

# CAREER COUNSELLING TECHNIQUES



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Career counselling is a personal experience for both counsellor and client. The nature of this experience varies from person to person and from context to context. Therefore, trying to get a handle on this process is, at best, a difficult task. Issues of philosophy, style, strategy and mandate all come together in a particular situation at a particular time to create a particular career counselling experience. To suggest that there is a career counselling process, or one acceptable system of career counselling techniques, is to ignore the uniqueness of this experience for both counsellor and client. Thus, the first message that I would like to leave with you is that, at some point and on some level, you will need to develop your own set of career counselling techniques and processes.

This manual is really a description of how I go about career counselling. In this regard, it is very much a personal journey. Furthermore, if you were to ask me next week to describe my model of career counselling, I'd probably have some different things to say—new ways of thinking about some things, additional insight on others, and the realization that some of it just doesn't work any more. This is the second message that I'd like to leave with you: That counselling is a dynamic experience. Like healthy humans, a counselling process is truly alive when it continues to grow and change, when it adapts to new experiences and when it comes to new understandings. A counselling process that is static, that doesn't change and cannot accommodate new information or ideas quickly becomes of limited value to anyone.

As you proceed through these materials, it would be helpful to keep these points in mind:

1. I am merely presenting my way of doing things (because it's the one I'm most familiar with).
2. You will need to develop your own way of doing things.
3. You should expect your way of doing things to constantly evolve and grow.

Put another way, you will need to personalize and constantly adapt your counselling style and techniques. Hopefully, you will find some help in the pages that follow.



## Introduction

**O**ne week before sitting down to begin writing this manual, I had the most profound experience of my life—witnessing the birth of our first child. Nicole Marie, a strapping 9 pound 10 ounce baby girl, entered this world at 3:52 in the morning after a long and difficult labour. My wife’s pregnancy was fraught with difficulty, but our little girl is healthy and happy. I can’t help but wonder what lies in her future: Will she experience a world where her gender will not be a barrier to doing the things she wants to do? What obstacles will she have to overcome to find satisfaction in life? How will she be able to cope with a world that is changing so rapidly? I also wonder about my own life: How will I adapt to my new role as father? How will the introduction of this precious little girl into my world affect the other roles I have acquired? It seemed that I was looking at life from an entirely different perspective than before.

In many ways, the issues I was wrestling with could be likened to the kinds of issues people face in planning their careers. The birth of Nicole left me wondering how I would learn to manage my new existence, and it is this concept of “management” that is central to career planning. In its most general form, career planning is all about developing ways to manage one’s path in life. It is true that we can never totally account for all events, nor can we predict what the future has in store for us. However, by using some sound planning principles, we may become more effective managers of the events that fate or the gods throw our way, and thereby increase the odds that our life and work will hold some meaning for us.

The general theme that I will present in this manual is that career planning is really a process of managing change. As career counsellors, your primary task is to help others to manage change in their lives. Later on, I will describe some of the key components of that process, and present some ideas of how you can develop the tools needed to make the processes work. First however, it is necessary to set the context for the processes of change management. The rest of this chapter is organized under the following sections:

1. **Prerequisite expectations and review of terms**
2. **Client outcomes of career counselling**
3. **Meaningfulness for the career counsellor**
4. **The 5 critical career counselling processes**
5. **Basic career counselling tools**

## Prerequisites and Review

The materials that are presented in this manual require 2 general categories of background information and skills. First, you will need to have developed a reasonable facility with basic communication skills used in counselling contexts. These include specific skills sets such as reacting to clients, soliciting responses from them, and structuring interactions. You should also be able to apply these skills in generic communication processes, such as establishing rapport, exploring issues, building client skill repertoires, problem solving and developing social support systems. As a result of the application of your current communication skills, you should be fostering client growth and development by affirming self-worth, giving the client a sense of being heard, fully exploring the issue at hand, identifying barriers to growth and development, and developing strategies for overcoming barriers.

The second category of background information that will be needed is a fairly comprehensive understanding of theories of career development. The works of Parsons, Holland, Super, Tiedeman, Krumboltz, Hackett and Betz, Astin and Gottfredson should be familiar to you. Furthermore, you should have developed a sense of your own theory of career development; this will allow you to take the ideas presented in this manual and adapt them to your style and situation as appropriate. If any of these concepts are new to you, then you may benefit from a review of introductory counselling techniques and theories of career development.

## Client Outcomes of Career Counselling

The work that we do as career counsellors has the potential to have a very real and direct impact on the lives of our clients. Career planning can free individuals from debilitating social or economic situations, in that occupational mobility is often a cornerstone to the development of independence. The young mother who unexpectedly finds herself as the sole support of two young children will need to find the means to support herself and her children; the child of poverty may be destined to repeat a pattern of despair unless viable options are discovered and somehow made possible; the ex-offender will need to find a way of life that does not include actions and individuals that are threatening to society. For all of these people, and hundreds of others that you can think of, independence from the circumstances that bind them requires movement away from a debilitating environment to one that is personally productive; career planning is the most practical way to accomplish this.

Of course, career planning is not restricted to those in society with “special” needs. For



many people, occupations have the potential to provide enhanced self-esteem, and for a courageous few, meaning may be found in one's work. At the very least, effective career planning organizes and directs potential, and helps to make the most of one's opportunities.

By now you may be shaking your heads at the lofty idealism expressed in the magical powers of career planning. To get back down to a more realistic level, I will present the outcomes of career counselling in terms of direct client outcomes, rather than social, economic or cultural outcomes.

