

Why career counselling is more valuable now than ever before

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Author



Kobus Maree

Professor of Educational Psychology,
University of Pretoria

The days of staying in one career forever are over for many people. Shutterstock

The world of work is changing all the time – and fast. Jobs have emerged that didn't exist five or ten years ago. And the idea that you'd stick with one career for your entire working life has been left in the dust. The Conversation Africa's education editor Natasha Joseph asked Professor Kobus Maree of the University of Pretoria's Educational Psychology Department to explain how career counselling has changed – and why it's so important.

When you talk about career counselling, I suspect a lot of people think back to their school days when a guidance counsellor said, “You should do this job one day.” But it's a far broader world, isn't it?

Career counselling entails much more than merely choosing a job and hoping to stay in that job for the rest of one's life. Choosing a career is seen by many as trying to find a way to integrate into society, say as a teacher or a plumber, and also about making a social contribution.

Today, career counsellors believe that it is essential to identify a person's original “pain”. This provides the starting point and life plot of every person's career and life career story.

Career counsellors endeavour to help people deal with their pain – and empower them to use this pain to help others. In the process, people can heal themselves and make social contributions. Some people understandably grapple with the contention that every life story starts with pain. My own

research, and others', suggests that very high career achievers understand the value of pain to any life story: the more you hurt and struggle, the more you have to strive to prove yourself.

Why is career counselling so important?



Career counselling can help people to navigate crossroads in their lives. Kobus Maree

Once people know where they are headed, they mostly become motivated to work hard to realise their goals.

People consult career counsellors when they face a “natural” crossroads: having to choose a school, university, field of study or one from a number of employment opportunities. A second group consults career counsellors when they begin to doubt whether they have made the appropriate choice in terms of schools, subjects, universities, careers or employers. In all these cases, the future is already upon them: “the old” – what used to work – no longer does.

Workers are being confronted increasingly in the postmodern era with the impact of change on the workplace. They have to face and deal with repeated work-related crossroads and transitions. They hesitate because they are uncertain about the way forward. Career counsellors then enable them to recount their career life story. This allows them to listen to themselves by revisiting instances when they faced a crossroads. And by listening to themselves, they become able to deal with their current crossroads.

Whose responsibility is it to set up career counselling mechanisms? Individual schools and universities? Does the government have a role to play?

I should think that everything starts with the government. But a host of other stakeholders are also responsible: education and labour departments; primary, secondary and tertiary training institutions; professional bodies and qualifications authorities; and youth development agencies, private practitioners and non-profit organisations.

The role of parents, teachers, role models and a person’s peer group also shouldn’t be underestimated. Society has a collective responsibility to ensure that every person be granted access to career counselling. In fact, postmodern career counselling can help “invisible” and “unvoiced” people who are desperately in need of career counselling become “visible” and listened to.

How much does your research and experience suggest that people are using career counselling services in South Africa, where you’re based? What holds people back from seeking career counselling?

Sadly, only a small percentage of South Africans ever have access to career counselling. Career counselling in Africa at large is still premised on the belief that career counsellors should “test” clients to assess their personality profiles and help them to find the “best fit” between their personality traits

and the traits required to execute a certain job successfully. People hope that career counsellors will tell them which careers to choose.

Moreover, career counselling offered by private practitioners is too expensive to be accessed by people who are poor – and that’s the vast majority of South Africans.

Far too few teachers are trained to administer career counselling adequately. Introducing Life Orientation as a school subject has not resolved the challenge either. Few of the teachers currently facilitating this subject have been trained adequately to administer career counselling.

There’s some work being done to improve career counselling in the country. The South African Qualifications Authority, for instance, has developed a career guidance hotline that doesn’t just involve a professional telling job-seekers what to do. The government is working on a plan to develop and implement a three-tier system of career development services in South Africa.

The world of work is constantly changing. We have jobs today that didn’t exist ten or even five years ago. How much is career counselling as a field adapting to those changes?

The US Department of Labour estimates that 65% of today’s schoolchildren will end up working in jobs that don’t currently exist.

Change is the new normal. For this reason, career counsellors must do their work in such a way that their clients become career adaptable and, most importantly, employable. It is vitally important that students acquire those skills that will help them not only survive but rather *flourish* in times of change. Career counsellors should become *au fait* with the basics of “employability counselling”, so to speak.

Career counsellors should try and use the best elements from various approaches in their work. Their allegiance should, ultimately, be to find the best ways to be useful to clients.