

Professional career advice and information from a distance by Leonardo Evangelista (2000)
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This page deals with how to give professional advice and information from a distance through the use of a forum carrying e-mail messages, which can be viewed by anyone. We are referring here to careers guidance, which, according to the circumstances, may involve enquiries of a 'technical' nature ('Where can you find degree courses in...?'), but also enquiries which call for a detailed appraisal of the individual capabilities and plans/objectives of the client.

The forum concerned is that contained in the Guidalavoro web-site www.guidalavoro.net, devoted to vocational options and job search, and in which we have a section for supplying careers information and guidance at a distance <http://www.guidalavoro.net/cgi-bin/wwwboard/wwwboard.html>. The replies are given within a few hours or days.

For both the client and the consultant, carrying out careers guidance at a distance has the advantage of being able to supply advice and information without having to physically go to an agency.

In the case where the service is paid for by a third party (for example a public careers guidance organisation), the advantage for the promoter is the possibility of supplying a service without having to organise a special venue, and of paying the consultant only for his/her services without the need for a physical presence.

The supply of advice from a distance must take into account certain aspects:

A. The absence of the client in person

A.1. In one to one, face to face consultation, the physical appearance and body language (posture, tone of voice, glance, gestures) combine to form a whole, together with the content of the client's conversation, so as to give, at times, a different meaning to such content.

A.2. Seeing the client also gives you an idea of his/her temperament/disposition/personality (e. g. with above or below average personal capabilities) and this impression can have an effect on the strategies which we then suggest to him/her or work out together.

A.3. The absence of the client in person also means not being able to assess him/her from the point of view of a possible employer who may call him/her for an interview. It can happen, at times, that you find yourself faced with a person who is a little slovenly, or you realise that the person in front of you is a little retarded or has a slight handicap. These aspects cannot be detected in guidance conducted at a distance.

A.4. It must be said that these cases (verbal communication at variance with other forms of communication, and above or below average personal capabilities, etc.) are significant only in a minor fraction of interviews.

A.5. In carrying out careers guidance at a distance, by means of e-mail, the only assessable aspect is the written message. In this case our impression of the client is formed from the content

of the message (from the things which it tells us) but also from the format of the content (the syntax, the style, that is, how it is expressed). In this case it is necessary that the consultant have a good capacity for understanding the nuances of expression. However, the act of having to write obliges the client to present his/her case and enquiry in a more concise and clearer way than by verbal communication, and this can help the consultant.

B. The greater difficulty in interaction, so that it ends up restricting it

B.1. In the face to face interview it is very easy to ask questions and receive answers. If, during the course of consultancy conducted at a distance, the client or consultant makes a statement, which requires further expansion, it is then necessary to write another message, and wait hours or days for a reply. This leads to a decline in tension which, as a rule, discourages the exchange of many messages, thereby limiting the standard session of consultancy at a distance, to a message containing the question from the client and a message with the answer from the consultant. In cases where the client's enquiry doesn't convey all the necessary information required to form a clear picture of the situation, it is possible to reply, by making some conjectures ('I don't understand from your message if actually.... If that's so, then.... If instead....then.....), or refer the client to a consultant in person. It may also be necessary have recourse to a consultant in person, in the case where, despite having all the necessary information, there is the need for a more detailed appraisal, which takes into account the finer points and which requires, therefore, also the study of the client's physical appearance, temperament/disposition/personality and other, non verbal, ways of communicating.

B.2 Writing is more demanding and requires more time than speaking. The written replies of the consultant tend therefore to be succinct (no more than 10-20 lines). If the subject requires too long a reply, it is possible to refer the client to an Internet web-site, to a book or to a consultant in person.

C. The possibility for other people to make suggestions, give encouragement, or tell the client about their own experiences.

C.1. In carrying out careers guidance at a distance, organised not as an exchange of private messages between consultant and client, but as a forum open to all (as in Guidalavoro), other visitors to the site can take part, by making suggestions and giving encouragement. This normally has a positive effect on the client, because it makes him/her feel less alone with their problem. Messages of a negative nature could also come through (abusive or too aggressive), but normally the fact of sending a public reply to someone induces them to being sympathetic and meaningful. In any case, it is always possible for the consultant to reply to messages of a negative nature or delete them from the forum.

In conclusion: can careers guidance carried out at a distance, by means of e-mail, be an effective method?

Our reply is a positive one, because by this method a certain number of clients can have access to comprehensive answers, which otherwise (for reasons of time or distance from careers guidance agencies) they wouldn't have.

Based on our experience with the forum of Guidalavoro, it is possible to give comprehensive answers at a distance (without the need to refer to a consultant in person) in at least 50% of cases.