

The digital career practitioner: Effective and ethical use of digital tools in career education



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Over the last 20 years, technology has played an increasingly central role in career education. Career practitioners have had to adapt their practice in response to new technological developments such as social media, smart phones, online learning, virtual reality and AI. They have had to consider the way that global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have solidified these changes to society and to education. And they have needed to view all these technological changes critically: social media isn't always socially beneficial, smart phones can harm young people, and online education has proven to be far from revolutionary.

Career guidance practice can get stuck between the transformative potential of technology and the growing concern that it has not delivered on its initial promise (Kettunen & Sampson, 2019; Staunton, 2025). It is in this context that career guidance practitioners should reflect on technology and what it means for their professional practice.

The internet and career development

In 2020, Tristram Hooley and I developed a typology that explores the impact the internet has on people's careers (Hooley, 2020; Hooley & Staunton, 2020). This typology is based around six metaphors: library, media channel, surveillance camera, marketplace, meeting place and arena.

Library

The internet provides unprecedented access to information and creates new opportunities for career-related learning. However, how do people deal with the scale of online information? How do they find, and understand the quality of, that information?

Media channel

Digital technologies allow people to broadcast content that either directly or indirectly presents their career identities online. This creates opportunities to curate their online identities and presence but also present challenges in managing different aspects of professional and social lives.

Surveillance camera

The flip side of the media channel is that people's digital activity is always visible online (and can be almost impossible to retract). This can have a negative career impact and leave people open to discrimination or harassment. It's important that people carefully manage their career footprints, while recognising that there may be limits to how effectively they can do this.

Marketplace

Digital technologies also serve as a marketplace for career opportunities. People may simply use the internet as a place to find and apply for jobs, but there is also the potential to develop new forms of employment that exist purely in digital spaces.

Meeting place

Social media enables people to meet and connect with each other virtually, from anywhere in the world. This can allow people to develop and maintain relationships related to their career. These can be entirely online or move between online and offline spaces.

Arena

Finally, digital technologies create an arena within which discussion and debate can take place. Career-impacting debates around issues such as equity, diversity, workplace safety, the Green Agenda and AI often take place online. Digital spaces are important forums for contesting and developing these positions.

An understanding of these metaphors can help people develop strategies and practices that respond to the many opportunities and challenges, limitations and dangers of digital technology.

The internet and career guidance practice

In addition to transforming how people manage their career, digital technology has had a huge impact on the delivery of career education. Career practitioners have dual responsibilities, of advising their clients on how to use digital technology effectively and safely (Sampson et al., 2019), as well as integrating technology into their own practice intentionally, effectively and ethically (Kettunen & Sampson, 2019). Technology offers new ways of interacting and learning but has also created new tensions within career education practice (Kettunen & Sampson, 2019; Roberts & Lyall, 2023; Staunton, 2025).

The rate at which digital technology has been adopted into career practice has accelerated exponentially since the pandemic, which has intensified the challenges career practitioners have always faced in learning and applying new digital tools (Kettunen & Sampson, 2019 ; Staunton, 2025). There is now a plethora of applications offering one-to-one and group communication (for example, Zoom or Teams), online courses, information through websites, or interaction with chatbots (Roberts & Lyall, 2023). Many of these practices and products have become normalised in the sector *before their benefits or disadvantages have been clearly understood*.

Recent research I have undertaken reveals that practitioners hold contrasting views about the benefits and disadvantages of using digital tools in practice (Staunton, 2025). The table below shows three central issues that came up through my research:

- How clients accessed careers support.
- How career practitioners developed positive relationships with their clients (often called the working alliance).
- How career practitioners interacted with their clients.

Tensions	First view	Contrasting view
Access	Enables access.	Excludes some.
Working alliance	Technology makes a working alliance harder.	Practitioners can adapt to new practices.
Interactivity	Technology makes sessions less engaging.	Technology creates new ways to engage.

Access

Digital technology can be used to move beyond the model where clients and practitioners must be in the same place. This appears to improve access to services. However, digital services can present access problems for those who cannot afford the right technology, have lower levels of technical literacy, or have disabilities that make them hard to use.

Working alliance

Humanistic psychology, which underpins many principles of career guidance, emphasises the importance of non-verbal communication and the reading of body language in client/practitioner sessions. It can be hard to pick up on these signals online. But it could be argued that this is a practitioner, rather than a client, concern and that there are ways for practice to adapt to this new format.

Interactivity

There appears to be a difference of opinion between practitioners about whether the use of digital technology allows for more or less interactivity. In both one-to-one and group contexts, career practitioners emphasise the benefits of interactive learning and active participation in sessions. Online group sessions can make interaction harder, and participants more passive, with practitioners often facing a wall of switched-off cameras during online group work. But digital technology also offers the potential for introducing new types of interactive elements, such as polls, quizzes, and interactive whiteboards or mindmaps.

My research highlighted multiple tensions around the use of digital technologies. However, the consensus was that although they may not offer the perfect pre-packaged solutions, digital technologies should be embraced rather than avoided. It was gratifying to see practitioners utilising new technologies while retaining a clear sense of their own identities, ethics and theories.

Facing the future

Our research found that digital technologies present constantly expanding possibilities and complex challenges, some of which are not easily overcome. Considering this, I suggest keeping the following points in mind when you think about how to use digital technologies in your practice.

Firstly, **avoid technological solutionism**. Digital technology is not some magic ingredient you can simply add to a situation to make it better. There are multiple examples over the last 20 years of situations where people thought technology was making positive change, when in fact it did the opposite. When tempted to use a digital product (or being sold one by a vendor), ask if there are ways of accomplishing the same result without using technology or by using existing, freely available tools. It's important to take a step back, to ensure that increased technology adoption doesn't become the norm.

Remember, most **technology is owned by someone**. This may seem obvious, but we should never ignore the companies behind the technology, their commercial goals and strategies, and the costs, financial and otherwise. We must remember to consider carefully who owns the technology, what their values are, and who they are ultimately serving. For example, for many tech companies, their users' data is their most valuable asset and they are happy to sell it for profit. This also creates a good argument for seeking out technology solutions that are publicly owned.

Finally, **keep focused on the problems that you are trying to address**. There is a danger with new developments, such as the recent flood of AI tools, that they turn into a goldrush of excitement, with limited concrete benefits or dangerous unintended consequences. It seems so apparent that technology will make things better that we can forget what solutions we are actually seeking. Your career practice is at its best when you are clear about your students' needs and what you want to achieve with them, **and then** identify and assess appropriate digital tools and practices (Healy, 2020). We can outsource many tasks to technology, but our ethical decision-making should always be ours alone

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