

Counseling for Business & Industrial

Career Counseling

2.1 Introduction of Career Counseling

The *Compendium of methods and techniques employed in career counseling* aims to be a synthetic presentation of the main instruments of the information, counseling and guidance practice. Such a work (alongside others introducing the legal framework, the objectives and tasks of counselors, the ethical code and the quality standards in the guidance practice, information and communication technology in career counseling, the characteristics of adult counseling, distance counseling, evaluating counselors and counseling bodies, key competences of practitioners, counseling as education, etc.), is a milestone of professional maturity in the field.

It is to be expected that on review of this work, career counselors should be able to:

- 1) easily identify the methods and techniques that are most appropriate to the specificity of their work, most adequate to the client categories they work with and the problems that the latter face;
- 2) choose – in awareness and by comparison – those counseling tools that have appropriated qualities for the identification of interests, aptitude systems, personality features, etc. of the clients involved, and on implementation and result interpretation, facilitate clients' decision making regarding their career, suggest alternative occupational pathways, support the creation of an individual career development plan, help understand the world of work and social and economic relations, enhance a successful start with the social and professional life;
- 3) identify the evaluative qualities and the limits of professional counseling and guidance instruments; act professionally, ethically and qualitatively in the examinations, evaluations and interpretations required by the particular counseling situations.

European policies in the lifelong learning field reconfirm the essential importance of information, counseling and guidance services in the process of “*facilitating the access to the education and continuing training offer*” and of supporting the positive entering of social and professional life for young people and adults. In this sense it is necessary to create a culture of open, transparent, comprehensible dialogue resulting in a practical gain for both the clients and the employers.

At the same time, these services must be provided insistently and persuasively so that any person should have the opportunity of learning and training throughout their lifetime and benefit from equal opportunities on the labour market (special attention should be given to groups threatened by social and job exclusion), stimulate social cohesion, encourage private initiative and assist the improvement of beneficiary’s lifestyle.

2.2 Counseling & Guidance

Counselors who work in information, counseling and guidance institutions will make recourse to the information and communication technologies to facilitate the access to their services of as many clients as possible, will work in close cooperation with the local employers and the community, endeavouring that their services should be up to date, connected to clients’ needs, to their systems of qualifications and interests, and to the dynamics of the local, regional, national and European social and economic development.

While selecting the methods and techniques for this Compendium, we held in mind the following issues:

- 1) the practical value of the method or technique for the field of counseling;
- 2) solid, rational, logical theoretical base, grounded on rigorous and systematic empirical research;
- 3) the existence of standards adapted to the social, cultural and economic specificity of the population or the possibility to easily adapt these instrument to the practice prevalent in our country;
- 4) facile use and quick results, comprehensible for client and counselor;
- 5) the extent to which the method or technique are is widespread in career counseling in our country and internationally;
- 6) the diversity of information sources, direct access to the reference material about the working method or technique.

At the same time, the selection process is concerned with aspects such as:

- 1) the consensus or majority vote of the authors team and their close collaborators;
- 2) the result of polls among counseling practitioners regarding the instruments they employ in practice or have requested to use.

In the choice of instruments, the following practical considerations are of some importance:

- 1) adapting the instrument to the category of clients requesting counseling services and to the specificity of their problems;
- 2) mastering in detail all the technical and methodological aspects required for the administration of the instruments, scoring and interpretation of results;
- 3) being acquainted with the social, cultural and economic environment of the clients, as well as with other characteristics pertaining to their gender, education, residence;
- 4) knowing the context in which the instrument intended for use was developed before deciding for its applicability;
- 5) the comprehensibility of the general structure, procedural friendliness, statistical support, availability of standards and scoring scales;
- 6) the extent to which the instrument offers the information needed by the clients in their career development.

The main questions that counselors should ask when deciding upon the purchase, adaptation and use of tests are the following:

- 1) To what purpose were the tests developed? What do they claim to measure?
- 2) What target groups are they recommended for?
- 3) What types of items / tasks does the test employ for evaluation?
- 4) Does the test come with an administration and scoring manual?
- 5) Does the test include standards and scoring scales for assessing the results?
- 6) Is the test easy to use and the result interpretation comprehensible and transparent for the beneficiaries?
- 7) Are there data regarding the test's reliability and validity?
- 8) Are there copyright provisions? What are the costs?
- 9) Who are the authors of the test?

Another category of problems that such a work may encounter is related to the methodological systematization, categorization, taxonomy of models and techniques used in the practice of career counseling. It is known that extremely diverse objectives, criteria, indicators might be applied to the process.

In their daily activity the counselors develop their own working style based on their preferences regarding the methods and techniques; on the other hand they must use certain methods and techniques adequate to the categories of clients and to the categories of problems raised.

