

The Internet and Careers Information and Guidance: how to use it and what are the possibilities for integration with existing services? by Leonardo Evangelista (1999)
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This article is intended to answer a series of questions on the possible utilisation of the Internet for careers information and guidance purposes, in particular:

- How the features of the Internet can be combined with the practice of providing Careers Information and Guidance
- What services it is possible to supply through the Internet, and in particular, what levels of advice and by what means
- How to use it and what type of integration is possible with existing services.

1. How the features of the Internet can be combined with the practice of providing Careers Information and Guidance

There are some features, which make the Internet particularly interesting to organisations and associations, which have already started, or would like to make available to their clients a careers guidance service.

The large amount of quality careers guidance material, which it is possible to access in the net free of charge

In a search carried out during the period January - December 1998 more than 200 British web sites dedicated to or usable for Careers Guidance were identified (Note 1). The recorded sites cover a large number of topics, generally in a thorough or extremely comprehensive manner and in a certain number of cases some of the information is only available on the Internet.

One of the limitations of the Internet is, however, the difficulty of tracing some information. In this case, as is well known, search engines exist and some search engines, in order to facilitate further searching, even offer thematic guides. The trouble is that, on account of the sheer dimension of the Internet, neither system is very effective. For a possible solution to the problem of tracing information, see Point 4.

The possibility of being able to offer a careers guidance service at a low cost and irrespective of opening hours, availability of premises, or place of residence of the users.

Once placed on the net, the sites are freely accessible by all those who have at their disposal or can use a computer connected to the Internet. Like a book, the Internet allows individual and autonomous reading of the sites on the part of the users, and the consultation is independent of opening hours, availability of premises, place of residence of the user, presence of qualified careers advisers.

In addition to the great ease of supplying the service, one aspect to highlight is how inexpensive it is to use the Internet. The cost of setting up a site depends on a series of variables, such as for example, the quality and length of the included texts and the type of graphics chosen, but in

- B. Supply of general information directed at the individual needs of the client, but without the possibility of feedback. For example: a university prospectus, which, in addition to the data supplied as in Point 1, quotes a series of information on the qualities necessary to successfully attend a university faculty and how to choose a particular faculty.
- C. Supply of general information directed at the individual needs of the client, which allows limited possibility for feedback. For example: a 'help line' for advice on universities. Direct contact with a careers adviser allows more detailed treatment of individual cases, even though it is still not ideal. In the case of the telephone, the relationship with the adviser is purely verbal, and this can lead to an element of feeling a nuisance and of taking up too much time which in turn can pressurise one into feeling hurried.
- D. Supply of general information directed at the individual needs of the client, which allows good possibilities for feedback (individual face to face interview, conducted sitting down together, without time constraints). This option, provided that the adviser is well prepared and has the time at his disposition, allows the supply of information, on the basis of an in depth examination of the client's requirements and personal situation, and the identification of solutions or ways forward, personalised to suit the individual (Note 2).

In considering this classification one must keep in mind that the possibility of feedback and the interview procedure (standing or seated) might not be enough in itself to define the level of information. For example, a good printed prospectus (level B) may prove to be better than the telephone situation or a face to face interview with ill prepared, stressed out or de-motivated advisers (level D). Let's assume, for our purposes, that the information is always supplied to a good standard, at all levels.

At this point we are better able to define the type of service which it is possible to supply via Internet.

At any given moment, the total requests for information from the clients of careers guidance services will be spread over all the levels, but each client, according to his own personal situation and awareness, will request information from one specific level and not the others, for example from level C.

One can debate to what extent the requests of the clients tend to be distributed among the different levels. Our personal experience is that a considerable part of the requests, equal to roughly half, is concentrated on levels A and in particular B.

The use of the Internet then, provided that this takes place by using sites with a suitable layout (in particular which contain 'general information directed at the individual needs of the client', i.e. which consider the possible questions and the mental pictures of the user -level B-, or if preferred, which take a user tailored approach), allows the supply of a totally satisfactory service to a large number, equal to roughly half, of the client's requests.

This percentage can be further increased by combining the Internet with other tools which allow feedback with qualified advisers (telephone, fax or electronic mail) so as to satisfy even the requests from level C.

