UNDERSTANDING THE DIGITAL SKILLS OF THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT SECTOR

NICKI MOORE LOOKS AT HOW PRACTITIONERS HAVE PROGRESSED IN THEIR USE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

It is ten years since the Career Development Task Force (2010) first suggested that members of the career development sector should improve their digital skills. Since then, several changes have taken place including the publication of the CDI's digital strategy which was referenced in the government's *Careers Strategy* (DfE 2017). Policy makers and thought leaders stress the need for career development practitioners to be digitally literate but the extent to which this vision has been realised has not been clear.

The CDI as part of its digital strategy commissioned the International Centre for Guidance Studies at the University of Derby to undertake research which explored the extent to which digital technology plays a role in the delivery of career development services. It also sought to establish how confident practitioners are in using technology and what their digital training needs are. The research report, *Understanding the use of digital technology in the career development sector* (Moore and Czerwinska 2019), is available on both the iCeGS and CDI websites.

This article raises further questions in response to the research.

Using digital technology to deliver services
Digital technology is widely used by career development practitioners in two ways: firstly to offer services to their clients and secondly to manage business processes. This is an interesting finding because much of the narrative around the use of digital technology in the sector relates to its use to provide career development interventions with clients. The fact that practitioners are increasingly using technology to manage business is seldom explored. However, practitioners are using applications which they believe are making them more efficient and cost effective in their roles. This raises some important questions for example, where does the responsibility lie for this aspect of professional development? Does it lie with the initial training of career development practitioners, their employers, the practitioners themselves, the CDI in setting out the standards of practice, or the government who has asked the sector to address this area of professional competence? The research suggests that all have some responsibility in resolving this issue however the provision of training for practitioners is not without costs and therefore funding must be made available to help fulfil the government's ambition.

The barriers to using digital technology
Time, money and a lack of skills were cited as barriers

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for implementing digital technology in careers work. However, the very essence of what makes digital technology so effective in delivering career services; namely, the fact that it allows practitioners to work remotely, is also one of its downfalls. Practitioners spoke of feeling isolated and guilty when they experienced technology failures. To some extent, training does help to counteract this problem however, the provision of good-quality, accessible and immediate technical support is a big factor in improving practitioner confidence when using digital technology. This will be an important element in realising the government's ambitions but is not without cost to the sector which will need to make this provision available if practitioners' confidence in digital technology is to grow.

Career development practitioners demonstrated their resilience with some working around and across a multitude of organisational platforms, rules and regulations, in order to fulfil their roles. This adds an increased level of complexity to their work. It also raises questions for organisations working together in careers hubs and LEP areas about how systems and processes can be streamlined to ensure that those working across many organisations can do so efficiently and effectively.

Digital competence
As we have seen, infrastructure issues can be a barrier to the use of digital technology, but so can the skills and confidence of the career development workforce. As noted, career development practitioners are prolific in their use of technology and cited forty-seven different applications which they use to deliver services to their clients and to manage their businesses. That said, as a profession, there were areas of digital competence which have been revealed as strengths and others which are revealed as areas for further development. Using the digital capabilities based on those produced by Jisc, (the UK organisation which supports the development of digital capabilities in the higher education sector), the research found that career development practitioners lack confidence in:
• contributing to blogs and public webpages;
• running advanced internet searches, copyright law, survey design and the use of online survey tools, and reacting to being 'hacked';
• fundamental design skills for producing eye catching, engaging and effective information products such as infographics, presentation slides, posters and leaflets;
• using technology to support the development of digital materials and the delivery of learning activities; and
• managing their own online identity and in challenging unacceptable behaviours of others in the use of digital applications.

This raises questions for those tasked with supporting the continuing professional development of the career development workforce. How can training and development opportunities for career development practitioners be prioritised so that they are equipped with the knowledge and skills to use and embed digital technology in their practice? How can existing expertise be maximised and shared so that more people can benefit? How can the training and development opportunities be funded so that the maximum number of practitioners can benefit?

Training and support in using digital technologies
Career development practitioners are clearly demonstrating an appetite for developing their digital expertise. Many are already accessing opportunities for continual professional development such as those offered by their employers and through online sources of help. The research revealed that one of the most important sources of support for developing confidence and expertise is the presence of digitally literate colleagues who are generous in their time and patient in their level of support. There is evidence that this approach is being adopted by some career service providers who are recruiting 'digital champions' or individuals with particular digital expertise to support digital innovation and creativity. This was the third most popular type of development opportunity sought by practitioners after face to face courses and webinars. This does raise questions for those who work as sole traders and who may have little access to the opportunities for free CPD provided to those who work in organisational contexts. The sector will need to explore ways of meeting the digital training needs of this group.

Conclusions
This research was timely and acts as an indication of growing demands for the development and use of digital technology in the career development sector. The research shows that much progress has been made in the last ten years but there is still some way to go before we can be confident that career development practitioners can fulfil the Career Development Institute's ambition "To embed digital literacy in every aspect of the work of career development practitioners." (CDI 2018).
In the next business year the CDI aims to implement aspects of its digital strategy with a focus on digital champions/mentors and CPD – 'Digital Bytes'*.

References

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*'*Digital Bytes'* will consist of short 20-30 minute online training sessions, provided by the CDI on a wide range of digital training, e.g. cyber security for you and your clients; using infographics in presentations; managing your own online identity; contributing to blogs; running advanced internet searches and more.*

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