Chapter 26: Career Coaching

Julia Yates

Introduction

Identifying the ideal route to a successful and fulfilling career has never been an easy task, and careers are more complicated now than ever. The first major challenge facing those trying to pinpoint and pursue their career goals is that there are simply too many career options to choose from. For example, the UK government now recognises 36,000 different job titles (Office of National Statistics, 2019), an impossible number to imagine, let alone research. The second issue concerns the trajectory of career paths, which are more fluid and less predictable than before, with job changes, redundancies, career breaks and self-employment more frequent and less socially stigmatised than they have been in the past. It is a challenging landscape to negotiate and it is no wonder so many people seek out career coaching to help make sure they are capitalising on the opportunities available and making the most of their skills and abilities.

Many coaching sessions, whether under the banner of life coaching, or executive and workplace coaching, will touch on career choice and career development. Our careers are influenced by and impact on almost all aspects of life: leisure, family, performance, motivation, well-being and mental health, so career experiences and career decisions will be germane to many kinds of coaching conversations. Unfortunately, for the most part, the research into career choice and development lies outside the mainstream coaching literature, meaning that it is not always tailored to the needs of coaches, and sometimes can be difficult to access. Career coaches are of course not expected to have an encyclopaedic knowledge of the current labour market, but for coaches who are regularly discussing career issues with their clients, it may be useful to understand a little more about the way that people make their career choices and the processes of career change.

Career coaching explained

Career coaching is generally focused on making choices or facilitating transitions from one job to another. Clients who are looking for support with their choices might be choosing which path to take, or could need help deciding whether or not to stay in their current position or industry. Those looking for support facilitating transitions are generally clearer about what they want to do, but need some help getting there – working out how to look for or apply for jobs, or how to excel at interviews. In practice of course, the distinction between these two aspects of career development is not clear cut: people's choice of career path is influenced by their strategies and chances of success, and the process of job search can lead people to question or review their plans.

Historically, career support has been something that people called on only once. We were expected to make our career choices early on, and anticipated seeing out our working days in the same field, or even the same organisation that we started in after school or university. Changes in the employment market, accompanied by a more sophisticated awareness of decision making and the search for fulfilment, mean that career support is now seen as something that people may need to draw on throughout their working lives and beyond.

The first career decision is generally taken whilst people are still in full time education, whether at school or university. Traditionally, the career support given at this stage has been publicly funded, provided by the education institution and is generally described as careers advice or career

guidance. This kind of support, in theory at least, is almost synonymous with career coaching, delivered through one to one interventions, which are structured around a GROW-like model, and underpinned by a non-directive, non-judgemental, person-centred Rogerian philosophy (Ali & Graham, 1996). But the context in which this advice or guidance occurs means that in practice it can look a little different from the kind of career coaching we might recognise. These career sessions are usually one-off, very time-limited (often just 15 minutes long) and in practice, more directive than the practitioners might want. The public funding for this kind of support has been dramatically cut over the last decades, opening up an interesting gap in the market for career coaches.

More often, career coaches deal with mid-career changes, working either with clients who are voluntarily changing career, or with people who have lost their jobs. This kind of work can sometimes be straightforward support for clients looking for a new similar position, but more often will involve helping people think about a new direction, as people either choose to, or find themselves compelled to consider alternative career paths.

Some clients seek out career coaching to help them back into the workplace after a career break. One client group who often seek the support of career coaches are parents (usually mothers) who have taken time out to raise their children; career coaches also commonly work with people whose illnesses have led to time out of work, or those who are trying to get back into the workforce after a period of unemployment.

One growing area of career coaching work is retirement coaching. Cliff-edge retirement that takes people from full-time work to full-time leisure on their 60th birthday is becoming increasingly rare, and older workers are now more likely to cut down their hours gradually, continue with the same job under another kind of contract, or might retire and embark on a whole new lease of life, reinventing themselves and finding a new direction for their third age. This is the first generation to anticipate so many years of active life after retirement age, so these career paths are inevitably ill-defined, and this group of clients can find it useful to get support with thinking creatively about options and approaches to their next stage. Older workers can also need some support with securing a job or negotiating with employers; despite the changes in legislation, demographics and the pensions crisis which are combing forces to keep people in work longer, social attitudes are lagging behind, and older workers have to contend with discriminatory attitudes and practices which exacerbate the challenges of job hunting.

