

Listening to low-qualified workers:

How career guidance can make a difference for them in the long term



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The purpose of this guide is to provide professional career counsellors with insights and ideas for working with their low-qualified clients. In a context of rapidly changing skill needs due structural changes such as technological advances or the greening of economies, transitions between jobs and sectors and in and out of the labour market are becoming more frequent. This is particularly true for workers with low qualifications who, today, hold jobs that are likely to be transformed by technology and globalisation or disappear entirely. Empowering these adults in making training and labour market choices by providing quality career guidance and advice is crucial.

This guide is largely based on qualitative interviews on guidance (QIG) with low-qualified workers themselves. The interviews centred around the expectations towards career guidance, specific experiences with career guidance and any barriers towards using career guidance services.

The QIG show that many low-qualified adults are content in their jobs and do not feel a strong drive to change and grow professionally. But they want better job quality:

have a few more days off
have more time for the family and for social volunteering
finish school/do training
reduce working hours
take time to find a better job without having the financial pressure
avoid evening shifts
have less work-related stress

And would prefer to have a more meaningful job:

work with old people/ children/ animals
do something more social but it is usually badly paid
establish a start-up in the social sector
work in a rehabilitation clinic
look for a vocational training as emergency paramedics
do social volunteering
work in some kind of social service

There is no script of how to conduct guidance, and no predetermined process to follow but the information collected through the QIG can help tailor support as much as possible to the needs and situations of low-qualified workers.



Before the first guidance session

Take-away:

Professional development is not a priority for many low-qualified workers but the openness to learning new things is high.

Knowing the cultural, social and economic reality of the low qualified clients, adapting the career guidance activities to their needs, aspirations and expectations is the only way that makes a long-lasting impact of the provided guidance possible.

The particular challenge when working with low-qualified workers is that they often see themselves in a comfortable or at least acceptable position thanks to their employment, despite it often being precarious and vulnerable to labour market shocks. Mostly, they seem to be unaware of the risks ahead and for this reason they do not seek career guidance until the risks materialise, through plant closures or economic dismissals.

On the other hand, contrary to the perception that low-qualified adults are not interested in training, when asked about their professional aspirations, the vast majority say that they would like to learn more and develop their skills.

I like it very much in my job. [...] It would be very nice to know about more job opportunities and how I can move up, for example. It would be nice if someone external came and offered advice, but I haven't had any contact with career guidance advisors yet.

38-year old woman, cleaner

Career counsellors have a crucial role to play in discussing the risks ahead and explain how training will be essential to turn these into professional opportunities

In addition, based on the QIG, the following barriers keep low-qualified workers from using career guidance:

- Guidance and training options are not well known

Many adults mentioned that more could be done to advertise guidance and training options. The lack of knowledge of providers, programmes and financial support are the biggest barriers for them to even consider the options

- Language barriers for adults with a migration background

Adults who are still learning the local language may be unaware that career guidance is available in many different languages and that career guidance advisors can recommend a wide range of options for professional development that can be combined with learning the local language

- Being “too old”

Older workers tend to think that re-entering a learning environment or considering job changes is ‘not worth it’ for them anymore



- Not being used to learning in a formal environment anymore

Many low-qualified adults express anxiety about returning to a classroom environment. They often don't consider learning on the job or learning by doing as learning and discard the idea of being able to learn altogether

- A biased view of what guidance consists of makes them reluctant to engage with counsellors

Many adults do not know how flexible most guidance offers are. They think that they need to have a clear professional project ahead of seeing a career guidance advisor. That career guidance advisors only provide job offers or that they only provide general suggestions that will not help them address a very specific situation

- Hesitation about what kind of questions/ doubts/ ideas they can discuss with a guidance advisor

Many low-qualified workers, especially those who have never actively looked for guidance, do not know what to expect from a guidance advisor which makes them nervous about contacting one

- Lack of support by the employer

According to the QIG very few of the interviewees received career guidance or encouragement to consult a career guidance advisor by their employers and some even faced resistance from their side. This is an important barrier as many low-qualified workers have little negotiating power with their employer, especially those on fixed-term contracts

Few low-qualified workers look for guidance of their own initiative. Most have heard that such career guidance services exist, but have generally only experienced it at the public employment service or in school. The QIG show how challenging it can be to reach out as interest in career development activities by them and their employers is generally very limited. It is thus even more important that career guidance counsellors participate in outreach activities to help engage and motivate adults who are disconnected from any professional development activities as well as to address other barriers.