In general, the sources of information/purchase of the instruments /questionnaires/ tests, etc. used in career counseling are:

- 1) specialized publishing houses commercializing psychological investigation tools;
- 2) publications (journals, books, other sources on the Internet);
- 3) copies from the originals in universities (used experimentally for research);
- 4) direct purchase from the source of the free use rights (through professional organizations, libraries, peer counselors);
- 5) purchasing the reference instruments and the rights of translation, adaptation, re-sampling and use (by institutes and universities) with their own funding or through various projects and programmes;
- 6) elaborating original instruments at the national level as a result of research activity carried in institutes and universities.

It must be said that it is forbidden to use psychological instruments protected by the copyright act without the permission of the authors or publishers. Access to these instruments is granted on the condition of purchasing the rights to adapt and use in full compliance with the laws, orders and provisions of the Regulations of professional associations in the field.

Besides the legislation, there are ethical principles that regulate the professional use of methods and techniques specific to career counseling and the counselors behaviour in relation to them.

The present Compendium is a methodological handbook and also a professional statement of coherence, synergy and continuity in the work of career counseling, a scientific and systematic approach to the field and a way of supporting high quality service of information, counseling and guidance.

We hope this Compendium to be a useful instrument both for the undergraduates preparing to become counselors, professors teaching this course and counseling practitioners in the fields of education, employment, youth work, law enforcement,

healthcare, military and others and who are known as careers advisors, school counselors, educational and vocational guidance counselors, employment officers, etc.

2.3 Methodological Aspects

Career counseling is a global approach to individuals under all aspects of their personal, professional and social life; it consists in providing information, counseling and guidance services with a view to supporting each and every person – in any stage of their life – in the development of their own career through decision-making as regards to education, work, and community life.

The domain of career counseling has known success and recoil of using various assessment methods and techniques (in the beginning mostly psychological tests, currently mostly questionnaires and inventories of interests, preferences, aptitudes, attitudes and values). In the dawn of educational and vocational guidance in Romania we can identify a psychometric phase, followed by an educational phase, and by the contemporary phase related to cognitive information management and processing, having the holistic career approach ethics and quality at its core.

In career counseling we identify helpful methods among tests, questionnaires or inventories concerning:

- 1) aptitudes (intellectual, verbal, numerical, reasoning, reaction speed, special talents, etc.);
- 2) personality;
- 3) interests and special needs;
- 4) values and attitudes;
- 5) assessment of academic acquisitions (learning skills and methods);
- 6) interpersonal relations;
- 7) self-image;
- 8) decision-making;
- 9) career development (training for decision-making); special categories of population.

Tests are a means to objective and systematic measurement / assessment of certain behavioral elements (in either areas: aptitudes, personality, attitudes, knowledge) of individuals, based on their answers to certain work-related tasks. These fixed sequences of personal characteristics investigated are considered relevant to defining and identifying the respective aspects in human subjects.

Standardized inventories are also means of measuring behavioral segments, in which the subject's answers are not judged as right or wrong, but compared against those of other individuals taken to be a group norm (Brown and Brooks, 1991).

In practice, it has been shown that in most cases counselors use inventories of interests and skills rather than psychological performance and personality tests. In fact, the balance between one type of instruments and the other stems from the role assumed by counselors: whether it is centred in supporting clients with their career development and decision-making, or in interpreting information for what is considered to be their clients' best interest.

As it can be noticed, the ends are the same, but the means different in each of the two situations described. Here are what psychological inventories and tests can identify with respect to career counseling:

- 1) areas of interest / preference in the sphere of occupations;
- 2) skills, abilities, aptitudes, as well as levels of performance required in various occupational areas;
- 3) aspects of personality compatible with certain occupational fields;
- 4) possible causes of dissatisfaction or lack of progress in the case of people on the job;
- 5) personal blockage and stereotypes in decision-making in the clients' occupational field.

2.4 Tests and Inventory

Interposing tests and inventories between counselor and client is not devoid of criticism. The most pertinent criticisms refer to the following:

- 1) counseling does not necessarily involve testing;
- 2) test results distort the relationship between counselor and client;
- 3) tests increase client dependency on external decision-making or self-evaluation, self-management, self-governed social and professional insertion;
- 4) tests are not infallible and are often "**responsible**" for cultural and gender labeling;
- 5) some results of psychological tests and inventories have a negative impact on certain categories of clients, in a manner that can discourage, debilitate their self-image instead of improving it, etc.

