Careers work in the blogosphere:
Can careers blogging widen access to career support?

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Abstract

This chapter explores the phenomenon of careers blogging. It argues that the blogosphere is an important arena within which people are having career conversations. It then goes on to define a typology of careers blogs which distinguishes between personal career blogs, career support blogs and careers work blogs. The chapter focuses on a discussion of career support blogs which it seeks to contextualise as a form of career support or career guidance.

The chapter demonstrates that the themes which career support blogs focus on are similar to those which career guidance practitioners focus on in other forms of delivery. Furthermore the business models that underpin career support blogs are also related to broader career support business models. However, it notes that the 'government pays' and 'charity pays' models are not represented in the sample of blogs identified here. It is possible that the lack of public or third sector funded career support blogs has an impact on the assumed audience for career support blogs. In general it appears that career support blogs are aimed at working adults although this may say more about how public sector funders have embraced blogging than about the inherent suitability of the mode for a wider range of clients.

The chapter finishes by exploring how career support blogging fits into wider careers practice. An argument is made that the careers sector should engage further with career support blogging as it offers a practitioner-led, interactive and cost-effective form of service delivery.

Introduction

Careers blogs are an established part of the online career support landscape. Google reveals 13,300 blogs which use the word 'career' in the title of the blog[1] and this number is likely to be the tip of the iceberg. However, it is a phenomenon that has grown up without much scrutiny from the research community and with little engagement from public sector careers practitioners. This chapter will explore the practice of careers bloggers, consider whether it offers a new model of delivery and ask whether it facilitates greater access.

Existing research has explored the role that technology can play in delivering career guidance (Watts, 1996; 2002; Bosley, Krechowiecka and Moon, 2005; Sampson, 2006; Watts and Offer, 2006). One finding has been that professionals are in need of models that enable them to fit together guidance practice with new technologies (Barnes and La Gro, 2009; Bimrose, Barnes and Atwell, 2010). However despite these difficulties there is evidence to suggest that the latest wave of technologies, especially social tools, have considerable potential for career guidance (Hooley, Hutchinson and Watts, 2010a).

Blogging is one area in which models of practice are easy to find. However despite the prevalence of careers blogs there has been no attempt to examine the nature of their content or explore the approach to interaction employed by the bloggers. This chapter will open up a discussion around careers blogging and examine how these practices sit within the broader practice and ethics of career guidance, particularly in relation to the issue of ensuring equality of access to career support services.

Defining our terms what is a careers blog?

Cann, Dimitriou and Hooley (2011) define a blog as follows:

> Short for 'Web log', blogs are websites composed of serial short or medium-length entries. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse-chronological order. Most blogs are interactive, allowing visitors to leave comments and even message each other via widgets on the blogs and it is this interactivity that distinguished them from other static websites. Blogs may be maintained by an individual or collaborating group.

Blogs present the most recently posted information first so that readers encounter information in a temporally relevant way. An additional key feature of blogs is that they are not merely broadcast channels but rather provide sites for interaction and the formation of temporary communities of interest. To illustrate how this works it is useful to explore a particular example.

Penelope Trunk is a careers blogger based in the United States. Her blog Penelope Trunk's Brazen Careerist[2] is influential and has led to Trunk becoming a media commentator on the issue of career. On 16th February 2011, Trunk posted an article on her blog entitled 'The best way to deal with getting fired'. A day later the article had received 49 comments. However these comments are

not all simply responses to Trunks' article; rather the commenters discuss the issues raised in the post amongst themselves and interact with Trunk herself. Trunk's interventions serve to challenge, clarify, encourage and engage. The 49 comments breakdown as follows:

Table 1: Responses to Penelope Trunk's blog post entitled 'The best way to deal with getting fired'.

Initial comments on articles	36
Replies to initial comments	4
Subsequent replies	5
Interventions by Trunk	4

Blogging is therefore an interactive and communicative process as well as a way to transmit information and opinions. Blogging offers a new type of one-to-many communication that does not have any obvious offline equivalents. Exploring the possibilities this offers may therefore be interesting and valuable from the perspective of the delivery of online career guidance.

If a *blog* is a piece of technology that enables a particular type of communication then *blogging* is a practice. It is difficult to estimate the number of bloggers or the size of the blogosphere with any accuracy. However some idea of the scale of the phenomenon can be seen through a recent demographic analysis of the blogosphere (Sysomos, 2010) based on over 100 million blog posts. Given this vast scale it is unsurprising that some of this activity is concerned with issues like career, learning, work, recruitment and work/life balance.

