

**HECSU research notes**

# Careers Service Web Site Design

This briefing summarises some of the learning arising from the CSU/NICEC *Careers Service Web-site Design Project 2001-2003* (Offer, M.S., 2003). This project, (which also built on previous work by Professor James P. Sampson, Jr. and colleagues at Florida State University), used workshops, distance learning materials and individual web site reviews to help Higher Education Careers Services to develop the content and structure of their web sites from a guidance perspective. Some of these materials are available on the Graduate Prospects web site on the Careers Services' Desk.

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## Needs-based versus resource-based design

Readers are referred to two publications (Sampson et al, 2001 and Offer et al, 2001) for a discussion about the merits of needs-based versus resource-based approaches to web-site design. The following summarises the key points:

### A needs-based web site

- identifies its target group(s);
- prompts them to *identify their own needs*;
- matches these to *relevant* resources or services;
- may be more helpful to first-time or undecided users.

### A resource-based site

- offers rapid access to a *comprehensive* range of resources and services;
- assumes users already know what they want or can work it out without difficulty;
- may be more helpful to repeat or experienced and decided users.

**Either design can be justified** - both have advantages and disadvantages. Most guidance web sites need to use elements of both types of structure in order to serve both kinds of user. However, it is important to decide which approach is to be the dominant one. That is a managerial and professional, not a technical, decision to be taken by guidance staff and not by IT service personnel or web designers.

**The needs-based approach** aims at *effective use* rather than *comprehensive access*. It may be preferred where the service is mainly to those who are less than certain about their career aims, who do not know where to start, or are otherwise undecided. It tries to apply principles of good guidance practice, where identifying a client's needs is the *sine qua non* of effective professional practice. However, it needs to include such features as a site-search facility, site map and index, and a 'what's new?', or equivalent, access point on the home page, to enable repeat or decided users to go straight to what they want.

**The resource-based approach** aims to display all potential resources, and is to be judged largely on comprehensiveness, speed and ease of access. It may be preferred where the target audience are deemed to be mainly decided and experienced, or where other types of user are to be diverted from the site to a face-to-face, or one-to-one, alternative service. However, in that case, some 'escape route' for those who do not know where to start, or who may have difficulty identifying their own needs without support, should be made available. For example, a 'diagnostic' or 'beginners' section should be offered, or at least a link to an adviser by email.

## Identifying needs on-line

**Diagnosing needs on-line** and filtering out those users who are best dealt with off-line, or on other sites, while directing those who can be helped on site to the appropriate page, can be achieved by judicious selection and use of

- well-structured menus;
- frequently asked questions;
- specific diagnostic exercises.

### A good menu

- is not an index (with items listed in alphabetical order);
- prompts the user to clarify their needs;
- consists of homogeneous items representing a genuine choice for the user - not a mixture of resources and needs, topics and navigational items;

- lists the items in a coherent (e.g. developmental) sequence;
- is based on the model of the guidance or career choice process favoured by the service, or a similar rationale;
- is written in user language, avoiding terms unfamiliar to them;
- helps the user anticipate which of their needs can be met and what outcomes may be delivered by the items offered - the user does not have to select each item to see if it is relevant;
- does not overwhelm the user: choice is not equal to the number of options.

### Frequently asked questions

- can be easier to identify with, for those who have not yet defined their needs;
- may encourage the user who can see their query is similar to those of others;
- should be genuine user questions, not the questions practitioners *think* users *should* ask;
- should be condensed into a manageable list - a longer list should be sub-categorised - no section offering more than 7-9 FAQs;
- can be supplemented with a 'none of these' option, where users are encouraged to email their enquiry - this can then be a source for new FAQs and replies.

### Specific diagnostic exercises

- could be based on a decision-making readiness or vocational maturity inventory - if it was intended to provide pre-guidance diagnosis: those who are not ready to make decisions may need to be diverted elsewhere;
- could arise out of the web-site section that is aimed at first-time users who have no or few ideas - if it is intended to deal with those who may have problems, in the first instance, by on-line interaction;
- one example of the latter is the *Career Planning Health Check* - available in the members' area of the Careers Services' Desk on [www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk). This was primarily intended for use on resource-based sites as a safety net for those who could not otherwise handle the volume of resources available without structured support. (After log-in select <Careers Service web-site templates> and <Career Planning Health Check Template>)

## Links

Links are the building blocks of menus and make up the structure of a web site. They

- deliver coherence and integration;
- enable user control and choice;
- equate to the off-line guidance activity known as 'referral' (especially as external links).

Links should:

- tell the user where they will go to from here;
- describe what needs will be met by going there - what will the user get from this link?
- take them to the precise page where the need can be met - deep links are best;
- be based on current and accurate knowledge of the target site.

## Target groups

The identification of an appropriate target group fulfils several purposes:

- It enables the needs of relatively distinct user groups to be identified and, if possible, met.
- It encourages the web site provider to think in terms of needs and how the resources provided can be customised to meet the concerns of different groups.

- It also alerts users who are not in these groups and whose needs must be met elsewhere, and saves them wasting time looking through resources or services that are irrelevant.
- It starts the process of prompting the user to define their expectations of the site, and of building an implicit or explicit on-line 'contract' as to how far these can be met.

