



Career guidance by telephone – an emerging model of practice

Jenny Bean and Gill England

**Otago Polytechnic and Career Practitioners Association of New Zealand
Research Symposium
13 March 2009**

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Career guidance by telephone – an emerging model of practice

Purpose of this paper

In 2007 Career Services piloted a service providing career guidance by telephone to people aged 15-30 years. The preliminary findings of this pilot were published in the paper “Career guidance by telephone – a valuable tool for experienced consultants”, which was presented at the 2008 AUT/CPANZ Research Symposium.

This paper reiterates the preliminary findings of Career Services’ career guidance by telephone pilot and describes its evaluation outcomes. It summarises how Career Services has moved telephone guidance from a pilot targeted at a specific age-group to a suite of integrated all-age career services. It also captures Career Services’ observations on this emerging form of practice from the initial six months of delivering an all-age career guidance service by telephone and invites discussion and research on three key questions.

Summary

Career guidance by telephone is a client-led service. The guidance session follows some standard processes, but it has to be flexible and fluid as the client has control over the process and can leave the call at anytime. To encourage the client to make career decisions, develop a plan and take action, the telephone career consultant uses a solutions-focused brief intervention model.

Career Services is now providing career guidance by telephone as part of its integrated suite of all-age career services. In global terms, Career Services is the most fully integrated version of a national multi-channel all-age service dedicated to career planning support (Watts, 2007). This move follows on from its successful telephone guidance pilot that was targeted at people 15-30 years of age.

Telephone career guidance is an emerging model of practice in New Zealand. Career Services is focused on learning as much as possible from its business, client and professional practice observations in its first year of delivery as an all-age service. In telephone career guidance the conversation continues to be the main tool for consultants, although some clients, depending on their age and/or situation, do need access to other tools to help move them forward in the guidance process.

Career guidance by telephone pilot

In 2007 Career Services piloted career guidance by telephone to identify if it should form part of its suite of integrated career services offered to young people making tertiary, trade training or career decisions.

The focus for Career Services in piloting career guidance by telephone was to try a different method of practice that would make career guidance more accessible to people, particularly those without access to one of their offices or the internet¹. Career Services wanted to test a method of practice that applied a client-centred approach to non face-to-face delivery and one that would be responsive to youth. Through piloting, the organisation aimed to establish the usefulness of telephone guidance for the client.

In 2008 the pilot was independently evaluated. On the basis of the evaluation outcomes a set of recommendations were made on the future of telephone guidance in Career Services. In 2008, based on its successful pilot outcomes Career Services began to deliver telephone guidance as part of its integrated suite of all-age career information, advice and guidance services.

Preliminary findings from the pilot

In the 2008 paper to the AUT/CPANZ Research Symposium², Career Services reported its preliminary finding that telephone guidance can be effective for clients. Telephone guidance had real advantages for clients, but it did present some challenges for consultants.

Advantages for the clients included:

- greater accessibility for those who are geographically or socially isolated, or have physical disabilities
- convenience – clients can choose when a call will take place, how long it will last, and when to end the session
- being highly focused – calls last an average of 26 minutes, compared with at least an hour for face-to-face interviews
- no overhead costs for travel and parking
- visual anonymity – for some clients the fact that they can't be seen allows them to share information more comfortably than they would face-to-face.

Our consultant found that she had to change the way she worked to compensate for the loss of visual cues (such as body language) and visual aids (such as card sorts) while conducting sessions by telephone.

The changes included:

- developing more intensive listening skills
- learning how to ask questions that are effective over the telephone and which focus on getting as much information as possible in a short time

¹ In the 2006 Census 91.6% of New Zealand households had access to a telephone, 74.2% to a cellphone, 60.5% to the internet. Source: Statistics New Zealand website, <http://www.stats.govt.nz/census/2006-census-data/national-highlights/2006-census-quickstats-national-highlights-revised.htm?page=para011Master>.

² 'Career guidance by telephone – a valuable tool for experienced consultants', England, G., van Holten, A. & Urbahn, J. (Career Services). Presented at the AUT/CPANZ Research Symposium, 29 February 2008. Source: Career Services website, http://www.careers.govt.nz/career_guidance_by_telephone.

- greater use of techniques such as scaling questions and reflection, rather than visual aids such as card sorts.

Outcomes of the pilot evaluation

To identify how effective career guidance by telephone was for the client, Career Services worked with the Nielsen Company to evaluate the first six months of the pilot from the client's perspective.