Different types of careers blogs
This chapter will discuss blogs which are overtly focused on the issue of career. It will not examine blogs which discuss career occasionally but are mainly focused on another subject (although this would be an interesting subject for further study). However, this still leaves a wide variety of blogs that exist for highly diverse purposes. It is difficult to discuss Edward Antrobus' blog about his experiences as a new graduate (The Entry Level Dilemma) in the same terms as Helen Curry's blog about the interface between careers guidance and technology (Careers Service 2.0). Careers blogging clearly covers a range of distinctive practices and it would be useful to have a typology of these different

approaches. There have been various attempts to develop typologies that describe the variety of blogging purposes and practices (Herring et al, 2004; Cardon et al, 2007; Lehti, 2011). However, none of these typologies work particularly well in the context of careers blogging. So by focusing on blogs which concentrate on the issue of career it is possible to propose a careers blogging typology as follows.

Table 2: A careers blogging typology

Type	Description	Example
Personal career blog	In which the blogger focuses on their career journey, job seeking or learning.	I want a job at Pixar
Career support blog	In which the blogger provides information, advice and support for others around the issue of career.	Position Ignition
Careers work blog	In which the blogger discusses theory and practice relevant to careers and allied professionals.	Careers in Theory

Each of these different types of career blog would benefit from further study. However, this chapter will focus on *career support blogs* because these represent a conscious attempt to intervene in the career learning of individuals. Developing a greater understanding of this type of careers blogging is essential in order to explore what place the practice of careers blogging has within the wider practice of career guidance.

What kinds of things do careers support blogs discuss?
There are many career support blogs dispensing information, opinions and advice on the web. From this array 25 blogs were chosen and their outputs for November 2010 were coded and analysed. Blogs were identified through Google searches (both through the web search and the blog search tools) and through recommendation from the author's Twitter network[3]. Blogs were analysed if:

- they had made at least one post in November 2010;
- they were broadly focused on the area of career and could be typed as a career support blog;
- the way that posts were archived on the blog made it possible to isolate and identify posts from November 2010. Some blogs either archive thematically or do not have a functional archive; and if
- they were in English.

November 2010 was chosen because it was relatively recent and was a normal working month (in comparison to December which contains the Christmas holiday).

One finding from the process of blog identification was that a large number of blogs post very infrequently or have not been updated for a long time. The process of establishing a blog is a technically simple one which takes minimal resource. However, the process of updating and maintaining a blog requires a sustained investment of time. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that many blogs cease to be updated after a period of activity. An interesting area for further study would be to examine what causes these blogs to become inactive. However, inactive blogs remain available on the web and continue to be indexed by search engines. This requires individuals engaged in career exploration to be aware of the need to attend carefully to the date of publication as well as to other issues around the provenance of the content encountered.

In total 228 blog posts were analysed, drawn from 25 blogs. Posts were coded using codes derived from the data. In total 20 codes were identified. Each post was only coded once and so codings represent the main focus of the post.

Table 3: Coded blog posts

Code	Description	Frequency
LMI	Information about the labour market, occupations, sectors and employers	34
Recruitment and job search	Discussion of the process of job searching and interview and selection processes	29
Well-being	Discussion of the psychological wellbeing of the individual. This includes issues like happiness, self-belief and self-efficacy	22
Work	Discussion about workplace issues and how to be effective in the workplace.	18
Transition and career change	Posts which discuss career movement between different life and job roles. This includes some posts about unemployment.	17
Enterprise	Discussion of issues relating to entrepreneurship, self-employment and portfolio careers	13
News	General updates, often with a focus on the blog or blogger. This also includes announcements and signposts to new resources.	13
Events	Information about fairs, events and workshops	10
Networking and building relationships	Discussion of networking and building relationships.	10
Personal development	Discussion about how to develop skills, abilities and attitudes for your career	10
Work/life balance	Discussion about balancing work with other responsibilities and aspects of life.	10
Miscellaneous	Off topic posts and interesting ways to talk about career.	8
Learning choices	Discussion of learning and course choices. This frequently includes discussion of the career and financial outcomes of these choices	7
Personal brand	Discussion of how to build your personal brand, including building an online profile	7
Promotion and advancement	Discussion of movement and promotion within an organisation or career path	5
Vacancies	Announcement of new vacancies	4
Accessing careers advice	Advice on how to access career support	3
Career choices	Advice on making career choices	3
Volunteering and internships	Discussion of the role of unpaid career building work	3
Skills development	Focused advice on developing a particular skill e.g. presentation skills or use of software	2

Table 3 demonstrates that the topics addressed by careers bloggers are similar to those which would be addressed by other careers practitioners. The top three issues cover understanding the labour market and career roles, being successful in recruitment processes and building a positive self-image. It is anticipated that these issues would be important regardless of the medium through which career support was delivered.

