

# Career guidance on online platforms in the Covid-19 context

Interview with Hannah Courtney Bennett, Chartered Psychologist and Career Coach

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## About the interviewee

A Chartered Psychologist since 1998, Hannah's work focuses on career development and talent management through assessments and one-to-one coaching. As an Occupational Psychologist she has provided assessment and selection services to organizations, including job analyses and identification of competency frameworks, job design and interviewing. This side of her work puts her in a position of strength when it comes to coaching and identifying talent, strengths and interests with anyone facing significant career decisions, be they career changers, returners, graduates, undergraduates or young people. Hannah has been working as a consultant for the past 20 years and prior to this worked for the National Health Service and then the Sussex Police where she obtained her Chartered status.

## Introduction

A key theme during the Small Group Meeting was the importance of career guidance, for helping young people identify their interests and strengths, and the opportunities in the labour market, including those that may not necessarily be readily visible. In this practitioner interview, I spoke to Hannah Courtney Bennett about her experience of in-person and online career guidance delivery. Due to Covid-19 restrictions the interview was conducted online and lasted about an hour. Below is a summary of the interview.

## The interview

**Belgin:** *Tell me about your career guidance practice with young people?*

**Hannah:** As part of the career guidance practitioner qualification, I had to do certain amount of work experience working with young people in schools. Much to my surprise, I really enjoyed working with young people. It is good fun and I feel like I am making a difference. Now I work with people of all ages with career decision-making, but I carry on doing four or five days a month in schools, working with young people. I support several schools mainly working with 14- to 18-year-olds, as they plan their transition to further study, education, training or work.

There is a statutory government requirement in the UK for young people to receive career guidance. This is something that was introduced in 2014 following significant work by Sir John Holman and the Gatsby Foundation. This resulted in a framework called the *Gatsby Benchmarks of Good Career Guidance* (Holman, 2014). The framework aims to ensure

that young people are provided with high-quality career guidance to make informed decisions about their future (for example, if they are 'career-ready'). The last benchmark states that every young person should receive expert guidance from somebody suitably qualified. In my head it ought to be benchmark number one! In practice, this implies that every young person who is in school must be seen by an impartial career guidance practitioner; and this is how I continue to work with young people.

I visit each school once a week or once a fortnight. They're not big schools so I can see the majority of the 14- to 16-year-olds in one day. In my practice, I follow the Single Interaction Model (Reid & Fielding, 2007), which recognises that you are only likely to get one meeting with your client. I see each student one-to-one for one session, that is about 40 minutes long. We talk about their career pathways and options. I help them explore their interests and strengths with questions such as: '*Do you know what's your plan?*', '*What are your predicted grades?*', '*Have you had any thoughts about what you want to do after school?*', '*Do you know you can do an apprenticeship?*' or '*Have you thought about the International Baccalaureate?*'. Then we'll put together a plan and consider whether their plan is feasible or not. For instance, if ultimately the student wants to be a physiotherapist, I would point out that they should be studying biology. These are little but crucial mistakes students often make when they select the subjects they are going to study. So, we question the feasibility of their choices (e.g., '*If you don't like chemistry, do you really want to do medicine?*')

It's about challenging the young people to identify what they enjoy but also become aware of the requirements of job roles as well. Related to that we also talk about how to get work experience and the importance of work experience in general. I highlight some of the other opportunities (like Young Enterprise, if they are interested in business and financial education). Students find it difficult to explain their work experience. I ask them about the things they do; such as volunteering or working in charity shops. I try to help them see that all these activities count as work experience and teach them how to speak about them. I show them how search engines work, and how to use different databases. If they've got no idea about what they want to do as a career, I share with them a couple of good tools for self-assessment that will give them ideas, such as for gaining awareness on ability, personality and interests, and for relevant career suggestions (for further information look at my website).

However, each school provides a different career guidance service. Before, careers people like me were funded by the local government. Now money goes to schools directly to

decide the type of career guidance they wish to provide. So, to some extent, schools can choose to do this in completely different ways. In some schools a member of staff will be the careers advisor (as an additional role); whereas other schools will reach out to qualified people like me.

