

Action Research in Career Counseling

Project Study “Research and Development for Enhancement of
the Supply-Demand Adjustment Function and the Career Support Function
in the Labor Market”

Summary

Authors

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1. Research Objectives

This research aims to improve career counseling from the perspective of building a Career Concept through “conscientization” of a career counseling process with the goal of controlling their activities according to how the counseling proceeds.

As a research methodology, we selected action research. Kurt Levin, an advocate of action research, said, “Nothing is as practical as a good theory.” (Lewin, K. 1948). Believing that training is necessary when putting a theory into practice, he suggested a triune action research to be carried out; research, training and practice. The research is conducted in this way. First, we present the idea of career counseling focusing on building a Career Concept based on a theoretical background (research). Next, based on the idea presented, we develop a training program to conscientize a career counseling process and incorporate it into the training course at the Labour College, which is an institute providing training to career counselors on a national scale (training). Then, we develop a system in which career counselors can practice

conscientization of the career counseling process at the counseling counter (practice). Through this cycle of research → training → practice, the theory will be revised and a more effective training program will be developed. Career counseling services will also be further improved through practice.

This report presents the results of our study of the above-described cycle as a practical example and discusses future issues.

The career counseling referred to in this report is counseling for job seekers who request career counseling among the unemployed and career changers who use the services of public employment security offices.

2. Career Counseling Model

(1) What is a “Career Concept”?

In career counseling, given as part of general job placement services provided by public employment security offices, the match between the skills of the job seeker and the skills needed by an employer side is examined to increase the possibility for the job seeker to secure work. When assessing the vocational skills of a job seeker, his/her work experience, educational background, training history, licenses and qualifications he/she obtained and various other work-related events are considered.

In this research, a person’s vocational skills are viewed as a Career Story which interprets and connects past, present and future events, such as “I am doing XXXX (or I am going to do ZZZZ) because I have been doing YYYY before” or “I am going to do ZZZZ because now I am doing XXXX.”

In career counseling, the job seeker and the staff in charge of career counseling (hereinafter referred to as the “career counselor”) examine through dialogues a match between the job seeker’s skills and the skills needed by employers while construction (making), deconstruction (breaking down), and reconstruction (remaking) a story.

After this process narrows down the employment offers that the job seeker applies for, the above story will develop into one incorporating a specific and practical plan for activities to obtain employment, including preparation of a curriculum vitae and setting up an interview schedule, which will be an activity plan for the future based on past and present events. This is called a “Career Concept.”

(2) Model for Building a Career Concept

As a process of building a Career Concept through career counseling, we propose a model shown as Figure 1. In this model, the process is divided into three steps: (i) collection, (ii) processing, and (iii) utilization of information on job offers and job

seekers.

(i) Information collection

The job seeker and the career counselor collect information both on job offers and job seekers through discussion, using the information on job offer form and job application form as a clue.

