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Professional identity transformation: supporting career and employment practitioners at a distance

Abstract:

The professional identity of career counselling and employment practitioners is somewhat fragile. Balancing tensions like meeting targets that exist around funding, whilst attending to the individual needs of the clients they serve, can prove challenging. Maintaining professionalism is increasingly also challenging for practitioners because they need to attend continually to their professional learning needs, ensuring familiarity with new theories, research and ways of working. This article draws on European research (2014 – 2018) that examined how career guidance counselling and employment practitioners can be supported at a distance using technology, to facilitate their professional identity transformation. Results from an international online learning course designed to support practitioners across Europe from this research are presented and the implications for practice discussed.

Keywords: career, employment, practitioners, professional identity transformation.

Introduction

Nomenclature used to distinguish occupations associated with the broad community of career guidance and counselling practice is varied and can be confusing. A clear distinction exists, for example, in some countries between career guidance/counselling practitioners and employment practitioners. On the surface, this distinction may appear straightforward. Career guidance/counselling practitioners support individuals in their transitions into and through the labour market, while employment practitioners have a primary focus on supporting individuals into sustainable work, or employment. Sometimes, this particular distinction is further emphasised by the different organisational contexts and cultures in which the practitioners are employed. In the UK, for example, employment practitioners, currently called work coaches, predominantly operate as civil servants from a government department (Department for Work and Pensions), which is the UK Public Employment Service (PES). In contrast, career guidance/counselling practitioners operate in a range of different occupational contexts, like career services, schools, colleges, and private consultancies. In some other European countries, for example, Croatia and Slovenia, this type of distinction regarding the particular organisational context does not exist, with the majority of career and employment practitioners employed by the same employing organisation, or PES (Artiles et al., 2018). A further complication relates to how the roles and responsibilities of these practitioners are by no means static, but shift and transform to reflect political, cultural and social realities. In the UK, for example, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is beginning to depart from its established focus on unemployed adults, to providing support for claimants in employment and to students in schools (DWP, 2018).

Irrespective of differences like their occupational role, title, status or organisational contexts, career and employment practitioners all operate within the same space, supporting their clients (sometimes also referred to as customers) in their multiple transitions into, and through, labour markets. There is, consequently, often considerable overlap in the ways in which they work with their clients/customers. Current volatility in labour markets internationally exerts considerable pressures not only on the clients/customers of career guidance counselling and employment services, but also on the practitioners providing these services. Responding to the impact on these practitioners of increasing labour market volatility, the European Public Employment Service (PES) 2020 Strategy outlined some changes that were necessary, to keep pace with this volatility (PES Network, 2015). These changes included the recommendation that these practitioners needed to operate differently, in roles and capacities that required them to adopt new professional identities that involved new skills, competences and understandings (PES Network, 2015). Increasingly, there is recognition that individuals navigating their way through complex labour markets need career and employment support (e.g. Cedefop, 2011). However, as indicated above, it is not only the individuals who are the clients/customers of these services who need support. Practitioners providing these services similarly are in need of support. For career guidance/counselling and employment practitioners to survive, and thrive, in volatile work environments, ongoing learning support is necessary to ensure that knowledge and understanding at the cutting edge of practice is integrated into practice for the benefit of clients. To illustrate this point, reflection on the ways in which information communications technology (ICT) is being integrated into practice is instructive (Bimrose, Kettunen, & Goddard, 2015). Over the past few decades, practitioners have been, and continue to be increasingly required to transform their

working practices to accommodate technological change. Delivering career guidance and employment interventions to clients at a distance and/or supporting clients in their search for labour market information (LMI) require fundamental change to previous practices, which require practitioners to embrace and integrate a whole new way of thinking and working (Bimrose, Hughes, & Barnes, 2011). Transforming practice, in turn, requires transformation of an individual's professional identity, allowing accommodation of these changes.

Supporting career guidance/counselling and employment practitioners to manage and shape these types of changes was a key goal of the research study, entitled EmployID, upon which this article draws (2014-2018). With a clear focus on professional learning and development to facilitate the transformation of the professional identity of practitioners, both individually and collectively (Brown & Bimrose, 2015), this article first examines the nature of professionalism and professional identity, with particular reference to career guidance/counselling and employment practitioners. It then describes the approach to developing an online learning course that was adopted as part of a larger European research study, to support the process of change. Key themes that emerged as findings from the analysis of results of this research are presented and discussed, with reference to the implications for practice.