Career Services provided the sample for the evaluation to Nielson on a weekly basis. The final sample size was 74. The clients were contacted by telephone and interviews took place between 20 November and 14 December 2007. The achieved sample size was 43, translating into a 58% response rate.

The following is a summary of the evaluation findings of the client's perspective of career guidance by telephone pilot:

- 87% of participants considered the information and advice offered through telephone guidance has made a difference to how they are feeling, or what they are doing now in their life, training, job or career
- 79% of participants found the telephone guidance service very/extremely useful
- 63% of participants believed that the telephone guidance service couldn't do any better
- 47% of participants said it was unlikely or extremely unlikely they would have visited a Career Services office had the telephone guidance service not been offered
- After the telephone guidance discussion, 73% used the Career Services website and 9% talked to Career Services career consultant face-to-face.

"Well, it was good because it gave me an idea of what I'd be good at, and it has led me into taking the next step in doing a course."

"The thing is, what it's done is it has helped me open my horizons, and helped me think of the bigger picture. I haven't been able to implement them yet due to my children. I've been looking at different education options that I would not have looked at before."

"When I first got hold of them I was very confused and they sent me some information and narrowed it down to what I'm into and that sort of thing,... and she's going to ring me back and we have to narrow it down even more and figure out the next step from there. She was very down to earth, she understood me."

"I couldn't get to Dunedin and have an interview like that. It's convenient and you open up more in the privacy of your own home. It was just good."

- Verbatim comments from telephone guidance clients

For Career Services the pilot identified that career guidance by telephone:

- provides increased accessibility - for clients who would not have otherwise accessed face-to-face career guidance in one of our regional offices or for those that have no internet access or disability
- improves efficiency – more focused session times and sustainable use of resources

- is distinct from, but complementary to, traditional face-to-face career guidance
- requires the practitioner to develop more intensive listening skills and to practice with minimum use of tools.

Transforming a pilot into an all-age service

Career Services decided to move career guidance by telephone from a pilot targeted at a specific age-group into its suite of integrated all-age career services. The decision to move to an all-age service was based on the organisation's current service provision, and the increased accessibility and reach the telephone service provides its clients.

To move career guidance by telephone from the pilot stage into an integrated service, Career Services focused on:

1. continuing to provide a highly professional seamless service to clients
2. using an existing platform of technology that is centrally located with easily accessed technical support
3. developing a service offer that was complementary to its traditional face-to-face option
4. recruiting, training and providing ongoing professional development and support to two full-time telephone career consultants.

Year 1 - Launch and learn

On 1 August 2008 Career Services introduced career guidance by telephone into its suite of integrated all-age services. The service continues to be delivered from the organisation's advice line (contact centre) in Wellington by two telephone career consultants.

Telephone guidance is an emerging form of practice in the New Zealand careers industry and Career Services is focused on learning as much as possible from its first year of delivery. These learnings will be used to enhance the telephone guidance service to better meet the needs of its clients in the future.

As career guidance by telephone became an all-age service, Career Services was not able to accurately forecast what the demand would be for the service, or whether two telephone career consultants would be able to meet the demand³. Rather than advertising the service to the public, Career Services decided to work with its regional office network and advice line staff to offer career guidance by telephone as a complementary service to its face-to-face guidance sessions.

³ During the career guidance telephone pilot period (1 July 2007 – 29 February 2008) the telephone guidance consultant delivered 342 interactions with 265 clients. 331 interactions were delivered by telephone, three by e-mail and eight through the on-line chat facility.

By providing the offer of telephone guidance from these two sources, Career Services was able to manage the level of demand and continue to provide a high quality service. This approach also enabled Career Services to provide a guidance service to those people who in the past may not have been able to access the traditional face-to-face services⁴. In addition, at times telephone guidance may offer clients the option of reduced waiting times.

Telephone, web-based, face-to-face guidance services are viewed not as alternatives but as alternative portals into an integrated range of services (Watts, 2002). Clients can use the channels they prefer, and do so interchangeably (Watts & Dent, 2008). To ensure clients experience a seamless integrated service, Career Services uses technology to capture client interactions. The Client Relationship Management (CRM) system means that clients who access our services repeatedly (no matter which channel they choose) do not have to re-tell their previous interactions with the organisation.

