

DigiGuide

*Digitising Good
Guidance Practice*

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



CASE STUDY: LEARNING AS YOU GO



**BALLYMUN
JOB CENTRE**

Building a Brighter Future With Work

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Project reference: 2020-1-IE01-KA226-VET-082926



Table of contents

Title	1
Competence	1
Abstract	1
Background	2
Key Words	4
Key Characters	4
The Case Study Story	5
Questions, comments and topics of discussion	11



Title

Learning as you go

Competence

CEDEFOP Competence area 3 – Supporting competences

3.6 Engage in research and evaluation

Main tasks are:

- a. Develop knowledge of research methods including data-gathering techniques, analysis of qualitative and quantitative information, use of research literature and research ethics.
- b. Implement research or evaluation projects including agreement of all parties, seek views of service users, involvement of stakeholders, as well as funding proposals.
- c. Interpret, present, and use findings including presentation and dissemination methods, integrating results into practice.

DIGICOMP areas:

-Competence area 1. Information and Data Literacy

-Competence area 2. Digital Content Creation

Abstract

This case study is about a career guidance practitioner engaged with an ethos “of not leaving anyone behind”, challenged to deal with very different type of clients/ service users in the context of the Covid19 pandemic. This practitioner is expected to evaluate their guidance approach, carry out labour market research and look for innovative ways to support a range of client needs via an online method of working, and “learn as he goes”.



Background

Ballymun Job Centre (BJC) was established in 1986 as a community response to chronic unemployment. A voluntary organisation with charitable status, the BJC has a proven track record of providing client-centred career guidance IAG and innovative services. BJC aims to provide individuals with greater labour market choice and the opportunity to improve their employability, increase their potential earnings, and reduce their vulnerability to poverty. As part of their role as an IAG practitioner, staff at the BJC are tasked with conducting research¹ on the labour market, its trends, the criteria for employment, and the potential barriers clients face upon returning to the workforce. Moreover, IAG practitioners will need up to date knowledge on the various organisation and information sources that can assist their clients in achieving their goals, promoting client-orientated solutions. This research can be hampered by the pace of change in modern society and other factors beyond the control of the IAG practitioner. As a result, the BJC encourages IAG practitioners to evaluate² their findings and professional practice.

The Ballymun Job Centre has two main offices, the headquarters in the centre of Ballymun in the north of Dublin city (urban) and another one in the coastal town of Balbriggan in Fingal (rural), the northern part of county Dublin. The Job Centre caters for a variety of clients and provides access to employment guidance, education, and training which leads to job placement and thus to quality employment and increased income and job security.

Clients in the Ballymun area, include those referred by the Social Welfare and others who present as walk-in clients (self-referral). Clients can be long-term unemployed or short-term unemployed. Typical guidance would involve an initial evaluation meeting, evaluation of client's needs, training/education needs assessment, guidance and advice on labour market

¹According to **the CEDEFOP Panorama publication, 2009 p.87**, Research, in the context of Career Guidance, takes the form of employing research methodologies such as data-gathering, analysis of quantitative and qualitative information, and the use of research literature and ethics, to best present the most accurate information for clients seeking employment.

² According to **the CEDEFOP Panorama publication, 2009 p.87**, Evaluation of findings and professional practice requires the BJC and its Practitioners to implement evaluation projects which includes an agreement of all parties to adhere to research ethics, seeking the views of their clients, the involvement of stakeholders in this process, and reviewing funding proposals.



opportunities, assistance with looking for employment (including CV/cover letter preparation, interview preparation) and the likes.

During the Covid19 pandemic, BJC has remained open to the public with reduced number of staff as it is an essential service for the community. Effective measures of remote working have been implemented by all staff and most of the clients have adapted to videocall/phone formats of guidance during the periods of mobility restrictions. However, a number of clients have been greatly impacted due to their lack of access to basic services such as, internet and transport.

At the same time, the impact of the pandemic in terms of isolation and remote guidance, results in a lack of connection between the practitioner and the client consequently creating additional challenges in providing support for a range of needs that includes levels of self-confidence development, and a complex journey through the process of finding out about specific needs, as well as, attempting to empower each individual to reach out for opportunities. To overcome such challenges practitioners' will need to evaluate their practices from pre-covid time and assess their practicality in the post-covid context.

In addition, the increasing number of people that lost their jobs as a result of Covid has dramatically changed the workload for guidance practitioners resulting in additional pressure to deliver employment guidance digitally. This is directly related to the guidance practitioners' engagement on evaluation because there is a need to update the systems to be able to access heavy databases remotely, ensuring digital safety of the clients' personal information and keep updating the guidance monitoring platforms. In other, the job offers are changing and technology competencies are more in demand. Guidance practitioners need to update their labour market knowledge using various research methodologies to be able support their clients in a rapidly changing environment.

