

Preparing Youth to Succeed: The Importance of Career Guidance

Written by the International Youth Foundation



Photo courtesy of Christy Macy

Trainees in the *Caribbean Youth Empowerment Program* (CYEP) in Saint Lucia participate in a class designed to help them choose a career and find employment.

In every country, youth face the challenge of deciding on a career path and starting their professional lives, often while navigating a weak and constantly changing labor market. Though having an education and in-demand skills are crucial components, youth need more to achieve long-term success. They need to know how their economy—on a local and national level—is growing and changing, and how this influences the job landscape. They need to understand how the available career options relate to their own interests and talents. And they need to develop the essential soft and technical skills that employers seek, while gaining relevant experience for the workplace.

Effective career guidance (CG) services address these issues, helping youth to make confident, tailored, and insightful career choices.

From the Middle East to the Caribbean, programs offered by the International Youth Foundation (IYF) have yielded evidence showing that insufficient or incomplete knowledge of available career paths, and how to pursue them, is a primary barrier to youth entry into the labor force. Our experience in a wide variety of contexts has shown that guiding youth—not only through skills acquisition but through the process of career choice—is crucial to successful youth employment programs.

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Being a part of this program taught me more about myself and what should be my career.

— 19-year-old participant at the C.A.R.E Career Guidance Center in Saint Lucia, who is now pursuing his plan to become a police officer.

Focus: *My Career, My Future*

IYF offers a comprehensive career guidance package of tools and training plans, adapted from international standards to address the specific needs of youth at risk, which can be integrated into any community setting. These resources, called *My Career, My Future* (MCMF), can empower career guidance facilitators (CGF) and organizations to find the right kind of information that will benefit the youth in their communities as well as facilitate youths' long-term career planning and entry into the job market. The package includes the following resources for youth:

- Job boards
- Occupational profile cards
- Personality/career assessments
- Referral resources to life skills and technical skills trainings

In addition, it also provides the following resources for professional development for CGF:

- Facilitation and administrative skills resources
- Labor market assessment and data gathering resources
- Session plans for providing career guidance to young people
- Monitoring and evaluation support

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CHARTING THE COURSE: CREATING EFFECTIVE CAREER GUIDANCE PROGRAMS

So, what is career guidance? CG helps young people make informed choices about their future by actively engaging them in a process to understand their interests and abilities, identify the right job opportunities within the local environment, and become better equipped to make decisions about which training or career opportunities to pursue. Career guidance should help youth ask and obtain answers to the questions: Who am I? What are my options? Where do I want to go? How do I get there?

The ultimate goal of CG is a career plan that is chosen, designed, and carried out by the individual young person. However, for this to happen, programs need to be based on accurate assumptions about youth and youth behavior, have access to high-quality training and up-to-date market information, and provide competent and caring adults to help youth navigate a path to success. With these elements, successful CG programs produce informed, inspired youth who feel empowered to pursue their career path. To

support this, IYF has developed a number of materials to help staff at youth-serving organizations to plan and implement effective career guidance and related services. These include the *My Career, My Future* reference package for career guidance facilitators, as well as the *Certified Youth Development Professional* training program.

The following best practices for implementing quality career guidance services draw on these two resources as well as on IYF's experience implementing career guidance programs across the globe.

1. Competent Career Guidance Facilitators

The most important factor in providing effective career guidance services is the presence of caring, competent adults in career guidance roles who help youth to make informed decisions and take tangible next steps towards their goals. It is recommended that these adults—Career Guidance Facilitators (CGF)—have the following key competencies:

- An understanding of career guidance theory and practice
- The capacity to communicate with, support, and advise job seekers and facilitate career guidance sessions.

Focus: Saint Lucia

On the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia, the public school system does not adequately equip youth with the skills needed in today's labor market, causing many to become disengaged and drop out of school. As a result, many youth fail to find decent jobs or pursue meaningful careers. In 2013, the *Caribbean Youth Empowerment Program* (CYEP), an initiative of IYF and the U.S. Agency for International Development, sought to address this need, establishing a first-of-its-kind Career Guidance Center under the auspices of the Centre for Adolescent Renewal and Education (C.A.R.E.). The center served as an accessible, safe and comfortable space for youth to take part in trainings and one-on-one coaching and counseling sessions. It also included computers and phones that youth used to research information on educational and career opportunities or carry out a job search.

The Center provided life skills training, career assessment and advising, career plan development, guidance counseling, and career coaching services to more than 380 youth. Ninety four percent of project beneficiaries expressed satisfaction with the training and support services they received from the project. Key components of the program included the creation of a youth-friendly space to deliver activities at a local shopping venue frequented by youth and the provision of psychosocial support to program participants, many of whom faced challenges related to low self-esteem, anger management, coping with past abuse, and family conflict. This project represented an innovative approach in Saint Lucia to offering a "one-stop shop" for youth at risk in the absence of other available services.