As blog posts are freely available on the web, blogging seems to offer a cost-effective way to deliver careers support. However there are inevitably concerns about quality and access that need to be addressed carefully. Is careers blogging actually serving a minority of digitally literate high achievers or does it also have the potential to be an inclusive mode of delivery that engages a wide range of participants? Careers blogs will be of limited use to those who are not regular or confident internet users. However, there are also limitations to accessing conventional face-to-face career guidance which is usually delivered (in the UK at least) during the working day, in a fixed high street location or attached to an educational institution. Given this, can careers blogging extend the overall reach of career guidance services as well as their efficiency and effectiveness?

Who writes and pays for career support blogs?

The sample of 25 blogs posted a mean of 9 posts during November 2010. The length of blog posts varies from a couple of sentences to many pages, but for all of these blogs there is evidence of consistent and sustained content creation This level of commitment suggests that these blogs are serving a purpose, at least for the individuals who are contributing to them. Of the blogs, 16 were produced by a single author, with the other 9 being produced by a team of authors. In total there were 53 contributors to the 25 blog sample.

The literature around blogging (e.g. Nardi et al, 2004; Gurak and Antonijevic, 2008) has examined why people blog. However the reasons why blogs are written are likely to be different when we move away from social, lifestyle and interest based blogging such as the personal career blogs already discussed. Hou et al (2010) and Luehman and Tinelli (2008) have explored how teacher's experience of blogging has contributed to the development of professional communities of practice and this literature undoubtedly offers approaches that would be useful in examining careers work blogs. However there has been little literature that has examined how blogging is used to provide a service or how that service is enabled by a business model.

Career support bloggers write as a form of intervention in the careers of others and so need to be examined from the perspective of service delivery. Given that blogs are freely available it raises an important question about why people put sustained time and energy into maintaining them. Hooley, Hutchinson and Watts (2010b) have created a typology of business models that underpin the career support market (government pays; charitable body pays; individual pays; opportunity provider pays; embedded career support). It is important to note that although no one is paying to consume any of the blogs in this sample, each of them is underpinned by a business model. So for example in the case of the 'individual pays' model the individual is not paying to access the blog, rather the blog is being used to accompany or market an 'individual pays' service such as one-to-one counselling, training or a book. It is therefore useful to examine the sample blogs from this perspective.

Table 4: Who pays for career blogs?

Business model	Description	Frequency
Government pays	Public sector funded services	0
Charitable body pays	Services funded by a charitable body or philanthropist	0
Individual pays	Services purchased directly by the individual	11
Opportunity provider pays	Services funded by employers or learning providers to gain access to a recruitment market	8
Embedded careers support	Services provided as part of a broader experience such as a learning programme, employment or a professional association	3
Reputation building	Careers blogs that are maintained without funding to develop the reputation or profile of the blogger	3

An additional code of 'reputation building' was added to the five Hooley, Hutchinson & Watts (2010b) codes to cover those blogs that did not appear to be monetised in any obvious way. It is useful to briefly look at an example of this kind of site to illustrate the difficulties of coding some of these blogs. The Ms Career Girl blog is a career blog aimed at 20- and 30-something women. The site is regularly updated by its founder Nicole Crimaldi and a range of guest bloggers.

The site does not feature job vacancies or a call to purchase career coaching or any other kind of product. When interviewed (Hooley, 2010) Nicole Crimaldi revealed that she started Ms Career Girl as 'a "passion project" that allowed me to use the creative side of my brain'. However, she notes that the blog has

boosted her own career leading to 'book offers, media opportunities, free stuff and the invitation to meet and interview people I would've never met without the blog'. Undoubtedly some of these opportunities are paid, but it would be difficult to feel that they pay for the blog in any straightforward way. Furthermore Nicole continues to work in Asset-Based Lending at JP Morgan Chase and to use Ms Career Girl as a reputation-enhancing side project.

While only three of the sample blogs exist solely for reputation building, this is clearly a motivation that is bound up with the activity of many of the other bloggers. So the Headstruck! Career Blog is maintained by organisational psychologist Rob Archer. He sells career counselling and training services to both individuals and organisations. The blog provides a marketing platform to engage potential clients, but it also serves to generally enhance his profile and reputation.

The reputation building aspect is less evident in the 'opportunity provider pays' blogs. So the Science Careers Blog is a multi-author blog which provides content around the Science Careers online jobs board. The blog is therefore offered as a small part of a larger offer to employers who seek to recruit scientific professionals. In general content is kept distinct from advertising, so employers are buying space in Science Careers rather than endorsement from the Science Careers' bloggers. This distinction is not adhered to by all 'opportunity provider pays' blogs. Blogs maintained directly by employers such as the Sodexo Careers blog offer careers advice as part of a strategy to engage readers in the company's recruitment process. While the approach taken on the Sodexo Careers blog may fall short of the kind of impartiality promised by professional career guidance, it does at least offer transparent partiality as it is open about the fact that it is seeking to recruit readers and that advice is offered within this context.

