

By Any Other Name: Understanding Career Coaching Services

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You're having lunch with a friend and express to her that you're feeling dissatisfied with your current job or vocation. She suggests that you hire a coach to help you figure out your next career move. You've heard of people hiring a career coach but are a little fuzzy on what exactly coaches do or even how you would go about finding and choosing one.

If you are at a crossroads in your career, want to set new personal or professional goals, or feel stuck in trying to achieve goals you have already set, you might consider engaging the services of a professional to help you develop a plan for moving in the direction you desire. But when you start to explore the types of career management professionals who could help you, you will probably encounter a bewildering array of titles such as career coach, life coach, executive coach, career management consultant, outplacement consultant, career transition consultant, even psychologist or therapist.

When you seek out other professionals such as a doctor, attorney or accountant, standardized credentials make it easy to identify those who are qualified to deliver specialized services. But when it comes to understanding intangible services such as using a career coach, consultant, counselor or other type of advisor to help you make career decisions, consumers can feel bewildered by the choices available and have trouble differentiating between these types of roles.

Terms such as *coach*, *consultant*, or *counselor* are often used interchangeably and can mean drastically different things, even to those who work in the field. It can often seem like trying to compare apples and oranges. In addition, this type of field is relatively new and generally unregulated, making it difficult for consumers to identify the most qualified professionals in the field and choose one that is the best fit for their needs

How can you determine what type of professional services would be of most use to you in making decisions about your career choices and directions? Before beginning to explore and talk with different career management professionals, take the time to clearly define what you want from any professional you might work with. Some common reasons for engaging the services of a career coach, consultant or counselor might include:

- Wanting to increase your satisfaction with your current workplace or choice of work.
- Desiring a career that provides more challenge or better meets your potential.
- Needing greater clarity about what types of work or career would be a good fit with your values and goals.
- Being uncertain of how to go about moving into a new career or type of work or gain the required training.
- Experiencing career transitions such as a layoff or impending layoff, semi-retirement, injury or family circumstances that make it difficult to continue in your current work.
- Making a transition into a new career.
- Seeking objective advice about your leadership style and effectiveness

There are many other potential reasons you might seek out a career management professional, so it's important to be clear about what your goal is in doing so. Take the time to write out a few lines describing why you want to engage someone to help you with career management and decision-making and what you ultimately hope to achieve by engaging in this process. Your preparation will also be useful when you begin to contact potential career management professionals so you can succinctly explain your needs and expectations.

While titles of various career management professionals can vary greatly, here are some of the most common titles you may encounter along with a description of what each role might consist of:

A **career management professional** may go by titles such as career consultant/counselor, career management coach/consultant/counselor, career management specialist, executive coach, or business coach/consultant. Usually the title of individuals who do this type of work will suggest something related to career or business. Those who work in this capacity will usually focus on helping you to identify your work-related dreams, vision or passion, set goals and develop a concrete plan for achieving those goals. These professionals usually specialize in helping clients choose, change or redirect their work, plan and manage their careers, and address leadership and management effectiveness. They have an understanding of how people can succeed in organizations, advance or transition professionally, and how the interaction between interests, skills, values and work options affects career choices. Career coaches will ask a lot of questions about your values, aspirations and long-term work goals. While some of this discussion will likely include factors related to your personal life, the main focus will be on work and career. They may provide you with questionnaires or assessment tools to help you clarify your interests, values, skills, and so forth. Their background and experience in assessing and coaching you on career management techniques should help you to break through barriers to achieve your goals. Career coaches may also help you more concretely with job search, writing a résumé and cover letter, and practicing for job interviews.

