

# How Career Decisions Are Made

**NICEC**

The National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling is a network organisation supported by CRAC. It conducts applied research and development work related to guidance in educational institutions and in work and community settings. Its aim is to develop theory, inform policy and enhance practice through staff development, organisation development, curriculum development, consultancy and research.

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The main aim of career guidance is to help people with their career decision-making. If this help is to be effective, it needs to take account of what we know about how such decisions are made.

This NICEC Briefing seeks to summarise the current state of knowledge on the career decision-making of young people. It draws upon the wealth of research which has been conducted into this topic, in the UK and elsewhere. It aims to do so, as far as possible, in straightforward, non-technical terms.

The Briefing is designed particularly for lay members of Careers Service Boards. It may also be helpful to other groups and individuals.

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## THE ELEMENTS OF CAREER DECISION-MAKING

Some argue that the jobs young people enter are largely determined by *social background*, and that for many young people, choice is virtually non-existent.

Others, including many guidance practitioners, disagree. They argue that most young people *do* have meaningful alternatives from which to choose. They view the key tasks of career guidance as being to make young people aware of these alternatives, and to enable them to choose between them in terms of their own *individual attributes*.

Still others offer a 'mid-range' perspective, emphasising the *influences* of key individuals and other sources.

Arguably, good guidance needs to be based on an understanding of all three perspectives: social background, more immediate influences, and individual attributes.

### SOCIAL BACKGROUND

At the broadest level, our culture transmits a complex set of social expectations. The position that young people and their families occupy in the social structure affects their views of themselves and of the world of work, and hence influences their aspirations and expectations. Aspects of an individual's background that can restrict the range of possibilities include:

- *Parents' occupational level.* Young people with parents in professional and skilled occupations tend to have more ambitious aspirations, and more access to opportunities, than those whose parents are in semi-skilled and unskilled occupations or in long-term unemployment.
- *Gender.* Individuals from both genders may be resistant to choosing occupations conventionally associated with the opposite gender. Gender stereotypes of appropriate occupations can be as limiting for boys as for girls.
- *Ethnicity.* Ethnic origin can influence career aspirations and, because of the more limited networks of some ethnic-minority groups, can restrict the opportunities young people have to test their aspirations and gain access to employment.

A key task of careers services is to reduce these restrictions, and to extend the range of possibilities open to all young people. This may include:

- Challenging gender, ethnic and other social stereotypes.
- Providing access to role models of, for example, women and black individuals who have succeeded in non-traditional occupations.
- Providing support to those who – after looking at alternatives – wish to pursue traditional paths.

### IMMEDIATE INFLUENCES

Young people draw on a wide range of sources of information and support in making job choices. Sources of direct influence include:

- Parents and other relatives.
- Friends and peer-groups.
- Careers specialists.
- Subject teachers.
- Contacts with employers and direct experiences of employment.

Individuals are also influenced by books, leaflets and careers software, and by the media through job advertisements and more generally.

Research indicates that:

- More young people rely on 'informal' advice and support from parents and friends than on help from those with 'formal' guidance responsibilities such as careers advisers and teachers.
- Parents tend to be seen as the most helpful sources of influence, followed by careers advisers and careers teachers.

These various sources of help exert their influence in different ways:

- *Parents and other relatives* contribute first-hand knowledge of particular jobs and of work in general. Also, research shows that family advice and support is more influential on the decision to stay in education after the age of 16 than is advice from careers specialists. But:
  - There is a danger that the knowledge of parents and relatives will be out-of-date, given the current pace of change in the labour market.
  - Some parents may have inappropriate aspirations for their children, pressurising them into unsuitable opportunities.

Families can also affect young people's views of work in less intentional ways. Research shows that:

- Early experiences within the family influence the development of interests in particular occupations, and whether young people participate in further and higher education.
- For girls, the choice of non-traditional careers is influenced by parental attitudes towards work and by the kinds of relationships they have with each parent.

# HOW CAREER DECISIONS ARE MADE

■ *Friends and peer-groups* exert a powerful influence in adolescence, as the young person develops a stronger sense of identity.