Nevertheless, many of the observations above target the inappropriate use of test and inventory results and not the instruments themselves. It is therefore up to the counselor to choose the appropriate tests and inventories for each particular client according to the type of problems raised, the way the instruments are used and especially to the interpretation of the results, as well as to the ethical and professional standards of practice. After all, a counselor employs certain tests and inventories to help clients get to know themselves, self-assess their personal resources, enable them for decision and planning their own careers. In other words, the assessment instruments can help clients with:

- 1) awareness of personal aptitudes, ability, skills or knowledge;
- 2) choosing education and training pathways in accordance with their projects and results regarding their career in given life contexts;
- 3) identifying occupational alternatives complementary to their structure of interests, aptitudes and dominant personality traits;
- 4) drawing up a positive and realistic self-image;
- 5) identifying the causes, the nature and the amplitude of barriers in their occupational area;
- 6) preparing for decision-making and autonomous career planning development;
- 7) compensating the gap in information, incomplete or erroneous information and diminishing the stereotypes regarding the world of work;
- 8) identifying possible sources of professional dissatisfaction, social misfit or difficulty in carrying relationships and role performing.

Counselors employ psychological tests and inventories mainly in two cases:

- 1) they wish to save time when busy with many clients;
- 2) they attempt to compensate the lack of information in the case of new clients.

A counselor can obtain sufficient information about clients on a first meeting through the interview that usually takes place in such circumstances. This is true in case of people familiar with counseling; in these situations, evaluation by psychological tests and inventories is uneconomic in terms of time, relevant information gained, and costs.

Other clients directly and explicitly request assessment with psychological tests and might not have an accurate self-image or ongoing projects for career development. Such people can express unrealistic expectations regarding the

testing, as well as regarding the counselors themselves. In special cases, counselors make use of tests or inventories in order to “*break the ice*” in the communication with certain clients or in following meetings as supplementary arguments to help them come to a decision: choose an education way or select an occupation.

Client priorities are the benchmark concerning whether to employ or not certain tests and/or inventories. Even more important than the administration of the psychological tests or inventories is the interpretation of the outcomes they produce. Here are broadly the steps that a counselor must make sure to have taken:

- 1) choosing the most appropriate instrument which can have maximum impact on solving the problems of the client;
- 2) making sure the subjects understand the purpose of the test and/or inventory about to be applied, the tasks that need completion, the filling out procedure, the reasonable expectations to have in relation to the testing;
- 3) checking that subjects offer all required data;
- 4) taking notes about the behaviour of the clients while sitting in the test;
- 5) rigorously checking the answers, consulting with the answer page, encoding, adding up results (for subtests);
- 6) accurately reporting performance to standards;
- 7) reviewing the data obtained and preparing the client for the interpretations of the results.

Here are a few questions for the client that can be asked by the counselor before the interpretation of the results:

- 1) What do you think about the test?
- 2) What do you think was your performance?
- 3) What did you think of the testing conditions?
- 4) What questions stood out?
- 5) Can I clarify anything for you?
 - a. obtaining the necessary information in order to understand the performance with respect to the client’s real life (level of education, social and cultural environment, gender status, personality traits, etc.; the same score does not automatically mean the same irrespective of the client);

- b. integrating all the information on the client (education, family, personal experience, etc.) in a dynamic, realistic interpretation, related to the client's real life, which should make sense and have the a proactive value;
- c. at the same time, during the interpretation itself, the counselor must: actively involve the client in attributing meaning to the results (e.g. "*With mechanic interests you scored very high and with artistic interests below average. Why do you think this is the case?*"),
- d. avoid a highly specialized language in explanations, technical terms that could be unknown or wrongly / vaguely perceived by the client, _ have an attitude of **well-meaning neutrality** and not "beautify" the results at certain subtests: some subjects may be astonished by the capacity of the test and of the counselor to reveal very personal things in their life or may be offended by certain failures ("*The difficulty and the discomfort of interpreting low performance or negative results is the problem of the counselor and not of the client*" (Tinsley and Bradley, 1986),
- e. be aware of the client's attitude towards the "**ability**" of the psychological tests to "solve" personal issues, support them so that the clients' expectations are realistic (for instance the client may have an exaggerated faith in the test to provide miraculous results or solutions; the counselor may encounter skepticism or negativity due to difficulties in introspection or as a defense mechanism, etc.).

Practice has proved that in career counseling, guidance and information the clients request and accept a comprehensive approach to their problems and do not focus on choosing an occupation. This makes counselors admit the fact – which is natural, in fact:

- that people consider the different roles they perform simultaneously and/or alternatively throughout their lives to make up a continuum they get involved in completely, with their entire being and all aspects of their personality. For these reasons, the counselors must understand the intra-personal interactions triggered by performing various roles by an individual in a concrete life situation.