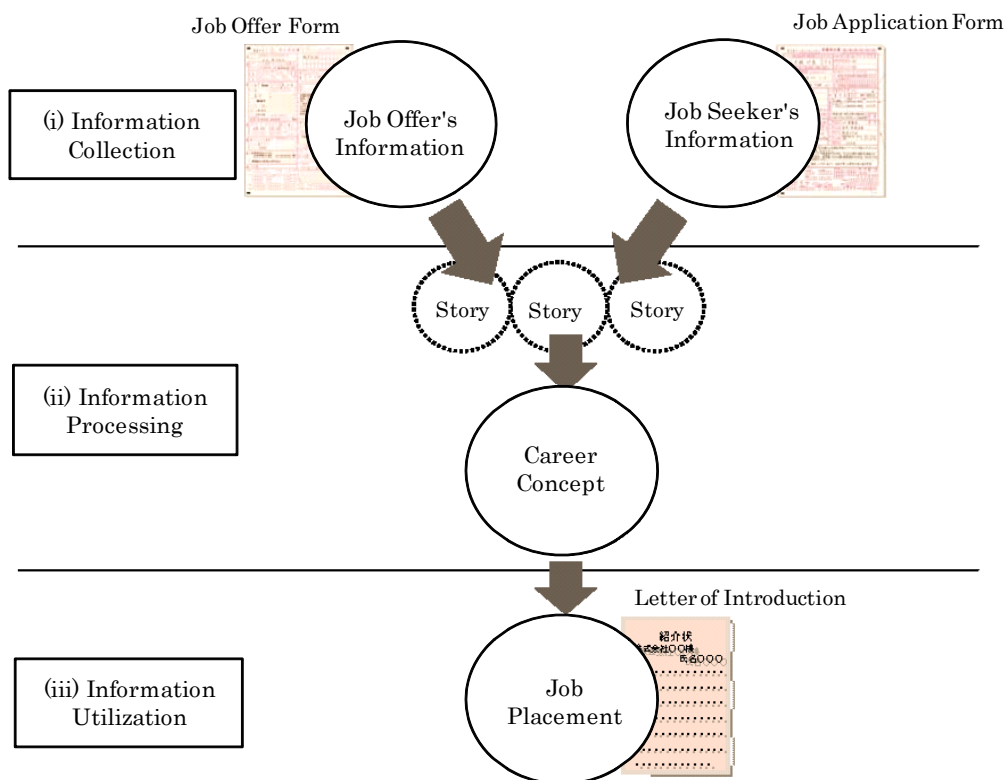
(ii) Information processing

Necessary information is picked out from the job seeker's information and organized as a Career Story. The story is constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed repeatedly while being compared to and based on the information on job offer form. In this way, a Career Concept is built as a more specific activity plan for those jobs that the job seeker will apply for.

(iii) Information utilization

By using the Career Concept, the career counselor can provide job placement services in a more efficient manner, and the job seeker can also examine the information on job offer form more efficiently.

Figure1. Model for Building a Career Concept



(3) Background Theories of Career Counseling Model

There are three major theories of vocational development: (i) the trait and factor theory, which emphasizes the importance of an objective match between the personal traits of the job seeker and the job (Parsons, F., 1909/2005; Williamson, E. G., 1964); (ii) the vocational development theory, which emphasizes the importance of the job seeker's subjective view, i.e. self-understanding and vocational understanding (Super, D.E., 1953); and (iii) the constructivist approach, which holds that by expressing his/her subjective understanding of himself/herself and the job mainly by means of language and sharing it with others, the job seeker actualizes the concept of a career (Savickas, M. L., 1993; Peavy, V., 1996; Cochran, L., 1997. et al.).

In this research, we posit that career counseling will shift from Job Placement Type, in which “the career counselor takes a neutral position between the job seeker and the employer and introduces an appropriate job offer to the job seeker from an objective perspective,” to Catalytic Agent Type, in which “the career counselor acts as an intermediary between the job seeker and the employer and provides support so that the two parties can constructively talk with each other.” The theoretical background of Catalytic Agent Type of counseling is the constructivist approach.

When viewing the vocational development of a job seeker from the perspective of the constructivist approach, it can be seen that the environment surrounding job seekers has been drastically changing with the advancement of the information society, economic globalization, diversification of employment patterns and increased mobility of employment, and it is difficult for a job seeker to directly control what happens to him/her. However by giving meaning to what has happened by thinking that “the present exists because of the past and the future then exists because of the present” and making a Career Story, the job seeker can cope with the difficult situation he/she faces and can actively seek a job. Therefore, we believe that the role of the career counselor in career counseling is to help the job seeker create his/her Career Story.

3. Development of Training Program

(1) Outline of the Training Program

The training program was developed with the aim of conscientizing a career counseling process from the perspective of building a Career Concept so that they can control their activities at the counseling counter and improve their career counseling skills. “Conscientization of a counseling process” means that after a career counseling, the career counselor reviews the counseling process of a session and verbalizes what was communicated between the job seeker and the career counselor. The program is to

provide training in such verbalization.

This program, which is titled “Case Study,” has been provided by the Labour College since fiscal 2005 as part of its professional training course for career counselors.

At the Labour College, the program provides a total of 9 hours and 40 minutes of training in two sessions (days), with a two-week interval between the first and second sessions.

To date (as of January 2008), the program has been offered six times to a total of 263 career counselors. Starting in fiscal 2006, the career counselors taking the program have been requested to report on how they have used what they learned in their actual work to the Labour College on a voluntary basis, and a total of 69 reports have been submitted by 60 career counselors.