Requests of this type must be satisfied by recourse to one or more advisers. However the service doesn't necessarily require the opening of actual agencies, thereby avoiding a considerable increase in costs. The advisers can, in fact, be hundreds of miles away, and provide this service under agreement with a public body or bodies.

That is to say, we can imagine the existence of advisers specialised in providing (even from their own home) an advice service by means of E-mail, fax or telephone -but E-mail is much more economical compared to a 'help line' or fax and long distance telephone calls -, to clients spread throughout the UK, under an agreement with different public bodies.

The Internet forms, however, only a support role for clients who need information from level D. It should be said that even a client who initially needs information from level D benefits, however, from the gathering of information from levels A to C, and that the information, so gathered, can, in a certain number of cases, render superfluous individual advising.

In conclusion, the utilisation of the Internet, either on its own, or with the support of careers advisers working at a distance, can succeed in the total satisfaction of the majority of requests from the clients of careers guidance services. It should be said that, at the moment, the number of sites which take a user tailored approach is small, and that they cover only a part of careers guidance topics. For a possible solution to this problem, see Point 4.

3. How to utilise the Internet and what type of integration is possible with existing services

From what has been said so far, it is possible now to return to how the Internet may be utilised and to the possible integration of it with the other means of supplying careers information and guidance.

The possible solutions are included in two fundamental cases:

A. Areas, where careers guidance services are lacking or have insufficient infrastructure or scope (for example, in large areas with low population densities). In these cases Internet can be utilised to transform any type of public place or place open to the public, where an agent and a computer may be present, into a point for the supply of careers information and guidance. Places particularly suited for a solution of this kind are, for example, public libraries, schools, offices open to the public. In addition to encouraging, in this way, the accessing of information in existing sites, the managements responsible for careers guidance can create their own web site containing information of local interest and set up a distance careers advising service for clients in their own region.

B. Areas, where careers guidance services are already established and easily accessible. In these cases, it is possible to equip the agencies with terminals linked to the Internet, which would allow the users autonomous access to the majority of information normally requested from the advisers, thereby reducing the workload of the advisers and improving the quality of the service.

Also, in this case, it may be opportune to create their own web site containing information of local interest and set up a distance careers advising service for clients in their own region. The promotion of the utilisation of the Internet and the opportunity for distance careers advising also has the advantage of reducing the number of visits to the agency and allowing better coverage of the region and the prospective reduction in the number of agencies themselves or of their opening hours.

4. 'Careers Information and Guidance on the Web', a tool for careers guidance via the Internet

We have seen so far how the utilisation of the Internet allows for setting up or improving careers guidance services. This opportunity is, however, linked to the possibility of overcoming the problem of finding information and of setting up web sites, which take a user tailored approach to careers information and guidance.

With these objectives in mind, in the sphere of the Project referred to at Note 1, the web site entitled 'Careers Information and Guidance on the Web' (<http://www.aiuto.net/uk.htm>) has been developed (the Italian section of the site is at <http://www.aiuto.net>).

'Careers Information and Guidance on the Web' is a 60 plus page guide to British web sites dedicated to careers information and guidance, with extensive coverage of the principal careers guidance topics. We recommend readers to consult it directly for a detailed examination of its features (see, in particular <http://www.aiuto.net/uk6f.htm>) and how to utilise it (see, in particular <http://www.aiuto.net/uk6d.htm>). Careers guidance agencies interested in collaborating with us can read at <http://www.aiuto.net/uk6g.htm>.

NOTE:

1. The Project, directed at establishing new ways of utilising the Internet for careers information and guidance purposes, has been promoted by the Professional Careers Information and Guidance Services for the Region of Florence, Italy (<http://www.provincia.firenze.it/infolavoro>), and carried out by 'Servizi per l'orientamento' and in particular by the author of this article. The Project obtained financing from ISPO of the European Union (<http://www.ispo.cec.be>).

2. So as not to over-complicate this article, 'group discussion', in which a careers adviser provides information, partly general and partly personalised, to a group of clients (as, for example, in careers guidance courses for job search, or for choice of university) has not been mentioned. The discussion group can be placed, according to how it is conducted, in levels C or D).