A **life coach, consultant or counselor** may act in a similar capacity as a career coach but may deal with broader issues relating to your life as a whole, including more personal issues such as family relationships, health, fitness, and so forth. Within the field of life coaching, there may be a host of specialized professionals who target one area including career management, fitness or finances. If you choose to work with a life coach to help you with career decisions, ensure that individual has relevant experience and credentials to help you with your decision-making process. While the coaching process itself is generic and can be applied to many different areas, if you are spending time and investing your money on the services of a coach, you want to pick someone who has the expertise to help you in making career decisions. You may look for someone who has knowledge of your specific industry or who has worked with many other clients who have experienced the career transition or issues you are facing.

An **outplacement consultant or career transition consultant** is often hired by an organization that is laying off one or more employees. Organizations will contract with a firm that provides outplacement (not to be confused with outsourcing) or career transition services and will pay fees to the firm. In exchange, the firm will work with individuals who are being laid off in providing them with assistance in preparing to look for work, updating their résumé, writing a cover letter, preparing for job interviews, and so forth. These services are contracted for a set period of time, as little as a one-time workshop to three or more months of service with no cost being incurred by the individual.

A **therapist, psychologist or personal counselor** may or may not have the expertise needed to help with career decisions. Most therapists and psychologists are trained in applying one or more therapeutic models (such as Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy) and are usually focused initially on understanding a client's past experiences and history and how they are affecting or even limiting the individual today. They may delve more deeply into one's emotional history and past relationships. Career and life coaches may use techniques similar to those of a therapist or psychologist but are usually more present and future-focused. Some therapists, counselors and even psychologists are moving into the career decision-making arena, but again it's essential to determine if the person you choose to work with has the experience, skills and knowledge you need in a career management professional.

Once you have defined what you want from working with a career management professional, you might explore websites such as the Institute for Career Certification International (www.careercertification.org) or the Association of Career Professionals International (www.acpi.org) to find names of individuals in your location who have the focus and expertise you need. There is no formal credentialing established in the field of career management services, so be aware that anyone can hang out a shingle and call themselves a coach or consultant. When you begin contacting individuals, you might ask questions such as:

- What types of client issues or concerns do you typically handle?
- How much experience do you have with clients who are experiencing the types of concerns I have?
- What credentials and training do you possess?
- How long have you been in practice?
- How much do you charge?
- Is the first consultation free?
- What processes and techniques do you use?
- What is your training/education/experience in working with career issues?
- What is the nature of your business experience?
- Do you have a background in psychology?
- How would you approach a situation like mine?
- Do you provide assessments and how do you use them?
- Are our meetings confidential?

Look for someone with whom you feel comfortable talking and who provides the kind of motivation you seek. Some clients respond better to a supportive, warm and nurturing type of coach whereas others need someone who will give them a “kick in the pants” when they need it. You should find the person you work with to be easy to talk to, motivating and even inspiring. Ideally you want someone who appears to use a variety of tools and techniques based on the individual client’s needs rather than taking a “one size fits all” approach. Fees may be charged on an hourly basis or as a flat fee but can vary greatly from one career management professional to another based on their experience and geography. Some work only in person; others will work with you remotely on the phone or by videoconferencing. If you are being offered flat fee services, clarify what will be included in terms of content and availability.

You may be able to find a career management professional by asking colleagues, checking with certification bodies such as the Institute of Career Certification International (www.careercertification.org) or contacting college and university career centers. Once you’ve identified a potential career management specialist you might work with, be sure to ask for references from previous clients.

Unfortunately there are a few unethical people who may describe themselves as coaches or consultants, but engage in practices that take advantage of job seekers who are vulnerable and desperate to find work. Be cautious about individuals who seem to feel they can be all things to all people or who rush into telling you they can help you before they have fully explored what your needs and goals are. Also, no professional career management specialist will charge you a fee to place you in a specific job.

Those who have achieved a level of certification, such as the Certified Career Management Professional designation available through the Institute of Career Certification International, have agreed to adhere to standards of excellence and ethics. This is an important factor in a profession that is unregulated and self-monitoring. An ethical and skilled career management professional will take the time to understand your wants and needs of the career decision-making process, and will refer you to other qualified professionals if your needs can be better served by others.