THE PERCEIVED ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN CAREER GUIDANCE AMONG PRACTITIONERS WHO ARE EXPERIENCED INTERNET USERS

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The increasing use of technology is placing new demands on career guidance practitioners. This article examines what changes, if any, have occurred in the perceptions of guidance practitioners regarding their role and the role of the internet in meeting guidance goals and delivering career guidance services. The data were collected in focus groups in 2001–2002 and a follow-up study in 2010. A total of seven focus groups were held. The data were analysed using combined methods. The results indicated that practitioners now observe that the need for differentiated service delivery modes is more explicit due to varied levels of readiness in decision-making and ICT literacy.

INTRODUCTION

The current wider paradigm of guidance is recognised as a crucial dimension of lifelong learning, promoting both social and economic goals: in particular, improving the efficiency and effectiveness of education, training and the labour market through its contribution to reducing drop-outs, preventing skill mismatches and boosting economic productivity (for example, ELGPN, 2010; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2004). Lifelong guidance enables citizens of all ages and in any phase of life to analyse their own interests and skills, make educational and vocational decisions and manage their individual span of development in learning and at work (Council of the European Union, 2008). A key rationale for this recent policy interest is the notion that lifelong guidance represents both a private and a public good (Watts, 2008). A second major change relates to the concept of 'lifelong guidance' and its linkages to lifelong learning. The move from 'education and training' to learning changes the focus from structures and institutions to development of individual lifelong career management skills (Watts, Sultana & McCarthy, 2010).

There has been a consistency in various policy documents (Council of the European Union, 2008; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2004) emphasising quality assurance and more diverse service delivery in guidance services. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) has the potential to expand access to career guidance. New forms of virtual tutoring and support, distribution of working life information and career planning and development resources are being developed. Overall use of new technology in guidance settings is expanding. Generic counselling processes have been developed to help clients make effective use of ICT in career guidance (Sampson, 2008).

The increasing use of technology will require reconsideration not only of the services provided, but also of the means by which those services are delivered. A consensus has emerged that both the counsellor and ICT have an important role to play in the delivery of enhanced career guidance services via the internet (Vuorinen, 2006). But a broader understanding in the perceptions of guidance practitioners regarding their role and the role of the internet in meeting guidance goals and delivering career guidance services is needed because that understanding will determine effectiveness in the use of the internet in their practice. In fact, practitioner perceptions of the role of technology will have an impact on how their practice will evolve. Thus, the aim of the present article is to examine what changes have occurred over time, if any, in the perceived role of technology in career guidance among practitioners who are experienced internet users. The study will focus on whether or not there were differences in the perceptions among practitioners in 2001–2002 and in 2010.

The Internet in Guidance

Several innovations have emerged to supplement traditional career guidance practice. One such innovation is the use of ICT. The past decade has seen an incredible expansion in access to ICT and today technology permeates almost every aspect of our lives. Individuals are now able to access the internet not only through their personal computers but also through mobile phones and other mobile devices. A 'read web' has changed towards a more social, collaborative, interactive and responsive web.

The potential of using ICT to deliver career guidance services has long been recognised by the broad community of careers guidance professionals and researchers. Beginning with access to traditional occupational and career information, ICT in career guidance has evolved to include a wide variety of information sources as well as facilitating interaction among clients and guidance professionals (Bimrose & Barnes, 2010; Harris-Bowlsbey & Sampson, 2005; Offer & Chiru, 2006; Sampson, 2008; Vuorinen, 2006; Watts, 2002). Material development (Barnes, La Gro & Watts, 2010; Vuorinen, 2006), automated interaction, games and simulations present a wide range of opportunities (Hooley, Hutchinson & Watts, 2010) and purposes for using ICT in guidance. In the last few years, the potential of ICT in the development of more integrated lifelong guidance systems is also being realised. ICT is acting not just as a tool but also as a powerful agent of change that illustrates the transversal elements of education, employment and social policies (ELGPN, 2010).

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The goal of using ICT-based career guidance resources and services is to help young people and adults to make informed and careful occupational, educational, training and employment decisions (Sampson, 2008). Information delivered via ICT facilitates the clarification of self-knowledge or the knowledge of options for the person seeking assistance in solving problems and making decisions. Completing practitioner-assisted or self-help career assessment via ICT provides a resource for clarifying self-knowledge about values, interests, skills, aptitudes and employment preferences. Using occupational educational, training and employment information provides a resource for enhancing knowledge of options. Communication among and between career guidance practitioners and the individuals served provides opportunities to facilitate use of the overwhelming amount of information that is now available (Sampson, Shy, Offer & Dozier, 2010).