Professionalism and professional identity

Professionalism relates to the behaviour and qualities of a group of individuals that can include reference to a calling, adherence to ethical standards, together with the requirement for specialised knowledge gained over a period of time: 'possessing special knowledge and skills in

a widely recognised body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to apply this knowledge and exercise these skills in the interest of others’ (Professions Australia, undated). It therefore aligns closely with the need to integrate new knowledge and understanding, usually embodied in emerging theory and research, into professional practice:

Careers practice in contemporary times requires practitioners to be equipped with the latest developments in the field – this includes knowledge about current theories, and models and strategies for applying that knowledge in their work with clients who seek career support.

(Arthur, Neault, & McMahon, 2019, p.xiii)

Without research-informed theory underpinning their practice that reflects current trends and contemporary issues, those providing career guidance/counselling and employment services cannot (and are unlikely to) be regarded as professionals by the clients/customers or the societies in which they operate.

Linked to professionalism is occupational identity. Identities at work are the meanings attached to an individual by the self and others that are displayed in attitudes and behaviour, as well as in the stories we tell about ourselves to others and ourselves (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). These meanings and stories may be based on social identities, associated with work, or personal identities, based on personal characteristics, attitudes and behaviour an individual displays or which others attribute to him or her (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). The focus of the EmployID

research was upon learning as a driver of identity development at work and an exploration of how identities at work develop and change over time. Brown (1997) developed a dynamic model of occupational identity formation (see figure 1), where the process of acquiring an occupational identity takes place within particular communities in which socialisation, interaction and learning are key elements, with individuals taking on aspects of existing identities and roles, while actively reshaping other aspects in a dynamic way. The formation, maintenance and change of occupational identities are always influenced by the nature of the relationships around which they are constructed. Over time these interactions may lead to modifications and reshaping of these same structures, the communities of practice and the individual's work identity (Brown, 1997).

[Figure 1 to be inserted about here]

Further developments in thinking about occupational identity development are represented below (Brown & Bimrose, 2015; 2018). Learning at work and occupational identity development can be effectively supported if it is understood that such learning can be represented in three ways: as a process of identity development; as a process of development in four inter-related domains; and as taking place in the context of particular opportunity structures (see Figure 2).

[Figure 2 to be inserted about here]

The first representation views learning as a process of identity development: ‘learning as becoming’ is outlined in the strategic career and learning biographies of individuals. Key influences in this representation of learning include: the personal characteristics underpinning learning and development: learning through self-understanding; a commitment to own learning and professional development; and career adaptability (Brown & Bimrose, 2015). The second way learning and identity development can be represented is as occurring across four domains: relational development; cognitive development; practical development; emotional development. Learning may involve development in one or more domains and development in each domain can be achieved in a number of different ways, but development can be represented thematically, though the extent of development under particular themes can vary greatly between individual cases (Brown & Bimrose 2018). The third way that learning and identity development at work can be represented acknowledges that learning takes place in the context of the opportunity structures within which individuals operate. These structures may also play a key role in access to work which is rich in learning and development opportunities (Brown & Bimrose, 2018).

These two frameworks provided the theoretical underpinning of the EmployID research study in general, and of the on-line course in particular, with the findings reported below.

Methodology

Supporting the professional identity transformation of career guidance counselling and employment practitioners to enable them to meet the challenges of their rapidly evolving work roles was the key aim of the EmployID research study. This was initially focused in the context

of PES, though in the latter stages of the study, it was extended to a wider range of career guidance and counselling and employment professionals across Europe and internationally, with the intention of investigating how technology enhanced learning (TEL) approaches could facilitate professional identity transformation for careers and employment practitioners. The TEL approach adopted in this research emphasised the role of facilitation (Bimrose et al., 2014) and included the use of blended learning programmes, or Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), for career guidance counselling and employment practitioners more generally, complemented by the use of on-line LMI tools and on-line support for reflection and peer coaching.

