

Generative AI in the Career Guidance Session: Dynamics, Role Reconfiguration, and Professional Competence

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Abstract

Background. The integration of generative AI tools into career guidance practice is reshaping how sessions are structured, how practitioners and clients interact, and how professional competence is demonstrated. While much research has focused on task-level AI adoption, the dynamics of AI use within the guidance session itself remain underexplored.

Aim. This paper examines how Italian career guidance practitioners integrate generative AI tools directly into their guidance sessions: when and how AI is introduced, how it is presented to clients, what changes in the structure of the session, and how the practitioner's role and professional competence are reconfigured as a result.

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 use AI directly within sessions, typically in the second phase of the session dedicated to occupational matching and action planning. AI is introduced via screen sharing, with prompts written and discussed openly with the client. The comparison between conventional Google use and generative AI reveals a qualitative transformation across nine dimensions: from cognitive activity to relational configuration, from document production to ethics and responsibility. The practitioner's role shifts from direct producer of content to director and validator of AI outputs. The interviews suggest that AI use does not necessarily weaken the consultative relationship and, in some cases, may increase client engagement and perceived service quality. One increasingly important component of professional competence is the capacity to govern AI interaction and integrate it into the guidance process.

Keywords: *generative artificial intelligence, career guidance, career counselling, guidance session, professional role, practitioner competence, co-pilot, co-thinking, Italy*

1. Introduction

The question of what happens inside the career guidance session when a practitioner opens a generative AI tool has received remarkably little empirical attention. The existing research on AI in career guidance has focused primarily on adoption rates, perceived utility across task categories, and practitioners' attitudes towards the technology. These are important dimensions, but they leave

largely unexplored the moment-by-moment dynamics of sessions in which AI is present: how it is introduced, how it modifies the flow of interaction, what it changes in the practitioner-client relationship, and what it means for the demonstration of professional competence.

This paper addresses that gap. Drawing on nine in-depth interviews with Italian career guidance practitioners, it examines the integration of generative AI tools into guidance sessions as a practice, with attention to its temporal, relational, cognitive, and professional dimensions. The Italian context is relevant because the national guidance system includes public employment centres, private employment agencies, training agencies, and freelance career counsellors. However, the interview sample analysed in this paper does not include practitioners working directly inside public employment centres; it mainly covers practitioners working in private employment agencies, training agencies, HR firms, and freelance practice.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 describes the methodology. Section 3 presents an overview of AI use patterns across the nine practitioners. Section 4 analyses how and when AI is introduced into sessions. Section 5 presents a systematic comparison between conventional Google use and generative AI along nine dimensions. Section 6 examines the reconfiguration of the practitioner's role. Section 7 discusses the findings and their implications.

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 their 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. The interview guide included sections specifically dedicated to how practitioners use AI within sessions, how they present it to clients, and how they perceive its impact on the guidance relationship and on their professional role.

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

3. Overview of AI Use Patterns in Sessions

Table 1 summarises the key parameters of AI use across the nine practitioners. It shows substantial variation in adoption intensity, modality, and the proportion of sessions in which AI is used directly.

Table 1. Overview of AI use patterns in guidance sessions (nine practitioners).

	Context	AI use modality	% sessions with AI	Teaching AI to clients	When AI is introduced	Profile
Op1	APL / GOL	Direct use in session (rare); teaching very limited	<5%	Very limited	During session	Minimal
Op2	HR firm / Freelance	Systematic; teaches clients; supports consultancy	~100%	Yes, systematically	After rapport established	Intensive
Op3	Training agency / Freelance	Explains tasks first, then shows AI; screen sharing	100%	Yes, sequentially	After initial explanation	Intensive
Op4	GOL 4 / Trainer	Screen sharing; home exercises; compares platforms	100%	Yes, with homework	From second session	Intensive
Op5	APL / Freelance	Mainly back office; assigns tasks done at home	~50% of cases (mainly back office)	Indirect (home tasks)	Outside session / back office	Intermediate
Op6	GOL 4	Teaches Perplexity on mobile for job search	~50%	Yes, for digital users	During session	Intermediate
Op7	Training agency / Freelance	Demonstration; trains clients; makes them autonomous	10-50%	Yes, selectively	During session	Intermediate
Op8	APL / Freelance	Mainly back office; screen sharing ~40% of sessions	~40%	Yes, with critical review	After rapport established	Intermediate
Op9	APL	Back office for assessments; in session for unfamiliar roles	~50%	Yes, when feasible	During session	Intermediate