To summarise, the guidance practitioners find themselves dealing with different platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, influencing clients and labour market dynamics, working from home or with clients who prefer to access remotely, with the additional pressure of adapting fast to an increasing demand and expectations to learn as they go, without enough time to evaluate their work, carry out training and labour market research.



Key Words

Remote guidance, disconnected, isolation, innovation, increasing demand and expectations, research, and evaluation.

Key Characters

Guidance Practitioner:

Gino is a well experienced career guidance practitioner in Ballymun Job Centre, used to working with technology and supporting diverse clients with a range of needs. Gino has been working in guidance for more than fifteen years and has been supporting a variety of clients in the Ballymun Job Centre. During Covid19 he has encountered additional challenges. The main type of clients which he works with, are in the category of high support, which consists of individuals facing additional barriers to employment such as a criminal record and past or current drug abuse. Gino is well linked in with various services in the area which allows him to refer clients to services providing additional supports, while also monitoring their progression as they move closer to the labour market. When working with “high support clients” Gino has often felt a face-to-face approach works best and this usually enables him to support and empower clients to put together a career plan and link them in with various agencies in the area.

In addition to this, Gino also works with mainstream clients. Typically, these clients may be removed from the labour markets for various reasons such as career breaks, employment changes, caring for family, etc. They are often ready to return to work and have an understanding of their interests and skills. These clients are typically looking for employment guidance to learn about viable paths to employment and access support for upskilling.

Client A High support:

Carl is a 33-year-old male, living in a rural area of Co. Meath and has been unemployed the last 5 years. He is an early school leaver who completed his junior certificate (lower secondary



EQF level 3). His main work experience was in a community work placement programme called TUS³. Prior to this, he spent time in and out of prison for minor drug charges. As Carl is in receipt of job seekers allowance, he was referred by Intreo (Public Employment Service)⁴ into Ballymun Job Centre for support in gaining training/ employment. Carl previously achieved one year of a plumbing apprenticeship and would like to return to complete this and become a fully qualified plumber.

As Carl is far removed from the labour market, he is also faced with a number of barriers such as low literacy skills, low self-esteem, no access to iPad/ laptop, no transport – public transport is very limited in his area.

Client B Mainstream:

Sarah is a 38-year-old woman with one child who is now 16 and she has concrete financial needs. Sarah was contacted by Department of Social Protection (DSP) for an initial meeting to discuss training and job seeking supports to help her return to the workforce. Her previous employment has been in IT consulting and web development, and she wishes to pursue this line of employment again.

Sarah believes she is highly skilled in web design and development but has not worked in the sector for over 16 years.

Secondary characters: Alice (Gino's manager) and peer practitioner work colleagues

The Case Study Story

(Pre-covid scenario) (Introducing Carl)

³ Tús initiative is a **community work placement scheme providing short-term working opportunities for unemployed people**. The work opportunities are to benefit the community and are provided by community and voluntary organisations in both urban and rural areas.

⁴ Intreo (the Public Employment Service) is a **single point of contact for all employment and income supports and services**. We know that searching for your first job or looking for a new job can be challenging.



Carl attended the Balbriggan office of Ballymun Job Centre four years ago, before the Covid19 pandemic. Carl, with poor literacy and IT skills and a criminal record, feels hopeless towards gaining employment. He is also attending a methadone rehabilitation clinic daily, which makes him unavailable for flexible working hours as he must attend the clinic every morning. Carl left school at 15, he was regularly in trouble and was seen to have behaviour issues although he was never formally diagnosed. At 16, he began an apprenticeship in plumbing. He enjoyed working with his hands and felt he was really good at this work. Despite this, Carl only lasted in his apprenticeship for one year as he was under pressure to make more money to support his family. Carl was the eldest child of a lone parent family and had six siblings. The family relied heavily on social welfare payments and Carl, no longer in school was under pressure to find adequate work to help with the finances. Carl began working on building sites in manual labouring positions and it was here that he was introduced to drugs. Initially using recreationally, Carl quickly progressed to chaotic drug use and consequently lost his job. Carl then began dealing drugs and was charged several times for this and also for the possession of drugs over the years.