The methodology used to design the learning support comprised participatory design (Kensing & Blomberg, 1998), involving end-users in each stage of the design of outcomes, so that learning (both online and face-to-face) was developed that met the particular needs and requirements of career guidance/counselling and employment practitioners. As part of the overall learning support, ICT applications were developed to support practitioners with on-line reflection, peer coaching and the use of LMI in their practice. The online learning programme, or MOOC, was designed and developed specifically to support the continuing professional development (CPD) of career guidance counselling and employment practitioners across Europe, in a variety of contexts, including self-employment (Bimrose et al., 2019). It ran over a six week period from March to May, 2017 and was open to everyone with an interest in the consequences for the professional identity transformation of career guidance/counselling and employment practitioners of the changing world of work.

A core didactical element was active learner engagement via discussions and reflection activities. Whilst each participant was encouraged to work through each of the five lessons, or modules, as an individual learner, the underlying ethos of the course was one of active learning in a professional context. The content of each week was based around the following five topics: Introduction to the changing world of work; Coaching: Going Digital; Labour Market Information (LMI) and Sectoral Knowledge; and finally Reflection and Evaluation. Each topic comprised stimulus material, which included expert commentary on the topic linked to supporting video, audio and written material. There were also recommended individual and group learning activities and eight facilitators with career development and/or online tutoring expertise facilitated the topic discussions. As a consequence, responses were made to all participant comments and discussion lines.

The participants worked through the online learning course at their own pace and were able to access materials and content over a time period that slightly extended the core delivery of the course (that is, from March to June 2017. Active learner engagement via discussions and reflection activities were triggered by the eight core tutors. In total 402 participants from at least 20 identifiable countries signed up for the course. As some participants used a generic email address and did not disclose where they worked the exact number of countries may have been higher. It was not possible to identify the exact background of staff because, to encourage participation, the online platform required only a minimum of name and email address in order to register for any of their courses. Although background information was not collected, the content analysis identified both that a wide range of statuses and roles were represented, and that no single designation predominated.

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6 The approach to data analysis of the qualitative comments generated in the online course
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8 by all participants entailed coding based on a scheme that was developed by Murphy (2004) and
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10 Rodrigue et al. (2012) to analyse online asynchronous discussions. After four coders tested the
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12 original scheme on a restricted set of comments, each topic/week was coded by two independent
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14 coders. The units of analysis were chosen thematically (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer,
15
16 2001). The exact beginning and ending of each idea within the comments was marked and
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18 assigned a code using a software tool (MAXQDA). Nine researchers went through two rounds of
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20 coding, with data analysed both inductively and deductively in stage. The researchers developed
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22 a coding scheme based on more than 1,000 comments through a mainly explorative content
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24 coding process involving five phases. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion.
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26 A full and detailed account of the process of data analysis is available for scrutiny (Bimrose et
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28 al., 2019).
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35 Of the 402 signed up for the online course, eighty six mostly professionals in career
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37 guidance/counselling or employment services (as they reveal in their comments throughout the
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39 course), actively engaged in the course (that is, they made at least one post) and all these
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41 participants achieved course completion. The other 316 registrants either did not start the course
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43 or else passively consumed the course without active engagement. In the three months runtime of
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45 the course, the 86 active participants wrote 1073 posts in total. On average, each post contained
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47 more than 81 words, showing the high levels of engagement of participants and, when coupled
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49 with the qualitative data analysis, indicates the richness of their contributions. Compared to the
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51 very large drop-out rates reported for online courses of about 90 per cent (Gütl, Rizzardini,
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Chang, & Morales, 2014), the retention rate for this online course was encouragingly high. This high level of involvement of participants was also reflected by 92 per cent of their initial comments having received at least one reply. Overall, the course was very successful with high learner participation and positive feedback.

Results

Thirty sub-themes emerged from the process of analysis of the dialogue contributed by online course participants as outlined in the methodology section above. Of these, five were particularly relevant to a discussion of professional identity development. These themes were: learning from others, the role of communities of interest, shifting professional identities, feelings of isolation and the effects of organisational change will be presented and discussed below.

Learning from others

The importance of learning from others as part of the process of professional identity development was emphasised. As one online learner observed: ‘People sharing information about their contexts and aspects of their practice (as indeed you have done!) has created a very rich learning resource - I certainly have learned a great deal’. (Lesson 2, row 138).

Colleagues are one of the most important sources for learning from others, as the following examples of participant dialogue illustrate:

I reflect on my courses considering how I feel myself and what feedback the participants give. When I do courses together with a colleague, we reflect together, too, but I also discuss with them when I'm considering changes or when I face challenges.