(2) Basic Ideas of the Program

The program has three basic concepts as follows:

First, techniques for career counseling are studied from the perspective of verbal expression of the job seeker’s Career Concept. By mastering Expressional Technique¹ used in constructing a story, we believe that career counselors will be able to help job seekers build their Career Concept more effectively.

Second, as a way of mastering techniques for career counseling, the program places more importance on making career counselors conscious of various techniques at the counseling counter rather than enabling them to put a specific technique into practice. Since the flow of a career counseling session may change in various ways depending on what the job seeker says and the career counselor’s response, it is more important in the program that career counselors review the process of counseling for the purpose of improving their counseling skills and become conscious of different techniques, rather than being able to put a specific technique into practice.

Third, the program not only provides training but it also intends to improve the career counseling services provided at the counseling counter. By making career counselors conscious of different techniques, the program supports them in considering which technique should be used at which time, in order to provide better career counseling,

¹ Expressional Technique is defined as "techniques constructed from multiple linguistic expressional methods used to express one's Career Story that enables one to select and carry out an appropriate method of expression in response to the status and flow of the career counseling between the job seeker and the counsellor. Expressional Technique is divided into "Subject", "Viewpoint" and "Tense". Each Expressional Technique is categorized into three categories of Expressional Method. Now, Past, Present for Tense; Outer, General, Inner for Viewpoint; and Matter, Sentiment, Reasoning for Subject.

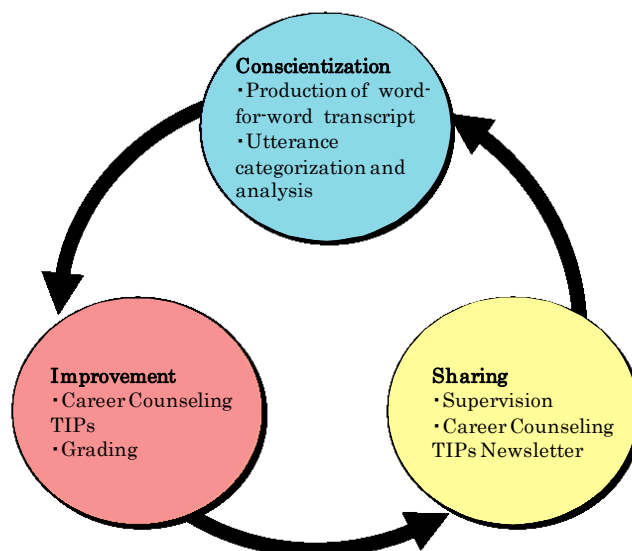
and putting this knowledge into practice at the counseling counter.

(3) Processes of the Program

The program consists of three processes as shown in Figure 2. First, in the “conscientization” process, career counselors become conscious of the process of their career counseling. Next comes the “improvement” process, in which they consider how they should change their responses during conversations with job seekers and put this knowledge into practice at the counseling counter. Then, in the process of “sharing,” career counselors share with each other practical cases, mainly concerning verbal communication with job seekers, where the Labour College plays a central role.

The program provides support for one cycle of these processes. Even after completing the program, career counselors become more conscious of the process of career counseling through “sharing” and have more options to respond to what job seekers say, which will lead to further “conscientization” and “improvement.” Thus, the practice is expected to continue in cycles.

Figure2. Improvement of Career Counseling



4. Changes in Evaluation of Counseling after the Program

Each career counselor has three opportunities to grade his/her own counseling performance, giving 10 points for the best and 1 point for the worst performance: (i) prior to participating in the program (hereinafter referred to as “pre-participation”) but immediately following a counseling session of which the production of word-for-word transcript has been assigned; (ii) after the word-for-word transcript has been analyzed in the program (hereinafter referred to as “post-analysis”); and (iii) after practicing what has been learned upon returning to the counseling counter (hereinafter referred to as “post-practice”).

We conducted two types of analysis on the scores of grading: a comparison between pre-participation and post-analysis scores and a comparison between post-analysis and post-practice scores. In the comparison between the pre-participation and post-analysis evaluation of 80 career counselors who participated in the program in fiscal 2007, the largest proportion of participants, or 65.0%, lowered the evaluation of their counseling performance, followed by those who did not change and those who raised the evaluation, at 17.5% each. The same tendency is also observed among the 47 participants in the program in fiscal 2008.

