

Quality assurance in careers guidance services - a tri-variable model

1. Introduction

In the majority of the Italian Jobcentres and careers guidance agencies, quality is assured by employing the services of qualified careers practitioners. However, from a perspective of continual improvement and increased openness towards the service user, it may be useful to define theoretically what is meant by quality and to study how careers guidance services can be further improved. The aim of this article is to present an easy to understand and simple to apply model based on the active involvement of careers counsellors.

2. A model for quality in careers guidance services

A good quality product or service is one which fully meets the expectations of the customer and is recognised by experts in that particular field.

Reference to experts is necessary as, in many instances, the customer is not capable of fully assessing the overall quality of the service or product. For example, in the medical services, the patient is able to correctly evaluate elements such as the waiting room reception, the appointments system, the 'turn-taking' procedure, the courtesy shown by the doctor and the clarity of his explanations (all aspects to do with the way in which the service is supplied). However, the patient is unable to assess the most important elements, those of accuracy of diagnosis and prescribed treatment (aspects to do with the efficacy of the service). Even though efficacy is by far the most important, both facets contribute to the overall quality of service.

Customer expectations can be formed from previous experiences (e.g. I would describe as poor quality service having to queue at a post office where the queues are longer compared to the one that I normally use to pay my bills), or from the customer's personal idea of what constitutes good service (e.g. no queue at the post office). In some cases, particularly when the customer is not familiar with the aims of a service or has never used it before, he or she may have too high or too low an expectation. For this reason, it is helpful to clearly define the aims and minimum standards of the service being offered (usually by means of a written document).

The above exposition serves to highlight that good quality is, generally speaking, a relative concept and subject to constant change. A product or service may no longer be considered of good quality if the expectations of the customer and/or the parameters of the experts change. From a certain point of view, good quality is a 'social' concept; the result of negotiation among those involved in the planning, assessment, supply and realisation of a product or service.

In general, quality is assured by an expedient combination of:

- A. Human resources
- B. Other productive factors, excluding human resources (note 1) (eg: premises, computers, computerised data banks)
- C. Productive processes (note 2) (e.g. the necessary procedures for booking appointments for personal consultations).

We could say that the production of quality products (from now on, if not otherwise specified, the term 'products' also means 'services') requires the availability of optimum productive factors which are then utilised by qualified human resources in accordance with optimum processes.

So, as it is based on three variables, our model can be called a *tri-variable model for quality assurance*).

For example, the quality of a short course on job search techniques depends not only on the counsellor's ability to take groups and on his/her knowledge of the subject (use of the best human resources) but also on the availability of a suitably equipped room in which to hold the course (use of other optimum productive factors).

Another example is in the related field of job matching, where the service will not function well

- without a computerised data bank (other optimum productive factors)
- if there is insufficient information held on each jobseeker: age, qualifications, etc. (best practice)
- if the method used for job matching does not include:
 - A. the forwarding of at least 5 curriculum vitae to the company concerned
 - B. a prior telephone call to the selected applicants in order to check if they are still looking for work and would accept a job offer. (best practice)
- if the counsellors gathering the personal data are not capable of conducting interviews (optimum human resources).

In order to be able to apply this model to careers guidance, two factors must be considered:

- A. Careers guidance is a service incorporated within employment policy and its overall effectiveness depends on the availability of other services such as providing opportunities for jobseekers to serve apprenticeships or attend training courses. For example, the overall effectiveness of careers advice targeted at young people taking part in compulsory training schemes is improved if there are a number of training courses or apprenticeships available from which to choose. It is necessary, therefore, that the public authorities examine the quality of service overall, otherwise, despite having an excellent careers guidance service, there is a risk of providing a poor global service. From now on, however, in this article we are referring to the quality of careers guidance services only.
- B. The term 'careers guidance' covers many different activities: individual advice, group activities, the production of informative material and the setting up of Internet sites etc., each of which may be aimed at different categories of clients. The realisation of quality service will require, therefore, a particular combination of practices, productive resources and standards of professionalism, which will vary according to circumstances and which must be individualised depending on type of service and, at times, on client sector.

In order to attain quality service in careers guidance it is necessary, therefore, to draw up general aims for each of the individual services involved and establish how those services will be supplied. Then, in order to achieve the aims, it must be decided how best to combine human resources with other productive factors and productive processes.

3. The counsellors' role in the establishment and regulation of quality standards in careers guidance services

It is of fundamental importance that the process of establishing and regulating quality standards sees the direct and full involvement of counsellors (at agency, public service or professional association level), because:

1. thanks to their experience, they are able to easily define the objectives and identify the optimum combination of factors
2. in this way, they can be directly involved (and therefore motivated) in the improvement of the service.

