



CSW
Corporation for a
Skilled Workforce

Good Jobs. Thriving Communities.

Catalyzing the Development of Robust Career Navigation Supports

A Working Concept

Prepared By

Carrie Floyd,
Program Director for Educational Attainment

May 2012

Acknowledgements

This working concept has benefited from feedback and review from the following individuals within CSW: Keith Bird, Kysha Frazier, Larry Good, Jeannine La Prad, Leise Rosman, and Ed Strong.

Corporation for a Skilled Workforce is a national nonprofit organization that partners with government, business, and community leaders to develop good jobs and the skilled workers to fill them.



Career Navigation: A Campaign for the Future

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

“What are you studying?”

“What do you do?”

Whether it was as a child in school or during adulthood at a dinner party, we’ve all asked – and tried to answer - these questions countless times. Work is a central part of our lives – it helps define us, it provides for us, and it shapes most of our days. We spend more than a third of our waking lives in our jobs, and even more time thinking about our work. Yet, most of us are expected to make critical, lifelong career decisions as adolescents with limited information and experience. Children are asked to envision their future careers, high school students are exposed to career days and college choices, and college students are required to declare their majors or professional paths.

Despite this early and frequent focus on career goals, only a small minority of people actually follow a linear path to finding and fulfilling their career aspirations. For most, such career decisions and the resulting paths are complicated, fragmented, and circuitous -- often resulting in careers that were never even imagined at the outset. Many do not have the information and help needed to carefully consider the options and implications of career choices until after they have already invested significant time, energy, and money into a career path that may not fit their strengths, interests, or the needs of the labor market.

This paper describes a new approach to identifying, following, and obtaining quality careers and career paths. Rather than a call for a unique, isolated system, this paper makes the case for a widespread campaign involving a range of stakeholders and a diverse set of integrated tools to better provide the services and resources individuals need to make good decisions. The following explores the characteristics that are critical for ensuring this movement embraces a 21st century approach. In this paper we attempt to identify opportunities for a range of stakeholders –national, regional, public and private - to build a new approach to career navigation.

We envision a strong, integrated set of high tech and high touch tools that enable individuals to access and receive real-time, tailored information and supports to make truly informed decisions about career and learning opportunities.

The Need: The Paralysis of Choice

In spite of the importance of jobs and career choices, most people have little to no idea how to navigate the many and complex systems in place to prepare for and connect with jobs. Unfortunately, this issue does not get simpler as people age; rather, workers are faced with continuous choices and decisions throughout their lives. The need for clear and informed career decision-making is not isolated to high school students or graduating college students. Many dislocated and incumbent workers have watched their career paths disappear with new technologies and changing markets, while others have not yet managed to access quality career options. It is clear that having a postsecondary education increases employment options, yet it is far less clear what type of credential leads to quality career opportunities. Ultimately, for many workers of all ages and experiences, the path through training options into a good job in their local economy is so hazy that they have never been able to start along a promising career path.



Individuals have an array of choices available to them and the flexibility to explore almost any appealing option. Yet, the information to understand and navigate these choices is often disconnected, cumbersome, and focused on immediate job placement – not long-term career pathways. Such a wide array of choices and flexibility without good support in decision-making can be overwhelming, effectively paralyzing workers’ ability to move forward.¹

Case managers and counselors currently attempting to provide support to individuals often cannot effectively guide participants into new training opportunities leading to market relevant credentials. They often do not have the information necessary to help others make informed decisions and are overwhelmed with incredibly high caseloads. Further, the number of staff focused on providing career navigation assistance is shrinking in nearly every system – K-12, community colleges, universities and the one-stop system – as a result of budget challenges all face. This already limited pool of counseling funding is fast disappearing.²

The lack of early and ongoing, consistent, high quality career navigation support takes a hefty economic toll, both personally and broadly. In the resulting “start and stop economy” individuals enroll in courses that are not necessarily in good alignment with their career goals, skills, or labor market demands, and so are more likely to drop out of or switch training programs prior to receiving a credential. Other individuals try “starter” careers and wind up unhappy and unproductive with their initial, uninformed choices. As a result, workers waste their time and money and become increasingly frustrated with the notion of learning, employers experience higher turnover and lower productivity, and the public workforce system is less able to optimize investments in workers.

The labor market is not what it was two decades ago, and neither is the path to success in this new market. For the foreseeable future, the learning path will rarely be a straight line from traditional high school, through college, to a job. We can no longer ignore the realities of increased specialization in the labor market by asserting that earning any college degree ensures that good work will be easy to find. Workers need to be able to function as “working learners” who can simultaneously work and learn, and all learners must have access to the information and support they need to make good training and career choices.

Our nation’s workers, employers, and educators all require a new commitment to help them identify good career options, the skills needed in those jobs, appropriate learning opportunities, and supports available through robust, individualized career navigation approaches.