This is probably because by participating in the program, the career counselors became conscious of what job seekers said and their own responses as well as the process of career counseling, and as a result paid more attention to the problems with what they said at the counseling.

In the comparison between the post-analysis and post-practice evaluation of 41 career counselors who participated in the program for fiscal 2006 and 2007, the evaluation of each one of the three post practice counseling performances were raised by more than 70.0% of the participants. This result may indicate that career counselors became more conscious of the process of career counseling than during their pre-participation time and were able to better control their activities and improve their counseling skills through practice.

However, considering that this is one of the programs of a professional training course, these changes in the evaluation of their own counseling performance by career counselors might naturally be attributed to the effects of other programs. Therefore, we cannot say only based on this analysis that conscientization of a career counseling process caused the improvement in their counseling skills.

We need to further study the extent to which the career counselors experienced conscientization of a career counseling process through the program and how

conscientization of a career counseling process works in practice.

5. Conscientization of Career Counseling Process

In the utterance analysis and search training of the program, career counselors experience conscientization of a career counseling process from the perspective of building a Career Concept by analyzing the word-for-word transcripts of career counseling that they provided and using the System for Preparing and Analyzing Transcripts on Career Counseling and Job Placement (hereinafter referred to as “Careetalk”).

The training consists of six items: “the number of remarks and utterances,” Expressional Technique including “Processing,” “Tense,” “Viewpoint” and “Subject” of utterances, and “Career Counseling TIPS.” A worksheet has been developed for each item, and program participants are scheduled to work on each item for 30 minutes according to the instructions provided on the worksheet.

Conscientization of a career counseling process proceeds in three steps. The first step is “comprehension of fact” based on an analysis of the word-for-word transcript. The second step is “interpretation of fact,” which means to understand the utterances of the job seeker, responses of the career counselor and characteristics and tendencies in the career counseling process. The third step is “verbalization of interpretation,” by writing down the above results on a worksheet.

Using the KJ method, we sorted out and summed up the information written on the worksheets as well as the participants’ opinions and comments on the program written on the review sheets. By doing so, we examined to what extent the career counselors experienced conscientization of a career counseling process and what opinions and comments they have.

(1) Summing Up Information on Worksheets

Table1 is a summary of the information provided on the worksheets, which shows what a career counselor experienced during the program from the perspectives of (i) clarification of fact by quantitative analysis, (ii) clarification of fact by qualitative analysis, and (iii) interpretation and verbalization of fact.

Table1. Conscientization of Result of Worksheet Analysis

Worksheet	Clarification of Fact		(iii) Interpretation and Verbalization of Fact
	(i) Quantitative Analysis	(ii) Qualitative Analysis	
Number of Turns and Utterances	The counselor realized how many opportunities to speak were provided to the job seeker through quantitative analysis of the number of utterances by the participants.	The counselor realized the contents of the job seeker's utterances by searching his/her utterances.	The counselor interpreted whether the job seeker could say what he/she wanted to say.
Processing	The counselor realized the tendency of career counselor's questions through quantitative analysis of his/her "Question" and job seeker's "Response" by the participants.	The counselor realized the contents and effect of his/her question by searching utterances in his/her "Question" and job seeker's "Answer".	The counselor interpreted appropriateness of his/her questions.
Tense	The counselor realized which tense was used most often in the utterances through quantitative analysis of "Past", "Now" and "Future."	The counselor realized which point in time the participants were referring to by searching utterances in "Past", "Now" and "Future".	The counselor interpreted the time span of the topic.
Direction	The counselor realized to what extent each participant expressed his/her ideas and feelings through quantitative analysis of "Inner" by the participants.	The counselor realized to what ideas and feelings the participants expressed by searching utterances in each participant's "Inner."	N/A
Subject	The counselor realized to what extent each participant expressed his/her sentiments and desires through quantitative analysis of "Inner" and "Sentiment" and "Inner" and "Reasoning."	The counselor realized to what sentiments and desires were expressed by each participant by searching utterances in "Inner" and "Sentiment" and "Inner" and "Reasoning."	N/A

These results indicate that the career counselor experienced both "comprehension of fact" and "interpretation of fact" in terms of the number of remarks and utterances, Processing, and Tense, while in terms of Viewpoint and Subject, the career counselor only comprehended the fact and did not go further to interpret it.

