

Professionalisation for New Zealand Career Practice: *Lessons to Learn, Challenges to Meet*

Dale S. Furbish

Abstract

The New Zealand Association of Counsellors has been engaged in a professionalisation process for counselling in New Zealand since the mid-1980s. The issues surrounding professionalisation have been well documented in the *New Zealand Journal of Counselling*. The Career Practitioners Association of New Zealand is now attempting to establish a professional environment for career practice in New Zealand. In this article, the author suggests that professionalisation for career practice involves many of the same issues that were salient for counselling, and that professionalisation of career practice would be facilitated by referring to counselling's experience. Critical issues and needed steps for professionalisation of career practice are further identified in the article.

Introduction

Professionalisation has recently been a topic of discussion and debate within the New Zealand career practitioner community (cf Furbish, 2003; Furbish & Ker, 2002). Discussions about professionalisation are useful for defining the nature and scope of career practice, setting standards for those who hold themselves out as career practitioners and creating a positive environment for those who receive services and those who fund services. Discussions about professionalisation are also essential to enable career practitioners to determine how far towards professionalisation the field has advanced and what still needs to be accomplished for professionalisation to exist. However, a more fundamental issue for career practitioners to decide is if New Zealand career practice should be a profession and if it is capable of becoming one.

Although professionalisation is often viewed positively, professional status is accompanied by both rights and obligations (Everts, 1987). Professional status is not properly gained by mere self-designation by those engaged in the occupation. Although self-perception of professional status by the membership of a profession is necessary, external and objective standards must also exist. Emener and Cottone (1989) state that professions are characterised by a body of specialised knowledge

(usually gained by formal university level study), theory-driven research, professional preparation and review, a code of ethics, and professional identification and practice control. Further, these codes are enforced by the profession and are acknowledged and accepted by the community. Dialogue among practitioners within relevant professional associations is necessary in order to examine the issues surrounding professionalisation and to gain a consensus that professionalisation is desirable, necessary, and should proceed.

Professional membership, as a result of set standards, competencies and behaviours, is not open to all. However, the founding committee of the Career Practitioners Association of New Zealand (CPANZ) made a conscious effort to create a professional association that would embrace practitioners from a number of practice settings who provide a range of career services that vary in complexity. Professionalisation may call for a reconsideration of the inclusive philosophy that has characterised CPANZ to this point. An anticipated outcome of professionalisation is the possible exclusion of some practitioners who do not satisfy the established professional criteria. CPANZ and career practitioners must therefore evaluate the consequences of a potentially more exclusive organisation.

Exploring the professionalisation process

Hermansson and Webb (1993) identify the dramatic economic and social conditions in New Zealand that necessitate quality services to assist New Zealanders with career issues. In order to fulfil the demand for career-related services, helpers from a variety of disciplines and training backgrounds are engaged in offering assistance to clients on career matters. The chartering of CPANZ in 1996 initiated a movement to recognise career practice as a specialised service. As career practice has grown since 1996, it has become apparent to many that it operates in an environment that necessitates professionalisation. For example, Anderson (1996) discusses the importance of career practice operating within the ethical practice standards of a profession. Professionalisation has also been an important topic at meetings of the CPANZ Executive Committee.

CPANZ has begun to explore professionalisation and has opened an internal debate. However, it is apparent that there has been similar, focused and relevant debate about professionalisation within the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC) for the past twenty years. Since both organisations operate in largely similar social, economic and political environments in New Zealand, career practice could be well served by a thorough study of the professionalisation of counselling. Extensive resources exist for CPANZ to consider. An indication of the extent and depth of professionalisation discussions within NZAC is reflected by the report that nearly 25

percent of the items published in the *NZAC Newsletter* between 1989 and 1996 were focused on professionalisation (Miller, 1996). Also, a number of relevant and informative articles concerning professionalisation of counselling in New Zealand have been published in the *New Zealand Journal of Counselling* and its predecessors. Among these are Everts (1987), Vacc (1987), Manthei (1989), Anderson (1991), Miller (1994) and Anderson (1996).

Many of the issues that surround professionalism with regard to NZAC are salient for career practitioners. Indeed, a number of NZAC members have practices in which career-related services are offered to their clients, and a career focus group exists within NZAC. While in New Zealand many career practitioners do not have counselling qualifications, career practice involves many of the above services.

