CES Briefing

What's the evidence? Comparing the impact of career websites and other career support

by Cathy Howieson and Sheila Semple   Number 63, 2013

UK governments expect career websites to fulfil a central role in career information, advice and guidance. In Scotland, Skills Development Scotland's input in schools is now based on the expectation that all pupils will use its website My World of Work (MyWoW) and many may not need individual contact with a careers adviser. Career websites have the potential to make a valuable contribution but currently little is known about their effectiveness and impact. This Briefing outlines the findings from a study that examined the comparative impact of career websites such as MyWoW.

➥ Just over two-fifths of S4 pupils had made use of MyWoW; pupils who were uncertain about their career ideas were less likely to access it than those who were more definite.

➥ Most pupils who accessed MyWoW also used other sources of career information, advice and guidance (CIAG) including leaflets and books in the school careers library, face-to-face contact with careers advisers and discussions with teachers.

➥ Just under a fifth of pupils did not have any CIAG in S4 (apart from discussion with their family). Non-activity was related to lower attainment, school attended and pupils' perception that their school was not helping to develop decision-making skills.

➥ Pupils and teachers valued MyWoW but as part of provision that includes face-to-face support, including from a careers adviser, for the majority of pupils.

➥ Compared with other sources of career support, MyWoW had a limited impact on pupils' careers management skills as did the PlanitPlus website.

➥ Clinic sessions with a career adviser, discussion with teachers and use of the school careers library each had a substantial impact on pupils' career management skills.

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Introduction

The careers landscape in the UK is fast changing but it is clear that career websites are being expected by the UK governments to fulfil a central role. In Scotland, Skills Development Scotland's (SDS) input in schools is now based on the expectation that all pupils will use its website My World of Work (MyWoW) and many may not need individual contact with a careers adviser (SDS 2012).

Career websites (and other ICT based provision) have the potential to make a valuable contribution to career information, advice and guidance (CIAG) but little is known about their actual impact on individuals' career development. It is unclear whether they can deliver the gains in career development that research has shown the more traditional forms of CIAG achieve (Hughes and Gration 2009). Moreover, while young people are often perceived as 'digital natives' such assumptions are challenged by evidence from a number of studies (Howieson and Semple 2013).

This Briefing reports on research that examined the use of career websites by S4 pupils and, in particular, assessed the impact on their career management skills in comparison with other sources of support. The research builds on an earlier SDS funded study of the impact of websites (see Howieson and Semple 2013).

The research involved a 'before' and 'after' survey of 1039 S4 (Year 11) pupils in 14 secondary schools across Scotland supplemented by group work with 51 pupils and interviews with school staff in three of the schools and interviews with key informants. SDS did not give permission for career advisers to take part in the research. The study considered the comparative use and impact of MyWoW and also PlanitPlus, the two main publicly funded websites in Scotland compared with other careers support.

Pupils used a variety of sources

Pupils made use of a variety of sources of CIAG including family, teachers, career advisers, MyWoW, PlanitPlus and the school careers library.

Pupils with a disability and those from backgrounds other than white British each had a higher than average usage of the careers library. Almost all pupils had discussed their career ideas with their family. Girls were less likely than boys to have had a number of CIAG inputs. Pupils' use of MyWoW and several other CIAG activities varied markedly across the schools but this is not readily explained by the profile of the schools.

The study focused on pupils' use of MyWoW rather than whether they had simply been introduced to it and/or registered for it, and on this basis, 43% had used it by March of S4. Use of MyWoW did not vary according to pupils' attainment level but pupils uncertain about their career ideas were less likely to access it than were those who had some or definite ideas about their career plans.

Focusing specifically on those who had accessed MyWoW, very few of them (10%) had not used some other source as well (apart from talking to their family). Indeed, the picture that emerges is one of the 'active pupil' who is relatively engaged in his/her career planning and likely to make use of the different sources of CIAG.

A substantial proportion of pupils who had accessed MyWoW had also used leaflets and books in the school careers library (40%) which demonstrates the need to look beyond assumptions about 'digital natives'. Most of the MyWoW users had also discussed their career ideas with a teacher (73%) and a substantial minority had had direct contact with careers advisers through interviews (29%) and clinic sessions (23%).

Of some concern must be the 17% of pupils who did not experience any CIAG activities in S4 (apart from talking to their family). Non-activity was related to: the school attended; pupils' attainment (a higher proportion of low attaining pupils had no CIAG compared with mid and high attainers); and if pupils thought that their school was not giving them the confidence to make decisions. It is notable that pupils' opinion about their school's help

in developing decision-making skills was a significant factor in other analyses.