The Vision: Robust Career Navigation Approaches

We envision a strong, integrated set of high tech and high touch tools that enable individuals to access and receive real-time, tailored information and supports to make truly informed decisions about career and learning opportunities.

Our vision asserts that the key to effective career navigation is clear, up-to-date transparent information combined with support to help interpret and apply that information. This approach uses 21st century technology emerging in similar media, marketing, and communication spheres.

¹ Schwartz, Barry. The Paradox of Choice

² The 2009 ratio for high school counselors to students was 459-to-1, where as the recommended ratio is 250-to-1. In Michigan, the 2009 ratio was 660-to-1. www.schoolcounselor.org



This approach is not a single, coordinated national career navigation system. Nor is it an isolated initiative that merely touches individuals entering training, or an effort to simply match individuals to potential employment opportunities. Rather, the needed approach is a diverse collection of robust, integrated tools that help career navigators and counselors work in close partnership with individuals to help them make highly informed choices.

Career navigation is not a single, isolated decision point. Instead, individuals face a continuum of choices and needs. Robust career navigation approaches enable individuals to easily:

1. Recognize their passions, interests, and personal goals;
2. Identify viable career opportunities in alignment with their interests, including those within key industries in and outside of their region;
3. Understand the skills, competencies, and credentials necessary to meet their career goals;
4. Select quality training programs and educational institutions that offer employer informed competencies and credentials;
5. Access supports to enter and succeed in education, including financial aid, alternative delivery options, and supportive services;
6. Receive supports to be successful in and out of a program, including peer mentoring, learning awareness and wrap-around services;
7. Obtain and retain career and job placement opportunities, including networking;
8. Develop an entrepreneurial approach to lifelong career development based on individual assets and personal interest.

These robust career navigation approaches must integrate multiple players, interfaces, and tools to work with individuals to make well-informed decisions. We envision a set of approaches that utilizes existing platforms to connect with innovative, high tech tools and tailored career counseling.

The Work: Building High Tech, High Touch Approaches

We have a lot of work to do before we can achieve this vision. The currently available career navigation supports (including counselors) are too often overwhelmed by the demand, or using approaches and information that are outdated or unreliable. Information is flowing faster than ever, but career navigation efforts have not taken advantage of the emerging technologies so many other industries have used successfully. A new approach to career navigation must capitalize on the following trends:

- **Self-Aggregation:** Features that allow users to select information or aggregate special choices for themselves, informing future information dissemination (ex. Digg, Google Alert, Idealist Job Notifications).
- **Peer Aggregation:** Features that enable users to select individuals they trust or associate with to help them aggregate information (ex. Twitter, Digg, Facebook, Pinterest).
- **Social Networking:** Features that allow for users to connect with others to both share and receive information (ex. LinkedIn, Facebook).
- **User Targeted Marketing:** Features that utilize available data to inform and provide user targeted advertising based on analytics (ex. Google Adwords, Facebook, etc).
- **Tiered Service Delivery:** Approach allowing users to determine the intensity of support and resources they receive (ex. tax support, insurance plans, etc).



- **User Generated Content:** Approach that utilizes information shared directly from users to generate robust content and to maintain information (ex. Endnote, Wikipedia).
- **Matrixed Services:** A structure (or lack thereof) in which answers are in multiple places across multiple access points.

Many other industries (especially information industries) have benefitted from the incorporation of these technologies and have created entirely new and better experiences for users. Career navigation efforts must also begin to embrace these emerging technologies. We recognize (and expect) that there will be tools and approaches developed that have yet to be imagined. However, there are a significant set of critical components that should be strengthened and developed in the meantime. We believe that these include:

Integrated Online Resources. Information to help guide career decisions and choices is widely available, however, it is not organized in an easily accessible manner. We need to build online tools that allow individuals to access reliable, real-time information about industries, jobs, career paths, education, and supports. The substance accessed through a very high quality portal can be drawn from a combination of the many online tools sponsored by private companies and public entities. Many of these tools already exist, yet are fragmented across many complex websites with little validation for the user. For example, tools that current exist and should be leveraged to support this new approach include:

- **Career Development Tools:** There are many online tools for identifying and exploring career interests. They identify an individual's passions, interests and skills and attempt to align them with potential career opportunities. For example, the military's ASVAB test aligns career interests with career opportunities. Unfortunately, tools currently available rarely connect to actual job opportunities in the local labor market.
- **Online Learning Portals:** There are multiple portals in use and in development that attempt to catalog available training and education options. Typically, these portals are isolated to state boundaries or proprietary institutional offerings. While useful, these platforms are often out of date, with old information on course and class offerings.
- **Job Matching Portals:** Many job matching portals are available to job seekers, including Monster, and Idealist, among others. These sites allow employers to post job openings and job seekers to post resumes, and allow individuals to find and apply for job opportunities.
- **Networking Platforms/Social Media:** Many new sites have emerged that have made it easier for individuals to network and share information with others. Unfortunately, these networking sites are often disconnected from other information sites and typically rely on limited information sharing capacities.
- **Online Content Management:** Online platforms like Blackboard and C-Tools offer opportunities for courses to be delivered online to new learners. These tools provide content management platforms for traditional course delivery and are widely used at community colleges and four-year institutions. Recently there have been attempts to develop open source platforms.



