

eConsulting

In the frame of Developing Youth Career Services
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eConsulting

Not for commercial purposes

Information and communication technologies are transforming career information and guidance services, just as they are transforming service delivery in other sectors (e.g. banking and health services). To what extent can investment in ICT enhance the costeffectiveness of services? Should investment in ICT be viewed as an alternative to face-to-face services, or as a means of enhancing the quality of such services? What are the respective roles of government, of career guidance professionals and of the private sector in promoting the application of ICT within this field?

The present leaflet addresses these and related issues. It starts by examining the evolution of ICT and the ways in which it is currently being used in the delivery of career information and guidance services. It then looks at the types of clients with whom ICT-based systems are particularly used, and at how such systems can both expand and restrict access to career information and guidance. It next explores means in which ICT can complement and/or be integrated with other ways of providing career services. Finally, it identifies a number of key policy issues related to the role of ICT in national and regional career information and guidance systems.



Nowadays Internet is one of the established channels and natural means of communication and carrying out all kind of online services, including eConsulting. It is increasingly possible to deliver customer service directly through the Internet with little or no intervention by people. Companies are developing strategies to deliver outstanding services using new technologies and media and to compete on a global basis, and have given customers unprecedented power regarding their buying options.

Some of the best-developed and most popular services on the Internet are:

○ eBanking

Electronic and online banking and cash management services, access to electronic trading, sales and research tools , tax collection etc.

○ eLearning

Virtual distance education institutes offering courses and certificate programs designed to meet specific needs and forwarded to certain audience.

○ eShops

Practically anything could be bought online – from clothing to credit cards.

○ eGovernment

Governments and public institutions spend millions of dollars on automating systems and making their services available to the public online.

○ eMagazines

Most of the newspapers and magazines have online versions and provide access to their archives.

- eMarketing – for any company which wishes to justify marketing spending, maximize marketing campaign effectiveness, improve staff productivity and reduce costs, minimize duplication of effort between sales and marketing

Apart from the most popular ones, there are more and more emerging eConsulting services like:

- eMapping - people can and get instant access to the following information with the click of the mouse: property assessment, neighborhood information, demographic information, view parcels, view floodplains, view aerial photo/contours, and print a custom map
- eMunicipality - offers copies of ancient report requests, birth and marriage records.
- eLibrary catalogues.
- Chats - allow Web site visitors and agents to communicate on-screen and in real time, exchanging ideas and transferring URL's.
- AgriSupportOnline - involves isolated farming communities, provide them with access to mainstream agricultural information and knowledge.

There are different perceptions of what “eConsulting” is. In general there are two main meanings of this concept. The first one refers to delivering a special service that provides information and useful instructions of how to use the web-based services, such as eBusiness, ePay, eMarket. The second one refers to a specific area, namely providing career information and guidance. Such usage covers a wide range of applications. Key trends include its increased accessibility, interactivity and the more diffused origin of ICT-based resources.

The role of ICT in guidance can be seen in three ways: as a tool, as an alternative, or as an agent of change. The growth of websites and helplines as forms of technically mediated service delivery means that the potential of ICT as a change agent is now greater than ever before.

eConsulting is a query-based consulting service, operated via Internet. Through eConsulting a customer from any part of the world can avail of effective and valuable consulting support.



eConsulting is a means of providing the necessary support and advice to a person who needs by using the advantages of the Internet. However, it does not enjoy great popularity because of its specific nature and characteristics. Most of the people are not acquainted with this service and thus they are limited to using only the well - known means of consulting for finding job and career building - individual consultants, career centers, employment agencies, etc.

The invasion of the modern technologies and modern media in every field of the contemporary life is noticeable and irreversible, especially in the sphere of the services.

eConsulting is an illustrative example of how the development of technologies provides for improvement and facilitation of the important process of finding a job.

In order to assess the **merits and advantages of eConsulting**, you should be acquainted with some basic information about it:

- what is eConsulting
- how does it work / function
- is it accessible service - level of accessibility
- who can take advantage of it and to what extent, etc.

Advantages: The Potential Positive Aspects of Online Consulting

The good news is that online counseling offers a solution to many problems related to career development and facilitates the process of searching and finding a job. Counseling no longer needs to be limited to in-office meetings during the day. Counseling online can be at your convenience, in the privacy of your own home, at a lower per-session fee than you would pay for a traditional face-to-face visit to a local professional.

1). Online consulting is accessible any time and from anywhere you can access the Internet: those who live in remote areas, those who work on third shift, those who are caring for a family member who is homebound, those who are disabled, now have a convenient, non-threatening way to make a start in counseling. People who have difficulty getting to an office now can ask questions about job opportunities, get some basic information about what is troubling them and/or engage in an ongoing counseling relationship with an online counselor.