Guidance on the Internet

In guidance, technology has generally been used to deliver information, to develop material, to provide an automated interaction or to provide a channel for communication (Hooley, Hutchinson & Watts, 2010; Sampson, 2008; Vuorinen, 2006; Watts & Offer, 2006). Several types of ICT applications and internet-based services have emerged since the last decades of the previous century: for example, email, chat, newsgroup, websites, SMS (text messaging), telephone, software (CD-ROM and free-standing computer programs) and video-conferencing (Watts & Offer, 2006). Applications with or without automated interaction have been integrated in various guidance activities:

- self assessment or awareness-raising exercises and psychometric tests
- facilities to retrieve information about training and work opportunities relevant to the user
- decision aids
- training or distance-learning materials for job seekers
- CV and résumé writing programs or templates
- matching systems relating the user's input to work or learning opportunities
- dedicated experience-exchange mechanisms, such as email lists, chat rooms and discussion forums
- gateways or portals providing signposts to resources for work and learning

- dedicated authoring systems, including blogging and web page creation software (Offer, 2001).

New technology enables use of such resources to be massively increased but also poses challenges.

Generic counselling processes have been developed to help clients make effective use of ICT in career guidance (Osborn, Dikel & Sampson, 2011; Sampson 2008). According to Sampson (2008), career guidance services can be designed consisting of three elements. Career services include self-help, brief staff-assisted services and individual case-managed services that are delivered by staff members to assist students in making informed and careful decisions about occupational, educational, training and employment choices. All these elements can contain forms of web-based guidance services.

Effectiveness in the use of the internet is likely to be improved by providing counselling support for users who need it, by systematically integrating websites to existing services, by an ongoing re-evaluation of standards of practice, by awareness of ethical issues and standards in designing services, and by conducting research and evaluation to appropriately guide the evolution of internet-based career resources and services (Sampson, 2008). It is thus crucial to explore how counsellors recognise this need for support and how they should be trained.

Contextual Changes in the Use of ICT in Finland

The world of career guidance practitioners has changed considerably between 2001 and 2002 and then again in 2010. ICT has swept into modern society and rapidly been brought to use in various areas. According to the Official Statistics of Finland in 2002 (Nurmela, Parjo & Ylitalo, 2002), 66% of Finns had used the internet. Every other Finn had a computer with internet access at home, while 32% of Finns were using a computer daily. In 2010, the use of the internet is even more widespread. Now as many as 86% of Finns are internet users. The internet is used not only more commonly but also more often. In Finland, 72% of the population are on the web daily or almost daily. Every other Finn uses the internet several times a day, with 42% of Finns registered into social networks (Official Statistics of Finland, 2010). All of these figures are still trending upwards.

In a national evaluation of guidance at the secondary level in 2002, counsellors indentified the use

of ICT as one of the weakest competence areas in their practice (Kasurinen & Numminen, 2003). Including the use of ICT in the national core curricula as a compulsory element in careers education in 2003 had a great impact on the emergence of ICT in guidance in Finland. According to the guidelines, each student must be introduced to the existing national career information and career services on the internet. The goal is to help the students to use the services after their graduation with a lifelong-learning perspective. The other goal is to develop their skills to evaluate and select the relevant quality services on the internet to meet their individual needs. This is one competency for a citizen in a knowledge based society (Offer, 2001; Watts, 2002).

After the use of ICT became compulsory in guidance, the schools had to guarantee access to internet services for students. There was also a need to allocate funding for the in-service training for guidance practitioners and to integrate the use of ICT more explicitly in the initial training programs. Finally, there was a need for more dynamic national internet-based career resources and career information systems. The implementation of the core curricula was supported with a national in-service training program for guidance practitioners and 60% of the career practitioners in general education completed a 40-hour training module in the use of ICT in guidance (Vuorinen, 2006).

Aims of the Study

Our aim is to examine potential changes in the perceptions of guidance practitioners who are experienced internet users regarding their role and the role of the internet in meeting guidance goals and delivering career servicers. More specifically, we consider the following research question: what changes have occurred over time, if any, in the perceived role of technology in career guidance among practitioners who are experienced internet users?

