

**Supporting Clients via Narrative Storytelling and Artificial Intelligence:  
A Practitioner Guide for Career Development Professionals**

**\* Associate Professor William E. Donald** <sup>1 2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Southampton Business School, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

<sup>2</sup> Donald Research & Consulting, Oakley, UK

Email Address: w.e.donald@gmail.com ORCID: 0000-0002-3670-5374

**Professor Rob Straby** <sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Conestoga College, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada

Email Address: rstraby@gmail.com ORCID: 0009-0003-9618-8668

\*Denotes the corresponding author.

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** In this practitioner-focused essay, we combine traditional narrative storytelling approaches with Artificial Intelligence's (AI) innovative abilities to enable career development professionals to support individuals across their lifespan.

**Design/methodology/approach:** We propose a three-phase career exploration approach, developed and tested in a real-world setting for career development professionals to support their clients to consider various career-related options as well as identify strengths and opportunities for personal development.

**Findings:** In phase one, the client recounts 7-10 positive narrative stories about engaging in activities they enjoyed. In phase two, the career development professional uses AI with tailored prompts to generate a personalised client report based on these narrative stories. In phase three, the report serves as the basis for further discussion and exploration with the client.

**Originality:** Our approach acknowledges AI as a new actor and career development professionals as undervalued actors in supporting individuals to foster a sustainable career ecosystem.

**Practical Implications:** The approach provides a practical guide for career development professionals to increase their capability to support their clients in response to technological advancement and the contemporary world of work. A training document incorporating a worked example of the approach is provided in 'Supplementary Material Appendix 1'.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence, Career Counselling, Career Development Professionals, Career Ecosystem, Narrative Storytelling, Sustainable Career, Sustainable Career Ecosystem.

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## **Setting the Scene**

Artificial Intelligence (AI) represents a new, disruptive, and transformative actor that has the potential to either promote or threaten the sustainability of the career ecosystem (Donald *et al.*, 2024). A sustainable career ecosystem captures the interconnected and interdependent nature of different actors “whereby the lives and careers of individuals evolve and play out over time with an emphasis on sustainable outcomes for the individual, organizations, and broader society” (Donald, 2023a, p. xxvii). On the one hand, AI can help improve performance, well-being, and productivity in the workplace (Lane *et al.*, 2023). On the other hand, “3 in 5 workers are worried about losing their job to AI in the next 10 years, and 2 in 5 expect AI to reduce wages in the sector” (OECD, 2024, p. 3). Consequently, the role of career development professionals takes on increased significance in helping individuals achieve sustainable careers and such support will be required in an ongoing capacity (Donald *et al.*, 2024). We believe that incorporating AI into career development practices can help improve the support offered to clients as they navigate the complexities of the modern labour market.

In response, this practitioner-focused essay combines traditional storytelling approaches with AI's innovative abilities to enable career development professionals to support individuals across their lifespans. Our approach can help individuals to consider various career-related options as well as identify strengths and opportunities for personal development. Put differently, we focus on the interaction between career development professionals, their clients, and AI as actors to promote a sustainable career ecosystem.

In the rest of this essay, we outline a three-phase approach for career exploration that career development professionals can use with their clients. Initially, clients are encouraged to recount 7-

10 narrative stories of where they engaged in an activity they felt positive about. Next, the career development professional uses AI and carefully tailored prompts to generate a personalised client report. We refer to AI rather than any specific form of AI (e.g., ChatGPT) since our approach is not limited to any particular AI model. Finally, the career development professional and the client review the report together as the basis for further discussion and exploration. We also consider the ethical implications for career development professionals.

In case of interest, ‘Supplementary Material Appendix 1’ provides a working example that Author 2 developed to train fellow career development professionals on using the three-phase approach described in this essay.

### **Phase One: Narrative Storytelling**

In the initial phase of our three-phase approach for career exploration, the career development professional engages in an introductory session with their client, marking the start of their collaborative journey. This session is a foundation for establishing rapport and gaining deeper insights into the client’s aspirations and needs. It also provides an opportunity to explain the three-stage process and the rationale for each stage, as well as answer any questions and obtain informed consent for the career development professional to use AI.

The client is given a task to complete before their next appointment with the career development professional. The client is encouraged to capture seven to ten narrative stories, either in written form or as voice recordings, that illustrate positive moments from their past. While the focus is on significant personal accomplishments, the narratives can span a variety of experiences (e.g., education, professional endeavours, leisure activities, interpersonal relationships).

There are several reasons for phase one of our three-phased approach. First, it enables the client to reflect on their lived experiences across various contexts at different points in time. This demonstrates the interplay between the person, context, and time dimensions of a sustainable career (De Vos *et al.*, 2020) to strive for indicators of health, happiness, and productivity (Van der Heijden, 2005; Van Der Heijden and De Vos, 2015). Second, it enables clients to draw on interactions with other actors in the career ecosystem, highlighting actors' interconnected and interdependent nature (Baruch, 2013, 2015) and their shared reliance to achieve a sustainable career ecosystem (Donald, 2023a). Third, it can serve as a way to increase the client's confidence by recalling positive experiences and providing insights into what a meaningful career might look like for them. Fourth, it provides valuable information for phase two.