Three broad profiles emerge. Intensive users (Op2, Op3, Op4) use AI in virtually all sessions, combine direct in-session use with systematic teaching of AI to clients, and treat AI as a structural component of their guidance approach. Intermediate users (Op5, Op6, Op7, Op8, Op9) vary in their degree of in-session use, with some relying primarily on back-office preparation while using AI selectively during sessions. Op1 is the only practitioner who remains at the margins of AI integration, using it in fewer than 5% of sessions and teaching it to clients only very occasionally.

Most practitioners report that very few clients already use generative AI tools before beginning guidance, the exceptions being Op4 and Op6, whose client populations include a higher proportion of younger or digitally active individuals. Eight of nine practitioners use AI directly within sessions; eight also provide clients with guidance on how to use AI independently.

4. How and When AI is Introduced into Sessions

4.1 Timing within the session

Seven of nine practitioners (Op1, Op2, Op3, Op6, Op7, Op8, Op9) introduce AI from the first session. Op4 introduces it from the second session, and Op5 uses it mainly in back-office preparation, assigning tasks that some clients complete at home using AI on their own initiative.

The practitioners who describe introducing AI after a relational phase (Op2 after rapport is established, Op3 after an initial explanation, Op8 after creating the relationship) are in practice describing standard guidance procedure. Career guidance sessions begin with a demand analysis and personal exploration phase, typically lasting 30 to 40 minutes, which naturally precedes the working phase in which tools such as Google or AI become relevant. The declaration that AI is introduced after the relational phase does not therefore indicate a special precaution but reflects the internal structure of a guidance session.

Op4's decision to postpone AI to the second session reflects a different logic: a particularly thorough exploration of the client's situation in the first session, before action planning begins:

"I introduce AI not in the first session. First I try to understand who you are and what a programme of activities for subsequent sessions might look like, although sometimes already in the first session people have said: you know about AI."

Op5 occupies a different position: AI is used mainly in back-office preparation, and tasks assigned between sessions are completed by clients using Google, job portals, and, for those already familiar with the tools, occasionally generative AI on their own initiative. In-session AI use is selective, reserved for intermediate and higher-profile clients.

Op8 articulates the most explicit concern about relational attention in this group. Working remotely, Op8 initially worried that using AI during sessions would create a split in attention:

"Using these tools would be like directing one ear in one direction and the other ear in another. I already work remotely, and this makes it more difficult to create a relationship with the client. For this reason I use these tools mainly in back office."

However, when asked directly whether AI use damages the quality of the relationship, Op8 revises this initial concern:

"No, I see no difference, because I present it as an advanced tool, like a software, not as a consultant alongside a consultant. So I see it as something that empowers but does not replace. Like a crutch, and I see that the person feels strengthened because what AI produces seems scientific to them."

Op8's testimony is significant in two respects. First, it shows that the risk of attentional fragmentation, while real and worth managing, does not materialise as a relational problem in practice when AI is correctly framed. Second, it anticipates the theme of perceived competence: the client's sense that AI output is authoritative can reinforce, rather than undermine, confidence in the guidance process.

4.2 How AI is presented to clients

Practitioners adopt varied strategies for introducing AI, calibrated to the client's characteristics and their own professional style.