- For many, discussions with friends about careers are an important source of new ideas. Those leaving full-time education at 16 often hear about their first job from a friend.
- Friends who are already working provide young people with job information; those already in further and higher education are in a good position to give honest appraisals of specific courses and institutions.
- However, evidence shows that peer-groups can exert pressure on individuals to conform to gender and other stereotypes in making their choices.

■ *Careers advisers* tend to see their role primarily as helping young people to explore their aims and aspirations, broaden their ideas, frame options, and develop realistic plans for the future. They are a source of information about opportunities, though they also encourage individuals to search out their own careers information. This may lead to disappointment if a young person expects their careers interview to focus on the provision of such information.

- Research offers substantial evidence for the effectiveness of career guidance. Gains in self-awareness, knowledge of opportunities and decision-making skills have all been demonstrated.
- Research also suggests that young people from disadvantaged families may be more reliant than others on careers advisers: careers services may therefore need to attend particularly closely to the guidance needs of such groups.

■ *Careers teachers* are more likely to be involved in the teaching of careers education than in individual interviews.

- There is evidence that careers adviser interviews are more effective when preceded by careers education.
- Careers education also positively affects young people's view of the importance of gaining academic and vocational qualifications.

■ *Subject teachers* without formal guidance roles have particular influence on young people's decisions to enter further and higher education and on their choice of course. Individuals also gain useful information about their strengths and weaknesses from subject teachers. However, some young people report experiencing undue pressure from teachers to stay on at school, and/or follow a particular course, because of their concern to maximise student numbers.

■ *Contacts with employers* (e.g. talks) can provide useful inside information about different jobs and work environments, although there is a danger of bias and over-positive descriptions of what their organisation can offer.

■ *Work-experience placements* are offered to almost all young people while they are at school. These can have an important impact on career decisions, either reinforcing choices, or suggesting new possibilities, or leading to rejection of an earlier preference.

- Much depends on how the experience is integrated into the young person's learning – adequate preparation and debriefing are crucial.

■ *Books, leaflets and careers software* are an important source of educational and occupational information. Young people have access to careers libraries within careers services and schools, and these often contain computerised information as well as printed materials. The Internet is likely to become an increasingly important information resource in the future. But:

- Some recruitment literature, including that from educational institutions, tends to over-emphasise the attractive features of an employing organisation or educational institution.
- Computerised information, because of the way it is presented, can assume an authority it may not warrant.

■ *The media* generally are also sources of a range of incidental information about work. Television, for example, has a powerful role in broadening understanding, particularly of jobs that a young person would rarely come into contact with directly. To some extent, television promotes stereotypes of occupations, though this may be less so now than previously.

Young people may need help from careers advisers to judge the worth and validity of the information gained from these various sources and, where appropriate, to challenge it.

## INDIVIDUAL ATTRIBUTES

At the most basic level, career decision-making can be seen as a process of relating one's *interests, values and abilities* to educational and occupational opportunities. It is also important to take account of individuals' own views of these attributes (their *self-concept*) and of their confidence in their abilities (their *self-efficacy*).

■ *Interests* can be defined as preferences for particular work-related activities. One well-researched framework consists of six types of occupational interests: realistic (i.e. practical); investigative; artistic; social; enterprising; and conventional (i.e. administrative). Individuals can be distinguished in terms of these interests and are likely to prefer some of these types of work to others.

■ *Values* describe basic beliefs about what is important to an individual. Individuals differ, for example, in their needs for intellectual stimulation, security, or high financial rewards from work.

# HOW CAREER DECISIONS ARE MADE

■ *Abilities* are the strongest predictors of eventual occupational level. Distinctions are often made between:

- *Aptitudes*: the individual's potential to perform, with training, a specific task (e.g. numerical facility, spatial orientation).
- *Competences*: clusters of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are needed for effective job performance (e.g. lists of management competences describe the theory, behaviours and personal qualities needed for managerial positions).
- *Achievements*: educational and vocational qualifications (e.g. A-levels, National Vocational Qualifications).