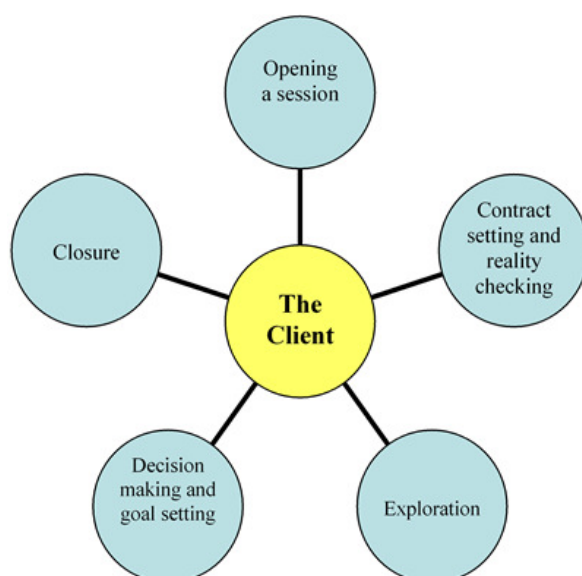
A high quality client-centred service

A quality standards manual was developed to ensure clients receive consistent high quality telephone guidance service. The manual builds on the learnings from the career guidance by telephone pilot and has been adapted for an all-age service, while maintaining a client-centred approach to delivery. The manual focuses on a range of topics including presenting the offer, making a contract with the client, the actual telephone guidance process, reporting requirements and quality assurance processes.

An effective career guidance by telephone session

The telephone guidance session is a flexible and fluid process, with the client moving in and out of various stages at various times. The following is a general summary of a session process.

Figure 1: Stages of a career guidance by telephone session.



⁴ For example clients that are geographically isolated or have physical disabilities.

The number and duration of sessions will depend on the client's situation and need – they may prefer longer or shorter duration sessions, in either one or more appointments. Career Services has learnt from the pilot that when working with people aged 15-30 years the average guidance session length was 40 minutes. Now that it is an all-age service Career Services expects calls to average from 40 to 60 minutes in length.

In addition, an effective telephone guidance session includes the:

- telephone career consultant being mindful of the environment that the client is in⁵
- client taking control and leading the process
- client reporting back on the direction they have taken.

Professional development and support for specialist staff

Staff require a unique set of skills and experience to deliver career guidance over the telephone. Along with a good understanding of career theory and career guidance experience they need to have well-developed listening skills which they use intensively in this form of practice. When delivering telephone guidance, consultants can no longer rely on visual cues, such as body language, it's the client's tone of voice that provides important clues (England, van Holten & Urbahn, 2008, p.11). They apply a solution-focused brief intervention model to manage the length of the call sessions. During sessions staff will synchronistically listen to and converse with clients while sourcing information and/or resources from a range of sources, including the internet.

Career Services has put in place a programme of training, ongoing professional development and support for its telephone career consultants. The programme consists of a mix of reviews⁶, coaching, professional development and professional supervision. Coaching sessions focus on a range of activities including reviewing calls to identify ways of improving skills and techniques, and considering the ethical implications of working with clients using this form of technology, such as issues of privacy and safety. Telephone career consultants, like other Career Services' practitioners, are members of the Career Practitioners Association of New Zealand (CPANZ).

Observations on this emerging model of practice

Career Services has now been delivering telephone guidance as an all-age service for six months (1 August 2008 to 31 January 2009). During this period the organisation has been embedding the model of practice and experiencing the traditional seasonal fluctuations in client numbers and presenting needs.

⁵ Examples of the pilot show that some clients were on the bus, washing their car and minding their children while conversing with the telephone career consultant.

⁶ Self, peer and client.

Who's using this all-age guidance service?

In the first six months of providing career guidance by telephone as an all-age service, Career Services has worked with 226 clients and delivered 300 guidance interactions.