Career Coaching Research

Career coaching draws on two distinct sets of literature. First there is career development literature. This field is wide-ranging, covering the career paths people take, job hunting and career success, and the experiences of groups of people of different ages, races and nationalities with a particular focus on social justice. Perhaps most relevant to career coaching is the career development research which examines the process of career choice.

The prevailing messages about career choice within the academic literature have shifted dramatically over the last fifty years. The 20th century advice was to follow a clear three stage plan: find out about yourself, find out about jobs and make a rational decision about which option is going to suit best (Holland, 1987; Parsons, 1909). This approach continues to dominate in much career practice, because it is so intuitive and so accessible, but our understanding of career decision making has moved on apace since these first theories were devised, and we now understand that this is just not how people make choices. More recently, the academic research has explored using identity as a starting point for career exploration (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012), the

importance of finding meaning through work (Simonet & Castille, 2020), and a more holistic approach to choices, acknowledging that boundaries between work and life are blurred (Savickas et al., 2009). The research community is also beginning to draw from decision making literature to understand that people do not always approach career decision making with a conscious and rational mind (Reddekopp, 2017).

The second relevant body of literature examines the effectiveness of interventions. Career coaches looking to understand the empirical evidence base behind their work, can draw from the evidence underpinning coaching (for example, Jones, Woods & Guillaume, 2016 or Theeboom, Beerma & van Vianen, 2014) and career guidance (see Everitt et al., 2018 a review), both of which attest to the positive impact that one to one support can have. Evidence that explores career coaching specifically is less bountiful, but the last few years have offered some examples of studies that show the positive impact of career coaching. Career coaching has been shown to lead to higher psychological capital (Archer & Yates, 2017); more effective reconciling of work and life roles with values and needs (Brown & Yates, 2018); reduced career ambivalence (Klonek Wunderlich, Spurk, & Kauffeld., 2016); enhanced career optimism, career security and career goals (Ebner, 2019); and career optimism, and career planning (Spurk, Kauffeld, Barthauer, & Heinemann, 2015). Some studies have also looked at career coaching within organisations, finding that the career coaching itself improves staff retention (Dugas, 2018) and job satisfaction (Fassiotto, Sandborg, Valantine, & Raymond, 2018) and that even the very existence of a policy that includes an offer of career coaching is linked to improved institutional satisfaction (Ling, Ning, Change & Zhang, 2018). These papers provide an important starting point but a more concerted focus on research in this area is much needed.

Career Coaching in Practice

The boundaries between work-life and home-life, and career and family are increasingly blurred, and the two parts of life inevitably influence and impact on each other. Conversations about career will touch on other facets of a client's life, and career issues will often crop up in discussions which centre on other topics. There are, however, some specific issues which will be particularly familiar to coaches specialising in careers work.

Initial career choice

In much of the developed world, young people usually face the need to make choices about the career path to pursue, or the job to take, with very limited understanding of the workplace, and often a fairly limited understanding of themselves. They can feel that they are making their choices in the dark, and relying heavily on guesswork and luck. For many of them, this can lead to some degree of anxiety which sometimes needs to be addressed during coaching, in parallel with their specific career dilemmas. One reassuring thing to emphasise with the younger clients is that their first job will not be their last. Thorough research to minimize the risks is without doubt important, but it can be comforting for the young people to conceptualise their first job as an experiment – they should enter with all good intentions, but feel comfortable to withdraw and change direction if they can see that it is not making them happy.

Compounding the challenge of limited work experience for younger clients, is that of their limited experience of making decisions. It is not unusual to find that a client, emerging from full time education, does not feel that they have made any significant life decisions for themselves, as schools, families and social norms have steered them quite firmly in one particular direction.

Working with a career coach who is expecting them to set the agenda and identify their own solutions, can be a new experience for some young people and might be one that is uncomfortable and daunting. A useful strategy to help with this, is investing extra time in agreeing a contract before the coaching starts. Time spent ensuring that the client really understands what coaching is, and why they will be encouraged to take control, is often time well spent. And whilst these clients sometimes need a bit of extra handholding throughout the process, don't be tempted to rush things, or offer solutions too readily. These are capable clients, they just need to adjust to a new kind of working relationship.

