

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Generative AI in Career Guidance Practice: Evidence from Italian Practitioners

Between Mercury and Virgil: Human Guidance in the Age of AI

Leonardo Evangelista

Independent Researcher | orientamento.it | l.evangelista@orientamento.it

DOI 10.5281/zenodo.20088528

Study design	Mixed methods: online survey + in-depth interviews + quantitative questionnaire
Survey sample	81 career guidance practitioners (Italy, predominantly Northern Italy)
Interview sample	9 practitioners (Northern Italy), already using generative AI in career guidance practice, at varying levels of intensity
Field period	June-July 2025
Context	Adult career guidance in Italy; interviewees mainly worked in private employment agencies, training agencies and freelance practice
Key concept	Eight-function taxonomy of AI use; co-pilot vs co-thinking modes

1. Why This Study Matters

Generative AI platforms - tools such as ChatGPT, Claude, and Perplexity - are qualitatively different from previous digital technologies. Unlike search engines or databases, they can perform directly some of the most cognitively demanding tasks in career guidance practice: synthesising client profiles, identifying coherent occupational pathways, generating personalised documents, and simulating selection interviews. This raises concrete questions about how practitioners' work, client relationships, and service delivery are being transformed.

Empirical research on this topic is scarce. A systematic review by Bankins et al. (2024) identified 104 empirical studies on AI and careers, of which only 15 addressed career guidance - all focused on students, none on adult clients or on how practitioners actually use these tools during counselling sessions. A scoping review by Pandya et al. (2024) confirmed the absence of studies on large language model-based tools in guidance practice. Hughes and Percy (2023) and Hughes et al. (2024) have noted this gap explicitly.

This study addresses that gap. It provides an early systematic empirical account of how career guidance practitioners integrate generative AI into their daily work with adult clients, drawing on original data from 81 survey respondents and nine in-depth interviews with active users in Italy.

2. The Italian Context

Italy provides a relevant and underexplored case. Career guidance services for adults are delivered through a mixed public-private system: public employment centres (Centri per l'Impiego, CPI)

operate under regional governance and serve primarily unemployed adults; training agencies provide guidance as part of active labour market programmes; and a growing sector of independent career consultants works with professionals and managers. The broader Italian guidance sector can be cautiously estimated at around 40,000 practitioners, based on earlier ISFOL data and conservative assumptions.

Italy is an interesting case precisely because it combines a well-developed guidance tradition, a fragmented and regionally varied delivery system, and a practitioner workforce with widely varying digital competences. The structural constraints of the public employment centres - rigid procedures, short appointment slots, closed IT systems - make them a limiting case for AI adoption; independent practitioners and training agencies represent the leading edge.

3. Research Design

The study adopts a mixed-methods design combining three complementary instruments:

- An online survey administered to 81 career guidance practitioners across Italy, designed to measure levels of adoption, reasons for non-use, types of use, and perceived benefits. Open responses were coded inductively into thematic categories, with AI-assisted classification checked manually by the author.
- Semi-structured in-depth interviews with 9 practitioners from Northern Italy who already use generative AI tools in their practice. Interviews were analysed thematically, and 74 specific activities were coded and classified.
- A quantitative utility questionnaire completed by 7 of the 9 interviewees, assessing perceived usefulness of AI tools across twelve standardised counselling tasks on a 1-5 scale.

Researcher positionality

The author is both a researcher and an experienced career guidance practitioner, with over twenty years in the field. This insider position enabled access to a practitioner network and a grounded understanding of the tasks under study; it also introduces a potential proximity bias that is acknowledged as a limitation.

Sample limitations

The interview sample is small and non-random (purposive and convenience-based sampling among active AI users), preventing statistical generalisation. The survey sample is self-selected and geographically skewed toward Northern Italy (Piedmont alone accounts for 41% of respondents), with an overrepresentation of training agency practitioners. No practitioners from public employment centres are included in the interview sample, despite their central role in the system.

4. Key Findings

4.1 Adoption is still limited

The survey reveals that 69% of practitioners either do not use generative AI tools at all or use them with fewer than 10% of their clients. The factors most strongly associated with non-use are age over 50, more than ten years of professional experience, and employment in public employment centres.

The main reasons given for non-use are:

- Insufficient skills and lack of practical knowledge (27 occurrences out of 42 responses)
- Negative personal attitudes towards generative AI (18 occurrences)
- Perception that tools are unsuitable for certain client groups, typically those with low digital literacy (7 occurrences)
- Organisational or procedural constraints (6 occurrences)

The factor most likely to encourage greater adoption is the opportunity to participate in structured training with hands-on practice (29 occurrences). This converges with the interview finding that all nine active users developed their AI competences largely through self-directed learning, trial and error, peer exchange and online resources; some also attended external courses, but none reported structured AI training provided by their organisation.

4.2 An eight-function taxonomy of AI use

To systematically describe the practices that emerged from the interviews, the study developed a taxonomy of eight functions, classifying 74 coded activities. The taxonomy is presented below in order of frequency:

Function	Prevalence	Examples
Author / Editor	9/9 practitioners 36% of activities	Drafting CVs, LinkedIn profiles, cover letters, competence assessment reports
Coherence Analyst	9/9 practitioners 22% of activities	Identifying occupational profiles consistent with client characteristics; skills gap analysis
Intelligent Search Engine	5/9 practitioners 18% of activities	Researching employers, sectors, training pathways, labour market data
Sparring Partner	4/9 practitioners	Simulating job interviews with detailed performance feedback
Super-Consultant	4/9 practitioners	Developing action plans; analysing options for self-employment or career change
Practitioner Supervisor	5/9 practitioners	Back-office review of counselling sessions; identifying professional development areas
Practitioner Trainer	Residual use	Self-directed learning to improve practice (e.g., competence assessment techniques)
Intervention Designer	Residual use	Creating self-assessment tools, group guidance materials

4.3 Two modes of use with different outcomes

Co-pilot mode. The practitioner queries the AI for a specific task output - a CV draft, a list of employers, a set of interview questions - and uses the result directly. This mode saves time but keeps AI use episodic and disconnected from the overall counselling process.

