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A CAREER IN CAREER

– understanding what career looks like in the career development sector



SIOBHAN NEARY, JILL HANSON AND VICKY COTTERILL PRESENT THE RESULTS OF A RECENT SURVEY OF THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT SECTOR WORKFORCE

Whilst it has been recognised that the UK career development sector has historically been very diverse in its scope, there is limited research available concerning the makeup of this specific labour force. In summer 2016 iCeGs (International Centre for Guidance Studies), in partnership with the CDI undertook a small piece of research to better understand the nature of the current career development workforce and the enablers and barriers for individuals moving into the career development profession.

Through an exploration of previous experience, knowledge and skills that career changers considered transferable, what attracted people to the profession, what facilitated entry and how they view opportunities for their own career development, it was hoped this better understanding would be achieved. Although this is not a systematic evaluation of the whole career development sector it provides an interesting snapshot of the profession at this moment in time.

Methodology

This research was a cross-sectional, mixed-methods design. An online survey was created using Survey Monkey and circulated to a range of potential respondents including, the CDI membership, iCeGS mailing database and contacts linked to both organisations. At the end of the survey respondents were asked to volunteer for in depth interviews of which six were conducted. In total 552 responses to the questionnaire were received. When these were cleansed for incomplete submissions and filtered for the UK, 453 responses were used in the report findings that follow.

Findings

The characteristics of individuals moving into the career development sector

The majority of responses were received from females over 35, and 94% of responses were from people of White ethnicity, with 86.5% identified as White British. This suggests a very homogenous workforce with a lack of age, gender and ethnic diversity.

The qualification levels of those who responded to the survey were high with 93% qualified to degree level and 72% having a postgraduate qualification. This would suggest that many of those responding had undertaken a university based initial training qualification; 89% identified having a relevant professional qualification. Responses were received from practitioners working in all parts of the sector, but the largest response rates came from practitioners working in schools (33%) and higher education (32%).

Factors attracting individuals in to the profession

Individuals sought to enter the careers sector for a range of reasons. The most common ones are presented in the table below.

Thematic responses for what attracted respondents to the profession

THEME	NUMBER OF REFERENCES
Helping people	233
Working with young people	113
Using existing skills and knowledge	78
Sector specific factors	28
Job specific factors	26
Education and what happens post-16	18
Personal development	13
A career guidance professional inspired me	9
Chance	8
Negative experiences of career guidance	4

By far the most prevalent responses focus on wanting to help people and to work with young people. Transitioners also want to make use of their existing skills and knowledge. When exploring the backgrounds that people had come from it is not surprising that many moved into careers from other educational contexts; 71 respondents had come from HR, training and learning and development and 62 had come from a school background. However, the sector is drawing people from a wide range of backgrounds including banking, communications and marketing, third sector, social work, manufacturing, TV production, medicine and health care.

The overwhelming majority of respondents had significant work experience before entering the career profession. Respondents worked an average of thirteen years in other fields before moving into the career sector, however the majority changed career within ten years. 18% of the respondents worked in other fields for over 20 years before their career change, often redundancy contributed to career change.

Many of the respondents referred to skills they had gained in previous education and employment experience as relevant and transferable to the career development sector. A common trend was personal attributes, or 'soft skills'. Communication and interpersonal skills understandably were the most frequently cited. Likewise, listening and empathy featured heavily.

Some forms of knowledge derived from previous relevant work experience was perceived as very useful, whether that be commercial awareness/LMI information or knowledge of academic and teaching environments. Other noteworthy phrases that appeared were 'curiosity' and 'positive mindset', each only being listed once but offering an interesting view of the career development outlook.

The Cloud tag below demonstrates the range of skills that have come into the profession.



All the interviewees maintained that they had not encountered any barriers or difficulties in accessing training for the sector, although half did state that they found the training and development options to be unclear. One mentioned the confusion among job advertisements where seemingly similar roles vary on the required qualification level, some only ask for Level 4 whereas others require Level 6 or higher, this issue has been explored previously in Neary, Marriott and Hooley, 2014. The CDI believes that people calling themselves career advisers should be qualified to at least Level 6.

Have transitioners' expectations been met and what are their views on career progression?

When considering the expectations they had prior to moving into the career development sector, 74% of the respondents said that their expectations had been met. Of those who responded less positively, the main reasons were salary and progression related, with some finding the high levels of administration challenging. The key themes that appeared were: administration and paperwork; opportunities; salary and funding; flexibility and variety, and respect, credibility and reputation.

Key reasons for people to move into this sector revolved around the notion of helping people, working one-to-one with people and making a difference. The focus on admin and paperwork was identified as distracting from the real purpose of their work. Linked to this there was concern about the lack of funding in the sector and the impact this was having on services. Personally, respondents felt that pay was low and there were few opportunities for advancement. Variety within the role was important, this both contributed to and stimulated learning which contributed to work based CPD (Neary, 2016).

There was a general feeling amongst the sample that the profession continues to be perceived as :
"A bunch of nice ladies in cardigans who sit students down for a lovely wee chat about their futures."
Respondents were disappointed that colleagues outside of the career profession did not understand the profession or the complexity of what CEIAG roles actually entail. Provision was perceived as undervalued.

Career trajectories

A number of respondents felt there was a lack of career development opportunities within the CEIAG sector. When asked explicitly about progression, 51% stated that they did not feel there was real opportunity for progression, but this does mean that 49% believe that there was, specifically identified by those working in schools.. Many felt that any progression would mean moving into management and therefore away from the face-to-face work that they joined the profession for. For those working in schools in particular there were limited perceived promotional opportunities available. Higher education and the private sector were seen as providing more opportunities for career progression opportunities.

Conclusions

It is important to remember that this study represents the views of a convenient sample of practitioners, therefore generalisations cannot be directly made to the whole workforce. However, this study has provided some interesting food for thought. Highly-talented and experienced people are attracted to the careers sector; they want to help people and to make a difference. But, the workforce is homogenously female, white and aging. It does not reflect the wider community that practitioners work with.

There are concerns due to the fragmentation of the sector as to career progression opportunities. There are a number of messages which are important for the profession; there needs to be a better articulation of what a career development practitioner does and the impact that the role can have on individual lives. This also needs to be reflected in salary scales. Consideration is also required as to how individuals can develop their career. This is more challenging particularly with the increased number of lone practitioners working in schools and other organisations.

Overall the messages are promising, people want to work in the careers sector, what is needed is to make sure that they are able to develop their careers in the way they wish to help their clients develop theirs.

References

Neary, S., Marriott, J. and Hooley, T. (2014). *Understanding a 'career in careers': learning from an analysis of current job and person specifications*. Derby: International Centre for Guidance Studies. University of Derby.

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