Career change

When working with career changers the focus of the conversations is more often on thinking about the logistical challenges. After ten or twenty years in the workplace, people have often developed a degree of expertise and a reasonably salary, as well as having other practical commitments such as a mortgage, children to support, or ties to a particular location. A new direction, mid-career, can sometimes be a sideways move, to a role in which an individual can capitalise on their experience and expertise, but often a new direction will involve some costly re-training, or starting back at the bottom of the career ladder. This may require considerable sacrifices for the client and perhaps their family, so clients may need to work with their coach to find a way to reconcile their work and life goals and priorities.

Alongside these logistical challenges, people who are facing redundancy or job loss may also be coping with a feeling of rejection and struggling with a lack of control. Psychological issues including denial, anger and depression can emerge and take hold following job loss (Blau, 2007) and career coaches need to anticipate, recognise and support their clients throughout. People facing redundancy tend to fall broadly into two campus: those who were perfectly happy in their roles, and are looking for support in their quest to find something else along the very same lines, and those who were actually not all that happy in their existing jobs, but were perhaps not quite ready to make a change. This latter group can fairly soon grow to see the redundancy as a positive – the spur that they needed to make the change they wanted, and the evidence is generally very encouraging, suggesting that most people who are made redundant end up feeling more satisfied in their career paths than they were before (Water & Strauss, 2016).

Return to work

The group who most often seek career coaching to help with a return to work are parents (mostly but not exclusively mothers) who have taken a career break. Here again, logistics are often the biggest challenge. Family dynamics tend to be quite entrenched by this point which often means that the stay-at-home parent expects to be the children's primary carer, even after their return to work. As such, they might be looking for a job that is part time, close to home, or allows them to work flexibly. Career conversations with returning parents often revolve around priorities and working out what kinds of compromises might be acceptable to all parties. Alongside the practical constraints, there are often issues of confidence to address. Time out of the workplace almost always leads to a significant loss of confidence and as we know that self-efficacy boost one's chances of both choosing a career (Ballout, 2009) and securing a position (Saks, 2006), the psychological issues are important to address and highly relevant to the conversations.

Retirement

This generation is the first to have an opportunity for a substantial post-retirement career, and as such older clients do not have a raft of tried and tested career paths, examples and role models to

learn from. Career coaching with this client group can often involve a lot of collaborative creative thinking, as clients design their own futures from scratch. At retirement age, people find themselves in very different financial situations. Some are financially secure, but want to find a way to reinvent themselves, pursue a long-held dream, or maintain a positive sense of identity despite their changed work situation. Others will be struggling financially, and need some help working out how to combat discrimination in the workplace.

Tools and techniques

Good career coaching makes use of a non-judgemental, non-directive approach, a structured conversation, and listening, questioning and challenging where appropriate. These characteristics of coaching will be familiar to all practitioners, but over and above those guiding principles, there are numerous techniques and tools which have been shown to be particularly useful in career conversations.

Initial career choice

Strengths. I mentioned above that clients making initial career choices can be held back by their limited experience of the world of work, and their limited understanding of themselves, within a work context. When faced with a list of skills needed in a job, or the person specification of an interesting-sounding position, it may be very difficult for these clients to work out whether they have what is needed. Working with strengths can be an accessible way for young people to start to understand themselves better, and to begin to link their own characteristics with specific jobs.

Put simply, strengths are things that an individual is good at and enjoys. The use of strengths at work is linked to a range of positive outcomes including work engagement and job satisfaction (Lavy & Littman-Ovadia, 2016), and this makes them a particularly useful technique to use in career coaching. Strengths are not directly work-related, but allow clients to think about their personal characteristics in any context; the power of the approach is thus not limited by the extent of the client's time in the workplace, as they can draw from their experiences within education, at home, or during sport and other leisure activities.