During the first 2 months of his personal and employment guidance journey, Carl spoke to Gino about his personal situation and expressed his interest in returning to education/training to complete an apprenticeship in plumbing. Carl was eager to begin this process as soon as possible but there were several barriers to address first. Carl and Gino worked on a progression plan together which included engaging with other agencies in the area who could provide Carl with the support to help him to achieve his goal. This would enable Carl to address some of the underlying issues such as, limited availability to transport, engaging daily in a rehabilitation clinic and low literacy and IT skills. Following this plan would enable Carl to be in a better position to prepare him for full time education and training. The first step in the plan was to refer Carl to a local training center which supports adults to work on their literacy and IT skills. Secondly, Carl was linked in with a local drug service where he could receive drug counselling and participate in recovery groups. Both steps would enable Carl to become more confident in working with groups and improving his IT and literacy skills. Gino and Carl are both feeling positive about the progression plan they have put in place and Carl feels optimistic that if he follows these steps, he will eventually be confident enough to return to his apprenticeship.

(Introducing Sarah)



Apart from the counselling work with Carl, Gino is equally feeling under pressure by another client named Sarah. Sarah is a single mother who took a break from the labour market to raise her son. After sixteen years of being outside of the labour market Sarah is being encouraged by the DSP to re-engage with the labour Market and or training.

Prior to having her son, she worked in IT with a special interest in web design and software development. Sarah feels this is a viable option for her when returning to work now and would like support in obtaining part-time work in this field. She is looking for part-time employment in web design/ software development but is struggling to get any job interviews. Sarah is actively engaging in her own research and looking to her guidance officer for feedback and advice on her next steps. She feels under pressure and is concerned that if she does not find something soon, her job seekers payment may be cut or stopped.

Gino, to assist Sarah, researched several sources of information on IT apprenticeship programmes and job opportunities in the I.T. sector, including using the google search engine, government agency websites, and FIT, The ICT Talent Pipeline⁵. Gino then sent these resources to Sarah, who explored them further. After Gino analysed the options of I.T. apprenticeships available to Sarah, he identifies that she does not have experience in software development and web design and despite her previous experience in the field, 16 years is a long time and much has evolved in the world of IT. From the research conducted by Gino, it soon becomes clear that her previous experience is no longer relevant or helpful in her search for employment in this given field. It is evident that Sarah will need to re-skill through education. Sarah is concerned by the cost of returning to training and feels overwhelmed at the idea of going back to education.

(Covid19 context)

During the pandemic (particularly during the lockdown restrictions) contact with clients of the BJC, was limited to remote or virtual communication. Due to government guidelines, face-to-face meetings were not allowed. This spawned a new way of dealing with clients – the hybrid model – a combination of telephone calls/zoom calls or face-to-face appointments.

While phone calls were suitable for initial (registration) appointments and one or two follow up meetings. This way of working highlighted the need for face-to-face meetings given that a

⁵ The ICT Associate Apprenticeship is a **national tech apprenticeship programme in Ireland**.



variety of issues could simply not be addressed while working remotely or via zoom meetings with service users. This encouraged Gino to re-evaluate his professional practice and search for innovative solutions to enhance the services at the BJC amidst the pandemic.

(Post-covid scenario)

When the Covid19 pandemic started and lockdown restrictions were put in place, Gino felt concerned for Carl as he had previously mentioned that he had no access to computers and particularly as the plan they had put in place would now be happening online and for the foreseeable forward. Carl is struggling to stay engaged with all of his support services as well as, his employment guidance practitioner via new contactless approach to working. Gino is also concerned as he knows Carl is already isolated and fears that this will push him further into remoteness and exclusion without the supports needed by Carl at this time. When Gino speaks with Carl explaining about the new ways of working, Carl tends to become frustrated and agitated, and consequently does not answer the phone for his follow up appointment.

Similarly, Gino and Sarah began looking for relevant IT apprenticeships and specialized upskilling programmes suitable to her needs. However, he only found very low paid internships and expensive private courses which Sarah could not afford. At the same time, Sarah is forwarding him unsuccessful job application emails from large IT companies, which results in Gino feeling like he does not know how to support Sarah to better manage her career expectations. It is clear at this point to both Gino and Sarah, that she needs to return to education/ training before she will be able to obtain a job in her favoured discipline. The idea of returning to full time education or training makes Sarah feel very overwhelmed and stressed. This issue is even worse due to Covid 19 as any training course she begins will be online and Sarah is concerned that she will not receive adequate supports to complete a course remotely. She has additional concerns regarding the cost of the training courses, as many are far outside of her budget. Equally, she is concerned that if she does not take up training or employment soon her payment will be stopped or cut by Intreo (the Public Employment Service), see reference above.

Gino would like to give time and support to both clients but finds himself surrounded by many barriers which are exacerbated by the Covid 19 pandemic. He also feels he is spending much more time engaging in evaluation and research for Sarah who is attending regularly and has



high expectations of Gino's abilities to support her. In contrast, Carl is now engaging less and is feeling even more hopeless and isolated in his situation.

Gino feels disconnected from his clients and his colleagues. Gino speaks to his team leader Alice, about feeling lost in terms of how to support clients such as Carl and Sarah, who both have very diverse needs but are equally facing many barriers in their career progression.