■ *Self-concepts* may be more or less realistic, but they can

be as important in decision-making as more objectively assessed attributes. This highlights the need for guidance to give young people the chance to describe their own views of their motivations and abilities.

■ *Self-efficacy* also affects decision-making. For example, lack of confidence in maths ability is influential in career choices involving maths. More generally, lack of confidence in abilities often affects the career decision-making of girls and of ethnic minorities. Guidance can help to develop such confidence.

In rapidly changing and flexible labour markets, individuals need opportunities constantly to reappraise their interests, values, abilities and aspirations. This emphasises the need for lifelong guidance provision.

## THE PROCESS OF DECISION-MAKING

Career decision-making rarely follows a planned, rational, linear sequence. Individuals react to events; their thought-processes are influenced by emotions and intuition; and they may backtrack and revisit previous stages in the process.

Theories of career choice attempt to model the process. Their assumptions vary concerning how rational and planful young people are. They also vary in the relative emphasis they place on social background, more immediate influences, and individual attributes.

■ *Opportunity structure theory* suggests that the entry into work is better explained by structural factors such as educational and socio-economic opportunities than by individual choice. Research confirms that children from working-class families are less likely than those from the middle classes to enter higher education and professional/managerial jobs.

- This theory suggests a rather limited role for guidance. For example, it points to the value of coaching young people to maximise the opportunities open to them and cope with the demands of the world of work.
- It also emphasises the need to take account of the realities of local and national labour markets in the support and advice given to young people.

■ *Social learning theory* and *community interaction theory* emphasise the influence of learning experiences and of the individuals with whom the young person comes into contact. Research shows, for example, that young people frequently identify with those with whom they have close relationships, and that this plays a part in the development of work preferences.

— These theories highlight the importance in guidance of widening the range of contacts young people have and helping them make constructive use of these contacts. Work experience, for instance, can help individuals develop a range of perspectives on careers. The impact of careers programmes in schools and colleges can be enhanced by involving parents, older peers and employers.

■ *Developmental theory* suggests that career decisions are forged over a long period of time by processes linked to the wider development of the individual. Research shows, for example, that children's psychological development proceeds through stages, where they pay attention to different aspects of self and situation, and learn to integrate material in increasingly sophisticated ways. Implications for guidance practice include:

- To recognise that career decisions are unlikely to be made within a single intervention – a careers interview, for example.
- To emphasise the value of careers programmes in schools and colleges which support the decision-making process over a period of time.

■ *Person-environment fit* ('matching') theories suggest that in making occupational choices, individuals seek to achieve congruence between their abilities, interests and values on the one hand, and opportunities on the other. Some such theories emphasise the role of the self-concept in the search for congruence; others focus on more objectively assessed attributes.

# HOW CAREER DECISIONS ARE MADE

Research shows that choosing a job which matches one's interests and values leads to job satisfaction. Early interests in scientific and technical careers seem to be particularly enduring and to have a strong effect on later choices. Correspondence between aptitudes and the ability requirements of jobs is a prerequisite of effective work performance.

- These theories emphasise the need for relevant and accurate information about both individuals and opportunities.
- Psychometric tests and inventories may be helpful in gathering information about interests, values and abilities. But it is not usually appropriate for advice and guidance to be given on the basis of these alone. Young people will need help to relate the results to their self-concepts and to their aims and aspirations.

■ *Psychoanalytic theory* suggests that career decisions can be linked to deep needs and drives within the individual. Research has provided some limited support for this, showing for example that individuals differ in their orientation to people or to things, and that this is linked to occupational preferences. The main implication for mainstream guidance practice is:

- To recognise that there may be deeper psychological processes which careers service interventions are unlikely to address, but which may limit the effectiveness of these interventions.

Rather than drawing on any one of these models alone, most careers advisers take an eclectic approach to guidance practice, using them selectively to provide insights relevant to the individual and the context. Also, most careers advisers see their role as supporting individuals in making their own decisions, rather than telling them what to do.

