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SHAPING THE NEW NORMAL: PRACTISING CAREER GUIDANCE IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS



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What is the potential of career guidance in a time where the coronavirus is disrupting work and life as we know it? How can we as career practitioners respond in a situation where we do not know what the world will look like and where we, as well as the citizens we meet, will have more questions than answers? In this article we argue, that supporting people to manage their way through the crisis is not enough. Career guidance should also help people to think about and shape the 'new normal'.

The coronavirus reminds us that human beings are not the only actors on the planet and that sometimes things happen that aren't the result of any government's policy. It dramatises the fact that we are vulnerable and that what we take for granted can fall apart quite quickly. These insights are important and have profound implications for our careers.

Understandably governments have been focused on the health implications of the virus. But, the coronavirus is bringing about major shifts in people's working lives as well as their health. Career guidance is about helping people to think about how they want to live their lives and combine their work, learning and leisure. These questions have huge relevance in the middle of the crisis, and they will become even more important in the post-virus future. Governments need to fund career guidance as part of the package of measures that they are offering in response to the crisis.

A new role for career guidance?

Recognising the importance of career guidance in the current situation begs the question, what should it be focused on in this new situation? It would be easy for career guidance to go into crisis-management mode and focus solely on helping people to manage their careers through the pandemic. Such an approach would inevitably focus on adaption and adjustment, for example helping people to figure out how to conduct an interview over video-conferencing software or explain to an employer why they lost their job during the pandemic. Managing crises is an important part of career guidance, but on its own it runs the risk of placing people in a passive role.

During the crisis people are experiencing a new reality. We are separated from each other, but there is also a new collective purpose. Governments are revealing that they can do far more than we ever thought to support the weak and vulnerable and protect people's livelihoods. These experiences might hold something that individuals and communities want to and will take further.

In such a situation career professionals should help people to understand that there are a range of different solutions to this crisis and that we need to think them through carefully and consider who benefits from each of them. This kind of analysis can help individuals to consider how to career more effectively and to recognise that careering is not just about learning to work from home, but also about exerting pressure for better sick pay, healthcare, job security and control over the direction of the economy.

Question what is normal

What is normal is shifting quickly in the current situation. Your clients and students will be engaged in a thousand micro-struggles about where and when they are expected to work, what work consists of, what constitutes sickness, stress and wellness and so on. As careers professionals we should be encouraging individuals to question and challenge what is 'normal' and supporting them to have an influence on what kind of 'normal' working lives emerge from the pandemic.

The 'normal' careers that we hope for are those in which human beings can flourish, rather than ones in which



people spend all their time working. Career is not just about paid work; rather, it is a thread that runs through your life joining your paid work, with your unpaid work, education, family time, leisure, citizenship and everything else. We need to help people to create a new normal where they can live better lives, connect to those around them and enjoy, and safeguard, the environments in which they live.

Encourage people to work together.

The crisis has helped people to see the way in which their lives are inter-connected. We have addressed the coronavirus collectively, as individuals cannot fight it alone. As the new normal emerges we should encourage people to talk to each other about how their perspective has been changed by the crisis. We can facilitate individual reflection on work and career, but when a crisis is this big it is unlikely that any individual has all the answers. We need to offer more group work and career learning opportunities that help people to come together and work through these changes.

Work at a range of levels

The crisis has highlighted the inter-connection of political decisions and individual's livelihoods. It has also shown how government can be quickly influenced to change its policy in the light of criticism and pressure from below. As careers professionals we need to recognise that our work isn't just about work with individuals. Helping people to build meaningful careers requires intervention into organisational, social and political systems as well as advice, counselling and education. We need to remember that when we are sounding the alarm about injustice or highlighting a government policy that hampers peoples' careers, we are doing career guidance just as much as when we are in the interview room or in front of a career education class.

Help people to analyse the situation and challenge it

The economic impacts of the coronavirus are still unclear, but they are likely to be substantial. We can expect unemployment to rise, occupational shifting to increase, and job content to change. It is already clear that the coronavirus is not going to affect everyone equally. Older people, those with pre-existing conditions and the immunocompromised look set to be made increasingly vulnerable to losing work, health and potentially their lives. Meanwhile, precarious workers, those on low pay and those without reserve capital also face unique challenges that go beyond maintaining their health.

Career professionals can recognise the specific needs of these groups, help them to see injustice and inequities in their treatment and organise in solidarity with them to ensure that they can still have access to a decent career. They can also help people to understand the situation, not just to react to it on a personal level. This means to encourage people to think about the politics of the situation and consider where they stand on the approaches that are being taken by governments, businesses and other actors.

Not our final words

We don't know what is going to happen next, but we are sure that career guidance is going to be more important than ever while the crisis unfolds and in its immediate aftermath. We hope that this article has stimulated some ideas and we would be interested to hear from anyone who is trying to put these things into practice.

Find out more about our ideas on the Career Guidance for Social Justice website <https://careerguidancesocialjustice.wordpress.com/>

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