

## **MAXIMIZING INDIVIDUAL POTENTIAL THROUGH PROFESSIONAL COUNSELING ACTIVITY**

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### **Abstract**

Counseling activity is a professional practice, which offers the individual multiple development possibilities, in terms of self-knowledge and specialized assistance for making a correct and realistic decision regarding the educational and/or professional path. In this sense, this article proposes for debate and analysis a series of elements that any specialist in this field must have in mind when practicing this activity. Also, the paper emphasizes the need for professional counseling that every individual feels, consciously or not, in order to build and develop their professional career. The counseling activity is a democratic relationship, which takes place in a collaborative professional framework, is part of a process and always has an ethical purpose, being adapted to a specific context and a certain culture. We all want to build a successful career, and in this sense we must remember that we have a dynamic process to go through, in which education, indeed, plays an essential role, but the counseling activity comes in support of it, helping the individual to realize their individual potential.

**Keywords:** counseling, successful career, education, self-knowledge, effective communication, personal development

## 1. What is career guidance and how is it achieved?

In summarized terms, career guidance is a process that helps us determine our strengths and weaknesses, interests, values, aptitudes and, on this basis, explore possible career development paths. Career guidance, also known as vocational counseling or career counseling, is the process by which a person is guided in the search for a profession that suits his profile. The ultimate goal is to match individuals' interests, skills, and personality with a position for which they are qualified

As its name suggests, *career guidance uses a person's vocation as a starting point in their job search*. *Vocational counseling* guides people looking for a job towards potential career paths, based on both a curricular and psychosocial approach (Bersan, Dumitru, 2023, p. 27). That is, through interviews and psychometric tests, the job seeker's motivations, talents and goals are explored. After this information has been analyzed, the different job options available are presented and the opportunities within each alternative are discussed to find the perfect job *When is this needed?* Although it is best to have career guidance services as early as high school, near the beginning of student life, it is never too late to explore which jobs can guarantee a more fulfilling professional life.

The qualities of each person determine the positions in which they will be able to develop their full potential. Therefore, it is essential to know ourselves, to ensure that the educational/professional path we choose really suits all aspects of

our life and way of being. However, it is not just about examining individual interests or professional skills, but knowing how to capitalize on them.

The great structural transformation (technological, economic and social) of our times generates profound changes in all human activities, but especially in those of a socio-professional nature. According to specialized literature, *new contents, new means, new methods and new social forms of work have a significant impact on the way professionalism is shaped* (Bieck, 2021). The personal qualities, skills and competences that are needed today to enter the labor market and to develop in any profession.

The perspective of educational counseling has gradually evolved from a service-based approach to support programs, with the belief that schools are essential agents of change and that external support should have a flexible and highly contextualized orientation, guiding and encouraging the development of the individual. Counseling plans are one of the main elements driving change for schools to improve and move forward as a measure of learning outcomes. In a socio-professional environment in deep evolution, new professional families, new careers and qualifications appear, which represent new challenges for pupils/students. It is becoming more and more necessary to learn how to navigate an ever-changing job market. For this reason, not only schools, but also the business environment and the political environment attach more and more importance to vocational guidance.

Career guidance is an effective way to find out what you want to do and how you can do it. The fundamental factor of a successful vocational orientation is the cooperation and determination of the individual in achieving his goals. The counselor will only facilitate making the best decision based on the counselee's own standards. Through career counseling, counselees can become self-

sufficient: counselors provide them with the tools and strategies necessary for them to self-direct themselves autonomously (Axinte, 2018, p. 78).

There are a multitude of situations throughout your professional life that may require the help of an advisor. Some of the most common situations that can occur and the phrases that accompany them are as follows:

-*Discovery*: starting a career - "I don't know how or where to start", "It's not what I've been told".

-*Unemployment*: re-entering the labor market after a long period of inactivity.

-*Help in building effective job search tools* - "I don't know how to make a good CV", "I don't know what a portfolio is", "I don't know if my CV is good".

-*Help to get through the selection processes* - "I have interviews, but I'm never the selected person, what am I doing wrong?".

-*Change*: professional stagnation - "I need a change".

-*Entrepreneurship*: "I'm tired of working for others", "I want to be my own boss".

-*Lifelong learning*: "I've been thinking about doing a master's for a long time, but there are so many... What should I study?".

-*Improving personal branding*: "I want to know how to promote myself better", "I don't know who to contact".

-*Mentoring* - "I want to help other professionals".

-*Improving professional skills*: The counselor guides those who participate in career guidance to test their skills needed for the set objectives.

Thus, professional counseling offers technical help in order to achieve any of the above objectives. But, if we speak in global terms, career counseling can offer a multitude of cross-cutting skills and benefits, such as: self-knowledge and defining the professional profile, since participating in a career counseling

process inevitably involves a process of awareness of the labor market, of the weak points that the individual has in relation to the labor market, of the strong points in relation to the competition.