Op9 uses an informal, slightly playful approach, designed to reduce anxiety:

"I tend to create a fairly informal relationship with my clients, so I present it a bit as a joke. I say: let's get some help from this very intelligent website. Some clients are afraid of AI, so I try to play it down, to use a light touch. I recognise that this approach might not always be optimal; perhaps I could introduce it in a slightly more serious way."

Op7 and Op8 present AI explicitly as a technical tool, in order to protect the practitioner's professional positioning. Op7:

"I present these tools as a tool, I show how I use them, and in this way the person starts to become familiar. They are usually very pleased: they say: That's amazing!"

Op8:

"I present this tool as a kind of personalised, consultable encyclopaedia, but one that we also need to be able to interpret. So the consultant maintains their own role."

Several practitioners assess the client's prior knowledge before proceeding. Op8:

"I ask: Have you ever used AI? Often I get young people who use it but for simple things. I explain to them how to frame the question and they see that the result changes depending on how you ask."

Op9 notes the variation in client reactions by age:

"When I show them how GPT works, some say: you're amazing, I don't even know how to use Google. Others say: I use it too. It depends a lot on age: people in their 40s-50s generally don't know what it is; others know but are sceptical."

4.3 Managing resistance and diffidence

Not all clients receive AI positively. Op8:

"Sometimes someone says: where are we heading with all this? It will eat our jobs, we will all be out of work. But there is also a lot of curiosity."

Op4 describes resistance rooted in a more general anxiety about technology:

"Bear in mind that sometimes these are people who have defensive attitudes towards technology, so you find no purchase. Then it turns out it is fear of not being up to it, fear that it is too difficult, and so you have to gradually dismantle that belief. Sometimes I give up."

4.4 Screen sharing as a structural practice

When practitioners use AI within sessions, the standard modality is screen sharing: the practitioner writes prompts visibly, and discusses the outputs with the client in real time. Op4:

"With all others, almost always remotely; in that case it is sufficient to share the screen. I have them practise at home on prompts and on Magic prompt."

Op8 confirms: in approximately 40% of sessions, screen sharing is used, followed by a critical review of outputs together with the client.

This practice creates a triangular configuration in the interaction: practitioner, client, AI application accessed via screen. This triangular configuration has existed since the diffusion of the World Wide Web and browser-based tools roughly thirty years ago. What has changed is the nature of the third vertex. The following section analyses that change systematically.

5. Conventional Google versus Generative AI: A Systematic Comparison

Conventional Google, used without AI integration, functions as a substantially passive tool: a vast digital library that can be consulted during the session when the practitioner needs information they do not already possess. The process remains centred on the practitioner's consultative capacities and their ability to process and synthesise information.

Generative AI tools can instead be imagined, as Op4 suggests, as two distinct assistants working alongside the practitioner: an expert in producing and revising CVs, LinkedIn profiles, and job applications, and a super-consultant capable of analysing the client's situation and suggesting an occupational target and action plan. Op4 describes AI as a magic wand that produces what you need, with ideas, suggestions, angles you would not have thought of. Op2 notes that it takes a tenth of the time compared to before, and that AI functions as a super-consultant of the consultant. Op3 describes having a mentor who checks her work and says: look, you missed this.

Table 2 presents a systematic comparison of conventional Google and generative AI use across nine dimensions relevant to the guidance session, developed from the analysis of practitioner testimony.

Table 2. Conventional Google versus generative AI: a comparison across nine dimensions relevant to the guidance session.