(Lesson 6, row 4)

I find the peer [learning] approach very effective and empowering, when people notice that they can help each other without someone else having to come and tell what to do.

(Lesson 3, 280)

It may also be the case that practitioners could learn from how their managers approached their work and their expectations:

Each manager identified change for me, I had to adapt and change my process of doing my work / duties as each worked different ways and had very different visions of what my role entailed / involved. My career path has taken me on a journey on many different roads and at each crossroad and junction I had to adapt and change. Identity is not only how we see ourselves but it is also how others see us.

(Lesson 2, row 1913)

The role of communities of interest

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The online platform helped build a community of interest for those participants wishing to exchange ideas and learn from colleagues. The comments of participants also revealed how reflection was seen as another avenue which could support identity development:

The notion of 'community reflection' interested me ... I can see how a formal meeting would be beneficial, but knowing the time constraints within the workplace, I find that chatting with colleagues, family and friends informally is equally rewarding in gaining ideas for improving practice and or build on learning.

(Lesson 6, row 236).

Participants suggested to their fellow learners that linking to other existing communities of interest could prove to be of value:

I can highly recommend connecting with experienced careers practitioners on LinkedIn either directly or on some of the [Professional Association's] Communities of Interest, as much of the best CPD advice I have had this year has been from speaking to practitioners directly.

(Lesson 2, row 1040)

This importance of learning from peers was reinforced through the idea that the online community had an important social element which contributed to practitioners' professional identity development:

For myself, I find 'practitioner groups' (such as this, but I have equivalents in my own organisation) are very useful. ... often [I] am the only one who deals in certain aspects [of practice], so support through practitioner groups and contacts made through these are invaluable. We can share similar issues and more especially, solutions/problems solved jointly.

(Lesson 2, row 1230)

It is so positive to be able to discuss issues with colleagues in a safe environment and great for building trust within the work environment.

(Lesson 3, row 867)

Shifting professional identities

It was evident from the online dialogue of participants that career guidance/counselling and employment service practitioners were facing multiple changes to their work processes and contexts and that these changes had profound consequences for their professional identity:

As a career guidance counsellor we need to be continually willing to adapt to change because of changing economies/job opportunities, changes in the recruitment processes, changes in education and training, and also changes in the welfare system to be able to offer the best service to clients. Lifelong learning, flexibility and being able to adapt to change are the keys.

(Lesson 5, row 541)

The expectations of clients and the wider policy environment sometimes did not keep pace with changes in the world of work and these too could pose challenges for how career guidance professionals perceived their role:

One of the key issues for me in the changing world of work is handling client/customer expectations. People who come to me for careers advice are often looking for a clear career plan - but in reality their ability to fully plan a career is challenging in the modern world of work. [...]. So sometimes it seems that the policy climate of careers guidance work supports notions of singular planned careers (and these are often the expectations clients bring to career guidance interventions), but the lived experience of people is more chaotic, and flexible.

(Lesson 2, row 845)

Professional identities also evolved over time as practitioners grew in experience:

Starting out in my career I really felt the need for reassurance. With experience I became more confident and as a result needed this reassurance less so. It was at this point when I developed my work identity, alongside being given more responsibilities and therefore facing more workplace challenges.

(Lesson 2, row 2030)

One practitioner felt that the nature of career development more generally was in a rapid state of fundamental change and wished to discuss the implications of this change for their own professional identities:

The need to see career development as a lifelong process does need to begin at school and it would be more useful if we moved away from interviews that seem to focus on what do you want to do in the future, to what are your skills now, what skills do you want to develop into the future, what are your current values and beliefs, what is your understanding of the world of work.

(Lesson 2, row 139)

The following dialogue illustrates how practitioners were also aware that approaches to career guidance and counselling were influenced by organisational factors such as the time available, client workloads, resource constraints and performance targets:

... the other aspect of this development (the increased focus on target driven approaches) is the emphasis placed upon directing people towards 'any form of employment' (as employment is the only progression that counts towards meeting targets), over and above assisting people to look at improving education and skills levels. It would appear that in the current climate, the 'soft skills' employed in attempting to assist people develop their own coping methods, skills sets and educational profiles and the resulting 'soft outcomes' are not as valued as they once were.