- Possession of up-to-date labor market information and resources
- The ability to plan, implement, and evaluate career guidance services.
- Knowledge about and skills to teach employability skills such as networking, job search techniques, CV and cover letter writing, and interviewing

2. A Youth-led Philosophy

IYF champions the belief that youth can tap their innate strengths and aptitudes to become agents in their own development. We challenge the notion that youth do not know the “correct” career path to choose and need adults to limit their options; instead, we recommend that CG interventions encourage youth to make active choices for themselves, based on good information and guidance. The role of the CGF is to guide the young person through a process of self-reflection and to provide objective information to inform his/her career decisions. Successful CG programs are those that train and challenge their adult practitioners to examine the assumptions and values they hold about youth in their program so that they can draw

on current youth development concepts and present a respectful ‘youth-led’ approach to guiding youth from adolescence to early adulthood.

3. Programs Tailored to Local Context

CG designers can ensure their programs are structured correctly for their specific youth target group by posing questions such as:

- **What stage are our beneficiaries in with regards to their development of career awareness and knowledge?**

Because CG programs may encounter youth at varying stages in the career guidance process, they should be equipped to assess the youth’s current stage, while tailoring the package of CG support accordingly. For example, youth at a basic *Self Awareness* stage will first need to better understand their aptitudes, capabilities, and unique interests. With self-awareness knowledge, youth at the *Opportunity Awareness* stage are poised to gain familiarity with different types of vocations, their educational and skill requirements, and the prospects they offer for hiring and long term growth. Finally, *Career Planning*

Focus: My Career, My Future (cont’d)

IYF trains interested facilitators on how to use the career guidance package, which includes how to implement the tools provided and enhance their own competencies using the materials. It also provides follow-on coaching support to facilitators as they use the package in their own organizations. MCMF is available in English and Arabic and is being tested in Spanish.

Focus: Palestine

As part of its mandate to improve the employability and entrepreneurship opportunities for young Palestinians, the *Youth Entrepreneurship Development* (YED) program, a five-year initiative of IYF and the U.S. Agency for International Development, took steps to integrate comprehensive CG services at the secondary school and university levels.

At the secondary school level, YED launched the School to Career (StC) program, which from 2012 to 2014 reached more than 5,380 students at 54 schools in the West Bank. To enhance students’ understanding of and exposure to the world of work, the StC program featured in-class lessons from an IYF-developed toolkit; psychometric assessments; in-school presentations by employers, university representatives, and entrepreneurs; job shadowing at civil society, public, and private sector employers, and field visits to a variety of professional and academic institutions.

At the university level, YED provided capacity-building support to strengthen the skills of career counselors and expand CG services, including training counselors and delivering life skills instruction aimed at bolstering youth skills in such areas as communication, teamwork, and critical thinking. Over two years, more than 2,100 students at 9 universities benefited from improved CG services, with the impact of the program expected to extend well into the future. Both initiatives were carried out in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education.



The [School to Career] project was very useful; it gave me the ability to distinguish between my interests, abilities, and the possibility of choosing the most appropriate career.

— Secondary school student, Palestine



Our grads would enter the job market not knowing how to write CVs. We bridged the gap between the theory [they learned at the university] and the labor market. Now, they can write, they can talk in interviews. When they go to interviews for scholarships, for example, we see the difference between those who trained and those who didn't in the way they answer, the way they understand questions, and the way they present themselves.

— Dr. Nitham Diab,
Arab American University,
Jenin, Palestine

stage beneficiaries will be ready with knowledge of themselves and their environment to outline their options, map out a career path with specific objectives, and move forward to carry it out.

- ***What are their educational and socio-economic backgrounds? Do youth have the core soft and technical skills needed to succeed in their chosen careers?***

CG programs should be able to provide youth from various socio-economic backgrounds with the supports and services they need. Some career choices will demand more education or skill levels than youth may possess initially. It is important for a program to be open with youth about all career options in the market while being clear about educational/experience requirements to achieve them. Youth who are interested in more demanding careers can then make their own decisions about whether to pursue further training or select another career path. Programs should be prepared to provide information and guidance about further training and education needed, whether technical or soft skills. Many organizations that offer CG services offer soft skills (or life skills) as a complement.

- ***In what context will the program be rolled out—e.g. a community-based organization, a private training institute, a school, etc.?***

The organizational context of the program can affect decisions around scheduling, how CG services are integrated into other training or program offerings, and how available infrastructure and resources are used. The context may also provide clues to the demographics of the youth population to be served.