In order to study what the elements of service quality are and how to improve them, all that is required is a blank double entry table which should then be presented to the counsellors for discussion and completion. It should show, on the one hand, the careers guidance services provided and, on the other, the aims of the service, human resources, other productive factors and processes (note 3). The following is an example of a completed table relating to careers guidance.

Analysis table (a tri-variable model for quality assurance)	
Name, location and method of supplying the service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual guidance given at the District Jobcentres. The service is provided on an appointment basis.
General aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the field of education and training, to help clients (according to individual circumstances) make choices, reduce uncertainty, construct and implement career paths for inclusion in working life, and improve job search by providing information, advice, and support.
Objectives for service supply	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least 80% of interviews must be carried out within two weeks of the appointment being made.
Factors in supplying quality service	
Human resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ESSENTIAL: counsellors must possess a degree in the field of educational psychology or social economics, plus a post-graduate qualification in careers guidance (a year long masters and at least 500 hours of training and/or at least 500 hours professional experience) • ESSENTIAL: availability of suitably trained counsellors in order to reduce waiting times between making an appointment and attending the interview
Other productive factors (premises, data banks, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ESSENTIAL: specially designated areas which are both pleasant and soundproofed • ESSENTIAL: availability of suitable rooms in order to reduce the length of time between making an appointment and attending the interview • ESSENTIAL: standardised 'user data record' (see form -note 5) • ESSENTIAL: register of client details • A computer connected to the Internet which is available for reference during the interview • Computerised client records • Computerised appointments diary

Productive processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fortnightly discussion amongst counsellors of the most complex cases • Opportunity for the client, subsequent to the interview, to contact the counsellor by e-mail or telephone
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The points marked 'ESSENTIAL' are those considered crucial for providing quality service, whilst the others are not yet fully operable (note 6). Once completed, the table must be discussed with the manager or, in the case of services contracted out to external organisations, the contractor and approved by them.

Once approved and made public, the table:

- forms the basis for explaining to the client what he/she should expect from the service. It is sufficient to explain it to clients informally, advising them who to contact if dissatisfied with the service.
- is a tool for bringing about improvements in services. The non-essential points suggest future strategies for improving the service.
- is a tool for developing common standards amongst different agencies. It isn't actually necessary for each group of counsellors to draw up their own quality standards, as those already put in place by others can also be adopted. For example, an agency may decide to follow the quality standards of the District of Florence Jobcentres or those of AICO (Associazione Italiana Operatori e Consulenti di Orientamento - the Italian Association of Careers Guidance Counsellors and Advisers –note 7).
- is a means by which public bodies can impose standards. For example, it may be decided that only those organisations which provide the service in accordance with the quality standards of the District of Florence Jobcentres, or those of AICO, should obtain funding.

It is likely, following an initial period, that the quality standards of the individual services will end up centring around two or three principal models.

In our opinion, it is very important that a method of determining quality standards is established which takes a bottom up approach involving the counsellors. It is also important that it should not be totalitarian, that is to say, it should not favour only one out of the many approaches that exist in careers guidance.

Also, particularly in the case of careers guidance standards, the principals of 'community standards' and of 'the respectable minority' used in U.S. law for evaluating medical or psychotherapeutic practices should apply. This means that all those practices adopted by the majority of counsellors, or those that can be shown to have a significant following among counsellors, are acceptable (note 8).

Public bodies or professional associations (for example, in Italy: ISFOL, Italia Lavoro, Formez, AICO) could promote the spread of national standards by fostering nationwide collaboration among groups of counsellors in drawing up quality standards.

4. Quality assurance in careers guidance services

Once having established the optimum combination of elements for the supply of quality service, how do we check its actual attainment?

In general, there are six main methods of assuring good quality. Let's take an example (note 9): a public organisation pays for the distribution of bread to the needy and wants to be sure that the bread supplied by the contracted bakery meets agreed standards on taste and nutrition. What can it do?

1. carry out a regular check (hourly, daily or weekly) on the product specifications (an approach based on the direct inspection of *product specifications*)
2. ask a random sample of consumers whether the bread is to their satisfaction (an approach based on checking for *customer satisfaction*)
3. ask the contractor to ensure that the bread is prepared by experienced bakers who can show that they have undergone an appropriate period of training and/or have acquired lengthy experience in the sector (an approach based on *workers' professionalism*)
4. require that the contractor have suitable machinery and use only the best ingredients according to prearranged specifications (an approach based on checking the use of *optimum production factors*)
5. ask the contractor to ensure that the bread is prepared to the highest standards, according to a prearranged process which sets out the quantities of ingredients, proving times and temperatures, cooking times and temperatures, etc. (an approach based on checking for *process optimisation*).
6. If, instead, the contractor is supplying a service rather than a product, then the approach based on *result assessment* may be used. For example: following treatment is the patient any better?