In the *school context*, three main aspects of guidance can be distinguished: personal, school and professional: personal, school and vocational guidance. In all of these, the counselor's activity has two main dimensions: *diagnosis* (description and etiology) and *therapy of possible anomalies or dysfunctions*. In both dimensions, the counselor can work on an individual or collective level, collaborating with the other main educational agents, the family and the teaching staff of the school institution, making available to them, first of all, his particular knowledge about the subject and the mechanisms of development. Usually, he is also asked to contribute to the dissemination of psychopedagogical principles and aspects that have the greatest impact on the quality of the educational act.

## **2. Stages of professional counseling**

The coordinated career guidance methodology focuses on what we call *early guidance*, covering the following three stages: *vocational, academic* and *professional* (Burtnett, 2021, p. 53).

### ***Vocational guidance***

The vocational dimension of guidance represents the interactive process between the individual and his environment, based on self-knowledge and the ability to analyze the context, which allows him to identify his personal interests, values and abilities. This is the first stage of the orientation process and is the basis for the other dimensions of the process: the educational dimension and the vocational dimension, so as to align subsequent decisions with the interests and values of the individual.

The process of defining a vocation has a close relationship with *self-esteem*, the concept of "self" and self-confidence, and is deeply affected by the values and trends prevailing in the society in which the young person develops. We are therefore talking about a living and open process, because people differ in terms of their abilities, interests and personalities. In addition, professional skills and preferences, the situations in which people live and work, and their self-concept change over time and with experience. This makes adaptation and decision making an ongoing process.

The development of *self-concept* is the product of the interaction between skills, abilities, opportunities in life and the level of approval expressed by the environment: teachers, family, superiors and colleagues in the tasks performed. This means that we are not born with a predefined vocation, but that we shape it throughout our lives, and for this reason, the opportunities for vocational exploration offered by school, family and companies are critically important.

### ***Academic orientation***

Academic orientation focuses more on educational pathways than on subsequent professional activity. It mainly tries to ensure that students get good and contrasting sources of information about the educational offer, which enable them to orientate themselves.

From this orientation point of view, aspects such as:

- Choice of educational paths in general school and high school, optional subjects and so on.
- Knowledge of vocational education cycles and existing university degrees, as well as content, enrollment conditions, structure, duration, etc.
- Identifying the technical and general requirements of different higher education and professional fields.

- Knowledge of the various types of higher education institutions and study methods (universities: full-time or part-time studies, dual education, distance education, etc.).
- The conditions and procedures for access to secondary and advanced studies and higher cycles, as well as to university degrees, where the student wishes to continue his education (enrollment procedure, passing grades, enrollment costs, etc.).

### ***Career guidance***

Career guidance is a continuous and gradual process that accompanies us throughout our lives and that favors career decisions. It is based on the analysis of different professions (current and emerging) and knowledge of the situation and trends in the labor market. At its core, it's about providing the information, real-world contact experiences, and tools necessary for people to define and update their professional project on their own and with the help of an expert.

#### *Professional guidance in the school environment refers to:*

- Encouraging self-assessment of skills and interests and contrasting them with professional activities.
- Providing opportunities, real experiences, contact with the professional world (visits to businesses, accompanying professionals, internships, etc.).
- Facilitating the early acquisition of knowledge and information about the world of work.
- Analysis of the skills and abilities required in different professional fields, which may be of interest to the learner.
- Developing the knowledge, skills and competences required by the professional profiles to which students aspire and by professional life in general.

- Encouraging entrepreneurial thinking and activity.
- Making students responsible for their own lives and careers.

In this article, we also aim to identify what a coordinated *career orientation entails*? If we summarize the above definition of career counseling and guidance as the process that accompanies a person in making decisions about his current or future career path, it is pertinent to ask ourselves the questions: *What exactly does a coordinated career counseling consist of? What value does this methodology bring? Coordinated career guidance is a career guidance methodology based on the following fundamental principles:*

1. The involvement of all key actors in the career guidance process: young people, families, schools, companies and others (higher education institutions, public administrations, employment services). In order to achieve a high impact on the development of skills for building the academic-professional path, guidance must count on the active and gradually autonomous participation of the student, the involvement of the guidance counselor, the management team and the teaching staff, the constant accompaniment and involvement of families, such as and seeking alliances and cooperation with the business environment.

2. Systematization of the student's vocational development process.

3. Vocational guidance methodology implementation model, coordinated in schools with a systematized procedure (phases, tools, documents), which facilitates the design and development of an action plan in quality parameters.

4. Promoting professional guidance from an early age, encouraging young people to be prepared to make decisions about their professional future.

*Coordinated career counseling and guidance aims to support schools in order to develop their own career guidance plan, based on the previously stated principles, providing practical guidance as well as working materials for schools to integrate and systematize the activities carried out.*



To develop a comprehensive plan, given limited staff resources, planning and implementation must be as efficient as possible. This can be achieved precisely by using tested structures, by integrating actions that are already taking place and by capitalizing on previous experience as well as available skills. Thus, we propose that any planning process begins with an initial diagnosis of the reality of the educational institution, identifying which activities, skills, materials or professional guidance resources are already available.