#	Dimension	Conventional Google	Generative AI tools	Relevance for the guidance session
1	Information retrieval	Returns raw, generic results with specific links	Provides structured, synthesised responses with a consultative framing; less transparent about sources	AI outputs are often more structured and easier to understand, but source verification is more difficult
2	Document production	Absent	Rapid production and revision of CVs, cover letters, LinkedIn profiles	AI substantially reduces the time needed and often produces outputs perceived as higher quality than those produced directly by the practitioner
3	Temporal pattern of use	Brief, punctual, intermittent interactions, generally secondary to the consultative dialogue	Longer, more continuous interactions; AI remains active and is queried repeatedly during the working phase	AI tends to be used across multiple exchanges within a single session
4	Cognitive activity	Centred on search, selection, comparison, and synthesis of information	Extends search functions; suggests action plans; evaluates and refines produced artefacts	The practitioner's task shifts from information retrieval and synthesis to AI management and critical evaluation of results
5	Practitioner role	Searches, evaluates, and synthesises sources; discusses results with client	Searches, evaluates results and suggested action plans; examines and modifies artefacts; discusses results with client	AI introduces validation activities (of web syntheses, suggested action plans, and artefacts) and reduces time spent on direct text production
6	Client involvement	Depending on the practitioner's approach: spectator or co-explorer, up to direct querying and evaluation	Analogous	Identical and dependent on the practitioner's approach
7	Perceived professional competence	Demonstrated through Google skills and capacity to analyse and synthesise retrieved information, and through writing artefacts	Practitioner's direct role in producing AI output is smaller (content is often already 'ready'), but their role as director and validator increases	Competence is no longer shown mainly through direct text production but through the capacity to obtain desired results from AI and to critically integrate them

#	Dimension	Conventional Google	Generative AI tools	Relevance for the guidance session
8	Relational configuration	Triangular: client, practitioner, Google in a passive role	Triangular: client, practitioner, AI entity combining writer/editor, search engine, and specialist consultant roles	AI takes on a much more active role; the practitioner acts as director of an entity that, in some cases, performs some traditional tasks more rapidly or effectively
9	Ethics and responsibility	Practitioner responsible for evaluating reliability of retrieved information	Also responsible for protecting client personal data and clarifying AI usage and reliability	Sessions require GDPR-compliant accounts; AI use must be authorised by clients; only necessary personal data should be shared

The comparison reveals that the shift from Google to generative AI is not simply a matter of efficiency. It involves a qualitative transformation across multiple dimensions simultaneously: the nature of the cognitive activity required of the practitioner, the structure of the practitioner-client relationship, the configuration of actors present in the session, the locus of professional competence demonstration, and the ethical responsibilities of the practitioner. Each of these dimensions is examined in more detail in the following section.

6. Reconfiguration of the Practitioner's Role

6.1 Acceleration and transformation of tasks

The most immediately visible change is the dramatic reduction in time required for certain tasks. Op2:

"It takes a tenth of the time compared to before."

Op3:

"Instead of spending a day's work on it (roughly twenty pages of report), with AI it takes me two or three hours."

However, the testimony on how this recovered time is actually used remains mostly general. Op6 provides the clearest indication:

"I start already with AI suggestions and this gives me more space for in-depth exploration. So I manage to go a bit deeper."

Op4 offers a more counterintuitive perspective: rather than saving time, well-used AI extends it, because the tool continuously opens further possibilities:

"I do not think AI is a way to speed up work: in my experience, using AI slows things down. If you use it well it is because you learn collaboration: if you are in a hurry it is better to use Google, question and answer and goodbye. Whereas if I use AI I build a collaboration, step by step. It is not quick, but it is thorough. The tool produces a result and then stimulates you: shall we go deeper on this point? Shall I make a technical sheet? What do you think about developing this point that seems important to you? It is as if it says: do not go yet, we have not finished, and even this makes you learn many additional things."

6.2 The guidance relationship

Contrary to what might be expected, the introduction of AI into sessions does not appear to weaken the consultative relationship. Op8, who was initially concerned about the risk of divided attention, concludes:

"No, I see no difference, because I present it as an advanced tool, like a software, not as a consultant alongside a consultant. So I see it as something that empowers but does not replace. Like a crutch, and I see that the person feels strengthened because what AI produces seems scientific to them."

Op2 describes an increase in client engagement:

"Once they have seen what happens, at that point they engage and actually send me prompts themselves, or even outputs they have created with AI on their own."