4. Elements to Promote Active Youth Participation

A robust CG program will incorporate the following three elements that reinforce each other and ensure that youth are both actively engaged in the program and achieve the intended outcomes.

- **Supports** are things that staff does *with* youth, such as help with CV and cover letter writing, or interview prep. Supports help youth form caring relationships with adults, giving them the confidence to succeed and take the next steps in their career path.
- **Opportunities** are things done *by* youth, such as participating in job shadowing activities, filling out self assessments, or developing their own career plans. Youth take these steps independently in order to gain the skills and confidence needed to achieve their goals and the program's outcomes.
- **Services** are things which staff does *to* or *for* youth like delivering specific trainings, posting employment opportunities, or providing safe centers equipped with computers and other informational resources. These services allow youth to better take advantage of the supports and opportunities the intervention also provides.

5. Up-to-Date Content and Materials

Strong CG programs will have updated and relevant information and tools available to their practitioners and youth participants. CG providers can assess the strength of their content by asking: Do we have quality assessment tools and tests to help youth gain personal insight? Do we have up-to-date information about the local job market and job profiles? Are we able to provide or connect youth with the training they need to achieve their career goals? Is there a structured approach to providing these resources to youth? The following types of content should be available to youth and CG facilitators:

- **Testing:** Appropriate psychometric tests and tools (e.g., Myers Briggs, Silatech's *Tamheed* tool) that assess beneficiaries' personality and aptitudes, and may point to suitable career choices)
- **Tools:** Career planning outlines and worksheets, CV and cover letter writing resources, interview guidance, and resource centers. Some CG programs will have mentoring services which provide youth with one-on-one or group guidance sessions.
- **Training:** When possible, CG programs should incorporate a robust behavioral skills curriculum like *Passport to Success*® (PTS), IYF's flagship life skills program. Behavioral competencies (like self-confidence, creative thinking, risk taking, and decision making) and skills (like project and money management) can help support youth's workforce readiness and assist them in making viable career choices.
- **Data:** Accurate statistics about the local labor market, growth sectors within the country, job profiles and their educational requirements, current job postings, and information about training opportunities.

LOOKING AHEAD

IYF's experience shows the value of investing in youth CG services that prioritize youth input and engagement, and which offer young people a package of tools, training, and information resources. As youth unemployment and underemployment continues to grow, stakeholders from all sectors can play a role and reap the benefits of a more engaged youth work force.

Private sector employers can gain access to better prepared applicants by helping career guidance programs conduct labor market analyses. Civil society organizations can advocate for or incorporate CG services into their existing or new programs. And crucially, the public sector can promote CG services and resources, while helping connect these services with existing employability programs or formal education systems.

IYF's goal is to use the support and participation of all stakeholders to integrate CG principles and best practices into existing systems, allowing greater numbers of youth to successfully navigate the job market and find meaningful work.

Additional Resources

Following are resources that may be helpful as you consider implementing a rural youth entrepreneurship program:

Career Guidance

Case Study:

Preparing Youth for the 21st Century Workplace

<http://library.iyfn.net.org/library/career-guidance-case-study-preparing-youth-21st-century-workplace>

Transitions to Work:

Advancing Career Education in Secondary Schools in Palestine

<http://library.iyfn.net.org/library/transitions-work-advancing-career-education-secondary-schools-palestine>

Transitions to Work:

Integrating Career Guidance into Palestine's Universities

<http://library.iyfn.net.org/library/transitions-work-integrating-career-guidance-palestine-s-universities>

Guide for Providing Integrated Career Guidance Services for Vulnerable Youth

<http://library.iyfn.net.org/library/guide-providing-integrated-career-guidance-services-vulnerable-youth>

Second Chances for Youth at Risk:

The Caribbean Youth Empowerment Program

<http://library.iyfn.net.org/library/second-chances-youth-risk-caribbean-youth-empowerment-program>

In 2008, with support from the World Bank Development Grant Facility, the International Youth Foundation, the Youth Employment Network, the Arab Urban Development Institute, and the Understanding Children's Work Project joined together to form the Global Partnership for Youth Employment (GPYE). Its goal: to build and disseminate evidence on youth employment outcomes and effective programs to help address the challenges facing young people in their transition to work. The GPYE leverages the technical and regional experience of the five partner organizations in youth employment research, programming, evaluation, and policy dialogue. The partnership's work focuses on Africa and the Middle East, regions in need of better evidence on effective approaches to promote youth employment.

This Best Practice Note is one in a series of assessments, research studies, technical guides, and learning papers produced by the GPYE to build the evidence base for improving policies, program design, and practices related to youth employability in the region. These resources can be accessed at www.gpye.org.

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