> " Professional identity is the concept which describes how we perceive ourselves within our occupational context and how we communicate this to others. "

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY:

What I call myself defines who I am.

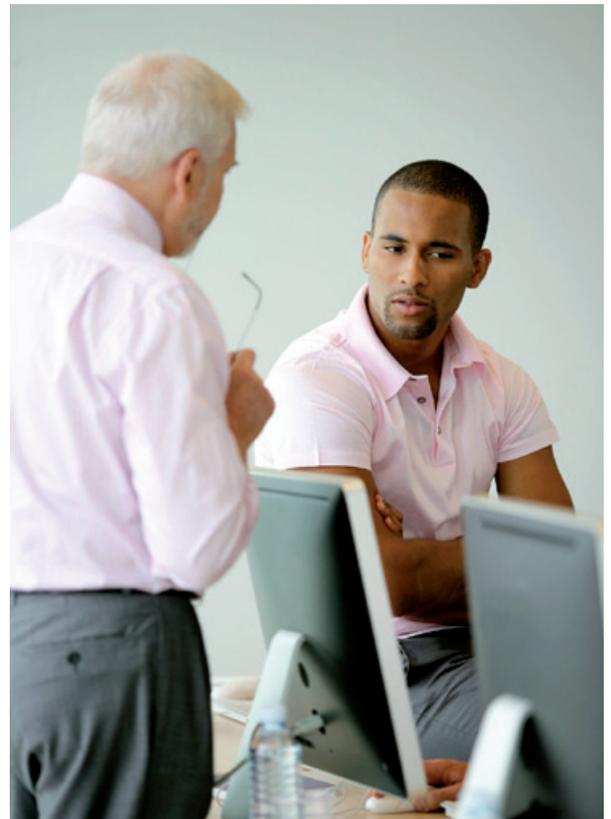**SIOBHAN NEARY EXAMINES HOW WE SEE OURSELVES AS PROFESSIONALS**

Over recent years the career development sector has experienced significant change. In England, the Education Act (2011) has specifically impacted on the careers workforce for young people *Langley, Hooley & Bertuchi, 2014*, while concurrently a National Careers Service for adults has been established. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, although they have all-age services, they have equally been subjected to change due to evolving policy agendas. How does this continual change impact on how professional career development practitioners perceive themselves? This article explores some of the findings from a research project which took place between 2007-2012 and explored careers practitioners' professional identity.

Professional identity

As practitioners, how do we communicate to others who we are and what we do? In a recent research project *Neary, 2011; Neary, 2014*, careers practitioners were questioned about how they defined their professional identity. Many found this a challenging question to answer, but predominantly the answers fell into three categories; (i) emphatic- I am a careers adviser/ education adviser, (ii) that would depend on who I am talking to and (iii) difficult because I have lots of roles. This diversity of responses suggests the multi-disciplinary nature of careers development work often challenges practitioners in being able to define their professional identity.

Professional identity is the concept which describes how we perceive ourselves within our occupational context and how we communicate this to others. There are varying academic definitions of professional identity. *Ibarra, 1999* suggests that it evolves through work socialisation and observation of our peers; *Larson,1977* argues it is based on shared expertise. Professional identity can be established and supported by the infrastructure which contributes to creating a shared sense of commonality amongst practitioners. *Hughes, 2013,* presents counselling as an example of an occupation that has a clear identity because it is underpinned by a professional association, a body of knowledge, nationally recognised qualifications, a national register explicitly defining CPD requirements, client contact hours and supervision. There has been significant work done on many of these activities by the Career Development Institute during its short history. This focus on standardised requirements for the professional will help in contributing to the establishment of the professional identity of careers practitioners.

Contributors to professional identity formation

How is professional identity developed? What contributes to practitioners as individuals feeling they have a professional identity? As can be seen from the three key responses above, professional identity may mean different things to different careers practitioners. For many the use of job title was a determinant in defining who they were professionally. Those defining themselves through a job title often felt they had a stronger professional identity than those whose job title was perceived to lack clarity.

The use of job titles for many was an important factor; particularly the change from 'careers adviser' to 'personal adviser' and the introduction of the generic term 'information, advice and guidance' (IAG). These influenced how many practitioners perceived themselves.

