



Photo: Colourbox. There is no doubt that high quality career guidance can support people in securing decent work.

What is decent work, and what does it mean for career guidance?

Decent work is an international concern. It has far-reaching implications for how career development practitioners approach their work. It relates to ethical professional practice. It is a concept that can shape what clients should learn from their engagement with career services.

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Decent work and economic growth together make up goal 8 of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There are four pillars associated with the goal:

1. employment creation/access to work
2. rights at work
3. social protection
4. social dialogue.

Principles of dignity, equality, fair income, safe working conditions and worker voice underpin these pillars (Global Commission on the Future of Work, 2019).

The pairing of decent work and economic growth is noteworthy. Economic growth is considered crucial to employment creation but in line with the other SDGs, it should be sustainable and not adversely affect the environment. Decent work and economic growth are distinct concepts, and it is the former that is the main focus of this article.

Working together to making decent work a reality

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) argues that internationally, governments, employers and trade unions need to work together to make decent work a reality for more people. Its approach to decent work is human-centred. Included in its recommendations to support 'individual capabilities' are aspects that align closely to the purpose of career guidance, e.g., supporting people through future of work transitions, and a universal entitlement to lifelong learning. In the recent review of career development support systems, *Developing national career development support systems* (Kadletz et al, 2021), the ILO explicitly link career guidance to both Goal 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth and Goal 4 Quality Education. This reflects the role of career development activities in Education as well as the Labour Market. They argue for a widening entitlement to lifelong career guidance and state that, as yet no country has an adequate system of 'lifelong guidance for all'.

The inclusion of decent work in Goal 8 is welcome, though the ILO's conceptualisation has numerous critics. Economists, sociologists, psychologists, industrial relations, and human resource management specialists might all take a different view of the concept of decent work (Brill, 2021). There are varied criticisms including that it does not address workers' concerns in more informal jobs; it downplays meaning and dignity at work; it ignores how 'worker voice' may be expressed outside of the union movement; it dilutes trade union rights; it fails to address adequately the difference in the nature of work across Global South and Global North. More recently, career development scholars (e.g., Robertson, 2021) have pointed out that decent work is primarily associated with labour market issues, and that careers professionals should also consider the wider social outcomes captured by the SDGs including health and environmental policy goals.

The Good Work Movement

In the UK context, decent work has been adapted in the good work and fair work movements. Several regional policymakers have developed aspirational charters and commissions to stimulate the creation of good and fair work. These mainly seek to influence good employment practices amongst employers. A preference for the words 'good' and 'fair' reflects a concern that 'decent' is perhaps not aspirational enough. The professional association for human resource managers, the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) has created a 'Good Work Index' (CIPD, 2021), building on previous government-commissioned research in the UK which identified seven measures of good work. The 'Good Work Index' is clear and serves to measure and stimulate employer engagement. The seven measures used by the Index can be valuable to career guidance practitioners in talking to clients about what good work means in practice. It is helpful for career guidance practitioners to utilise the knowledge emerging from Human Resource Management (a profession which shares many of career guidance's concerns).

CIPD Good Work Index (2021). Seven measures of Good Work - Adapted by CIPD from Carnegie UK Trust & RSA (2018):

1. pay and benefits
2. employment contracts
3. work–life balance
4. job design and the nature of work
5. relationships at work
6. employee voice
7. health and wellbeing.

Barriers to Good Work

The CIPD Index focuses on standard employment relationships. At the same time there has been an increase in non-standard employment relationships, including more casualised forms of work in developed nations. Insecure work can include self-employment, freelancing, agency work, and ‘zero-hours’ contracts. A more recent development has been a rapid growth in platform-based work, in which organisations and individuals use a digital platform to secure a wide range of work services for payment. There is concern amongst many commentators that more casualised forms of work are eroding decent work. However, even those in more standard employment relationships may experience indecent work, for example due to overwork or low pay.

David Blustein (2019) describes the deteriorating experience of work in the USA in his recent book - *The importance of work in an age of uncertainty* - arguing that practitioners must reflect deeply upon how support is provided for people who are more marginalised in the labour market. He criticises the assumption that people are free to make career choices and have the resources to implement them.

Employment legislation has not kept pace with change and does not provide adequate protections to people in non-standard employment. In the UK and elsewhere, there are concerns about in-work poverty, and a growing scepticism of assumptions that ‘any job’ is better than ‘no job.’ Post-pandemic, there is a growth in involuntary economic inactivity, a phenomenon associated with people who want to work but are neither able to secure a job nor claim unemployment benefits (many younger, older, and disabled people).

Recommendations for career guidance

There is no doubt that high quality career guidance can support people in securing decent work. Career guidance helps provide individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed career choices that align with interests, skills, and values. It promotes awareness of the labour market, helping individuals to identify the range of opportunities available in the labour market, including in-demand occupations and emerging sectors. It contributes to lifelong learning by encouraging individuals to continually develop their skills and knowledge throughout their careers. It fosters career resilience in assisting individuals to develop the skills and strategies necessary to adapt to changing labour market conditions and navigate career transitions.

But how can careers professionals infuse decent work as a concept into their practice? This may depend on what role or sector you work in. The following recommendations connect with the [Norwegian Quality Framework for Career Guidance](#) in several ways. They challenge practitioners to address their own knowledge of decent work within their professional competences, and to raise their clients’ awareness of decent work - developing their career competences. More broadly, decent work is an ethical issue affecting all aspects of

practitioners' orientation to employment issues. A reflection on decent work is useful in illuminating important ethical questions about decent and indecent work that practitioners should be aware of.

Professional competence

1. *Familiarise yourself with the concept of decent work and how to apply it to contemporary work.* Use it to evaluate the merits of work opportunities you discuss with clients, and in discussions with clients, colleagues, and employers.
2. *Familiarise yourself with debates about decent and meaningful work.* This can be useful in assisting clients make sense of the trade-offs between them.
3. *Ensure you understand worker rights.* Seek out useful sources about employment-related legislation. Share your knowledge with clients.

Work with clients: Learning outcomes from career guidance

4. *Find ways to highlight structural issues related to poor quality (indecent) work.* In your work with clients, be alert to the criticism of career guidance that it risks an over-emphasis on individual responsibility and neglects structural barriers.
5. *Use tools such as the Decent Work Scale (Duffy, no date) with clients.* Create your own and/or adapt available tools to assist clients to evaluate the quality of their work (see Dodd et al, 2021)

Work with other stakeholders

6. *Influence employers to create high quality work opportunities.* Use arguments that connect decent work to more productive work. Develop appropriate policies on vacancy-handling to ensure advertised jobs are decent.
7. *Actively support the local, regional, or national movement to promote decent work.* Find ways to openly support the importance of relevant legislative and policy developments, e.g., living wage, living hours.
8. *Reflect on how workers have a voice.* Engage trade unions in career learning activities. Discuss the role of trade unions with clients and alternative ways of enabling worker voice.

In summary, decent work is a fertile concept for career guidance practitioners to engage with. Careers professionals should take steps to learn about what decent work means in theory, for public policy and for their own practice. Engagement with decent work aligns with a social justice-informed approach to careers work (Hooley et al, 2021) which 'questions what is normal' in the world of work; 'builds critical consciousness' of both practitioners and clients; as well as operates at 'a range of levels' to influence employers and politicians to create and sustain decent work.

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