Method

This study examined career guidance practice using a phenomenographic approach. In order to answer the research questions we collected data in focus groups in 2001 and 2002 (n = 46) and in the follow-up study in 2010 (n = 10) among Finnish guidance practitioners representing comprehensive, secondary and higher education as well public employment services. In both

studies, practitioners represented the Finnish guidance community from a lifelong guidance perspective and represented both urban and rural settings.

The quality of the data collected in focus groups in part depends upon the nature of the focus groups and the quality of the focus group questions developed (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The focus group questions were designed to bridge the gap that was identified in the literature review on the perceptions of the practitioners on the use of ICT in guidance. Questions were tested among practitioners within an in-service training session focusing on ICT in guidance. Small amendments were made on the basis of testing.

The following questions were used in the focus groups:

- What is the contribution of information to students, in meeting career guidance goals? (In order to understand the contribution of internet-based information to career guidance goals, it was necessary to understand the basic contribution of career information to career guidance goals.)
- What is the role of practitioners, in meeting career guidance goals? (This question was necessary in order to understand the role of practitioners in helping clients to use current internet-based career information delivery systems and current internet-based career services. It was important to understand the basic role of practitioners in meeting career guidance goals.)
- What is the contribution of current internet-based career information delivery systems and current internet-based career services, in meeting guidance goals? (Within the analysis, this question provided information on how the practitioners perceived the nature of the internet and its strengths and limitations.)
- What is the role of the practitioner in helping clients to use current internet-based career information delivery systems and current internet-based career services, in meeting career guidance goals?

In the follow-up study in 2010 the same focus group questions were used with a minor update. With the rise of new information technologies during the web 2.0 era, there was a need to add one new question. To obtain answers on how experienced guidance practitioners perceive the role of social media in the use of internet-based career services and career information delivery systems a new question was presented:

- What is the role of social media in internet-based career services? (The results of this question will be presented as a separate preliminary study.)

To examine the potential changes in the perceptions of the practitioners, the data collected during the two phases were analysed using a combined methods approach. First, the qualitative data were analysed with content-driven approach and coded in themes using NVivo by one researcher and verified by a second researcher. Cross-validation enhances the objectivity and reliability of the research (Krueger, 1998). The second analysis framework for the role of information and the role of internet-based career information delivery systems was based on the DOTS-model (Law & Watts, 1977). The role of the counsellor was analysed with a framework of a three-step generic counselling process, including screening, orientation and follow-up by Sampson (2008). The third analysis examined whether or not there were differences in the perceptions between data collected from practitioners in 2001 and 2002 and in 2010.

RESULTS

The Contribution of the Internet in Meeting Guidance Goals

Results from both 2001 and 2002, and 2010 revealed that the practitioners were motivated in their use of the internet in guidance. Rather than developing coherent strategies for the use of ICT, the practitioners were using technical applications in order to solve fragmented problems.

In both studies, the emphasis in ICT use was in delivering career information rather than promoting career management skills from a lifelong guidance perspective. The internet had added value, especially in obtaining educational and labour market information.

In 2001 and 2002, in many cases within the educational settings, the practitioners were not able to use the internet in a flexible way in meeting student needs. They were able to use the internet only when a computer class was available. In 2010, students have better access to the internet and better ICT literacy. Nationally, there are also more online resources available in Finland. Instead of using the internet in

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the same scheme as printed materials, the practitioners helped their students in obtaining and selecting the information from the internet. The practitioners noted that the internet had in large part replaced the use of printed material in their daily practice: 'Updated information can be found from [the] internet—it is difficult to imagine work without the internet anymore'.

In 2010 the practitioners describe an external pressure to increase the use of the internet in their practice. They are expected to get involved in developing online career courses, to produce career information on institutional websites or to get engaged within social media. A clear need for peer support and ongoing in-service training in the use of ICT in guidance was identified both in 2001 and 2002 and again in 2010.

The Role of the Practitioner in Helping Clients to Use the Internet in Meeting Guidance Goals

In 2010 the practitioners used the internet in their practice more extensively than in 2001 and 2002. In addition to the internet-based career information and resources (for example, self-assessment tools) the schools have much more advanced administration software to follow up the students' learning pathways. The practitioners recognised that students use more diverse communication channels than the practitioners: 'students don't read e-mails that often, I guess they use other channels for communication . . . We should be present where the students are'.