So, depending on the circumstances, it is possible to use a single method of checking for quality (*monofactorial approach*) or, if a single method is considered insufficient, it could be combined with others (*multifactorial approach*).

Which approach or combination of approaches can best assure good quality in careers guidance services?

The approach based on result assessment (no.6.) does not seem very suitable for many of the services provided under careers guidance. The participation in careers guidance activities is actually only one of the elements which, together with many others, bring about positive results in the search for work. The possibility of any given individual finding work also depends on characteristics such as age, sex, physical condition, level of education and experience, place of residence and network of contacts.

The approach based on inspection of product specifications is, generally, the one by far the most used and often the most economic (the underlying philosophy being: it's the result that counts, not how it is achieved). This approach works better where the characteristics of the product are assessable according to physical or 'objective' parameters (e.g. shape, weight, chemical composition, torsional resistance, fire resistance, etc.). Nevertheless, in the case of services (including many careers guidance services) where characteristics are more problematic to assess, there are several examples of this type of inspection being used. One such example is the 'mystery shopper' used in the English careers services. In practice, this involves an expert who, working

incognito, uses the services provided and carries out an evaluation according to pre-established parameters.

The client's own evaluation of the service is very important, and recourse to this method is consistent with the approach taken in all careers guidance activities; that of respecting the client's judgement and promoting client autonomy. Client satisfaction levels can be measured in various ways. In the District of Florence Jobcentres, for example, the evaluation of specialist personalised careers guidance services is carried out by means of an anonymous questionnaire which is systematically handed out to a representative cross section of clients. The questionnaire collects quantitative and qualitative evaluations of two perspectives: 'satisfaction' and 'usefulness' (the questionnaire, together with an account of the procedure for collection and analysis of the data, is shown in Appendix 3). This approach, however, for reasons indicated in paragraph 2, cannot be used alone. In general, customer dissatisfaction must always be taken into consideration whilst customer satisfaction alone is not enough.

The approach based on checking practitioners' professionalism is that traditionally used in all independent professions including, up to now, in the majority of careers guidance agencies. The passing of a nationally recognised examination allows entry to a professional register in which all those qualified to practise the profession in question are listed, subdivided by place of residence. Having taken into consideration that this approach is the only one used in those professions (e.g. medical or psychotherapeutic –note 10) where bad practice can have much more harmful effects than in careers guidance, the same approach may be endorsed in careers guidance provided the test of professionalism is based on valid criteria. However, as already stated in paragraph 2, whilst such an approach works well in some areas of careers guidance, for example, giving advice on vocational choices, it doesn't work so well in others, for example, the initial reception procedures where, as well as the professionalism of the counsellor, other elements such as availability and spaciousness of facilities and quality and availability of information are strongly related to quality of service.

The approach based on process optimisation is important for the supply of those services (e.g. job matching) which, in order to function well, require specific, well structured procedures. However, it doesn't work as well in services which provide careers guidance, counselling or information. Furthermore, this approach may be unsafe if one specific procedure is imposed over another rather than being freely developed by the counsellors themselves.

To sum up, even the choice of which approach to adopt for assuring quality in careers guidance can be wide ranging, depending on the type of service under consideration. Nevertheless, the approach should be decided by counsellors at the same time as determining the quality standards. With the addition of the method of quality assurance, the double entry table then becomes as follows:

Analysis table (a tri-variable model for quality assurance)	
Name, location and method of supplying the service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual guidance given at the District Jobcentres • The service is provided on an appointment basis.
General aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the field of education and training, to help clients (according to individual circumstances) make choices, reduce uncertainty, construct and implement career paths for inclusion in working life, and improve job search by providing information, advice and support.
Objectives for	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least 80% of interviews must be carried out within two

supplying service	weeks of an appointment being made.
Quality service factors	
Human resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ESSENTIAL: counsellors must possess a degree in the field educational psychology or social economics, plus a post graduate qualification in careers guidance (a year long masters and at least 500 hours of training and/or at least 500 hours professional experience) • ESSENTIAL: availability of suitably trained staff to ensure reduced times between making an appointment and the interview itself
Other productive factors (premises, data banks, etc)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ESSENTIAL: specially designated areas which are both pleasant and soundproofed • ESSENTIAL: availability of suitable rooms in order to ensure reduced times between making an appointment and the interview itself • ESSENTIAL: standardised 'user data record' (see form) • ESSENTIAL: register of client details • A computer connected to the Internet which is available for reference during the interview • Computerised client records • Computerised appointments diary
Productive processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fortnightly discussion amongst counsellors of the most complex cases • Opportunity for the client, subsequent to the interview, to contact the counsellor by e-mail or telephone
Method of quality assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ESSENTIAL: examination of counsellors' c.v. • ESSENTIAL: inspection of premises where the service is supplied (a personal check carried out by the counsellor providing the service) • ESSENTIAL: weekly survey of waiting times between making an appointment and actual interview • ESSENTIAL: standardised procedure for evaluating client satisfaction (see questionnaire and account of procedure –note 11)

So, to summarise, the steps for putting in place quality standards and ways of monitoring them are as follows:

1. On the part of the counsellors: specification of general aims and determining of objectives for supplying services (in agreement with the manager or contractor). Identification of quality standards and how to monitor them.