Cadre of Career Navigation Advisors. The need for advising spans all ages, individual interests, and individual experience levels. Rather than trying to restore levels of advising and counseling within institutional silos, states, regions, and institutions could instead support and encourage development of a cadre of advisors who can work with all learners and job seekers, from high school through post-secondary education and throughout their working lives. Treating this as a shared responsibility and resource would provide:

- **Shared Investment:** Encourage regions to build their team of career advisors as a shared investment, with joint funding across institutions and integrated strategies and delivery of services. This can be a great example of interagency joint investments to make a crucial service affordable rather than the expensive responsibility of each individual agency.
- **Increased Consistency and Quality of Advising:** As part of encouraging regions to develop cadres of advisors, entities could support better advising in part by defining quality expectations and providing professional development. Again, this could be designed and delivered through a joint training strategy involving relevant experts from K-12, colleges and universities, one-stop centers, industry, and community organizations. One crucial dimension of this would be ensuring advisors are skilled at using the online tools and have access to up-to-date information.

Currently, multiple funding sources support this work, including K-12, community college, workforce development, and philanthropic funding. However, it is not the primary focus on any of these funding streams and thus, typically is not very robust. *As long as we treat career navigation as periphery to the work of these funding streams, it will never achieve the scale and quality needed to support individuals.* Moreover, none of these systems can afford to fund quality supports in a shrinking federal funding environment. Instead, we propose that career navigation be elevated as a primary function outside of any one of these systems. Funding streams must be pooled and innovative tools must be developed to better support robust career navigation approaches.

The Path Forward: A Call to Action

Robust, effective career navigation approaches will not originate from one location or be led by one entity. Instead, the approaches we envision will emerge from the collective, simultaneous hard work of a variety of actors. We must all work towards a common goal, shaping and developing the tools and supports our workers and employers need and deserve. We have the opportunity to create a movement that can better serve individuals in making critical career and education choices. The following articulates the diverse array of roles and opportunities stakeholders can play.

- **Nationally:** There are multiple private companies that have developed portals and systems offering portable career navigation, job matching, and networking information. However, these companies have yet to reach a demographic that needs intense career navigation, including low skilled working learners. There are two national roles that must be filled:
 - First, the Federal Government must help ensure that the data being used by these sources is accurate and applicable. The quality of any portal developed integrally relies on the accuracy of the data aggregated in the portal. The Federal Government has a responsibility to ensure that this data is accurate and up-to-date.
 - Second, the Federal Government and/or philanthropy could help companies already delivering career navigation services to reach low income, low skilled populations. This includes facilitating partnerships with public education, public workforce development, and other touch points for low-income individuals.



- **Private Sector:** The private sector currently offers many tools for individuals to identify career opportunities, find job openings, and enroll in training and education programs. However, many individuals do not know how to effectively use these tools and/or these tools are targeted towards higher income, higher skilled individuals. The private sector could improve these much needed tools and, with some support, could enter additional markets to reach higher scale.
- **State and Regional Government:** While there are national tools that offer general overviews and help to articulate the portability of competency based credentials, state and local governments must help develop localized information. The approach must offer general information in addition to highly specific and localized data. Further, states and regions can build and improve the infrastructure for career counseling and information delivery.
- **Community Colleges:** Community colleges provide the training and education services and must provide real-time information on their training programs and associated outcomes to a system that aggregates and integrates data. Importantly, more and better information on real completion and employment outcomes must be available to individuals.
- **Employers:** Employers are a critical component of this approach, ensuring that high tech tools and associated data are in close alignment with regional labor market needs, informing curriculum development and ensuring realistic portrayals of work are conveyed to potential students and job seekers.
- **Cadre of Career Navigators:** A cadre of career navigators should be available to individuals, including high school students, adult learners, postsecondary students and workers. Career navigators could be available to individuals through a tiered service delivery approach integrated with technology. For example, minimal support could be available through an online chat function, a call center, or group sessions. Intermediate service delivery could be available on a limited basis for participants at participating institutions. Premier services could be available for free to participants that need high touch support, or available for premium subscribers similar to an executive career coaching function.

Much of this work is already happening in community colleges, one-stops, high schools, and community based organizations. It is not enough. By strengthening these efforts and developing innovative new approaches, together, we can create a robust and powerful set of tools and approaches that can provide much needed career navigation to our nation's workers.

We have an opportunity to build the robust career navigation approaches our nation, our workers, and our employers need.





1100 Victors Way, Suite 10
Ann Arbor, MI 48108
734.769.2900 / Fax 734.769.2950
www.skilledwork.org