A very clear message from the QIG is that the low-qualified workers have a preference for meeting the guidance advisor in person. They see their professional development as a very personal issue and value the possibility of building a relationship with a counsellor.

In order to build up a trustful relationship and to feel comfortable telling the counsellor many things about me, an in person conversation would be helpful. If the situation requires online meetings sometimes that is also okay, especially when it is always the same counsellor who already knows my situation.

46-year old man, working in a supermarket

Take-away:

Outreach to low-qualified workers can be challenging but is extremely important.

Take-away:

Low-qualified workers prefer in-person career guidance with a regular counsellor..



At the same time, especially younger adults are relying more and more on social media and other digital information channels. It is important that a combination of provision channels are available to adjust the career guidance services and their image to the user's preferences.

The quality of the connection via phone or internet is also a concern. More adults feel that welcoming spaces and privacy during the sessions would be important to engage in a personal conversation with their counsellor.

While the experiences of those adults who have used guidance in the past is largely positive, some say the sessions they participated in were not very helpful or even discouraging. A bad experience can shape negatively the attitudes towards career guidance.

I talked to a guidance counsellor once or twice, but it was not very helpful. We just talked superficially about what I used to do [...] and what I would like to do in Germany, but I felt like we talked just to talk. I thought they would be able to help me, but they just wanted me to start a 3-years apprenticeship and did not give me information on shorter, like one year, upskilling or reskilling options.

34-year old man, assistant cook

During guidance sessions

Finding out more about the user

The objective of this step is to learn as much as possible about the career guidance user. This phase can be used to build up a relationship with the client and build trust for a longer term cooperation.

Engaging the person and generating interest

Professional development issues and especially the barriers towards them are highly personal. The QIG confirm that most low-qualified workers prefer an environment where they feel at ease sharing their wishes and worries. Some users prefer to ask their friends and family because of the trust relationship with them. It is very important to take the time to build trust to build an understanding of what steps the client has already taken and to identify what might need to happen next. Reassurance and encouragement are very important since the clients come with lots of insecurities. The length of this phase may vary depending on whether the clients came of their own initiative or were approached during outreach activities: expectations may vary and so may awareness of the opportunities that career guidance holds and how to seize them.

The table shows a range of services that low-qualified workers perceive as useful in the context of a career guidance session. Not all are relevant for every user. Findings from the QIG underscore that users hope to receive individualised guidance and a genuine interest in them as an individual:



Services expected by low-qualified workers

Expected support	Examples
Orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide basic orientation, showcase options - Clear doubts - Reality-check their idea of their professional life
Assessment of skills, interests and barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Skills-profiling activities - Personality tests - Exploration of aspirations and interests - Identification of barriers and how to overcome them
Provision of information on...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Target the information based on the assessments and labour market needs
...identifying and organising CET	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identify relevant CET courses - Suggest financing options
...job search and professional re-orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Propose concrete job offers - Explain processes and financing options (e.g. for self-employment, exploring different professions and vocational fields)
Continuous support and advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Formulate concrete steps for professional growth - Help with application processes - Encourage and motivate throughout the career guidance process - Problem-solve along the way

Source: QIG

Understanding the user's environment is important to strengthen engagement. For instance, many users have to deal with resistance by their employers and may benefit from strategies to deal with this situation. In most cases it will also be important to reach out to the user's family, their social network or other social services they may be in contact with to ensure that they support any professional development plan emerging from the career guidance sessions.

