

Teaching Generative AI to Career Guidance Clients: Digital Autonomy, Disintermediation, and the Changing Role of the Practitioner

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Abstract

Background. Career guidance practitioners have long taught clients how to use job search tools effectively. The emergence of generative AI tools introduces a qualitatively new dimension to this educational role: practitioners are now teaching clients to use instruments that can perform some of the most sophisticated tasks previously requiring professional mediation, raising the question of whether this teaching function carries a structural risk of disintermediation.

Aim. This paper examines how Italian career guidance practitioners teach generative AI tools to their clients: the methods used, the relationship to prior educational practices, the effects on session frequency and structure, and the nature and modalities of the disintermediation risk. It also analyses the limits of this teaching function, determined by variation in clients' digital competence.

Method. The analysis draws on nine semi-structured in-depth interviews with practitioners from Northern Italy, conducted as part of a broader mixed-methods empirical study (n=81 questionnaire respondents). All interviews were fully transcribed and analysed thematically.

Findings. Eight of nine practitioners actively teach clients to use generative AI tools independently. The teaching practice extends and transforms an educational approach already present in guidance work with earlier digital tools. Key novelties are the type of competences taught (prompt formulation, output evaluation) and the expanded scope of what clients can do independently. The disintermediation risk is real but differentiated: three distinct configurations emerge, ranging from clients who bypass guidance services entirely to clients who complete previously practitioner-dependent tasks autonomously between sessions. The risk is moderated by two factors: the irreducibility of the relational and motivational dimensions of guidance, and clients' uneven digital competence. Practitioners respond with differentiated practices, teaching AI only to digitally able clients.

Keywords: *generative artificial intelligence, career guidance, career counselling, disintermediation, digital autonomy, digital literacy, practitioner role, Italy*

1. Introduction

Teaching clients how to use digital tools for job search and career management has been part of career guidance practice since the diffusion of the World Wide Web. Practitioners have taught clients to use Google effectively, to read job advertisements critically, to navigate labour market information portals, and to manage their presence on professional networks. This educational dimension of guidance work, grounded in the field's commitment to developing client autonomy, is not new.

What is new is the nature of the tools now being taught. Generative AI tools can produce and revise CVs, simulate job interviews, analyse competence profiles against occupational requirements, research companies and sectors, and provide consultative responses to complex career questions. These are not supplementary information retrieval tools: they are instruments capable of performing some of the most cognitively demanding tasks in the guidance practitioner's repertoire.

When a practitioner teaches a client to use such a tool effectively, a question arises that did not arise with Google: is the practitioner teaching the client to become, in part, their own career consultant? And if so, what does that mean for the structure, frequency, and content of guidance services?

This paper examines that question through the lens of nine in-depth interviews with Italian career guidance practitioners. It analyses the methods through which practitioners teach AI to clients, the relationship of this practice to prior educational approaches, the effects on session dynamics and frequency, and the nature and configuration of the disintermediation risk that this teaching function carries.

2. Methodology

The data in this paper derive from nine semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted as part of a larger mixed-methods empirical study on generative AI integration in Italian career guidance practice (Evangelista, 2026). The broader study employed three instruments: an online questionnaire (n=81 practitioners), nine in-depth interviews, and a post-interview quantitative evaluation questionnaire administered to seven of the nine interviewees.

The nine interviewees were recruited through purposive sampling, with two selection criteria: active practice of career guidance counselling, and existing use of generative AI tools in professional practice. Participants were identified through the author's professional network and through voluntary responses to calls circulated via LinkedIn and email. All were practitioners from Northern Italy. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were conducted remotely, audio-recorded with participants' consent, fully transcribed, reviewed, and anonymised.

Interviewees are referred to as Op1 through Op9. All quotations are translated from Italian by the author.

3. Teaching AI to Clients: Continuity and Novelty

3.1 Continuity with prior educational practice

Eight of nine practitioners actively teach clients to use generative AI tools. The single exception is Op5, who uses AI primarily in back-office preparation and assigns tasks completed by clients using conventional tools, with some digitally able clients spontaneously using AI on their own initiative.

The teaching practice is grounded in an educational approach already present in guidance work with earlier digital tools. Op3 describes this continuity explicitly:

"Before generative AI tools, I taught people to use Google and to do everything by hand. I would say: look at this job advertisement, let's read it together, I'll teach you how to read between the lines critically, and I still do this because it is important that the person knows how to do these things alone. AI is wonderful but we must be able to do things by ourselves, for psychological reasons too. But after I have taught a certain thing, I say: look, there is help available. So first I explain the activities without using AI and then I show how to use it."

This sequential approach, teach the underlying process first, then introduce the tool, reflects a deliberate pedagogical choice: to ensure that clients understand what AI is doing on their behalf before becoming dependent on it.

Op7 states the goal clearly:

"My objective is to make them autonomous. If a person picks things up quickly, they then become fully autonomous in carrying out a range of activities."