Once we have the structural requirements for effective and sustainable career guidance, we can systematically apply a career guidance plan based on quality management. Implementation takes place on the basis of and is closely related to planning. The most important aspect of this concept is that professional guidance and corresponding actions are integrated into the systematic development or the so-called quality management system of an institution. In this way, these actions support each other and create synergies.

Current approaches to vocational guidance focus on the individual as an active subject and not as a passive receiver of the process (Negovan, 2021, p. 56). Therefore, it is not a matter of prescriptive and directive counseling, but of an educational intervention that seeks to revalue the potential of individuals through self-reflection, self-knowledge, autonomy, strategic planning and involvement in the decision-making process. Career guidance is a particularly necessary intervention in the transition process of adolescents and young people to active life, as this is a life stage of intense search for personal and social identity, the aim of which is to obtain the autonomy necessary to assume responsibilities in the essential activities of the society of which they belong. The transition process begins after physiological growth and mental maturation, which allows people to ask themselves: *Who am I and who do I want to be? What do I want to do, what do I know how to do and what do I need to know how to do?*

The end of such a process comes when all these questions can be answered, or at least when a certain degree of autonomy and responsible participation is achieved in the most relevant fields of action of each society.

In what follows, we propose a synthesized model of professional career planning, which must take into account four stages:

1. **Self-awareness** (Who am I?) aims to promote the awareness of what each person can and wants to be (self-concept), based on the exploration of his knowledge, skills, aptitudes and interests, together with the circumstances that surround him, from whose assessment self-esteem is generated, determined by experiences, expectations and attributions. This stage helps to explore one's own capacities, competences and motivations.

2. **Opportunity awareness** (Where am I?). The aim is to make people aware of the variety of training and work opportunities available to them, the demands and requirements of different occupations and the personal, social and economic challenges and satisfactions they offer. This stage, rather than conveying information, aims to encourage people to locate, process and critically position themselves in relation to it.

3. **Decision-making** (What to do?) develops the necessary skills to generate alternatives, interrelating what each person wants and values with their own limits and the possibilities of the environment in which they are, until making contrasted decisions consciously and responsibly.

4. **Transition** (How will I do it?) facilitates the learning needed to anticipate how to apply the decisions taken and to deal with their consequences, by planning actions in the short, medium and long term, depending on the potential and resources of each person, as well as personal needs and aspirations.

For the application of this model, it is necessary to differentiate between the three stages that are repeated cyclically in every decision-making process: the

accumulation of knowledge/information, decision and realization. In the first stage the counselor guides the individual to reflect on his own person, in the second stage the different professional alternatives and their consequences are analyzed (opting for those professions that are more in line with one's own interests and abilities, after taking into account the requirements of these), following that in the third stage the short-term actions and the measures to be taken are planned (for example, to make ourselves known through CV, cover letter, to present ourselves at the interview, projecting the personal brand on the networks social) etc.

In the decision-making process, we must put the young person at the center of any professional guidance process, so that he is the active protagonist of his own history. As can be seen, the promotion of professional orientation, especially with regard to the maturity of the career choice, is carried out in two directions: internally, by creating the conditions for individual development and self-evaluation, and externally, by facilitating access to the complex world of work, of universities and careers. In this way, students learn to find information, analyze it and evaluate it when making decisions. Consequently, the diagnosis of students' competences provides valuable information about the interests, qualities and deficiencies of each of them and is essential for the selection and implementation of the most favorable intervention measures for their development.

Like any other action plan, the professional career development plan must be evaluated, tracking the extent to which the set objectives have been achieved. Through evaluation, both the planning and the implementation of the professional counseling program as a whole can be verified. The obtained results provide a starting point for optimizing the quality of specific actions, but before starting this process, there is a need to develop specific evaluation standards. Thus,

communication is taken into account, the way in which the established objectives were reached, the barriers encountered during the actions. In other words, a comparison is made between the reference state and the actual state.

Possible key questions in the evaluation process:

- *To what extent are we satisfied with the communication between the actors involved in professional guidance?*

- *What problems arise during the implementation of professional guidance stages?*

- *To what extent are our career guidance activities implemented as planned?*

- *To what extent are our career guidance concepts and standards met?*

- *Where do we need to intervene and what aspects can be improved/changed?*

- *What have the actions achieved since the last evaluation?*

The evaluations of the professional/educational route have the role of contributing to the optimization of processes and actions, but also invite us to reflection. For the evaluation process and its result to be useful, the objectives must be concretely formulated, to be verified and measured (Bersan, Dumitru, 2023, p. 34). Also, the evaluation of the professional planning and the implementation of the action plan has the role of analyzing our recorded progress, but also of providing us with the necessary information to adjust our action plan, as there are situations in which professional or personal circumstances can change or new opportunities may arise.

In conclusion, career planning is an ongoing process involving several steps to help individuals set and achieve their career goals. Although the specific steps may vary depending on the context and individual needs, they often include the following: self-assessment, exploring options, setting goals, developing an

action plan, implementing the plan, revising the plan, or evaluating and maintaining professional development.

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