(Lesson 2, row 907)

That career guidance/counselling and employment practitioners were feeling that their identities were in flux was in contrast to one practitioner who reflected on the relative stability associated with a former identity, in the health care sector:

I feel I had a clearer professional identity to others as an Occupational Therapist, as a careers adviser - the professional status is more vague.

(Lesson 2, row 1840)

Feelings of isolation

Feelings of isolation were evident in the dialogue of a number of participants, for various reasons. While for some, isolation was perceived as being due to remote geographical location (sometimes hours away from other members of the team), other participants felt isolated within their own organisation because they were the only ones doing a particular type of work or because high numbers of people worked from home. Technology proved to be of particular benefit when it came to overcoming isolation, since it offered the possibility to connect to others in the virtual world, with the online learning course helping people feel a connection to others.

Feelings of isolation could follow from the demise of face-to-face meetings, since Skype was cheaper, or stemmed from the nature of portfolio working where individuals engaged with many people but always as an individual:

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3 I decided to go free-lance and have ended up with a portfolio of work, combining four to
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5 five briefs at any one time. I enjoy everything I do, but this new way of working also
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7 poses its challenges in terms of managing my workload and meeting everyone's
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9 expectations and timelines. It certainly has made me realise even more how important it
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11 is to be flexible and to invest heavily in building and maintaining professional networks,
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13 not only to keep finding work but also to create a pool of colleagues who can support you
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15 away from an office environment.
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19 (Lesson 2, row 143)
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24 One practitioner felt that new forms of work were increasing the distance from their
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26 colleagues as they missed the more extensive face to face meetings with colleagues:
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31 many career counsellors - they appreciate the help of modern technologies, but still feel
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33 the most significant work (at least as they perceive it) is done face to face.
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35 (Lesson 3, row 562)
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40 Another practitioner felt they were also losing real contact with and becoming isolated
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42 from full engagement with their clients too:
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47 I feel that we are losing human touch to save costs and time related to face to face
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49 meetings.
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51 (Lesson 2, row 155)
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Several practitioners saw themselves as being isolated and they were keen to seek and to rely on other networks or communities for their professional growth. The discussion of geographical distance continued as some of the lone workers were working remotely. Four learners conveyed how technology has contributed to effective communication and how it has become a part of their day-to-day routines. Faced with the geographical challenge (working in isolation/working remotely), some learners highlighted the importance of finding an opportunity to learn through relational learning, through building virtual teams and connecting with other practitioners. One practitioner mentioned that informal sharing mechanisms, including through social media groups, could help to gain new ideas for improving practice and to build learning, while another expressly mentioned how it helped them to maintain their identity in the current job as a career professional. Several practitioners outlined how colleagues learn particularly well from each other working in the same field, whereas colleagues working in different fields may deal with the same situation differently, including in their approach to problem solving. One practitioner pointed how the social dimension of learning could help people overcome feelings of isolation in their learning:

There is also the social aspect of learning, I enjoy being able to share and the learning journey with others, going through the same trials and tribulations that arise, being able to support and being supported by others also gives me great satisfaction as one does not feel isolated when undertaking the learning experience.

(Lesson 2, row 357)

The effects of organisational change

As well as dialogue directly related to changing professional roles, participants in the online learning also discussed the structures and contexts within which they worked. Eight practitioners stated that their organisations were undergoing profound organisational changes on a structural level that had affected their work. These large-scale structural changes included administration and management restructuring, establishing new departments and, in one country, the privatisation of PES and social security services. Other practitioners stated that the PES services in their countries were to be decentralised, with their services outsourced through private companies. As noted above, one of the triggers of professional identity transformation in organisations is technological change. The high speed of technological change has influenced the way practitioners work in their daily routines and how business and services are conducted. The practitioners welcomed the opportunity to talk through the consequences of some of these changes. Some PES providers are developing their digital services and online client support, with four practitioners outlining how they were coping with the change, while one practitioner opined that the online approach is not as effective as the face to face career guidance counselling both because information can be interpreted differently and navigating through the websites can be confusing and frustrating.

Two practitioners identified that there can be a mismatch in training plans between management's agenda and client needs, with management making decisions without any input from career guidance/counselling practitioners. However, several practitioners indicated that management support (financially and non-financially) had opened up more possibilities for professional growth. The dialogue also involved reference to budget cuts, with consequent

limited resources in the public sector and financial constraints in training for professional growth of career guidance/counselling practitioners. Such constraints have resulted in some practitioners becoming reliant on professional development events and online activities that were free of charge.