Op1 confirms the same orientation:

"The objective of my guidance work is that they become autonomous in their job search. I do it with them, so I teach them the little I know."

3.2 What is novel: the competences being taught

The educational approach is largely continuous with prior practice. What has changed substantially is the type of competences being taught. With Google, practitioners taught information retrieval: how to formulate search queries, how to read job advertisements critically, how to evaluate the reliability of sources. With generative AI, a different and more complex set of competences is required.

Op4 describes the core of what they teach:

"Initially, if there is something to do together, I do it. For example, I teach them to understand the difference between a query and a prompt and how a prompt should be structured. I have them practise at home on prompts and on Magic prompt."

Op8 uses screen sharing to transmit practical familiarity:

"I share the screen and show them how they can use it. For me it is important that the person acquires some familiarity with it."

The competences now being taught include: prompt formulation, the art of iterative refinement of requests, critical evaluation of AI outputs, awareness of AI limitations and hallucination risks, and the capacity to use AI as a thinking partner rather than merely a retrieval tool. These are substantially more complex than the competences required for effective Google use, and their development requires more intensive instruction and practice.

3.3 The expansion of the practitioner's educator role

Teaching AI to clients expands the practitioner's role as a digital educator relative to their role as a direct provider of guidance content. Op4 articulates this shift with particular clarity:

"The adult of the future is not the one who is able to give answers, but the one who is able to ask questions. Your added value lies in the fact that you teach them advanced techniques for using these tools that they had not thought of."

This formulation is significant: it positions the practitioner's distinctive competence not in the content of their knowledge but in their capacity to teach a new cognitive practice. The practitioner as educator of AI use is, in this framing, more central to the guidance mission than the practitioner as holder of occupational knowledge.

4. Effects on Session Dynamics and Frequency

The acquisition of AI competences by clients modifies the structure of guidance work in ways that extend beyond the session itself. Before AI, clients carried out activities between sessions using conventional tools: Google searches, reading job advertisements, preparing documents. These activities were limited in scope by the tools available.

Generative AI substantially expands what clients can do independently. Tasks that previously required the practitioner's presence and active assistance, particularly the production of documents and the simulation of interviews, can now be performed autonomously at home by clients who have been taught to use AI effectively.

Op9 describes this change directly:

"Everything becomes simpler because working alone at home, after I have already shown how it is done, the number of job search attempts increases greatly."

Op2 observes a phenomenon of active co-learning: clients not only apply what they have been taught but develop further autonomously, sometimes surpassing the practitioner's own level of AI proficiency:

"They engage and actually send me prompts themselves, or even outputs they have created with AI on their own."

Op7 confirms this dynamic:

"After a few meetings, some know more than me because they really become passionate about it."

The practical consequences are significant. The process of guidance can accelerate. The number of sessions required to achieve a given outcome can decrease. Activities that previously occupied session time are completed outside sessions, freeing in-session time for more complex or relational dimensions of guidance. This restructuring is not uniformly experienced as loss: several practitioners describe it as an improvement in the quality and efficiency of the guidance process.

5. The Disintermediation Risk

5.1 The nature of the risk

The educational function described above carries a structural risk: if practitioners teach clients to use a tool that can perform some of the most sophisticated guidance tasks, they may be teaching clients to make themselves, in part, independent of professional guidance services.

Op1 names this risk directly, in response to a question from the interviewer about whether clients might find everything they need for their career management without professional mediation:

"If you teach people to become autonomous they will be able to search for work, to gather information more quickly, more effectively, more incisively: perhaps our role will be somewhat different."

The risk is real but, as the testimony reveals, it is not uniform in character. On the basis of the interview material and the broader implications of the findings, three possible configurations can be distinguished. The empirical material most clearly documents the second configuration; the first and third represent plausible extensions of the same disintermediation dynamic.

5.2 Three configurations of disintermediation

A first configuration involves clients who, having acquired AI competences, do not approach guidance services at all, judging that they can satisfy their career management needs without professional mediation. This is a form of disintermediation that occurs before the guidance relationship begins: the potential client becomes, in effect, a self-sufficient user of AI guidance tools.

A second configuration involves clients already engaged in a guidance process who, having learnt to use AI during their sessions, carry out an increasing proportion of guidance-related activities autonomously between sessions. The guidance relationship continues, but its structure changes: more is done outside sessions, fewer sessions may be needed to reach the agreed objectives, and the content of sessions shifts towards more complex or relational dimensions that AI cannot address.

A third configuration involves clients who, having completed a guidance pathway, do not return to professional services when new career management needs arise, preferring to use AI independently. This is a form of post-guidance disintermediation: the practitioner has, in effect, trained a client who will not need them again for standard guidance tasks.