## STYLES

At the point where decisions are finally taken, research suggests that they may be made in at least three different 'styles':

- *Rational*, where the individual weighs up the pros and cons in a systematic way.
- *Intuitive*, where the individual relies more on feelings, and choices are instinctive rather than carefully thought through.
- *Dependent*, where the individual complies with others' wishes and denies personal responsibility for the decision.

Individuals may exhibit a range of styles in the course of their decision-making. Career guidance tends to assume, and to encourage, the rational style. But:

- This may not represent the way in which some young people approach decision-making.
- The rational approach may need to be extended to encourage young people to identify and explore the intuitive and dependent elements in their decision-making.

## HOW CAN CAREERS SERVICES MAXIMISE THEIR EFFECTIVENESS?

This brief analysis of how young people make career decisions has identified a number of implications for guidance work with individuals. However, careers services work within considerable constraints regarding their influence on young people's decision-making. These include:

- The sheer numbers of young people careers services have to deal with, which restricts the scale of help that can be offered.
- As a result, the limited contact young people have with the service, in comparison with 'informal' influences on choice.
- The fact that some decisions are 'timetabled' by the structure of the educational system (e.g. choices at ages 14, 16 and 18).

Key aspects of 'good practice' include:

- *Links with schools.* Through their involvement in careers programmes in schools and colleges, careers advisers are able to have an impact on early career-related decisions, such as GCSE option choices, and to support the schools/colleges in their more sustained interventions. Careers services and schools have complementary guidance expertise, and their relationship is best viewed at a collaborative partnership. Careers advisers' position on the boundary between schools and the wider community means that they are well-placed to contribute knowledge and expertise from the standpoints of both individuals and employers.

Research indicates that young people benefit more from guidance where careers advisers have a high degree of involvement with the school's careers programme. But this requires time to consult with school staff and to plan programmes of learning.

- *Involvement with parents.* Since parents have such a strong influence on young people's aspirations, careers services need to find ways of involving them in guidance programmes. This role requires co-ordination and liaison skills, so as to identify and exploit the range of expertise and support parents can provide. Special skills are also needed when parents are present in interviews.
- *Links with employers.* Good relations with employers are necessary for informed guidance to individual young people. They are also essential if careers services want to influence local opportunities for training and employment in the interests of young people as a whole. Training and Enterprise Councils can be an important resource here, given the limited amount of time available for this work.

Organisationally, work with employers may require a different set of skills from those needed to work with individuals. An important issue is the extent to which these functions should be separated: the more this is done, the stronger the co-ordinating mechanisms that need to be developed.

- *Work with ethnic-minority groups.* Young people from ethnic-minority groups and their families often have ambitious aspirations: these need to be viewed positively though not uncritically. If careers advisers regard such aspirations as unrealistic, or discourage pursuing options where it is thought the young people may experience rejection, care needs to be taken to ensure that this does not simply reinforce discrimination.

Careers services need to find ways to give those from ethnic minorities access to positive role models, to extend their range of informal networks, and to help them deal with discrimination. They may also need to invest resources in work with employers to combat discrimination in recruitment and selection.

- *Work with special-needs groups.* Close attention is needed to young people with special needs in relation to education, training and/or employment. These include those with various forms of mental and physical handicap, many of whom need sustained support in the transition to work.
- *Work with those who appear disaffected.* Particular attention is needed to young people who have dropped out of formal education, training and employment. Many of them experience a variety of other social problems, including homelessness and drugs. Close contact needs to be established with youth workers and other adults working with such young people. Appropriate forms of outreach work need to be developed.

In these cases, as elsewhere, careers advisers need specific additional skills to offer the specialist support that is needed.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

For a more extended review of much of the research summarised here, see:

Watts, A.G., Law, B., Killeen, J., Kidd, J.M. and Hawthorn, R. (1996). *Rethinking Careers Education and Guidance: Theory, Policy and Practice*. London: Routledge.

Further copies of this Briefing are available from:

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