

Empowerment & Career Guidance:

Practical Tips for the Career Guidance Practitioner

In our career guidance practise we adopt an approach that is focussed on increasing the confidence and self-esteem of the service user; what we would describe as '**empowerment**' of the service user.

The concept of empowerment is very complex and heavily theoretical! It's linked to the Radical Theory of career guidance and we would suggest further reading and research if you want to learn more about this.

In relation to our own career guidance practise, we would simply describe empowerment as a process of supporting and enabling people from low income disadvantaged backgrounds to recognise their own power and ability to challenge and change their situation; to gain the confidence to believe in themselves and take actions to achieve their career goals.

Whilst we would strongly advocate use of this approach in all career guidance practise, we believe it is particularly important in our work with people from disadvantaged areas in the UK. People who experience disadvantage often have multiple barriers to overcome to enable effective engagement in employment e.g. negative experience or exclusion from mainstream education leading to low skills and qualifications, long term unemployment, feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, low confidence and low self-esteem.

Effective re- engagement of people from these target groups has demanded an alternative approach; one which places the service user at the heart of the guidance process, supporting them to have a voice in identifying goals and appropriate ways to achieve them. We find this approach highly effective in building confidence, supporting re-engagement and achievement of positive outcomes.

As guidance practitioners, we play a central role in facilitating this process through our interaction with service users. The basis of our approach is to build trust and mutual respect, to value and validate the perspective, knowledge and experience of the service user and to work in ways that actively engage the service user to increase their control in decisions around employment and career options. We encourage, support and enable them to make informed choices.

The role of the career guidance practitioner and the nature of the interaction between the practitioner and service user is therefore of vital importance to us. The underlying values, beliefs, behaviour and attitude of the career guidance practitioner is crucial in terms of ability to effectively facilitate and support confidence building and empowerment of the service user.

Practical tips on how to put this approach into practise in practitioner service user interactions:

- Develop awareness of yourself as a practitioner. Who are you? What type of background do you have and how has this influenced your underlying values, beliefs and biases? Yes biases! We all have them! These will influence how you perceive and interact with service users.

- Be aware of the wider context in which you practise career guidance and the impact this may have upon employment and career opportunities. This is the context in which service users live and seek employment and career opportunities so it is essential to equip yourself with good knowledge and understanding to inform your approach. For example, in the North East of England the decline of former major employers in coal mining, ship building and other heavy industries has resulted in a dramatically changed employment landscape and has led to entrenched poverty and social inequality in this part of the UK. Employment insecurity is now a common factor in many North East England communities. This presents many challenges for our career guidance practise.
- Listen carefully to the service user and value their perspective. Remember people don't all view the world in the same way so don't assume you fully know or understand what the world looks like through the eyes of the service user!
- Validate and value clients existing knowledge and experience. In our work with disadvantaged people, service users often comment on how interactions with professionals can make them feel inferior, and unimportant; the professional acts as the 'expert' using power over the client to portray their knowledge as the true correct valid knowledge and opinion. This serves to reinforce feelings of inferiority insignificance and disempowerment.
- Gain insight and understanding of the service user's personal biography. Be actively interested in their background and story as this can provide real insights into existing knowledge and experience and also underlying barriers or issues a person may need support to overcome.
- Recognise and acknowledge the potential impact both opportunities and constraints, related to a client's location within the wider social, economic and patriarchal structures of society. For example, cultural values and traditional beliefs will influence perception of self and perception of potential career options. Supporting service users to increase awareness of these factors and how this can limit or constrain them is a really powerful way to increase confidence. We find working with people in small groups who share a similar experience for example women, young people or people living in a specific geographical location works really well. We facilitate conversations regarding experience of education, employment etc.
- Work hard to build a relationship of trust with clients. Remember, it is not only the practitioner perception of the service user that impacts on the quality of the interaction, but also the way in which the service user perceives the practitioner!
- Acknowledge that sometimes people lack confidence and maybe don't initially voice their dreams and aspirations. In our experience, it is only after building relationships of trust that people feel confident and comfortable enough to share their inner thoughts, concerns and dreams.
- Encourage and support clients to dream and aspire e.g. ask the client what in an ideal world they would love to do? What do they want to achieve? Open up the possibility that they can actually achieve dreams and make it clear that

you believe they can achieve. I remember as young mother, I desperately wanted to return to education but didn't dare tell anyone as I was afraid they would laugh. Finally, I met a fantastic practitioner who I trusted and felt confident enough to confide in and share my aspirations.

- Really important - support planning of realistic steps towards achievement of goals – e.g. acknowledge the dream job, fantastic, now let us look at small achievable steps you can take towards achieving this goal.