2.5 Technical, Basic Information

Technical, basic information accompanying any quality psychological test refers to:

- 1) **reliability**: lack of measurement errors in psychological evaluation, assessed by the internal consistency of the test and stability in time of the scores obtained when the test is re-applied; the **reliability coefficient** (which in most quality tests ranges between 0.80-0.90) is estimated through:
 - 2) **internal consistency** of the instrument, resulting from a **statistical calculus** of correlation and assessed to be high if all tasks / items of the test prove to measure the same psychological variable; the check can also be performed by *applying test halves* and calculating the correlation coefficients of the scores of the two halves of the test,
 - 3) **stability in time** of the performance obtained by the client, which implies **testing-retesting** after a certain interval (the two halves must contain the same number of items and a similar degree of difficulty, and the selection can be performed by selecting the items numbered with odd numbers for instance; a stability coefficient of the scores is considered to be better the closer it is to 1;
- 4) **validity**: it is the most important quality of a test and refers to adapting the contents of the test to the problem under investigation (in other words, is the affirmative answer to the following question: does the test truly measure what it intends / claims to be measuring?). This quality of a test is indispensable because in many situations the direct measurement of one's psychological characteristics is not possible (e.g. interests, attitudes, personality traits, etc.).

There are three main categories of validity tests:

- a) **content validity**: refers to the proportion of items in the test that are significant / relevant to cover the objective of the psychological measurement (the most frequent cases are the scholar tests),
- b) **criterion validity** refers to providing a proof / prediction with respect to the existence of a relationship between the test results and a certain type of behaviour, taken as a criterion (e.g.: if we are to evaluate work performance, we should include in the respective test those items that will make sure that

we are evaluating precisely the aspects that define the respective criterion); two types of criterion validity are identified in that case: ***predictive*** and ***concurrent***, function of the temporal relationship between the test results and the confirmation in reality of the measurements made, ***construct validity*** refers to the degree in which a test through its items measures a certain psychological trait which we wish to evaluate (the construct / concept reflects in this case the operationalization of a theoretical psychological framework based on which the test is developed).

- c) ***objectivity***: refers to that quality of the test that allows for similar results with different operators (tests relatively “immune” to the subjectivity of the score-marker are multiple-choice questions, such as true / false or pre-formulated answers);

- d) ***the practical value*** of the test refers to its appropriateness in everyday psychological evaluation: ***economical*** (re-usable materials: grid format, the test itself, apparatus, textbooks, answer sheets), ***reduced duration of application***, easy to understand by subjects of the ***filling-out instructions***, ***quick scoring and straightforward interpretation pathways***).

In general, the authors of professional psychological assessment instruments offer along with the test all the data regarding the characteristics of the population on which the scoring standards were elaborated (gender, age, education, etc.), as well as statistical information and commentaries considered to be relevant with respect to the main quality features of the tests (reliability, validity, etc.).

As regards the people whom are subjected to psychological tests, inventories, questionnaires, etc., the counselor performs the assessment in order to find out what they ***can do*** (due to their innate personal qualities or prior learning) and what they ***would like to do*** (interests, motivation, attitudes). The relationship between these aspects of the individual’s personality is a different matter: both components are, reciprocally, the necessary but insufficient conditions to ensure success in the workplace. We should mention here that when we speak of work in the broad sense we mean activities that can be mostly manual / physical or intellectual, carried out in order to make an income or other kinds of material, moral or financial compensation for the effort made or the time consumed. Among the categories of activities targeted and that qualify as work are:

- in state or private institutions and enterprises, at home, voluntary / charitable, learning and training activities, etc.

Certainly, the assessment of clients has a supplementary justification if the career counseling involves or requires it, according to the definition accepted by the majority of practitioners or theoreticians in the field.

“Career counseling is the process of attaining the maximum compatibility between the resources, requirements, aspirations or interests of an individual and the real offer in the field of education, training and social and vocational integration.

Career counseling is a social service initiating a holistic, continual, flexible approach of individuals, throughout all the phases of their lives (formal education, employment, social integration, community involvement, continuing professional development, changing jobs, family status, re-qualifications, retirement, etc.) and under all the significant aspects of life and the roles taken on in school, profession, social and community life, family, leisure, etc. which is represented by information, counseling and guidance provided by authorized counselors.” (Jigau, 2003).

We implicitly find in this extended definition of career counseling the idea of individual characteristics and work environments, the purpose of the information, counseling and guidance, counseling throughout one’s lifetime, as well as elements of the processes related to decision-making and planning career development.

Consequently, career counseling is a basic component of information, counseling and guidance services meant to support the social and professional integration of all age groups through lifelong learning and counseling. For a long time, in the psychological assessment and examination with a view to career counseling (or educational and vocational guidance, in a more restrictive sense), aptitudes and personality traits were considered decisive.

Recent research has drawn attention to the fact that people exhibit complex occupational behaviors and are not a *puzzle* of independent characteristics, that they have unique life experiences, a hereditary background which cannot be replicated, sets of values, aspirations and attitudes in various contexts of their existence, that in their social and professional life they play different roles simultaneously or successively, other than those strictly related to their occupation, etc. Thus, psychological evaluation and examination will have to take into account the influence of other aspects, such as family, education, community, pastimes, hobbies, public functions voluntary taken or other roles played throughout one’s lifetime.