2). Online consulting lets you stay in touch: the contact with your online counselor can be more immediate, more affordable and more frequent than they, or you, could schedule (and maybe even tolerate) face-to-face. You might use e-mail to "journal" your experiences for you counselor. Brief daily/weekly contacts are possible when needed.

3). Online consulting gives people more time to formulate their thoughts and feelings: The spoken word is certainly more spontaneous than the written one, but the written word can be more precise. One advantage of an e-mail based counseling relationship is that it lets both the counselor and the client take the time needed to find the words that best express the shades of meaning each is attempting to convey. Other forms of online counseling like chat sessions and videoconferencing are more immediate and more similar to an in-office interaction.

4). Online counseling provides support to those who are isolated and alone: If one of your problems is that you have cut yourself off from friends, family, and even acquaintances, an online counselor can be a first step in the process of re-connecting with the world and finding a proper job.

5). Online counseling is usually less expensive than face-to-face counseling: The online counselor doesn't necessarily have to carry the overhead of a bricks-and-mortar office.

So, Internet allows interactive sessions with experts, without having to leave home or your workplace. Using the Internet means that the physical location does not matter, and therefore you can:

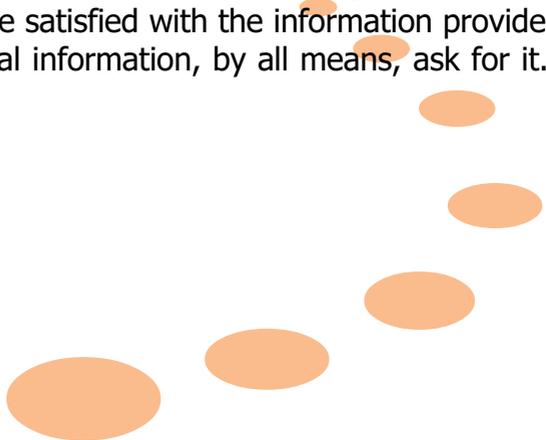
- Access wide range of resources.
- Access when you need it.
- Access eConsulting services before critical situations arise.

Limitations of eConsulting

Online consulting does have some limitations. Only you can decide whether they outweigh the plusses, or if they are more serious than the equally real limitations of more traditional counseling.

Online counselors get to know you only through what you have written: traditionally, the experienced professional uses all kinds of cues to understand the meaning of what you are saying.

Some who claim to offer online counseling have little or not enough training: If you go through a reputable Web site that checks the credentials of its provider members, you can be assured that you are working with a licensed professional. Otherwise you might be fooled. Take the time to review the credentials and biographical statement of any professional with whom you are planning to work (whether online or in an office) to ensure that you understand and are satisfied with the information provided. If you require additional information, by all means, ask for it.

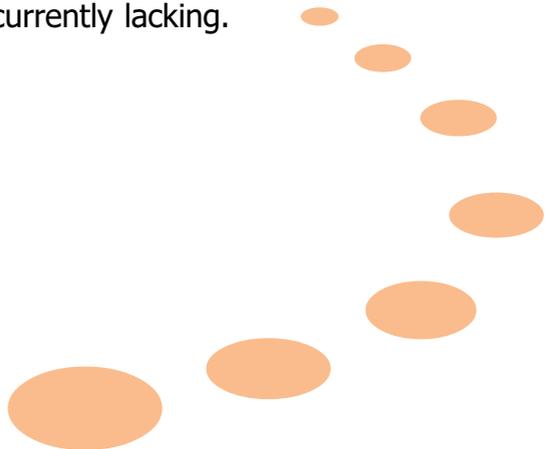


Normally, the whole operation of services delivered through eConsulting is performed between three types of users:

- 1).** eConsulting Online Administrator - a person who administers the site. This role includes managing the customer profile, validating ticket books requested by customers, validating requests and managing the different eConsultants.
- 2).** eConsultant - a person who is an expert in one or more products or subjects and offers specialized knowledge to help the customer. On receiving a request the eConsultant will present a viable solution in the form of a Net Conference or a dialogue with the customer or even in the form of documents.
- 3).** Customer - a person who becomes a user of the services of the site. It can also refer to a company. In this case the customer identifies a member of his or her own staff.

Traditionally, most guidance services have been built around one-to-one counseling interviews. The models used in such interviews have varied from diagnostic approaches, in which the counselor has analyzed the individual's attributes and made appropriate recommendations, to person-centered approaches where the counselor helps clients to explore their self-perception and to make their own decisions.