2. On the part of the manager (or contractor): approval of the proposed objectives and standards, and their implementation
3. The drawing up of a customer service charter
4. The setting up and application (ongoing) of identified procedures for guaranteeing the desired quality standards.

Notes

1. In economics, 'productive factors' is the term used for every ingredient of the production process, for example, labour, raw materials – land, water, minerals, and reproducible factors (machinery, buildings, etc.). Source: *La nuova Enciclopedia del diritto e dell'economia Garzanti* (1989), pages 568-569. (extract translated from Italian into English)
2. We use the word *processes* when talking in general or when we want to refer to non-standardised systems (that is to say, those carried out as the operator believes best), and we use the word *procedures* when pre-established methods must be followed. As a rule, the term *procedures* is used for those processes which, in order to be effective, have to be carried out according to a specific *modus operandi*.
3. Shown in appendix 1
4. The contents of the individual fields are illustrative. The table does, however, reflect our experience in the District of Florence Jobcentres.
5. Shown in appendix 2
6. Only the most important variables that can't be presupposed should be shown in the table. The attainment of the desired quality standards actually depends on innumerable factors (in our case, for example, it is also necessary that counsellors speak Italian, that they don't offend the clients, that a comfortable temperature exists in the counselling areas, etc.), but most are either of little significance or can reasonably be taken for granted. So, for example, in the column intended for productive processes it isn't necessary, as a rule, to describe the whole productive process but only the stages which require special procedures (which are then described separately).
7. www.aiconet.it, now www.assipro.it
8. Refer to Beutler L.E., Bongar B., Shurkin J.N. (1998), *A consumer's guide to psychotherapy*, Oxford University Press, pagg.56-58.
9. The example is taken from our article *La qualità nei servizi di orientamento (Quality in careers guidance services) in Quaderni di Orientamento*, n.20, March 2002
10. This was the situation in Italy until 2001 but since 2002 it has been obligatory to also complete a certain number of hours training each year.
11. The survey form and a description of the procedure are shown in Appendix 3.

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Appendix 1: blank analysis table

Analysis table (a tri-variable model for quality assurance)	
Name, location and method of supplying the service	
General aims	
Objectives for supply of service	
Quality service factors	
Human resources	
Other productive factors	
Productive processes	
Method of quality assurance	

Appendix 2: user data record (individual services)



District of Florence

CAREERS GUIDANCE INTERVIEW RECORD



Counsellor _____ date _____

Full name _____

Place and date of birth _____ Nationality _____

Address _____ tel. _____

QUALIFICATIONS AND TRAINING/FURTHER STUDY

KNOWLEDGE OF LANGUAGES AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

WORK EXPERIENCE

CURRENT SITUATION (PERSONAL/PROFESSIONAL)

PROFESSIONAL ASPIRATIONS

REASONS FOR REQUESTING AN INTERVIEW

The procedure for the submission and examination of the feedback form

Because the results are collated over a period of time, it is essential that the procedure is always carried out in the same way by all counsellors. The procedure applies solely to the careers guidance interviews and counselling.

1. Method for submission of data: At the end of the interview, the counsellor him/herself completes questions 1 to 4 b and hands the questionnaire to the first client of the day.

Then says: 'We are carrying out a check on the quality of our service and we are asking all our clients to fill in this evaluation sheet. You can complete it, in private, in the reception area and then put it in the box provided'

If necessary, the counsellor will accompany the client out of the room and show him/her the box for depositing the completed forms.

The box should be similar to a ballot box; it must be locked and sealed and, in order to ensure anonymity, all questionnaires must be collected in at the end of the month only.

2. The methods for processing the data: the questionnaires must be collected at the end of the month by the project co-ordinator (if the box contains more than one counsellors questionnaires) or even by the counsellor him or herself.

In order to avoid loss of time and a disproportionate amount of processing, the project co-ordinator processes only the replies to question 6. The replies to the other questions are only taken into consideration in order to examine the reasons for client dissatisfaction.

3. Evaluation of collected data: the service provided by each counsellor is assessed positively when 60% of replies to question 6 fall within the categories 'a lot' and 'very much'. This parameter is taken from Italian Legislation: **DM** (Ministerial Decree) 166/2001 which, on page 32 of the attached, prescribes as an indicator of the efficacy of careers guidance services and activities - 'positive evaluation - no lower than 60% client satisfaction levels.'