Career Genogram. A second technique that works well for young people is the career genogram. We know that values and aspirations are heavily influence by parents (Taylor, Harris & Taylor, 2004) and young people can often find it hard to establish their own identity, struggling to unpick the facets or versions of the self that they have chosen, or feel are authentic, and the aspects that are products of their family. A career genogram is a visual and powerful tool to help clients to reflect on the impact their family has had on their personal development and worldview. With this technique, the client is invited to draw a family tree, which includes their parents', grandparents', and siblings' jobs, and then uses this to help reflect on the influences that have come from their family – the jobs and sectors they are familiar with, the values that are manifest, and the family's conceptualisation of career success. This reflection can help clients to think about how their desires and goals have been shaped by their experiences, allowing them to examine them more objectively.

Career Changers

Job Crafting. Capitalising on the fluid nature of contemporary career paths, one useful approach to share with people who are finding their current jobs unfulfilling, is job-crafting (Berg, Dutton & Wrzesniewski, 2013). The idea behind this concept is that jobs are malleable, and the job a person might actually end up doing can bear very little resemblance to the job description originally given. To some degree, individuals can be in control of shaping these changes, crafting or developing their

roles to make them more palatable, satisfying or better suited to their skills. Organisations and teams are dynamic and there will often be opportunities to shift things around a little bit – people can take on new projects, expanding their skills or can divest themselves of elements of work that they find less stimulating. Good managers will always be keen to keep their staff motivated, and generally appreciate a pro-active attitude so can respond positively to suggestions for incremental changes. It can be liberating for career coaching clients to explore tactics for making their position more agreeable, even if they feel compelled to stay in their current position, and crafting a new set of daily duties can constitute the first stage of a longer term exit strategy, as they develop new skills and broaden their experience.

The Kaleidoscope Model. The Kaleidoscope Model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, Mainiero & Gibson, 2018) was developed to illustrate the career paths of women. The authors were frustrated that the career development literature from the 20th century had predominately been developed by, modelled on and tested on men. The assumption in these early theories had been that there was one default way to have a good career – the way that men did it. Mainiero and Sullivan decided to track the career paths of women, and found some consistent patterns. They saw that women's careers could often be divided into three distinct phase:

Table 26.1: Three phases of women's careers

Early-career: The need for challenge	Women are looking to be challenged, focused on learning, development and growth. During this stage, women's career development tends to mirror that of their male counterparts.
Mid-career: The desire for balance	Women become less interested in traditional markers of success such as promotion and salary, and instead look for jobs that allow them to reconcile multiple identities. Most often they are looking for jobs that allow them to be the mothers they want to be, which might include a career break, part time hours, or a new less intense job. It is at this stage that women's career paths tend to diverge from men's.
Late-career: The search for authenticity	Women in the last part of their career are generally looking for roles which are aligned to their values-system, which they feel are meaningful, and in which they can be themselves.

Women often come to career coaching when they are juggling motherhood and career, and this can coincide with the transition from early- to mid-career, when they are considering shifting to a more family-friendly position, or the transition from mid- to late-career, when they are looking for a route back into work. Sharing the Kaleidoscope Model with these clients can stimulate insightful discussions about their values and conflicts. It can also be validating for women to see that their own dilemmas are widely shared and their career paths are well-trodden, and this can offer reassurance and boost their confidence.

Older workers

Possible Selves. I noted earlier that older workers can sometimes need to be particularly creative in the way that they carve out a role (or multiple roles) for themselves post-retirement. One approach that can help to stimulate their creative thinking is Possible Selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves are hypothetical versions of ourselves in the future. We can all have multiple possible selves, as we imagine ourselves in all sorts of different possible scenarios. Possible selves interventions have

been shown to help clients to identify career goals, and helps with motivation and resilience (Strauss, Griffin & Parker, 2013).

In a Possible Selves career coaching conversation, the coach will invite the client first to identify and a number of different possible futures. These hypothetical versions of their futures can be realistic, hoped-for or even fearer possible selves, and the client can be encouraged to come up with a wide range of possible versions of themselves. The coach then asks the client to pick one of the possible futures to focus on and encourages the client to visualise their future in elaborate detail. The focus during this part of the conversation will be on the visual image, the narrative and the feelings, and the coach should help the client to describe their picture of the future, tell the story of their future and experience the feelings associated. Once the client has explored this possible self in depth, the coach and client can have a conversation about what this process has highlighted about their goals for the future, and discuss possible action steps.