Practitioners also highlighted significant shifts from previous practice as organisational culture aligned with changing approaches to delivery of guidance:

I've been working in career guidance for ten years now and when I first started off we would diagnose the need of our clients - assessing through the Approach to Guidance model. This has significantly changed and now we are getting clients to improve their career management skills and take control of their own career journey at different times in their life. I also have noticed the greater use of technology in our day to day job and a greater emphasis on more partnership working.

(lesson 2, row 134)

One practitioner suggested that their employing organisations needed to become more flexible, open, and market-oriented, which required a 'mental shift' for both managers and workers. Practitioners made eleven comments that related to how organisational changes had resulted in lack of time for professional growth through peer-to-peer support programmes. Reasons given were high workloads, work pressures, being too busy with a range of work commitments. Changes to key performance indicators have also added to increased pressure: according to one learner, measuring performance has become more focused on quantity (for

example, the number of clients/customers placed into sustainable employment) rather than the quality of their experiences as consumers of career guidance/counselling and employment services. A similar comment related to the measurement of soft outcomes, now largely overlooked in favour of the more visible indicators of the success of the services, like placement into employment or training/education.

Participating in the online learning was itself seen as helpful in adapting to major organisational change:

Being in the middle of big change makes big demands - on the professionals and of course on the structures of the organisation itself. Judging by the comments fellow professionals have contributed so far, I am confident that participating in this MOOC will help make sense of these experiences.

(Lesson 2, row 102)

Organisational changes, especially structural changes, are likely to lead to changes in roles and responsibilities as well as giving rise to new processes in the organisation. When changes in roles and responsibilities occur, these are likely to raise the question of one's capability in performing their new role. In general, gaps appear (big or small) between the current and the desired skill set whenever new roles and responsibilities emerge. The scale of organisational changes that emerged in the online learning dialogue are linked to the identity challenges of individuals due to the new roles, responsibilities and new processes being implemented. Technologies have also changed work processes and the way people communicate. The online learning course appeared

to help practitioners engage in dialogue about both the contexts in which they worked and their new roles and identities. In this sense, it can be argued that the online learning contributed to key aspects of practitioners' learning, development and identity transformation.

Discussion

The aim of the study was to gain insights into how career guidance counselling and employment practitioners could be supported in accommodating to, and surviving, volatile occupational environments, where their main purpose was, in turn, to support their clients/customers navigate rapidly changing labour markets. Analysis of their dialogue with peers and tutors during an online learning course revealed five recurring themes that emerged as important in their being able to adapt to change, thereby transforming their professional identities. These were: learning from others; the role of the community of interest; shifting professional identities; feelings of isolation; and the effects on organisations. Conceptually, the findings were in line with the models of identity transformation outlined above (Brown, 1997; Brown & Bimrose, 2015; 2018), which reinforces the idea that work identities are produced through a mix of personal agency, interaction with others, and existing social norms and discourses, and these factors interacted in a dynamic and iterative way. Professional identity development through narratives for storytelling and sense-making was evident, with the career conversations switching between three perspectives: skill development, the structures and contexts within which skills are developed, and careers (narratives) and identities. The central purpose of the EmployID research was therefore supported, as ICT tools like the online learning platform did create spaces to drive processes of learning, facilitation and reflection in support of identity development and career