Developing an identity is a major task for New Zealand career practitioners, just as it was essential for New Zealand counsellors to define counselling and how it differs from other helping professions (Anderson, 1991). Although career services have been offered in New Zealand since the early 1900s, Winterbourn's (1974) history of career guidance evidences the varied training of career practitioners and the diverse employment settings. Providing career services has at different times been the responsibility of the Department of Education (focusing on youth) and the Department of Labour (focusing on adults), and in some eras responsibility has been shared by different government departments or agencies.

In the past twenty years, practitioners in private practice have become more common. Today, as in the past, the educational qualifications of career practitioners span education, business, health, social work, guidance, psychology and a number of other disciplines. The diversity of backgrounds and employment settings has resulted in a fragmented identity for practitioners. For example, in schools, those who are responsible for career services are usually seen as teachers who are given time to provide career advice rather than career practitioners. Formation of a primary identification with career practice by those who provide career services is a necessary step for professionalisation. Miller (1996) reports that NZAC has successfully legitimised its identity from a similarly diverse constituency through professionalisation. Professionalisation efforts by CPANZ would likely result in a similar outcome for career practice.

At the early stages of professionalisation for New Zealand counsellors, Everts (1987) advised NZAC to first of all establish definitional criteria for its profession. Similar advice should be heeded by CPANZ. At this point in time, universal agreement about what is meant by career practice in New Zealand has not been reached. Savickas (2003) views career work in the United States as a speciality within the profession of counselling. Career practitioners (counsellors) assist individuals with the development of

their careers through services to proactively and remedially develop necessary career skills across the life cycle including, but not limited to, vocational guidance, work adjustment, career education, job placement, occupational information, academic advising, employee assistance, retirement planning, vocational rehabilitation, and organisational consultation. These tasks vary in complexity and required practitioner skills. For career practice to professionalise in New Zealand, a case must be made that career practitioners possess the specific ability to deliver agreed upon career services to a higher standard than those who are not professional career practitioners. Clearly CPANZ must take the lead towards achieving this goal.

In describing the professionalisation of New Zealand counselling, Miller (1994) cites a four-step process identified by Caplow (1996) as a guide for NZAC. This process is also relevant for New Zealand career practice. The first step is the formation of a professional association. A counselling professional association, the New Zealand Counselling and Guidance Association, was formed in 1974. A professional association for career practitioners, the Career Practitioners Association of New Zealand, was formed in 1996. Interestingly, concerns about professionalisation seemed to occur in both professional associations at about the same point of their existence, that is after about eight to ten years. This is perhaps not greatly significant in itself, but it does suggest that professionalisation issues tend to occur at a point in time after a degree of organisational maturity begins to occur. The point at which professionalisation begins to be of interest within an association seems to be after an establishment phase, once the foundation has been formed and issues related to professionalisation begin to become salient to the membership.

The second step suggested by Caplow is changing the association's name to reduce identification with lower status occupations. Miller (1994) reports that this stage was accomplished by New Zealand counsellors in 1990 when the name New Zealand Counselling and Guidance Association was changed to the New Zealand Association of Counsellors. While it is debatable whether the dropping of "Guidance" distances NZAC from a lower status occupation, or if it simply reflects its less common use in counselling literature, the point that the name of an association should be descriptive is significant. The term "career practitioner" is potentially problematic for describing professional service provided by CPANZ members. "Career practitioner" was deliberately chosen for CPANZ because it was inclusive (and perhaps ambiguous) enough to embrace individuals who provide a variety of career-related services in a variety of practice settings, employing a variety of strategies. "Career practitioner" can describe the work of counsellors, career coaches, psychologists, school guidance counsellors, classroom educators, employment consultants, vocational rehabilitation workers,

school career advisors, human resources specialists, social workers, and CV writers. A concern with such a diverse mixture of settings and approaches is that the profession cannot promote exactly what the profession does, resulting in public confusion and uncertainty among stakeholders in government and business. Currently, there is no discussion about altering the name of CPANZ, yet following from this discussion the issue needs to be at least acknowledged and considered.

Step three suggested by Caplow is promulgating a code of conduct. Miller (1994) reports that a Code of Ethics, a Code for Supervision and a Complaints Procedure have been ratified by NZAC in compliance with this standard. CPANZ has also established a formal Code of Ethics and a Complaints Procedure towards satisfaction of a code of conduct for members. In contrast to NZAC, however, supervision is not required for CPANZ members. Supervision has been a contentious issue within CPANZ. While Furbish (2002) found that almost 81 percent of surveyed CPANZ members were in favour of a supervision requirement, there is also strong opposition, philosophically if not numerically, for required supervision of CPANZ members.