The views of pupils and staff

In the survey pupils who had used MyWoW were positive about its value, most would use it again and would recommend it to friends (opinion of PlanitPlus was also positive):

"My world of work website is a good website to use when you are considering to find out your strengths and weaknesses. It helps you to become more confident with how to apply for jobs and college courses." (S4 pupil)

From a staff perspective, career websites were seen as valuable in providing access to comprehensive and easily updated information, in helping to broaden and clarify pupils' career ideas and providing an interest guide which matched pupils to careers. Websites were also valued as supporting staff's guidance work:

"It is updated continually by professionals so you know that it is current and you can have confidence in the information. (Deputy Headteacher)

Nevertheless, data from the surveys and especially from the pupil groups and staff interviews point up issues for pupils concerning the complexity of using websites such as MyWoW and in interpreting the information and relating it to their own circumstances:

"Websites can help with things like looking for the right job that suits you, however, they might not be good at knowing what the type of person on the other end of the advice is like." (S4 pupil)

and

"They need led by the hand… they like Google but are only capable of getting general information out of it." (Deputy Headteacher)

It is clear from the focus groups and open-ended survey comments that pupils, irrespective of their level of family support or attainment, would like face-to-face contact with careers advisers as well as access to websites:

"On a website you only support yourself, if you'd someone supporting you, you might get more interested in your career and you might go and use a website then." (S4 pupil)

However, many pupils were unclear about a careers adviser's role, and how and why to get in touch.

Staff, too, thought that careers websites on their own could not provide the personal support young people need:

"You can't ask a question and the website doesn't know you and can't personalise what it is telling you to suit you. A person will know what you have done so the advice can be much more personal and rich and useful." (Principal Teacher Pupil Support)

The impact of MyWoW on pupils' career management skills

Pupils and staff valued websites but the key issue is whether career websites deliver the same gains that traditional forms of CIAG achieve - do they also promote young people's career management skills?

The surveys centred on a set of questions on pupils' career management skills (CMS) defined in terms of: *awareness of strengths, weaknesses and values; opportunity awareness, career planning readiness; support and advice awareness;* and *application skills and knowledge* and aligned with the SDS Career Management Skills Framework which is used by SDS as the basis of its career development work.

Pupils assessed themselves in relation to these five CMS in the first survey and completed the same assessment three to four months later in the second survey. There were small increases in pupils' mean scores on all five aspects of CMS. We then used statistical modelling to assess the impact of career website use in the intervening period on pupils' CMS while taking account of any of their other career-related activity since the first survey and controlling for other factors that might be expected to affect pupils' CMS.

Our comparison of impact found that using MyWoW had a positive impact on one of the CMS – *support and advice awareness* – taking all the other factors into account. Use of PlanitPlus was also related positively to one CMS. Having a clinic session with a careers adviser had a greater impact in that this made a positive difference to three CMS: pupils' *support advice and awareness, opportunity awareness* and *career planning readiness.* Discussion of career plans with a teacher contributed to a higher score on four of the five CMS. Use of leaflets and books in the school careers library was especially helpful, having a positive impact on all five CMS even after controlling for all the other factors including use of both websites.

Discussion

The study highlights the importance of gathering hard evidence on the impact of CIAG provision as well as seeking users' and stakeholders' opinion of it. The study found that the impact of MyWoW on pupils' CMS was limited and this type of evidence needs to be taken into account in the continued development of the website and CIAG strategy.

MyWoW is valued by pupils and staff but while pupils are positive about career websites, especially for information purposes, it is easy to overestimate their ability to use them effectively; they themselves noted that websites are less helpful for certain purposes.

There was general agreement that MyWoW should be one part of CIAG provision that includes face-to-face contact with careers advisers and teachers; a key issue is how MyWoW can best be used alongside these other types of provision. The study also indicates that career uncertainty should be a marker of the need for personal contact with a careers adviser. It is evident, too, that pupils need to be more fully informed about the role of a careers adviser and about access arrangements.

The positive impact on pupils' CMS of using leaflets and books in the school careers library may come as a surprise but it is a robust finding and is a further example that assumptions about 'digital natives' are misplaced. It would be useful to examine the reasons behind this impact and if there are any lessons for website development.

It is of concern that despite the availability of MyWoW and other provision and the efforts of SDS and schools, a minority of pupils are not accessing any CIAG beyond discussion with family.

References

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