The three embedded career support blogs in the sample are all based within higher education institutions. Each offers a mix of news, vacancy information, event updates and more general content aimed directly at the service users of the institutions' careers service. In these cases the service that is offered might be most accurately described as a blended service where the blog enhances and extends the services that are made available through the existing careers service. It also allows career support to be made available to both the institutions' distance learners and for benefit to spill over to other readers whom the blog is not explicitly addressing.

The fact that none of the sample blogs are paid for through the 'government

pays' or 'charity pays' models does not mean that no blogs exist that are funded in this way. However, there is little evidence to suggest that 'government pays' services have managed to conceptualise where blogs fit into their service offer. Hooley, Hutchinson and Watts (2010b:6) argue that 'current public-sector management, target and inspection regimes tend to make innovation less likely' and it may be that this offers some clues about the apparent lack of 'government pays' blogs. Furthermore many schools and local authorities have stringent firewall policies that frequently screen out blogs and blogging tools alongside the less desirable content that they are designed to exclude. There would be value in a research project examining the nature of firewall construction and investigating some of the consequences of shielding public sector employees and service users from large sections of the web.

Career support blogs are therefore largely maintained by organisations and practitioners seeking to intervene in the career development of individuals. It is possible to situate most career support blogs within established business models which often link to other aspects of the career support market. However this only explains one side of the career blogging conversation. It is possible to identify who is writing the blogs, but further research is clearly needed to understand further who is reading these blogs.

Who are career support blogs addressed to?
There was a high degree of consistency in the assumed readership of the blogs. In general the reader was assumed to have some or all of the following characteristics.

- To have a strong attachment to the labour market. Work instability and redundancy are frequently discussed, but readers are generally assumed to be employed or recently unemployed.
- To have had experience of white collar work. Discussion of the work environment is usually illustrated with office-based or professional examples.
- To have intermediate to high levels of skill and education.
- To have intermediate to high levels of IT skill and digital literacy.

The only blogs that were addressed to a different assumed reader were the three blogs based in university careers services. These blogs had a much more sharply defined readership e.g. Careers and Humanities (assumed audience: Humanities students at the University of Derby).

The blogs in this sample are highly varied in terms of topic, approach and funding model. Where there is a greater degree of similarity is in the assumed audience. In part this is driven by the funding models that are currently underpinning the blogs and in part it is an outcome of the demographics of web use. Given who is paying for the blogs it is unsurprising that they are addressed to segments of the population who are either involved in active job seeking/ career building or who have the money and inclination to purchase other career support services. However this does not mean that career support blogging can only serve these audiences or indeed that it does (this discussion is based on assumed audiences rather than actual audiences). Furthermore as web use continues to trend upward alongside use of other internet technologies and the use of social media (Office of National Statistics, 2010) the potential audience for career support blogs is likely to continue to widen.

How does the practice of careers blogging sit within wider career guidance practice?

Career support blogging offers a well-developed model for delivering careers interventions online. It is a practitioner-led intervention and does not merely facilitate the broadcasting of information, but rather allows for interaction between a practitioner and a client or clients. The evidence presented here suggests that career support blogs cover a wide range of different subjects analogous to the kinds of issues that might be covered in other kinds of career guidance. However the nature of the topics covered and the assumed audiences for the blogs are clearly influenced by the business models that underpin the blogs. Career support blogs offer a scalable model for the delivery of career guidance. Currently they seem to be serving an audience (working adults) who are not well served by existing 'government pays' career support services and are therefore serving to widen access to career support. It seems likely that the potential audience for career support blogs will continue to widen in the future as digital literacy increases. While it is clear that careers blogging will not meet the needs of everyone, there seems to be good reason to experiment further with the approach and to explore how different audiences might engage with it. The fact that most career support blogs are aimed at working adults may say more about the speed with which public sector funders react to technological developments than about the inherent suitability of the mode for a wider range of clients.

Given that there is currently considerable restraint on public spending on careers support, it is possible to argue that the sector should look in more depth

at the potential of career support blogging. Blogging preserves a central role for an expert careers practitioner and may enable the impact of that practitioner to be scaled up. If the aspiration is to provide careers services that are universal, all-age, informed by expertise and cost-effective, careers blogging may be an important part of a new service blend.

Endnotes

[1] This search was conducted on the 19th February 2011 using the string 'inblogtitle:career' and Google's Blog search engine.

[2] Further details of all blogs cited in this chapter are given in the References section.

[3] Twitter is a microblogging tool which facilitates the exchange of information around loosely connected networks. As a careers blogger himself the author of this chapter has developed a network which is highly relevant to the subject of this chapter. The suggestions that were made by this network therefore aided in the identification of appropriate blogs for analysis.

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