**Belgin:** *Can you tell me about your experience of providing online career guidance?*

**Hannah:** Since 2013 I have been working with cohorts of university students in Europe. I work with a company in the sustainable energy industry that sponsors master's students. Each of those students have a career coach for their two years of study; and I deliver that coaching online. Additionally, young people or parents of young people contact me for online guidance from across the UK. This is either by recommendation or because they have been to my website.

Just before the first lockdown in the UK, in early March 2020, I was already speaking with schools and encouraging them to offer career guidance online. This enabled us to run with online provision quickly. In secondary schools, finding the space to provide career guidance was always a huge problem. For the schools I work with online delivery meant that they didn't need to put a careers advisor in a tiny space (like a broom cupboard), and we could carry on meeting. Providing guidance online kind of made me more accessible.

I would like to think that Covid-19 has raised the profile of career guidance. When schools are up against financial pressures, career guidance and careers education go to the bottom of the list of priorities. All the 'nice to haves' get pushed to the back of the queue. I felt strongly this shouldn't be allowed to happen to young people. I felt this time last year (March 2020) was so crucial for 14- to 16-year-olds. Students were confused; it wasn't clear whether they would be sitting examinations. They didn't know what was going to happen to their results and so they didn't know how they could make decisions, for instance, should they be looking for university applications or apprenticeships? They weren't getting any support.

**Belgin:** *How is providing online career guidance different from face-to-face delivery?*

**Hannah:** I don't find the online delivery much different to face-to-face. However, for some students, it is difficult to engage online because they don't have the full set of non-verbal cues they can use to understand the conversation. But, for other students, online delivery is better because they're much more comfortable with not interacting in person. So, there are plusses and minuses. But it only works if you've got the right

equipment and that it is functioning well!

In terms of the content of guidance; the nature of the work conversations has changed. We are now spending a lot more time talking about work experience. We do a screen share and search for options together. In current times, this usually means virtual work experience. Young people worry that there are no 'real' work opportunities. So, you need to show them where the opportunities are and what they look like. The importance of work experience has probably grown ever more important for young people in the pandemic. In the first lockdown in England (March 2020) students were sent home from school and there was little ongoing contact. There was little structure in the way home-schooling was done; and people were not prepared to educate at home. Nobody knew what to do and we didn't realise how long this period of home-schooling was going to last.

However, there have been some clear benefits from this situation. Particularly during the pandemic when people are working from home, you get more engagement from the young peoples' parents. This may be because parents are more concerned about the impact of Covid-19 on jobs and are therefore willing to find out what opportunities are available and what their children might be missing out on. Parental involvement is also necessary for safeguarding/child protection reasons as well (to protect young people's health, well-being and rights) during the online session. We have seen safeguarding procedures evolve all the time; at the moment (April 2021) a parent should be around with the young person at home. They don't have to be actually sitting with the student, but there needs to be always at least one parent at home. But, this is the recommended good practice, and not a legal requirement.

**Belgin:** *Tell me about the online career guidance training you developed? What does it involve?*

**Hannah:** Given the inconsistencies around career guidance delivery, and the importance of continuing career guidance despite lockdown restrictions, I prepared safeguarding guidance for remote interactions with young people and delivered this training in the area near my home. To prepare the material I looked at national guidelines first (see DfE, 2020). Then spoke to the schools and local authorities in the area. I made a strong case to continue career guidance, and the stakeholders came back and said - let's do it. These are the kind of schools that prioritise career guidance. They are the forward-thinking schools, continuing career guidance remotely from the start of the first lockdown. Now, many more schools are doing this, a year later.

A key issue was that a lot of the careers advisors did not have the confidence to do their work online; even though they had the expertise. Hence, I worked locally to put together this training package about delivering online career guidance (Courtney Bennett, 2020); and it does cover safeguarding, as it is a big part of the process. For demonstration, I brought in one of my children and we ran a mock online guidance session. This way careers advisors could see how the process works to increase their confidence that they could do this themselves.