Findings from the QIG show that while low-qualified workers are generally open to learning new things, not all were ready for drastic changes requiring lengthy training. Many do not consider learning on the job or learning by doing as 'training' and expect that they will be required to return to the classroom and getting a degree. Once they understand that training can mean learning new skills for their current job or learning how to use new techniques to avoid tasks they do not enjoy, they were happy to consider the option. The way training is presented may strongly influence the openness of the client to accept participation.

Assessing experiences, ambitions and barriers

Mapping the clients' experiences, ambitions and barriers helps to promote their self-awareness. The table below can help plan this phase.

Take-away:

It is not unusual to encounter resistance by employers and engaging them from the beginning may facilitate the process..

Take-away:

Low-qualified workers are generally open to learning new things, but rather not in a formal learning environment..



Self-exploration

Activity	Purpose	Examples of questions to ask	Examples of exercises
Mapping experiences	The purpose of this discussion is for the client to start putting past experiences into concrete, marketable points.	Tell me a about your job experiences. What types of jobs and industries have you worked in? Are you satisfied in your current job? Have you had other jobs where you have been more satisfied?	Write a list of all the roles the client has had in both working and private life (e.g. caregiving role). Make a list of strengths and weaknesses of the client.
Mapping ambitions	The purpose of this discussion is for the client to start thinking of their work experience as part of a career that they have control over. Many low-qualified adults feel like they work for the sake of working itself, and vocalising their ambitions can help them feel more ownership to a career planning process.	What is important for you in your paid work? What do you need in your working life to be happy? Are there any avenues in working life that you have an interest in exploring? What is the end	Make a list of values and conditions that are important for the client to have happy and sustainable employment.
Mapping barriers	The purpose of this discussion is for the client to clearly point the finger at what is standing in their way to progress in their career.	What are the main reasons why you have not considered options to invest in your career? Do you have important time constraints? What causes them? Do you have ideas where to start looking for career development opportunities?	Make a list of the barriers and research ways to tackle them.

Source: <https://ceric.ca/publications/guiding-principles-of-career-development>, own adaptation.

In addition, gathering information on training the client has attended (whether formal, informal or non-formal) and carrying out skills assessments is crucial to assess the potential and limitations of the client.

Showcase options, develop a career plan and help with decision making processes

Getting to know the occupational environment, the labour market opportunities and the support options

The purpose of this conversation is to help the client reflect on the future of their industry, on technology change and on other factors relevant to their job.

Given the often complex barriers that low-qualified workers have to overcome, they may need comprehensive support that combines different options. It is also important to provide them with relevant labour market information to ensure that they plan a career that takes into account their specific labour market outlook. Skills assessment and anticipation exercises can be useful to find out whether the person's current/ desired occupation is threatened by automation and can be used to inform the client in case adjustments of their preferences to labour market needs are necessary. Low-qualified adults are generally less likely than youth to think that new technologies will yield career opportunities for them (OECD/IBM Future of

Take-away:

Most low-qualified workers are aware of automation processes, but few expect to be affected.



Work 2021 Survey). Many are also unaware of the risks that technology can pose for their jobs. Based on the QIG, about half of low-qualified workers do not expect automation to affect them – neither in a positive nor in a negative way.

Future thinking

Activity	Purpose	Examples of questions to ask	Examples of exercises
Aid the client in thinking ahead and adapting to changes	The purpose is to give the client a set of tools to tackle potential changes or insecurities in the labour market	What is changing in your industry? Are there some possibilities that might arise from these changes? Which of these changes interest you the most?	Research artificial intelligence and help the client reflect the kinds of skills and knowledge they may need in the future.

Source: <https://ceric.ca/publications/guiding-principles-of-career-development>, own adaptation.

The role of career guidance advisors is also to match the skills, aspirations and expectations of the user with available training and labour market opportunities. Proposing irrelevant options may signal that the assessment phase was not conducted properly. Based on the QIG, most low-qualified workers wish the suggestions from career advisors were more in line with their wishes and needs:

Take-away:
Low-qualified workers wish that their preferences and needs be taken into account more.