Co-thinking mode. The practitioner engages in an iterative dialogue with the AI, progressively refining prompts and critically evaluating outputs. This activates a metacognitive process of

reflection that improves the overall quality of the session and tends to surface new perspectives for both practitioner and client.

The distinction between these modes has implications for training: developing co-thinking competence requires more than technical AI literacy; it involves learning to use AI as a thinking tool within a live counselling interaction.

4.4 Benefits: time, cognition, supervision

Among practitioners who use generative AI tools, four categories of benefit are consistently reported:

- Time savings: significant, particularly in document production (CVs, competence assessment reports) and in information retrieval and synthesis.
- Cognitive augmentation: practitioners perceive AI as performing analysis, synthesis, and person-opportunity matching drawing on a knowledge base substantially larger than any individual practitioner's, and doing so in real time during the session. Tasks rated highest in the utility questionnaire include drafting client profiles (mean 4.6/5), tailoring job search tools (4.4/5), interview preparation (4.3/5), and identifying suitable occupational profiles (4.2/5).
- Accessible supervision: even practitioners working in professional isolation (independent consultants) gain access to feedback on specific cases and peer-like support on complex situations.
- Accelerated development for junior practitioners: AI reduces the competence gap between novice and experienced practitioners, enabling less experienced staff to handle independently cases that would previously have required mentoring.

4.5 The reconfiguration of the practitioner role

The introduction of generative AI into counselling sessions restructures the dyadic practitioner-client relationship into a triangular configuration: practitioner - client - AI. The practitioner is no longer the sole repository of specialist knowledge, but becomes a mediator between the AI's outputs and the client's specific situation and needs.

This reconfiguration does not diminish the relational dimension of guidance: all nine interviewees emphasise that human connection remains central, and that AI is usually introduced after an initial phase of listening and needs assessment. However, the nature of practitioner expertise shifts:

- From content production to output validation and personalisation
- From information provision to prompt engineering and critical interpretation
- From expert authority to guided sense-making
- From passive tool use to active teaching of AI literacy to clients

Eight of nine practitioners already teach clients how to use generative AI tools directly, extending an existing tradition of digital empowerment (teaching Google, LinkedIn, job boards) into a new and more cognitively demanding domain.

4.6 Critical issues

Three areas of concern emerge consistently:

GDPR compliance. Only two interviewees report using business or company accounts. For the remaining practitioners, the use of personal or non-business accounts creates a situation of possible GDPR non-compliance when client personal data are processed. The study therefore identifies possible non-compliance for six of the nine practitioners (67%). At the time of the research (October 2025), leading platforms including ChatGPT, Claude, and Perplexity did not offer Data Processing Agreements for individual or freelance accounts.

Absence of organisational governance. Eight of nine practitioners report that their organisations have introduced no structural changes, no shared guidelines, and no training provision in response to the AI transition. Innovation is occurring entirely bottom-up, at individual level. This produces significant variability in practice quality within the same organisation and risks non-compliance going undetected.

Digital divide and service differentiation. The type of guidance received is increasingly determined by clients' digital literacy. Practitioners teach AI use to digitally competent clients; with low-literacy clients - who tend to overlap with other disadvantaged groups (low education, migrant background, social marginalisation) - AI integration is difficult or impractical. This risks creating a two-tier service.

5. Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This study contributes to the international literature on technology and career guidance in three ways.

Empirically. It provides an early detailed account of how career guidance practitioners actually integrate generative AI into adult counselling sessions, based on original field data. It documents both breadth of use (eight functions, 74 activities) and depth (two qualitatively distinct modes with different outcomes).

Conceptually. The co-pilot / co-thinking distinction offers a theoretically grounded and practically useful framework for understanding variation in AI integration quality. The eight-function taxonomy provides a structured vocabulary for describing AI-mediated guidance practice that can be tested and refined in future studies.

For policy and practice. The findings point to three priority areas: structured AI training for practitioners (currently absent); organisational governance frameworks that address GDPR compliance, quality standards, and equitable service delivery; and attention to the digital divide as a source of increasing inequality in guidance outcomes.

6. Limitations and Future Research

The principal limitations of this study are the small interview sample, its restriction to early adopters in Northern Italy, the absence of practitioners from public employment centres, and the self-selected nature of the survey sample. Findings cannot be statistically generalised to the national population of Italian guidance practitioners.

Priority directions for future research include: studies in public employment centres, where structural constraints are most acute; longitudinal investigation of the co-pilot / co-thinking distinction; comparative studies across national systems; the risk of client disintermediation as AI becomes more accessible; and the development of AI literacy frameworks specific to guidance practice.

Keywords: generative AI, career guidance, adult career guidance, practitioner practice, co-pilot, co-thinking, GDPR, digital literacy, Italy

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 a paper on the co-pilot/co-thinking distinction, are freely available at: <https://www.orientamento.it/generative-ai-in-career-guidance-practice-evidence-from-italian-practitioners/>

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7855-4023>

References

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>