The first topic covered in the training was how as a practitioner you prepare for an online guidance meeting. A key issue was setting up the image for video conferencing because everything a student sees on the screen, including your appearance and your background, will influence them – consciously or unconsciously. Especially in early days of the lockdown, we were still trying to figure out how to appear on video connections. In terms of setting up the image, the training discussed lighting in our rooms (e.g., soft/natural light on your face), our background (e.g., white walls, decluttered, and so on) and being at eye level with the camera (e.g., avoid holding the device or having it on your lap).

The second topic in my training was how to prepare for delivery. The logistics of the guidance meeting needs to be clearly communicated within the school; making it clear who is going to initiate contact with the student. You need to sit down with the safeguarding person within the school and agree with them what is to be done. There could be different interpretations of guidelines across schools, so different schools have different requirements of me (e.g., some schools recommend not having sessions from the student's bedroom).

Once an appointment is arranged, expectations also need to be communicated to the student (and parents). These include appropriate dress, appropriate venue, and who will be present with the student. It is also important to note that if the student doesn't have access to a video platform or doesn't want to use it, the consultation can be done on the phone. How the practitioner prepares for the call is also important. For instance, allowing yourself more time to prepare is considered good practice.

The third topic is on running the meeting. Establishing effective rapport online is a key issue here. Normally in face-to-face delivery I wouldn't mention confidentiality right at the outset, but in remote guidance I do, especially if there is an observer present (e.g., from school), so everyone understands the boundaries. I also take notes to summarise the meeting in a document. So, I need to tell the student that my gaze will move off the screen from time to time. I don't record meetings; but I'm wondering whether that's

going to change soon. During the third lockdown in England (January – April 2021) there was talk about recording lessons. More schools have chosen to opt into the recording of guidance sessions than have opted out. But young people can better express themselves in a safe environment, without recording. If the school wants to record the session, I don't have a problem with that, but I don't want to be responsible for looking after the data.

The final topic was on safeguarding. Safeguarding rules can vary from school to school. For example, with face-to-face delivery, in one school you can sit down and have a one-to-one with a student but in another school, you must never position yourself in between the door and the student. In other schools you're not allowed to be in a room with the door closed if there's no window. Now we have similar inconsistency of safeguarding principles with online career guidance to the extent that some schools do not want to engage in the process at all.

Online delivery does not negate the current safeguarding principles. So that means careers advisors need to be checked for criminal record, they need to have undertaken safeguarding training and to adhere to statutory safeguarding guidance. All advisors need to be familiar with the Designated Safeguarding Lead in the school and how to contact them. Online meetings should be held during normal school times and students need to be aware that a record will be kept and made available to the school as well.

Recommended online safeguarding practice (see DfE, 2020) is that advisors should try to avoid one-to-one situations, make sure there is a parent around. For instance, handling difficult cases is even more problematic online. I feel that is why it's important to have somebody else in the house while you are delivering guidance; as when you end the call, if they are upset, they are supported. This differs from my training when we were advised not to have parents present. This was to help you to speak to your student and for them not be influenced by anybody else. But, as a careers advisor one of your skills is to encourage young people to speak despite the presence of their parents. You can always listen to the parents and then ask the student if that's what they want to do.

## Conclusion

We thank Hannah for sharing her experiences and tips on remote career guidance. The Covid-19 pandemic not only limited the number of labour market opportunities for young people, but also opportunities for receiving career-related support. Research shows that goal-directed focused, as opposed to haphazard or exploratory, career behaviour, such

as that encouraged by the single interaction model of career guidance, is particularly more relevant for those transitioning into uncertain, ambiguous labour markets (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2021). We can therefore argue that not having access to career guidance potentially multiplies young people's disadvantage in the Covid-19 context. It is therefore crucial that careers practitioners are confident in online delivery of career guidance, including adjusting safeguarding of young people during these virtual sessions.

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