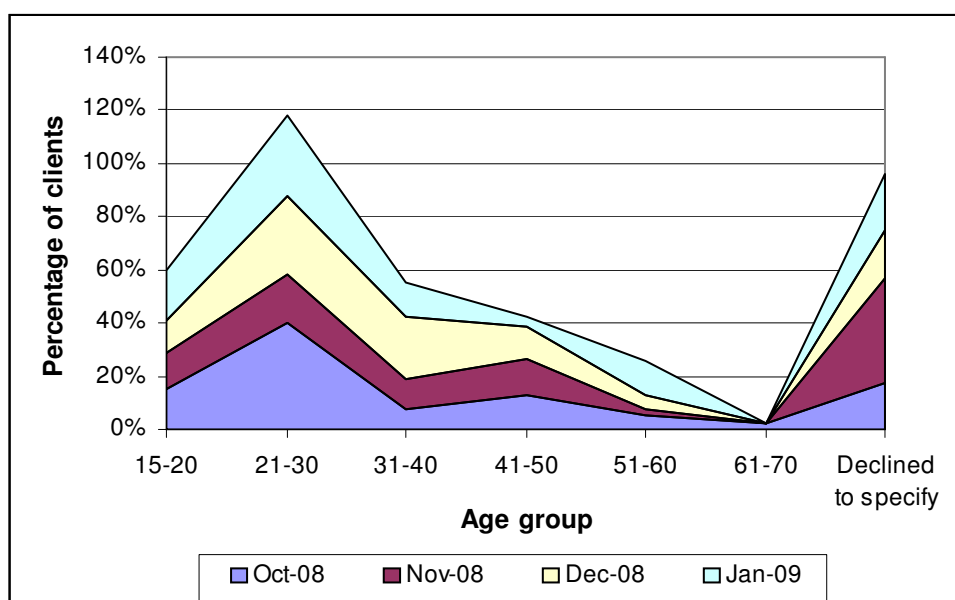
Table 1 shows a snapshot of the number of telephone guidance sessions, clients and interactions held during a four month period⁷.

Table 1: Four month snapshot of number of sessions, clients and interactions.

Number of sessions	Number of clients	Interactions
1	128	128
2	26	52
3	9	27
4	1	4
	164	211

Of the 226 clients seen during the first six months of this all-age service 145 clients were female and 81 were male. Figure 2 provides a snapshot of the age range of clients over a four month period.

Figure 2: Age range of clients over a four month period.



Telephone guidance is delivered out of Career Services' advice line (contact centre). The advice line's hours are 8am to 8pm Monday to Thursday, 8am to 6pm Friday and 10am to 2pm on Saturday. Telephone career consultants are available during office hours, and regular evening appointments are also available.

⁷ Period: 1 October 2008 to 31 January 2009.

During the first six months of delivering this all-age service the average monthly call length has moved from 55 to 42 minutes⁸. This change is a result of the organisation embedding the telephone guidance into its integrated suite of services, but could reflect the different levels of career needs clients are presenting each month.

Early observations

The evaluation outcomes from the career guidance telephone pilot show that this service is beneficial in helping clients to take the next step in their career journey. This form of practice continues to provide people with greater access to guidance services, especially those who, for whatever reason, are not able to or choose not to access a face-to-face session. Table 2 provides a four month snapshot of the situations of telephone guidance clients⁹.

Table 2: Four month snapshot of client situations

Situation	Percentage of clients
Not working	35%
Working	24%
Disability	8%
Geographically or socially isolated	4%
Solo parent	6%
Student	13%
Declined to specify	9%
	100%

Key:

Not working: unemployed or may be parents at home
 Working: working part-time, casual, temporary or full-time
 Disability: clearly identified they have an illness or injury and not working

The change in the country's economy is having an impact on the labour market. Now that telephone career guidance has moved to an all-age service Career Services is observing that the guidance channel appears to suit people who are in work. A more recent trend is that some of these workers are facing redundancy or have been made redundant.

The main tool for telephone career consultants continues to be the telephone conversation. However now that Career Services is offering telephone guidance to a broader client base, the consultants need to test out a range of tools and techniques that the client feels comfortable with and that will meet their career needs. For example consultants working with the pilot age group (15-30 years of age) included in their set of tools Career Services' online tools: the Subject and Skill Matchers, and Jobs by Interest. Now they are working with a broader client base they are using tools and techniques that reflect the needs of this client group.

⁸ The average call length at the end of the career guidance by telephone pilot was 40 minutes.

⁹ Period: 1 October 2008 to 31 January 2009.

“Thanks very much for your help with this up and coming work-life transition. Change is never an easy thing to deal with but I hope to make a gentle work-life transition.”

- Verbatim comment from a telephone guidance client

Career Services will continue to learn from its first year of delivering this emerging model of practice. These learnings provide the foundation for the organisation to continue to enhance telephone guidance and to fully embed the service into its integrated all-age career services, so Career Services extends its reach to better help New Zealanders to make good career decisions.

A challenge

We are inviting the careers industry to consider:

- How do we build the body of evidence for the effectiveness of career guidance in NZ, including career guidance by telephone?
- Where does telephone guidance sit on the continuum of technologically enabled guidance services in light of e-counselling (Goddard, 2008)?
- What are the implications for training and continuing professional development for career practitioners?

We encourage you to pose other questions to the careers industry.

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