A comparable institutional tendency can be seen in the design of AppLI, an AI-based web coach launched in May 2025 by the Italian Ministry of Labour. AppLI allows users to carry out orientation activities and job search preparation independently, while maintaining a connection to public employment services. Some orientation activities can now be carried out autonomously outside the session, potentially reducing or reorganising the number of meetings with practitioners.

5.3 Responses to the risk: the relational argument

Practitioners respond to the disintermediation risk with two main lines of reasoning. The first, and most frequently articulated, is that the relational and motivational dimensions of guidance are irreplaceable by AI and constitute the stable core of professional value.

Op1:

"Career guidance is not only about gathering information. Career guidance is about relationship and support, especially for more fragile people. generative AI tools cannot replace this relational and motivational dimension."

This argument is well-founded in the testimony collected. Practitioners describe clients who need sustained motivational support, who have emotional blocks towards technology, who require attunement to their personal situation that no AI can provide. The relational core of guidance, particularly for vulnerable or complex clients, is not threatened by AI.

The second line of reasoning is offered by Op2, who positions the practitioner as an indispensable mediator of AI use itself: clients need someone to teach them how to use AI effectively, to validate its outputs, and to integrate them into a coherent guidance process. In a formulation that echoes the Virgil metaphor developed elsewhere in the broader study, Op2 argues that clients need a guide who can accompany them through the unfamiliar territory of AI-assisted career management.

5.4 The digital competence limit

The disintermediation risk is substantially moderated by a structural factor: the uneven distribution of digital competence among clients. Practitioners consistently report that the capacity to use AI effectively is far from universal in their client populations.

Op4:

"Sometimes these are people who have mental blocks towards technology. Sometimes I give up."

Op9 draws a sharp distinction:

"With this type of client, for example older foreign nationals who do not use computers, I cannot assign tasks to be completed independently."

Op6:

"I ask almost all of them to download it, but the ones who actually use it are the younger clients and those who are actively looking for work."

The pattern is consistent across practitioners: AI teaching is effective for, and therefore disintermediation risk applies to, digitally able clients, typically younger, more educated, and more active in their job search. For digitally limited clients, the practitioner's direct role remains as indispensable as before the emergence of AI tools.

Practitioners respond to this variation with differentiated practices: they calibrate the depth and scope of AI instruction to the individual client's digital competence, teach AI only to those who can use it effectively, and maintain conventional guidance approaches for those who cannot.

6. Discussion

The findings document a teaching function that is simultaneously an extension of established guidance practice and a genuinely novel professional challenge. The continuity is real: practitioners have always taught clients to use job search tools, and the commitment to developing client autonomy is foundational to the guidance field's educational orientation. What has changed is the power of the tool being taught and, consequently, the scope of what autonomous clients can do.

The three-configuration model of disintermediation proposed in this paper offers a more differentiated picture than the binary question of whether AI will replace practitioners. The answer, based on this evidence, is: for some tasks, for some clients, AI is already enabling a degree of self-sufficiency that reduces the need for professional mediation. This is not uniformly true, and it is not uniformly problematic. For practitioners committed to developing client autonomy, a client who can manage their own job search effectively using AI is a success, not a threat.

The more significant implication concerns the redistribution of guidance work rather than its elimination. If clients can perform standard guidance tasks independently between sessions, and if session time is freed from those tasks, then the question becomes: what should sessions be for? The testimony collected here points towards sessions increasingly focused on the complex, the relational, and the motivational: dimensions where AI cannot substitute for the practitioner's embodied attunement, their capacity to hold ambiguity, and their ability to support clients through genuinely difficult decisions.

The digital competence limit identified in the findings is an important moderating factor, but it is not a permanent structural protection for the profession. Digital competence is distributed unevenly

now; it will be distributed differently in ten years. This suggests that practitioners who ground their professional identity solely in the production of guidance outputs that AI can increasingly replicate are more exposed than those who ground it in the relational and educational dimensions of their work.

The emergence of institutionally designed AI tools for career self-management, such as AppLI, suggests that the disintermediation dynamic is not only driven by individual client behaviour but is beginning to be shaped by policy. This adds a systemic dimension to what has so far been analysed primarily as an interpersonal phenomenon.

7. Connection to the Broader Study and Further Materials

This paper draws on material from: Evangelista, L. (2026). Tra Mercurio e Virgilio: l'integrazione dell'intelligenza artificiale generativa nella consulenza di orientamento. Un'indagine empirica sugli operatori italiani. Amazon KDP. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19855951>

The full research volume (in Italian) is available at: <https://www.orientamento.it/intelligenza-artificiale-e-orientamento-professionale-una-ricerca-sugli-operatori-italiani/>

Additional materials related to this study, including an executive report, translated practitioner testimonies, and papers on practitioner metaphors, the eight functions of AI in guidance, and AI use within the guidance session, are freely available at: <https://www.orientamento.it/generative-ai-in-career-guidance-practice-evidence-from-italian-practitioners/>

The author welcomes correspondence from researchers working on related questions.

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