Earlier, I suggested that career planning is really about managing change. Change management implies planning, and that is the focal point of career counselling. Thus, the primary client outcome of effective career planning could be stated as the **development and implementation of a master plan**. Within this primary outcome are 6 "sub-outcomes" for the client:

1. A dream or vision (hope);
2. A specified goal (target);
3. A list of alternatives for reaching the goal(s) (options);
4. A specific plan for goal attainment (means);
5. An acceptable career fit (satisfaction and resolution);
6. Self-sufficiency in career process (adaptability and independence).

**A dream or vision.** Solomon recognized the life-giving power of hope when he wrote "Where there is no vision, people perish" (Proverbs 29:18). One of our first tasks as counsellors is to instill a sense of vision or hope in our clients. Without it, growth is stunted, and people emotionally and sometimes even physically wither and die. A sense of vision may be expressed in a variety of ways: vocation, calling, mission, purpose and dream all convey similar meanings. It is this vision that provides the energy to enact plans; it is an enabling force that propels people forward. Unfortunately, many people have been taught to be "realistic" in their life plans, which is usually interpreted to mean "Don't get your hopes up." Most of our schooling and socialization processes teach us to conform, and stifle our creativity. While this sets limits on appropriate behaviour, it also boxes people into the mundane. What we need instead is the freedom to dream, to be creative in deciding who and what we shall be; our potential is only limited by the size of our dreams. Thus, an essential first step in helping people develop a master plan is to give them permission (and the tools) to dream and to shape a vision.

**A specified goal.** If the development of a dream provides the energy for career-life management, then a specified goal provides the focus. Dreaming, left on its own, is unrewarding and direction less. A specific target must be identified in order to give direction to the energy provided by the dream. For our purposes, the goal will usually be an occupational title or a listing of preferred activities in a specified situation. This goal or target must in some way approximate the dream, or the creative energy provided by the dream will be lost.

**A list of alternatives.** In a perfect world, each of us would be able to name the things that most intrigue us, and then happily pursue it until a new “thing” came along. The reality of our existence is considerably different—each of us faces personal, social and economic barriers to the pursuit of our dreams. Furthermore, no one is in a position to predict exactly what the future has in store. The barriers and concomitant uncertainty around ever reaching a specified goal tend to result in two major outcomes: People are hesitant to “dream” because they don’t want to get their hopes up, and when they do dare to dream, they are devastated when an unforeseen barrier prevents them from reaching their goals. Therefore, it is necessary to help people develop the notion of multipotentiality, and to have a multiple-option approach to life planning. Having alternatives means that we don’t get stuck when a plan goes wrong—we simply shift gears, and put “Plan B” into action.

**A specific plan for goal attainment (means).** Action planning puts the “how” behind the “what” of career planning. A dream, even with a focus, quickly loses relevance if there is no discernable path to reach the goal. Action plans may have varied levels of specificity, but they always provide a series of concrete steps that the individual may follow in order to reach the “goal.” Put another way, an action plan takes an intangible idea (I want to be a carpenter) and translates it into a series of manageable, visible steps (first, I need to take a pre-employment course in basic carpentry, then I need to find employment as a carpenter’s helper, etc.). Thus, a well-formulated action plan provides the means to enact a career decision.

**An acceptable career fit.** The general outcome that we work towards is helping our clients find a satisfactory resolution to the career issues that they presented upon entering counseling. You will note that I’ve used the phrase “acceptable” as opposed to “ideal” in reference to the career fit. It may not be possible to reach an ideal goal, but our work is not over until the client at least expresses that the fit achieved is acceptable, given present circumstances. It is also worth noting that the acceptability of the fit is determined by the client, not by the counsellor.

**Self-sufficiency in career process.** The ultimate outcome that we work towards is to foster adaptability and independence in our clients. It should be our long-range objective to make

ourselves redundant in our clients' lives as soon as possible. This means that we do not hoard the technology and knowledge that we use to assist our clients, but rather that we work towards teaching the process of career development at the same time that we facilitate the content of clients' career decisions. In this way, our clients become empowered to manage the transitions in their lives and reduce their reliance on "expert" assistance.

## Meaningfulness for the Career Counsellor

Meaning is an idiosyncratic construction; each of us finds value and relevance in different ways. Career counsellors may find meaning in a number of different aspects of their work and may find one career counselling setting "meaningful" and another "humdrum." At the core of effective counselling practice, however, there do seem to be some common elements. First is a genuine desire to help people grow and develop. This, if you recall, is the primary outcome of counselling (*i.e.*, fostering growth and development). This implies that effective career counsellors seem to be counsellors first, and career specialists second. Second, within the realm of helping others grow and develop, the career counsellor seems to find intrinsic reward from practical interventions that have (or may have) dramatic and/or immediate impact on the client. It is very rewarding to assist people to take control of their lives and to see direct evidence of such changes. Third, career counsellors often seem to be people with a mission; many see the principles and techniques of career counselling as being the most appropriate approach for addressing social and educational inequities. Thus, good career counsellors take pride in helping people grow, appreciate the practical nature of the career intervention, and usually have a heightened sensitivity to social iniquity.

A word about what is not salient for the effective career counsellor is in order. There is a popular misconception among many schools of therapy and counsellor training that career counsellors are people who are uncomfortable with or cannot function as "personal" counsellors or therapists. The people whom I would consider to be good career counsellors are, without exception, first and foremost skilled counsellors. Salience for them comes not from escaping from more "difficult" forms of intervention, but rather from the belief that the career intervention includes other forms of counselling, and that it is the most practical and compatible approach for them to use. Those people that do enter career counselling from the perception that it is somehow easier than other forms of therapeutic intervention are more similar to the people who enter the teaching profession because they believe it to be easier than other disciplines. The latter generally make poor teachers, and the former poor counsellors.