(2) Summing up of Information on Review Sheets

There are two kinds of review sheets. Review Sheet 1 is for reviewing the first day of the program, mainly focusing on learning the criteria for Utterance Classification² and practical training of Utterance Classification. Review Sheet 2 is for reviewing the second day, mainly focusing on the analysis of the word-for-word transcript.

According to the results on both review sheets as sorted out by the KJ method, the advantages for career counselors in participating in the program are that, mainly through the production and analysis of word-for-word transcripts, they can realize the characteristics and tendencies of their career counseling that they took part in and become aware of practical issues.

Their evaluation of the program is higher for the second day than for the first. This is probably because they understood the significance of troublesome work such as (i)the production of word-for-word transcripts, (ii)learning the criteria of Utterance Classification and (iii)classifying the utterances from the word-for-word transcripts.

6. Case Report on Practicing

Using the analysis of the word-for-word transcripts through Careetalk as a reference, the career counselors try to find better ways of expressing a Career Concept that can improve their career counseling and be able to try them at the counseling counter. To help them find such ways, we developed the Career Counseling TIPs, which consists of 15 items as shown in Table2.

² Utterance Classification is performed in accordance to Coding Manual, compiled the Utterance Classification criteria.

Table2. Career Counseling TIPs

TIP 1	Be aware of the number and length of interruptions.
TIP 2	When the job seeker uses words such as 'well', or 'but', wait patiently until he or she finishes his or her thought.
TIP 3	Give more verbal responders to make a conversation go smoothly than you usually do with a normal conversation.
TIP 4	Pay attention to changes in the job seeker's facial expression and body language after you pose a closed question.
TIP 5	Pay attention to changes in the job seeker's facial expression and words after you offer directions or advice.
TIP 6	For the first half of the vocational counseling session, ask as many open-ended questions as possible.
TIP 7	When the job seeker begins to speak about their feelings, try to repeat their words in your mind even if it delays your response.
TIP 8	After you have spoken on a general topic, always allow time for the job seeker to speak.
TIP 9	At least once a session, attempt to explain in your own words how you are currently feeling and what observations you have made.
TIP 10	Pay attention to the job seeker's emotional expressions.
TIP 11	When the job seeker expresses their emotions, repeat their words in your mind several times and then respond.
TIP 12	When the job seeker begins to express their emotions, think about how you felt when you heard it and put those thoughts into words.
TIP 13	Be aware of what tense the job seeker uses most often in their speech.
TIP 14	When the job seeker is explaining their previous experience, think about what your impressions are of their experience and put those thoughts into words.
TIP 15	Try to draw a timeline linking the past, present and future from the job seeker's words.

The career counselors are requested to report their experiences in practice by filling in the prescribed TIPs report sheet and submitting it to the Labour College by facsimile or other means. This is not mandatory but left to the discretion of each counselor. These practice activities started in fiscal 2006 and have continued up to now (January 2007). During this period, 229 career counselors participated in the program, and 60 reported on their experiences.

Interviews were conducted for these 60 counselors, and the summaries of the reports and the interviews were disseminated in the form of the Career Counseling TIPs Newsletter to all career counselors who participated in the program. To date, 10 issues have been published and 41 cases have been reported.

Using these 41 cases, we examined two points. First, we examined how career counseling services improved through practicing TIPs, which offer helpful advice on facial looks and words to choose, and identified future issues. Next, we examined the

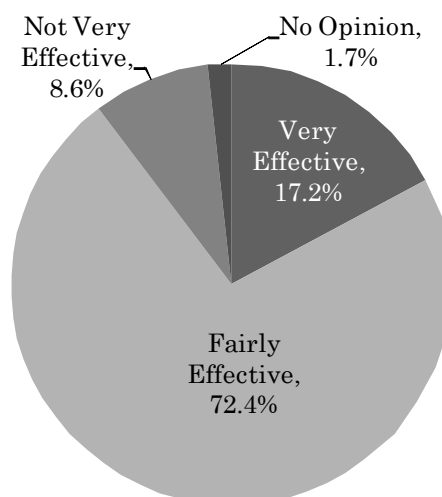
impact that conscientization of a career counseling process had on the improvement of career counseling services.