Alice reminds Gino that it is his job to be adaptive and flexible in the face of adversity and that if he is struggling to find solutions, he must then reach out to his colleagues and networks for ideas and potential solutions. She encourages Gino to continue his own research into different funding streams available for Sarah and relevant to those returning to education as a single parent. She also reminds Gino that many other organizations are experiencing similar challenges in the current health crisis and suggests him to inform himself about how they are overcoming such challenges.

Gino appreciates the support from his manager, but he explains to her that due to the lockdowns and remote working, he has not been able to collaborate to a great degree with his colleagues. In addition, there is increasing workload of many more clients who have lost their jobs during the pandemic, and he is now also struggling with a lack of time to confer with his colleagues.

Alice acknowledges these difficulties and suggests setting up a weekly team meeting over zoom for peer practitioner colleagues to discuss their challenges and offer support to one another. This suggestion by Alice will encourage the maintaining of evaluation projects among staff at the BJC and promote collaboration among its practitioners when conducting client-orientated research.

(Guidance Team meeting)

Gino finds that he is not the only practitioner who is struggling to come up with innovative ideas to work with clients remotely. Gino presents his current challenges in dealing with the digital gap that his clients, and indeed himself as a guidance practitioner, are experiencing. He explains the challenge to digitally empower his client Carl and the complexity of supporting a demanding client like Sarah.

(Suggestions to support Sarah)



Many of the colleagues empathize and relate with Gino's experiences and suggest several options for Sarah such as online free entrepreneurship training, digital hub external contracts and international remote IT consulting opportunities for English speakers. They also remind Gino that Sarah is entitled to up to 1000 euro in the client support grant for additional training supports to help her cope with any financial stresses and burdens she may be feeling. By collaborating with his colleagues, Gino has relieved some of his burden of the increase of research necessary to manage career guidance in a post-covid environment.

(Suggestions to support Carl)

Furthermore, Gino is encouraged to reach out to the external services that he has linked Carl in with such as the local drug service and adult literacy service, which also have challenges engaging clients remotely, so as to learn about how they are approaching those challenges.

Through the support from peers, Gino realizes that a local adult literacy service is lending laptops to clients so that they can continue their training online. At the same time, the local drug service Gino links with has moved many of their services online. If Gino can collect the laptop from the literacy service and bring it to Carl, he will then have access to online training and supports. Indeed, Carl is apprehensive about the idea of using a computer and zoom to attend his courses as he has never used Zoom before. As an innovative response to this challenge, Gino and a colleague decide to develop a step-by-step audio video guide to talk clients through using zoom. When it is completed, he forwards a link to Carl with instructions on how to open it. Carl admitted to watching the video many times before he understood how to use zoom but was eventually able to get online. Although very challenging at first that solution proved a success for Carl, and he was not only able to attend his groups and training from home, but he equally felt more confident using a computer.

The collaboration of Gino and his colleagues on research and an evaluation of their practices led to the innovative solutions for his clients Carl and Sarah to tackle the challenges of further digitalization in a post-covid world.

Conclusion:

All practitioners need to do more research and evaluation of their own practice and find new ways to support traditional type of clients, maybe through a hybrid approach including both online and face to face meetings, because they might be more technologically challenged and



struggle to compete in a more digitalized world of work. At the same time, they acknowledge that if they work collectively both internally in their own organization and externally, it is easier to assess their needs and find more effective methods to support isolated clients while Covid19 safety guidelines are still in place. Gino is reminded of his competencies in dealing with challenging clients and reaches out to some of his external networks to see how they are coping in the new world of work.

Gino now feels more motivated to work with his colleagues to better support Carl, Sarah, and others. He also acknowledges that as the world changes and adapts to the covid pandemic, clients need to learn new skills while looking for a job and sustainable employment. Gino engages in some research both online and networking with other services to learn about new innovative ideas to support and guide peer practitioners and their clients in their move to remote working. We are all learning as we go!

Questions, comments and topics of discussion

1. What is this Case Study all about? Please summarise the main idea of the case study and draft briefly in your own words.
Done in the peer review template
2. What else can explain Gino's situation with more clarity? Does this Case Study clearly address the practitioner competency of engaging on research and evaluation?
3. Does the opening (narrative descriptor) establish a clear starting point for the case study. Would some other part of the case study draft make a better introduction?
4. How does the case study draft hold together? Which paragraphs don't connect well with preceding or subsequent ones?
5. Select the best phrases, paragraphs, and/or ideas in the case study. Can they be exploited more thoroughly? How?
6. Is there any assumptions, stereotypes or unconscious bias in the Case Study that should be reviewed?