Many governments have seemed prepared to offer funding for initiatives involving the use of ICT in this field. Indeed, they have frequently seemed more willing to provide funding for such initiatives than for extensions of other forms of service delivery, and also less demanding in seeking evidence of effectiveness (Watts, 2001). In part this is because such funding is often linked to wider policy agendas: in particular, the interest of many governments in promoting e-learning (OECD, 2001) and in improving the ICT capability of their citizens, as a way of seeking to ensure their nation's future economic competitiveness. It therefore has a kind of "face validity" which sometimes seems to protect it from close critical scrutiny. Also, it is commonly justified in terms of promising future cost savings in expenditure on face-to-face career guidance services, or – a somewhat different argument – extending access to such services without commensurate increases in costs. Systematic evidence of such effects, and whether they involve any reductions in quality of outcomes, is however currently lacking.



eConsulting is the smartest way to get advice and services in real time. Today, when the complexity of solutions is growing and the companies are looking for more than just leading products and technology, on-line consulting is extending its role as partner that can reduce the risks associated with implementing strategic applications.

One of the greatest challenges facing business and industry today is trying to seamlessly bridge the multitude of diverse data sources, software applications, and hardware types that a company may possess, creating a harmonious flow of information and work processes that can be easily monitored and controlled. And if that's not enough, it all has to be done securely, at light speed, over the Internet.

The existence of Internet provides a wide range of opportunities for the attainment of high goals. However, in many cases the lack of experience, knowledge or preliminary information, demonstrated by companies or individuals, leads to bad and unsatisfactory results. That is when the introduction of eConsulting service is needed in order to ensure the positive development of the client. eConsulting offers a detailed plan to improve the situation by means of concrete analysis.

eConsulting aims at increasing the satisfaction and confidence of the clients - this is the most important advantage which will give them the chance to find easily what they are looking for, to be more satisfied and use the web site more and more often.

eConsulting is not only a theoretic structure, but a working platform with practical dimensions and significance.

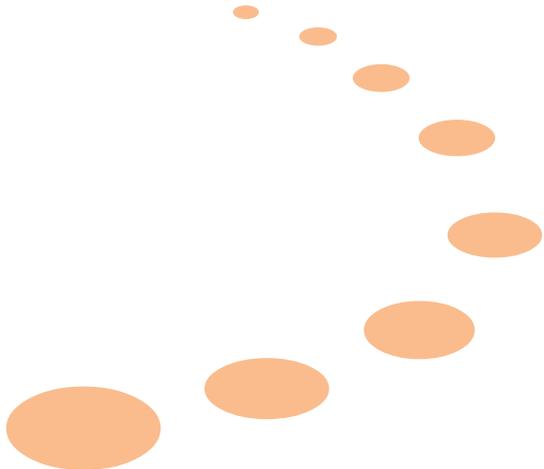
- **Virtual Career Centre (VCC)** - a new tool for career services, based on ICT, developed within the frame of the **Developing Youth Career Services** Project. Its main aim is to assist young people to receive information how to develop their career or business, and in this way to facilitate their integration into the complicated structure of the labour market.

VCC can provide you with practical approach to the services of one "real" consulting centre, but using the advantages of most advanced web technologies. This makes it possible for people living in different countries to share their problems and exchange experience. Users can take the advantage of interaction with real professionals answering their questions.

For more information you can visit the www site: www.careercenteronline.org

- **Virtual Resource Centre (VRC)** - Career Circuit's Virtual Resource Centre (VRC) is a Database on current programs, tools, and services related to youth career/future-building. Accessed online and through CD-ROM technology, the VRC Database is designed to jumpstart counsellors knowledge of Youth Service Agencies' resources and then connect them with the people and information spaces that can make a substantial difference in their work. For more info visit: www.online-counseling-service.com

- They serve as a *funnel* into companies' existing off-line services, aiming to maximize take-up of these services.
- They act as a *diversion*, seeking to take the pressure away from these off-line services by diverting users to other, usually web-based resources where their needs can be met.
- The third is an enhancement of such diversion, seeking to deliver *on-line guidance* within the site itself.
- The final two add further enhancements: providing a *forum* for putting users in contact with others facing similar issues to their own, or with people who may offer help in relation to these issues (e.g. potential career mentors); and providing a source of *distance learning* programmes in career management skills and related areas.