When does career coaching work best?

Career coaching clients will often sign up to see a career coach when they have become dissatisfied by their current work situation and are ready to consider new avenues. These clients have chosen to look for a new path and have decided that it is the right time to think about alternatives. Whilst there may be many challenges for the client to overcome, the coaching sessions are likely to be productive, and the coaching relationship collaborative because both parties are engaged with the process and trying to move forward to the same goal. But not all career coaching sessions are like this. Many clients are prompted to seek career coaching because they are facing redundancy, they are needing to make changes simply because of their age (younger clients leaving university, or older workers being pushed to retire), or they are forced to make a change for some other personal reasons – perhaps as a result of ill-heath, financial or family situations.

When clients come to career coaching because external forces are compelling them to make a change, it can be challenging to develop a collaborating and productive partnership. The transtheoretical model of change offers a useful framework to help illustrate this. This model sets out five different stages of change, which people progress through when making significant changes. The model was developed in a health context, examining the steps the people go through when stopping smoking or losing weight, but the model has been shown to apply to change in a range of different contexts, including career change (Barclay, Stoltz & Chang, 2010).

Table 26.2: Transtheoretical Model of Change

Pre-contemplation	During this stage people are not aware that they are dissatisfied, and have no conscious desire to make any changes.
Contemplation	In this stage people become aware that they are dissatisfied with their current situation and start to think seriously about their options. They may not be quite ready to make a commitment to a new path, but are open to finding out about possible avenues and reflecting on both what has led to their dissatisfaction and what future possibilities could lead to greater fulfilment.
Preparation	During the preparation stage, the individual is preparing for action, narrowing down their options to a realistic shortlist and clarifying their

	career goals. Once the goal is identified, the individual can begin to work out what action is needed.
Action	During this stage, the individual starts to implement plans, reflecting and reviewing them as necessary.
Maintenance	The individual has made the change, and now needs to become accustomed to their new environment and their new identity.

(adapted from Prochaska, DiClementi & Norcross, 1992)

Career coaching is most effective when the client has moved beyond the precontemplation stage, and is consciously aware that they want to make a change, motivated to work towards identifying a new direction and prepared to engage positively with the work that is needed. Expecting, or encouraging clients to engage with career planning before they are ready is rarely effective, and can prove detrimental to the coaching relationship. One of the most useful approaches to working with clients who appear to be in the precontemplation stage is Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2012), which can help clients to see the benefits of making a change.

Ten commonly used career coaching questions

A host of questions are available to careers coaches to help clients explore what's important to them such as values, identify the resources and strengths they can draw upon and also generate ideas about what types of roles might make a good fit based on their interest and values and their resources and strengths. In this section I have clustered the questions into three groups: Values exploration, Resources review and Ideas generation:

Questions to explore values
1. Who are your role models? What do you admire in them, in what ways are you like them, and what advice would they give you now?
2. What does 'career success' mean to you?
3. What was the best job you ever had? What was so good about it?
4. What is the best day at work you have ever had? What made it so good?
5. Think of someone you know whose job sounds interesting. Why do you like the sound of it?

Questions to help identify personal resources
6. Tell me about a time when you did something really well. What was it about you that made this successful?
7. What are the characteristics that are really particular to you? What makes you, you?

Questions to generate job ideas
8. If you knew you couldn't fail, what would you do?
9. If all jobs paid the same, what would you do?
10. If you could wave a magic wand and choose any job you wanted, what would you pick?

Conclusion

Career coaching is growing as a specialist strand of coaching, and as career paths become more fluid, and technology accelerates the pace of change in the workplace, the role of career coaches will continue to become more useful and more prevalent. This chapter has offered an overview of some of the key challenges and most useful techniques within career coaching, and has identified some of the specialism's distinctive features. Describing career coaching as a distinct branch of coaching is, however, arguably somewhat spurious. Career and family, work life and home life are intertwined, and work and home identities are increasingly blurred. Career-related issues will creep into many discussions which ostensibly focus on other aspects of life or work, and so an engagement with the research and coaching tools which are most pertinent to career development could be useful for a wide range of coaches.

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