No formal study of supervision for career practitioners has been conducted in New Zealand. However, it is reasonable to expect that similar factors are present here to those reported by McMahan (2003) among members of an Australian career counsellors' professional association. McMahan found that the diversity of membership backgrounds, member needs, and member roles were practical considerations militating against required supervision. Supervision was viewed by some as an overly restrictive requirement for association membership, and not appropriate or beneficial for all members' career practice settings. Supervision for CPANZ members will likely continue to be debated within the association. As a professional association, CPANZ has the role of establishing a meaningful and relevant code of conduct that directs professional standards among its members. Supervision of career practitioners is one important standard that is yet to be decided.

A fourth step recommended by Caplow is prolonged political agitation for legislation to protect the profession, including accreditation and credentialing. The means and mechanisms for accrediting counsellors has been actively debated within NZAC. Everts (1987) suggests an accountability cycle comprises interlocking rights and obligations among trainers of practitioners, practitioners, employers and the public. The result of the accountability cycle, according to Everts, is protection of the public and protection of the profession.

New Zealand counsellors and career practitioners have similar needs for transparent accountability. Miller (1994) points out that third-party funding agencies require professional association membership for providers of services and thus drive

professionalisation. This standard is intended to ensure that providers are competent and subscribe to ethical standards, and that clients have access to a formal complaints procedure. The professional association is consequently placed in a position to attest to these standards among its members. NZAC has over the years developed rigorous standards for association membership. CPANZ membership eligibility does not yet require the documentation of specific competencies related to career practice. This is perhaps the most serious issue for the professionalisation of career practice in New Zealand.

Certainly, standards exist within the field of career practice. In New Zealand, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (2004) has established standards for career practitioners. Internationally, relevant standards for New Zealand career practice have been established by professional associations in the United States (National Career Development Association, 2004), Canada (Canadian Counsellors Association, 2004) and the United Kingdom (Institute of Career Guidance, 2004).

Although there is some variation in language among the standards set by these various organisations, general consistency exists for the skills and competencies required for career practitioners.

The standards fall into the following areas:

- Knowledge of the role and identity of career practice as a helping profession.
- Understanding of ethical and legal issues in career practice.
- Competence in the career counselling and consultation processes.
- Competence in delivering career services in groups.
- An understanding of the theory and application of human development and learning.
- Understanding and respecting human diversity within a multi-cultural society.
- Knowledge of a range of career development theories and their application to the counselling and consultation processes.
- Knowledge of formal and informal assessment techniques.

Understanding basic research methods and how research outcomes are incorporated into improving career practice.

- Understanding how to evaluate the effectiveness of career counselling programmes and one's own practice.
- Demonstration of attitudes and approaches consistent with helping approaches.

For career practice in New Zealand, the issue is therefore not the lack of recognised standards, it is how to verify that members possess these competencies. A frequently used means for attesting to the skills and knowledge of career practitioners is the possession of a formal qualification in career practice. NZAC has identified a number of formal qualifications offered in New Zealand that are acceptable evidence for

meeting counselling knowledge and skills. There are, however, extremely limited opportunities to obtain a career practice-specific qualification in New Zealand. Only AUT and WelTec award tertiary qualifications in career practice. CPANZ professional membership criteria allow for a practitioner to possess any degree qualification combined with one year's career practice experience. Practitioners can also qualify for membership with three years' practical experience and no formal qualification. Furbish (2002) verified the diverse educational backgrounds of New Zealand career practitioners in a survey of CPANZ. The survey results revealed that while most respondents held degree-level qualifications, only one-quarter held a tertiary qualification in a career practice-specific curriculum. Other disciplines such as education, business and social sciences were commonly represented. While an argument can be made that these qualifications are relevant to career practice, competency in career practice skills and knowledge as established by professional bodies cannot be inferred. CPANZ must establish procedures for validating the career practice competencies of its members if progress towards professionalisation is to advance.