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3 construction. The spaces provided were animated in order to support rich interactions which
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5 helped participants to make sense of and tell stories about their changing world. Indeed, the
6
7 online learning had high levels of facilitation coupled with very strong emotional and relational
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9 components which generated commitment to the practical and cognitive dimensions of skill
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11 development.
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17 As with every research study, a number of limitations can be identified. The online
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19 course was a one-off intervention, experimental in nature. It piloted the feasibility of harnessing
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21 the potential of ICT to provide relevant support to practitioners under pressure to shift and
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23 transform their professional identities. The long-term vision of the research study was that users
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25 would take ownership of the ideas, processes and tools from the study so that they would
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27 continue to use and adapt them after the lifetime of the project. The materials used for the online
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29 course have been made available for future use ([https://mooc.employid.eu/the-changing-world-](https://mooc.employid.eu/the-changing-world-of-work/)
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31 [of-work/](https://mooc.employid.eu/the-changing-world-of-work/)), but it requires a commitment from an employing organisation to provide the range of
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33 resources necessary to support the integration of ICT for continuing professional development
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35 (CDP) (Bimrose, Hughes, & Barnes, 2011). Another limitation of the study relates to the levels
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37 of resourcing available to this online learning module from research funding. Having eight tutors
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39 to facilitate dialogue meant that it was exceptionally well resourced, perhaps to a level unlikely
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41 to be replicated in (especially in public sector) workplaces during a period of austerity.
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45 Additionally, because the research was time limited (that is, for four years), the funding came to
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47 an end on a scheduled date. The challenge is always to have the project findings integrated into
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49 practice. However, resources to monitor the integration into practice beyond the lifetime of the
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51 project and to evaluate the impact of individuals benefitting from outcomes was not available.
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Overall, the pedagogic approach of linking situated practice, overt teaching, and reframing was powerful, but transformed practice is a demanding goal and the affective elements of facilitation were important in order to generate a commitment to change and identity transformation.

Implications for practice

Various implications for professional practice are evident from this research. It would be difficult to argue that career guidance counselling and employment enjoys a clear professional status, internationally. In some countries, it may very well be regarded as high status. In others, its status is somewhat compromised by it being a fragmented and dispersed community of practice, like in the UK (Bimrose, Cohen, Arnold, & Barnes, 2013). The primary policy focus around this community of practice continues to be on providing services to clients/customers, rather than on its own workforce development (Bimrose, Hughes, & Barnes, 2011; Hooley, Johnson, & Neary, 2016). Yet the analysis of dialogue from the study reported here indicated a strong sense of belonging and commitment to providing a professional service to its clients/customers, despite operating in an often hostile and pressurised occupational environment. This finding resonates with other research that explored self-perceptions of professional identity in the same field: ‘The practitioners’ motivation was not just driven by a professionalism that sought to enact the principles of negotiation, for example, seeking to maintain or enhance other professionals’ value, and striving to find solutions rather than apportion blame’ (Gough, 2017, p. 205).

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6 It follows that professional identity could, and arguably should, be regarded as a
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8 legitimate focus for CPD. Within the field up to the current time, the focus of CPD has typically
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10 been on the development of skills, knowledge and competencies that enhance services to
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12 clients/customers. Little emphasis and/or opportunity has been provided for practitioners to
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14 address their own learning support needs arising from a turbulent environment that erodes and/or
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16 constrains professional autonomy. In future, this type of learning opportunity should be
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18 structured into CPD programmes routinely, not only by employers but also by professional
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20 associations.
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26 One other important implication for practice is the need to confront the need to integrate
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28 ICT into practice in the field so that it not only addresses the needs of the clients/customers
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30 consuming services, but also enhances the CPD support to benefit practitioners delivering
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32 services. Providing an online learning platform, similar to the one designed and piloted in the
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34 research study reported here, represents a potentially effective and cost-sensitive response to
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36 providing such support. Participants of the online learning, who discovered the course offer for
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38 themselves since there was no marketing budget, valued it not only for the content and
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40 facilitation of contact with fellow professionals, but also because it was cost free.
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47 The online course demonstrated the high value placed on peer learning support, which
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49 provided perhaps the richest source of learning. Whilst this has been evident for some time in
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51 face-to-face learning scenarios, the research study demonstrates that the same effect can be
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53 achieved virtually, at a distance, with colleagues who are located in different countries and who
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share group-based professional identities that transcend organisational contexts and national boundaries (Bayerl, Horton, & Jacobs, 2018).

Conclusions

The demand for career guidance counselling and employment support is set to increase with volatile labour markets and unpredictable labour market conditions. Meeting this demand is problematic in times when resources are often severely constrained. Harnessing the potential of technology provides one potential, powerful solution for supporting the practitioners at the sharp end of practice. The changing world of work has had, and continues to have, a profound impact on the processes and practices of career guidance counselling and employment practitioners, with consequent impacts upon their professional identity that are multi-dimensional and cumulative. Facilitated social learning spaces, such as those provided by the online learning course, do help individuals reflect, individually and collectively, upon the consequences of digitalisation, organisational change and other changes in their work context for their professional identities. The dialogue in the online learning course indicated how this platform did foster a feeling of being embedded in a community of learners.