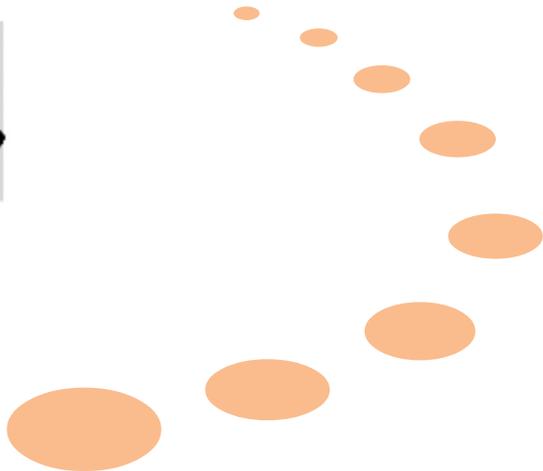


In relation to career information and guidance, the market would seem to be potentially inadequate in some important respects. The first is *impartiality*. The market tends to respond to the needs of those with most resources at their disposal. In the field of career information and guidance, therefore, it tends to be drawn to the recruitment interface, and to the needs of employers at that interface (e.g. Offer *et al.*, 2001). This can both constrain and distort the services that are offered, focusing them around the need to fill the vacancies on offer rather than to meet the individual's needs. This may not be sufficient to fulfil the public interest.

Secondly, there may be market failure in terms of *investment*. This is particularly true in relation to career *information*, which is not "excludable": individuals are not willing to pay for the collection and provision of information which will subsequently be available to others free of charge. This suggests that career information services should be provided by the state. On the other hand, it is argued by some that *guidance* services should *not* be funded in this way, because they are specific to the individual and therefore *are* "excludable" (Bartlett *et al.*, 2000). It is significant, however, that in practice the only area where a significant market has been developed for career guidance services is outplacement counseling, where the employer pays but has no interest in the nature of the outcome; elsewhere it seems to be difficult to modify guidance in the way that a market with growth potential would require (Watts *et al.*, 1993).

Where the role of the market is extensive, there remain issues about whether governments should retain a residual responsibility for ensuring quality – either by *exhortation*, through guidelines and the like, or by *regulation*. These issues are particularly pressing in relation to the Internet.

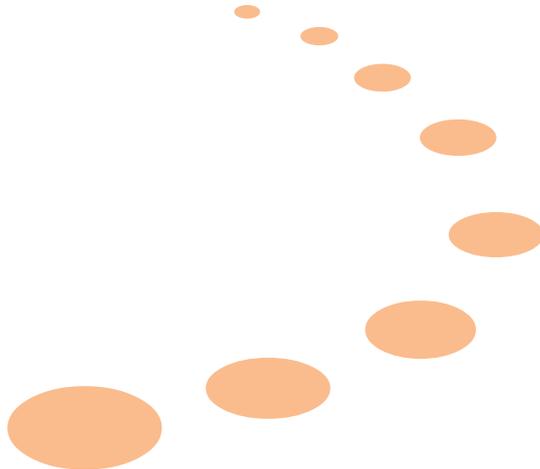
The quality of websites varies massively. Some are well-designed and user-friendly; some are not. Many give no information about the sources of data and when they were last updated. A study of websites offering no-cost career assessment found that almost none included any reference to how instruments had been developed or to underpinning psychometric data on reliability and validity (Oliver & Zack, 1999). There often appears to be no security regarding the confidentiality of client data. Little account is commonly taken of clients with visual disabilities or low vocabulary levels.



A variety of strategies can be adopted in response to such issues. One is to offer *guidelines*; another is to produce detailed *quality standards*. These can be linked to a *self-assessed* kitemarking system based on websites' affirmations that they meet these standards; or to an *accredited* kitemarking system based on verification by an external body. All these systems can be *voluntaristic*, or can be made *compulsory* – for example, for any services used by, or referred to by, guidance services in receipt of public funding.

Three further questions need to be addressed here. First, should such standards relate to the websites alone or to the guidance services in which they are embedded? The fact that some websites are independent and some are integrated suggests that both are needed. Second, should governments that decide to go down these routes seek to develop the necessary tools and mechanisms themselves, or to encourage and support other bodies to do so? The main relevant guidelines produced to date in Canada, the UK and the USA have been produced by professional bodies (NCDA, 1997) or by independent sector bodies (Canadian Labor Force Development Board, 1998; Guidance Council, 2004). Third, should standards be developed, set and accredited at national level, at multinational (e.g. European) level, or at a global level? The global nature of the Internet would suggest the latter, but there may be a trade-off here between desirability and feasibility.

The role of ICT in guidance can be seen in three ways: as a *tool*, as an *alternative*, or as an *agent of change* (Watts, 1986). Users and providers have often tended to view it in the first two guises: either as a supplement to existing services or a potential substitute for such services. But the wider emergence of websites and helplines as forms of technically mediated service delivery means that the potential of ICT as an agent of change – paralleling the transformations in many other service sectors – is now far greater than before. It is this that now provides the main challenge.



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