(1) Effectiveness of Career Counseling TIPs

On the TIPs report sheet, the career counselors are requested to evaluate the effectiveness of the TIPs that they practiced using four grades from “very effective” to “not effective” (Figure 3).

According to the analysis of the evaluation by 58 career counselors who submitted TIPs report sheets, the proportion of those who evaluated them as “fairly effective” was the largest at 72.4%, followed by those who said “very effective” at 17.2% and “not very effective” at 8.6%. Nearly 90.0% of these career counselors practiced TIPs at the counseling counter and evaluated them as effective.

Figure3. Effectiveness of Career Counseling TIPs (N = 58)



In the case study of practicing, the effects of Career Counseling TIPs can be classified in three ways: (i) the job seeker finds it easier to talk (TIPs 2, 3, and 4); (ii) the career counselor can understand how the job seeker feels (TIPs 6, 7, and 10); and (iii) the career counselor can provide information and advice to the job seeker more effectively (TIPs 5, 8, 9, and 15).

Most of the Career Counseling TIPs demonstrate these three effects when they are put into practice, generally in the order of (i) → (ii) → (iii). We can say that the career counselors carefully listened to what the job seekers said and then gave advice or information.

The problem with Career Counseling TIPs is that, by forging a comfortable atmosphere for job seekers, they tend to talk longer or talk about broader subjects not directly related to job seeking, thus resulting in longer counseling sessions.

(2) Effect of Conscientization of career counseling process

We believe that the effect of conscientization of a career counseling process is that the career counselors learn to control their activities depending on how the counseling proceeds and further improves their career counseling services. Using the cases of practicing, we studied how the career counselors have become able to control their activities through conscientization of a career counseling process.

The study suggested that as a result of conscientization of a career counseling process, career counselors have become conscious of the effects of career counseling in terms of the levels of changes in activities on three sides – the job seeker, the career counselor and mutual interaction—and become able to control their activities.

7. Overall Observation

(1) Issues in the Development of the Program

The first issue is to make it easier to classify utterances and improve training materials to help master Utterance Classification. Considering that many career counselors expressed opinions regarding the difficulty in classifying utterances, immediate action may be required.

The second issue is to revise the program so that the participants will be less pressed for time. Under the current program, career counselors learn 4 Expressional Techniques and 21 Expressional Methods within 160 minutes. We may consider lessening their burden by reducing the program's content.

The third issue is to make it easier to produce a word-for-word transcript. Under the current schedule, career counselors are required to produce the transcript in less than a month, while performing their daily tasks. It is necessary to extend this period and at the same time simplify the formal procedure for producing a word-for-word transcript.

(2) Issues in Action Research

The first issue is to introduce more of instructors' viewpoints. In this study, the researchers also functioned as instructors and observers. The experiences of instructors and the comments and evaluation by observers are valuable information for proceeding with action research. For the future, we need to actively take up these personal experiences with the program. Such viewpoint should not remain strictly personal, but

should be expanded into a more generalized viewpoint by discussing them in connection with the reviews of past studies and the results of research and experiments.

The second issue is to establish indicators for building a Career Concept. In this study, we posit that matching the job offer's information with the job seeker's information is to make a story based on the job seeker's information, interpret the vocational skills of the job seeker based on the story, and then determine whether those skills satisfy the needs of the employer based on the job offer's information. By verbalizing the above process of determination, it will be made clear what is important for a Career Concept, i.e. how the job offer's information should be sorted out and processed in order to make an activity plan for the future on the basis of the past and present, which includes a plan for activities to obtain employment with a specific job-offering company. Also, we believe that the development of indicators will help determine the degree of progress in the formation of a Career Concept in career counseling and thereby help assess the effects of career counseling and training in a more efficient manner.

The third issue is to develop a training program for career counselors so as to build their own Career Concepts. In career counseling by the constructivist approach, it is thought that an individual cannot control events but can change the interpretation of the events and make a new story. By doing so, it is possible to make the future activities of an individual more active.

An important point is whether the career counselor can understand the active nature of the job seeker. In order to do so, the counselor himself must experience this, and through his own experience, try to understand the active nature of the job seeker. For that purpose, we hope to develop a program in the future in which career counselors create various career stories by interpreting their own career and, using these various stories, construct their own Career Concept actively.