Both in 2001 and 2002 and again in 2010 within the three-step model (screening–orientation–follow-up), screening was based mainly on client interviews and the emphasis was more on client interests than on screening the readiness for career decisions or for the use of different information sources or career services. In both studies, the practitioners integrated internet-based self-assessment tools within their guidance process, but the internet was not widely used in the follow-up phase or in supporting the implementation of individual action plans or active transitions. The vocational psychologists in public employment services were using more internet-based resources during the entire service delivery process with their clients.

In 2010, the practitioners started to observe more clearly the need for differentiated services among their clients. They recognise the gap among students between low readiness and high readiness for decision-making and see that it has increased. They are convinced that the self-help model is not appropriate for some students. They seem to accept that they are not so much needed with skilled students who can provide evidence that their needs have been met from other sources. The practitioners note that the existing career information is still fragmented on the internet. They state that there is still a need for personal support for some students who need assistance in selecting and using internet resources.

According to the practitioners, the guidance process becomes documented and more transparent when using the internet. The practitioners use more time than formerly to formulate their responses to their clients, because these responses can be revisited later. This challenges the practitioners to evaluate their own work and their theoretical approaches, and generates new in-service training needs. The use of the internet provides a checklist that all the components of guidance during the whole process are covered and followed up.

DISCUSSION

In this study, perceptions of experienced guidance practitioners on the role of technology in internet-based career guidance were examined in 2001 and 2002 and again in 2010. The results show clear similarities but also some differences (see Table 1).

According to the results in 2010, students use the internet more than previously and this forces practitioners to change their communication channels; they cannot rely anymore on printed materials. The increase of career information and applications can be helpful but, on the other hand, fragmented services and data overload are now bigger problems than was previously the case. The results show that the gap between low and high readiness among the students has increased and the practitioners are seeing more clearly the need for differentiated service delivery modes (Sampson, 2008). The practitioners have more experience with using the internet both in and out of their work and in observations of the use of the internet among their children and other people. Due to more experience with using the internet, the practitioners may have acquired new lenses with which to view the situation.

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE ROLE AND USE OF THE INTERNET IN GUIDANCE IN 2001–2002 AND 2010

Similarities	Differences
The results from both 2001–2002 and 2010 show that: • practitioners were motivated to use the internet in guidance • ICT was used for delivering career information rather than promoting career management skills from a lifelong-guidance perspective • coherent strategies for the use of ICT were lacking • peer support and ongoing in-service training was needed • equal access and ethical issues were of concern • existing career information on the internet was fragmented.	Compared to 2001–2002, the results from 2010 show that: • students have better access to the internet and better ICT literacy • the number of ICT resources and services has increased • the internet has replaced printed materials as an information source • practitioners are using the internet more extensively • there is external pressure on practitioners to increase their use of the internet and social media • more advanced administration software is available • the need for differentiated service delivery modes has been observed and acknowledged • the gap among students between low and high readiness has increased • the internet has changed in nature due to social media and web 2.0.

As the practitioners observe the need for differentiated services, they see a meaningful rationale for their future work. On the one hand, they must accept that they are not so much needed with students who identify that their needs are met while, on the other hand, those students who have not been successful in getting the information they need require support from the practitioner. Both studies identify that some practitioners do not believe that students are capable of using information on their own.

The results show that the practitioners are experiencing external pressure to increase the use of the internet in their work. This is partly due to the educational policies in Finland, which require the practitioners to use the internet in their daily work. The practitioners describe the expectations to change their practice but they are not able to articulate explicitly the reasons behind that. In their work, the focus seems to be on individual needs. The integrative role of ICT in creating a common conceptual framework for the guidance strategies or modelling the services has not been discussed. Despite the fact of national training programs, the ongoing evolution of the internet necessitates the continuing in-service training of practitioners.

According to the results, the practitioners say that they could not work anymore without the internet. In order to use the internet in a coherent way, a practitioner must be able to identify the targets for guidance and the theoretical framework used in service design. Within initial practitioner training, the use of the internet should be integrated in the methodology of training and not used only as a separate entity. Students should have the opportunity to integrate key internet-based career services and resources within individual guidance processes and group settings from the very beginning of their studies. The training programs should guarantee the coverage of all guidance competences from content and process dimensions. By the end of the program, the students could then be exploring how to turn this experience into their own professional skills in promoting the use of the internet in guidance.

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