Therefore, as a profession we need to work with policy-makers to help them appreciate the dynamic correlation between effective career guidance, economic competitiveness in the 21st Century and bridging the skills gap in relation to GDP. All critical economic factors in the next fifty years.

Marketing career guidance relies upon making the process tangible and the results visible. It is crying out for distinction. This can only stem from a reciprocal understanding, greater engagement with stakeholders and the destruction of that unhelpful dichotomy. By coming together as a disciplined profession, our markets can only grow stronger and every citizen, including the guidance worker, will win.

Faktaboks:

Fulde navn: Duncan Bolam (duncanbolam@careerdovetail.co.uk)

Efternavn: Bolam

Fornavn: Duncan

Stilling: Career Strategist

Firma: Career Dovetail

Adresse (arbejde): 4 East Hill Court
DK-RH8 9AD Oxted
UK

Adresse (privat): 4 East Hill Court
DK-RH8 9AD Oxted
UK

Arbejde: 01883 723 901

Privat: 01883 723 901

Mobiltelefon: 07971 224 262

E-mail: duncanbolam@careerdovetail.co.uk

Web-side: <http://www.careerdovetail.co.uk>