Vacc (1987) discusses certification or registration as other mechanisms for establishing practitioner competencies. He discussed these since they were being considered as means of regulating counselling practice in New Zealand. Certification grants recognition to individuals who have met established standards. Licensure grants permission to individuals to engage in a regulated activity. While certification and licensure are usually accepted as rigorous means of validating knowledge and skills within a profession, Manthei (1989) points out that the process does not always ensure the desired results and he sees more disadvantages than advantages. Indeed, both mechanisms can require elaborate bureaucratic procedures to grant credentials. Ultimately, NZAC chose to use its professional membership standards for establishing counsellor competencies rather than a required certification or licensure (although voluntary certification is awarded by NZAC in recognition of attaining standards, and licensure is being investigated). For New Zealand career practitioners, certification or licensure are not likely to be soon implemented. CPANZ membership will continue to be *de facto* evidence of professional standards. It is therefore incumbent upon CPANZ to use membership procedures to advance professionalisation.

Formal testing of professionally relevant knowledge is a commonly employed method in the United States (Engles et al., 1995). Often such assessment is part of a certification or licensure, but it can also be used to establish eligibility for membership in a professional association. Testing can be an attractive method for validating professional knowledge and skills gained from a variety of resources and experiences if it is done well. However, testing as an assessment procedure requires a sophisticated

process of establishing and meeting psychometric standards for the assessment tools. It is unlikely that the resources to create a formal assessment procedure for career practitioners will be available in New Zealand.

Some next steps

If professionalisation of career practice in New Zealand is to proceed, a number of essential tasks will need to be undertaken. Among these are:

- **Establishing standards for career practice competencies and objective mechanisms for ensuring that career practitioners possess these competencies.** It would be appropriate for professional associations to investigate standards for training and experience for professional career practitioner status in the associations. CPANZ has a responsibility to lead this effort. Associations such as NZAC, whose membership is not exclusively composed of career practitioners, could consider specialisation designation for those members who are involved in career practice and establish standards for the designation. Professional associations may also consider standards for para-professional career practitioners, and distinguish the roles and services that differentiate professional and para-professional levels of practice.
- **Public education and governmental lobbying to establish value for career services delivered by professional career practitioners.** Such efforts again are the responsibility of professional associations who represent career practitioners. Campaigns led by career practice associations to publicise standards of professional career practitioners are necessary to encourage employers to fill vacancies with appropriately qualified and experienced practitioners and for the public to seek out professional career practitioners.
- **Establishing a broad dialogue among career practice stakeholders.** As career services benefit diverse groups within New Zealand and are delivered in many settings, communication among these sectors is important in defining the roles that professional career practitioners can fulfil. Representatives from Maori, Pasifika and Asian groups, education, government, business and health sectors, professional associations whose members provide career services as well as institutions that train career practitioners should be interacting to set the agenda for professional career practice in New Zealand.
- **Defining a timeline for progress towards career practice professionalisation.** The need for high quality career practice is clear. Yet realistically, time will be required to establish and implement standards and mechanisms for ensuring professionalisation of career practice in New Zealand. Although a number of years may be required, it is critical that the process is started, and followed through to completion.

Summary

Career practice in New Zealand is an emerging profession. The creation of CPANZ in 1996 was an important step towards professionalisation. While chartering a professional association is a clear indicator that career practitioners wish to be accepted as professionals, the existence of a professional association in itself does not result in professionalisation. Specific tasks and procedures that characterise a profession are still to be implemented. Career practice's maturation towards professionalisation is at a similar point to counselling in the mid-1980s. Fortunately, the professionalisation issues faced by counselling are well documented in NZAC publications. While differences do exist between the circumstances of counselling then and career practice now, the professionalisation debate that occurred within NZAC is instructive to CPANZ.

CPANZ has a role to lead the professionalisation debate among New Zealand career practitioners. Importantly, understanding what professionalisation means and the consequences of creating a professional career practice standard must be achieved. As a professional association, CPANZ must establish a unique identity for career practice specifying the scope of services and the qualifications required to provide those services. Standards of practice need to be refined, with issues like supervision resolved. Membership procedures must be established to verify that members possess the specialised competencies and knowledge required to deliver professional-level services. Greater advocacy to establish the credibility and value of career practice to government, funding agencies and the public is an important goal. Professionalisation does not occur at a specific point, but is an evolutionary process. CPANZ and career practitioners can obtain useful guidance from the well-documented NZAC professionalisation experience.

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Acknowledgement

The author would like to acknowledge the useful comments and suggestions provided by *New Zealand Journal of Counselling* referees to an earlier version of this article.

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