Op7 describes the emergence of a genuine partnership:

"I share with the person what I know, and they use it to actively search for their own professional path."

Op4 underlines the collaborative dimension, referring both to collaboration with AI and with the client:

"If you use it well it is because you learn collaboration."

The practitioner increasingly acts as a facilitator of the client's autonomy rather than as the exclusive holder of knowledge. The part of the session dedicated to developing client autonomy gains weight.

6.3 Perceived quality of the service

Clients perceive AI-produced outputs as more professional and authoritative. Op8:

"I see that the person feels strengthened because what AI produces seems scientific to them."

Op3 confirms an actual qualitative improvement:

"AI has increased the quality of my service because, however competent I may be in my sector, I am always a person with limited knowledge."

This perception of greater professionalism can strengthen the client's trust in the guidance process.

6.4 Redefinition of distinctive competence

The most significant reconfiguration concerns what professional competence looks like. Op7:

"What is your added value now? I keep improving my use of the tool. The objective is to make the best possible use of the toolbox."

Op2:

"AI does not replace the consultant, also because the responses need to be read with a very critical eye. When the responses do not satisfy you, seem obvious, you have to insist."

The capacity to produce content directly matters less; the capacity to direct, critically evaluate, and integrate AI outputs into the guidance process matters more. A second competence that practitioners are developing is that of digital facilitator. Op4:

"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 shift implies a change in what practitioners need to demonstrate during sessions and, consequently, in what training and professional development should prioritise.

6.5 Ethical and responsibility dimensions

The introduction of AI into sessions creates new ethical and legal responsibilities. Practitioners need GDPR-compliant accounts when personal data are processed, must inform and obtain authorisation from clients, and should share only the personal data strictly necessary for the stated objective.

Op8 flags a specific risk in remote sessions: the difficulty of maintaining full relational attention while simultaneously managing an AI interface. This risk, while manageable, points to the need for practitioners to develop deliberate strategies for maintaining relational presence while using AI as an active session tool.

7. Discussion

The findings document a transformation in the structure of career guidance sessions that is qualitative, not merely quantitative. The shift from Google to generative AI is not a matter of using a faster tool for the same tasks: it is a reconfiguration of the roles of all actors present in the session, including the tool itself.

The nine-dimension comparison in Table 2 shows that generative AI occupies a fundamentally different position from conventional search tools in the triangular configuration of the guidance session. Where Google is passive, AI is active. Where Google retrieves, AI synthesises, produces, and proposes. Where Google leaves the cognitive work of integration to the practitioner, AI performs much of that integration itself, shifting the practitioner's cognitive effort from production to validation and critical direction.

This shift carries professional identity implications. If the practitioner's competence can no longer be demonstrated primarily through the direct production of a well-crafted CV, a well-argued competence assessment, or a well-researched occupational profile, then the professional identity anchored in those capacities is under pressure. The testimony collected here suggests that practitioners are actively renegotiating that identity: repositioning themselves as directors, validators, and critical integrators of AI outputs, and as facilitators of client autonomy rather than exclusive holders of guidance expertise.

The finding that AI use does not weaken the consultative relationship is important and somewhat counterintuitive. It suggests that the relational core of career guidance, the practitioner's attunement to the client, their capacity to listen, to ask productive questions, and to hold the complexity of a person's situation, is not threatened by the presence of AI in the session. What is threatened, or rather transformed, is the practitioner's productive role: what they make, what they know, and what they do with their knowledge.

The variation in usage profiles documented in Table 1 suggests that this transformation is neither automatic nor uniform. It depends on the practitioner's professional orientation, their level of digital fluency, their institutional context, and their willingness to extend AI use into the relational and reflective dimensions of practice. The intensive users in this study (Op2, Op3, Op4) are not distinguished by technical skill alone: they are distinguished by a willingness to reconceptualise what a guidance session is and what it is for.

8. 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 and on the eight functions of AI in guidance, 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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