**Target groups frequently identified** in higher education include current students, graduates, postgraduates, prospective students, employers, and academic staff. Other groups may include minorities, especially potentially disadvantaged groups, but these should not necessarily be targeted from the home page, but rather at the points where their needs are clearly specifically different or additional. Other sectors outside higher education may find identifying their audiences more difficult, but the exercise of attempting to do so is still worthwhile in itself.

## Using a model of guidance

The construction of a web site may reflect explicitly or implicitly the model of the guidance/career choice process the service generally uses. This can be a strength - in giving coherence to the structure and content which helps the user to understand the schema employed and the rationale for it, and hence to use it in a more integrated and effective way.

Rather than taking isolated brief messages or pieces of advice and information from it, the user can see how what they are currently reading, or interacting with, relates to other aspects of the site which they have not yet used, but which they may find useful on another occasion. It also begins the process of anticipatory thinking about their career planning activities. Without such a model or without making it explicit in some way, the user may take longer to understand how different parts of the site relate together.

## Functions

Careers service web sites can have various functions. In principle these should be consistent with the strategic aims of the service and the role of the site in relation to other resources.

Five main functions of a web site are:

- to **funnel** users off-line towards face-to-face services or the physical careers centre. This may be a good idea for some users but could lead to overloading of scarce human resources or to frustration where users are not able to access the careers centre at a time to suit their needs.
- to **divert** users towards on-line services and resources available on other sites. This may be a sensible tactic for a service with few resources to develop its own web site, and where other sites have already invented the wheel. However, it is important to consider how users who *should* be so diverted will be distinguished from those who *should not*. The function might in that case be described as a filter.
- to offer **on-line guidance** - preferably with a degree of interactivity - to deal with users' needs as far as possible on the present site. This will also entail some diagnostic process to ensure that users are directed to the right resources to achieve the guidance outcomes they need and not those they don't.
- to act as a **forum** for the exchange of experiences between users, and between users and others. The role of the adviser becomes that of moderator, facilitator and group leader.
- to offer **distance learning**. Many sites now offer links to career management skills modules and these should be

integrated in some way with the rest of the web site. Users should be clear what outcomes they will achieve and how these relate to the rest of what is on the site, as well as why it will benefit them to spend the time involved in commitment to a learning programme. Such an approach may also involve embracing a more developmental approach to users' needs - e.g. with special targeting towards first, second or third years etc. This kind of site may also make use of the forum as a resource between learners, and the learners and their tutor.

**These functions are not mutually exclusive** and all may occur on the same site. Each should, however, be justified by reference to a strategic and managerial decision as to the role of the web site in relation to the rest of the service's resources.

## Form and content: readability, navigation and layout

**Layout and navigation** should support, not hinder, a user in getting to where they want to go and in absorbing the message. **Readability** also may mean something different on a web page as opposed to a printed text or handbook.

- **A needs-based approach** will be as evident in the form as in the content of the page. The concern is to enable the user to grasp the overall schema as quickly as possible, and to avoid requiring them to relearn it: then they can concentrate on what the site really has to say to them without distraction.
- **Web users scan rather than read**, so it is vital to structure any page so as to enable them to get an immediate overview of its contents and to make contact with any part of it that seems relevant to them at such a quick glance. Chunking and clustering of material, use of bullet points, generous white space, and internal page links/menus are all valuable tools here, especially if text has to continue 'below the fold'. The journalistic practice of the 'inverted pyramid' - say first what is of most importance, then what is important, then the rest - is worth following.
- **Pages should be as self-sufficient as possible** so that users arriving on any page can see quickly where it sits in the hierarchy of the whole site and be able to progress in any direction they choose. Bread crumbing, using a trail that shows the route normally taken to reach the page, is one way of achieving this. A link to a site map on each page also helps.

## Guidance, information and technology: a professional team approach

Two factors in the past seem to have slowed the development of careers service web sites:-

- There has been a tendency to see 'guidance' and 'information' as alternatives (where in fact the one subsumes the other) and the web site as 'purely' about information. The site's development was then left to the information staff alone.
- Many Careers Services, without direct technical support from their own institutions at first, originally left it to individual enthusiasts on their staff to develop the web site.

In practice, guidance web sites should have input from all the staff of the service, since diverse professional skills and knowledge are needed, both of the resources and the needs of the target groups. The task of web site content design is a *guidance* issue, rather than a purely technical one. People also support what they have helped to make!

## References and further reading

Graduate Prospects, [www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk) - Careers Service's Desk area [www.prospects.ac.uk/caservices](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/caservices) for information on Careers Service Web-site Templates, Distance Learning Units, and The Principles of Needs-Based Design and Reviewing your own careers service web site.

Offer, M.S., (2003) *Report on the CSU/NICEC Careers Service Web Site Design Project 2001-2003*, CSU Ltd, Manchester.

Offer, M.S., Sampson, J.P. Jr., & Watts, A.G., (2001) *Careers Services: Technology and the Future*, CSU, Manchester (especially chapter 5).

Sampson, J.P. Jr., Carr, D.L., Panke, J., Arkin, S., Minivielle, M., & Vernick, S.H., (2001), *Design Strategies for Need-Based Internet Web Sites in Counseling and Career Services*. Technical Report 28, Center for the Study of Technology in Counseling and Career Development, Florida State University, Tallahassee Fl.