"I feel as a personal adviser in Connexions my professional identity is vague, it is a bit woolly.... prior to Connexions I would say, "I am Sarah from Littletown careers service. I am a careers adviser at such a place," and everyone would say, "Yeah, she does careers then." Now I say, "I am Sarah. I am from Connexions and I am a personal adviser," and they say, "What is Connexions?" [Personal Adviser Connexions] (Names have been anonymised)

It was important to practitioners that their job title described what they did; job titles that were vague or indistinct were felt to impact on how practitioners both perceived themselves and how they felt perceived by others. Hence, the response 'that would depend on who I am talking to' required practitioners to customise the description of their job role to different audiences.

"Different job titles further confused things. I was known as an Employment Counsellor and then it was changed to an Employment Adviser...As a Careers and Higher Education Adviser, I feel my professional identity is more defined." [Careers and Higher Education Adviser]

Job titles therefore had an important role. They supported practitioners to articulate what they do, often identifying an area of specialism; 'young people', 'adult' or 'higher education'. The use of 'careers adviser' in a job title was perceived to have a higher professional status than a more generic term such as 'IAG adviser' or 'personal adviser'.

The second factor contributing to professional identity for the study participants was engagement in continuing professional development (CPD). All were engaged in a postgraduate qualification that focused on developing their knowledge of research, theory and policy within careers guidance. This supported participants to engage with their practice at a higher level while advancing their knowledge and academic skills. There were varying motivations for choosing to engage in CPD of this nature; these included career progression, a perceived lack of CPD offered by the employers, and wanting to engage in theory as this was an area missing in their initial training. Taking responsibility and owning their CPD was an important element for participants, particularly when contrasted with the CPD provided by their employers which they identified as focusing on processes and contractual compliance.

Engagement with CPD at this level contributed to some participants regaining or finding a professional identity or defining themselves as a professional for the first time. The study contributed to this through providing an intellectual engagement (some felt this was currently missing from their job), engagement with theory, exposure to policy, and an opportunity for structured reflection and to undertake research into their professional practice.

"I have more professional autonomy, the freedom to think critically and engage in policy and research and have the confidence to do it."[Adult Careers Adviser]

I now believe, as a result of my studies so far, that it is necessary to explore theory to be an effective professional, because if practice becomes routine, work becomes repetitive and one becomes functionary. Considering how and why we do what we do develops professional knowledge and influences practice. Thus, improving services to clients and one's own professional development and identity." [FE Careers Adviser]

Conclusions

Professional identity is not static but fluid; it is strongly influenced by how we see ourselves, how we perceive others perceive us and how we are viewed by society at large, *Beijaard et al. 2004.* This research provides only a snap shot into the views of a small discrete group of practitioners, but it suggests that what we call ourselves and how we communicate this defines who we are professionally. Equally important is that, through investing in ourselves by engaging in professional development, we take ownership of our professionalism. This is potentially what defines as being a professional.

References

Beijaard, D., Verloop, N. and Vermunt, J. (2004). Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*. Vol. 20 (2): 107-128.

Hughes, D. (2013). An expanded model of careers professional identity: time for change? *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling 41*(1): 58-68.

Ibarra. H. (1999). Provisional selves: experimenting with image and identity in professional adaptation. *Administrative Science Quarterly 44*: 764-791.

Langley, E., Hooley, T and Bertuchi, D. (2014). *A career postcode lottery? Local authority provision of youth and career support following the 2011 Education Act.* Derby: iCeGS.

Larson, M. (1977). *The rise of professionalism: A sociological analysis*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Neary, S. (2011). A careers adviser? So what do you do? *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling 27*: 40-46.

Neary, S. (2014). Reclaiming professional identity through postgraduate professional development: careers practitioners reclaiming their professional selves, *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 42*(2): 199-210.

"
Equally important is that, through investing in ourselves by engaging in professional development, we take ownership of our professionalism. This is potentially what defines as being a professional.
"

Siobhan Neary is a Principal Research Fellow at the International Centre for Guidance Studies at the University of Derby

15