I told the guidance advisor that I would like to work in a craft profession and that I am afraid of height, but they still sent me job offers for roofers. Finally I started a training as painter and varnisher, but this was also really not my preference. [...] It would have been great to receive more information on where I could apply and how, based on what I told them about me.

23-year old man, service worker

Many interviewees stressed how helpful it would be to receive a broader overview of the professions and vocational fields they could chose in the labour market and then look, with the counsellor, into specific information on those they are most interested in.

The guidance was not really helpful when one did not already know which profession to choose. [...] During a guidance session the most important would be to receive suggestions of paths to consider and recommendations where not to go. A broader overview of what is possible was missing.

25-year old woman, waitress



Create a professional action plan

Take-away:

Formulating an individualised action plan seems to not be common practice but can help keeping low-qualified workers engaged..

Based on the existing labour market opportunities, career guidance users can evaluate their original career plan against new ideas. They can discuss with the career guidance counsellor the benefits and drawbacks of sticking to their original plan, adjusting it, or drawing up an entirely new one. Using the previous steps and connecting the dots to formulate a concrete plan for the future is essential for the client to make use of the outcomes of the career guidance sessions in the longer term. None of the low-qualified workers in the QIG who had accessed career guidance had received or elaborated such a plan with a career guidance advisor.

Supporting the decision-making process

Activity	Purpose	Examples of questions to ask	Examples of exercises
Review existing career plan	The purpose is to listen to the existing plan but also provide a reality-check of their idea of their professional life	What new ideas have you had since thinking of your career? How flexible are you in changing their plans and to what degree? What about this plan makes you excited?	Write down the existing career plan and all new ideas and organise them in 'keep' or 'discard' piles
Support with taking decisions	The counsellor purpose is to offer orientation on the way forward and facilitate decision making based on the priorities set in the action plan	Are there any factors that are making it difficult for you to move into satisfying employment? What constraints are affecting your choices?	Review training programmes or job openings with the client that match the professional action plan and new ideas. Mind map the plan and courses you have found, together with any concerns, issues and obstacles (e.g. financial or time constraints).

Source: <https://ceric.ca/publications/guiding-principles-of-career-development>, own adaptation.

Low-qualified adults may be hesitant in making decisions about their professional future. While the career guidance counsellor cannot take those decisions for them, they can help in the process. By setting short-, medium- and long-term goals the clients can see the bigger picture as well as the concrete next steps to focus on. This approach can promote self-management.

Once the decisions are taken, the counsellor can help with preparing application materials, practicing job interviews and other practical support to achieve the next goals. To use a holistic approach, it is important to link career guidance with other programmes or support services, such as job placement offices, formal or informal educational establishments or services providing guidance on other topics that the client is dealing with (e.g. housing, health, family).





After guidance sessions

It is important that the user understands that major shifts in a career can take time, but that there are plentiful resources they can draw on for help throughout the process. The career guidance counsellor can support the client through this transition, offering continuous support:

Continuous support

Activity	Purpose	Examples of questions to ask	Examples of exercises
Provide support to tackle barriers	In the previous section the client will mind map barriers to change. The role of the counsellor will be to help minimise those barriers as well as new ones.	What kind of help does the client need from the counsellor? What kind of help do they need from other resources? Do you want to be self-employed and what help do you need in that case?	Help identifying sources of financial support or what kind of training rights they have in their current job. .

Source: <https://ceric.ca/publications/guiding-principles-of-career-development>, own adaptation.

The time following guidance sessions may be used to explore further support options that are relevant for the client and adjust their plan accordingly, reviewing and revising objectives on a regular basis to take new developments into account. The QIG underscores that low-qualified adults appreciate regular career guidance sessions as opposed to one-off support, particularly when a trust relationship was built.

Take-away:

Low-qualified workers appreciate regular contact with the same guidance advisor.

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