Overall, the online learning was successful in facilitating a dialogue about the implications of the changing world of work for the professional identities of career guidance/counselling and employment practitioners in Europe and internationally. There was clear evidence of professional identity development as the work roles of career guidance counsellors and employment practitioners evolved in volatile environments

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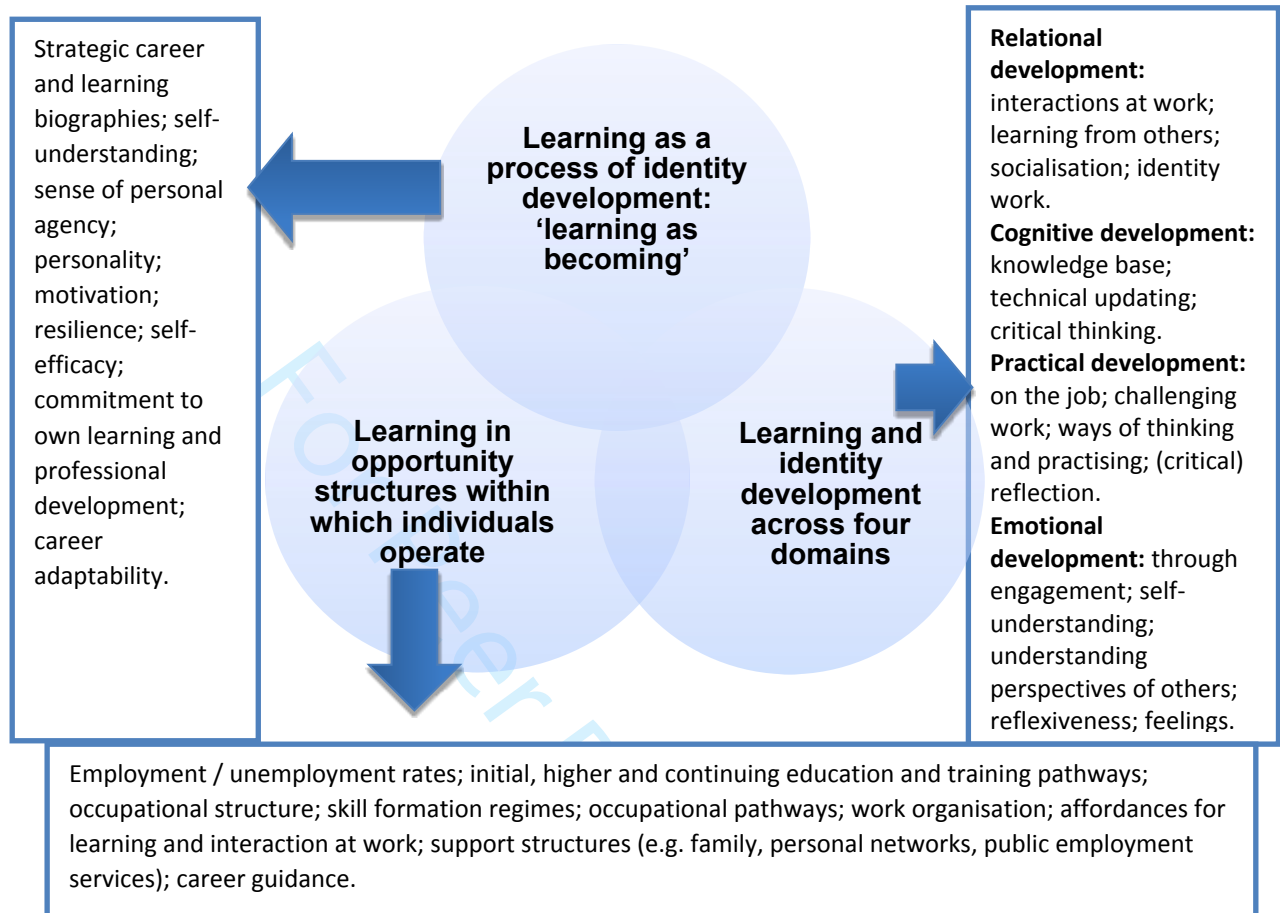
Figure 2: Key factors influencing learning and identity development at work

Figure 1: Dynamic model of occupational identity formation (Brown, 1997)