### **Phase Two: Artificial Intelligence**

In phase one, we asked our client to compile 7-10 narrative stories about times they achieved great things. We are ready to proceed if the client provides these in written form. If the client opts to send voice recordings, we need to transcribe these using speech-to-text software (such as that offered within Microsoft Teams or Microsoft Word). We then populate the text form of the narratives into AI.

In phase two, we present a set of example prompts, written by the second author, that we have used with clients to process their personal narratives (Figure 1). Writing our own prompts means we can ensure they are written effectively, are direct and specific, and use appropriate verb choices.

Figure 1

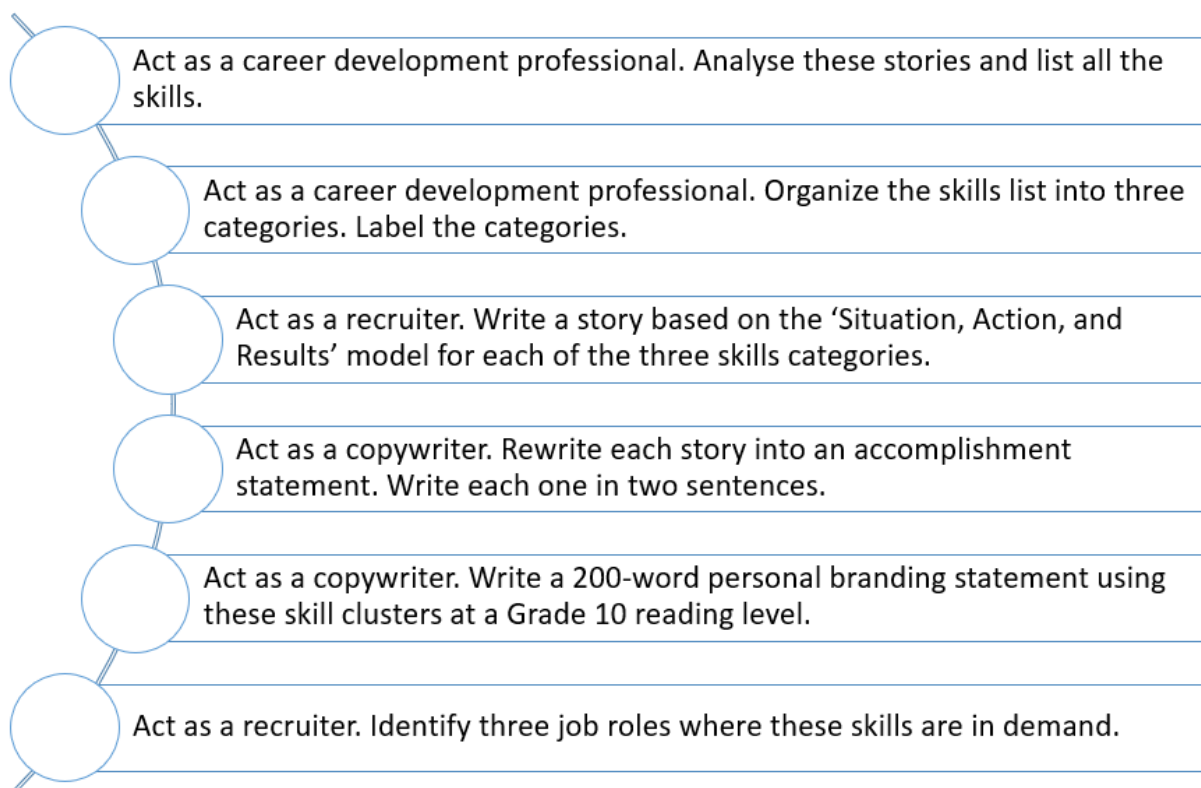


Figure 1: [CC by SA](#). 2024. Straby.



Caption: Sample prompt sequence engineered by Straby (Author 2) in his role as a career development professional in Canada.

You will notice that the prompts encourage AI to initially take on the role of a career development professional and subsequently act as a recruiter, helping to consider the perspectives of other actors operating within the career ecosystem (Baruch, 2015; Donald *et al.*, 2024). For example, asking AI to take on the role of a recruiter can provide insights into the types of jobs available based on the skills identified from the personal narratives. It can also provide insights into what recruiters may seek during the application and selection process. You will also notice that we task AI as a copywriter to provide our client with an initial accomplishment statement and personal branding statement (see Sylvester and Donald (2024) for additional practitioner-based insights into helping clients develop their personal brand). Again, the rationale is to acknowledge the interplay of the individual client and various contexts (De Vos *et al.*, 2020) in which they must showcase their abilities to prospective employers. Each prompt produces a text output, which the career development professional captures in a Microsoft Word document in the form of ‘prompt + output’. Once the process has been completed for each prompt, the Microsoft Word document represents the report for use with the client in phase three.

However, the choice of prompts can be engineered based on the preferences of the individual career development professional in conjunction with the objectives of each client. Consequently, the versatility of our approach means it can be used across the lifespan and is not confined to a particular geographical context. Examples of uses include (i) assessing skills and strengths, (ii) mapping skills to different roles, (iii) suggesting resources for upskilling opportunities, (iv) suggesting academic or career pathways, or (v) looking up information on employers or sectors to help prepare for the application process or to gauge person-organisation fit (see Donald, 2023b for insights into how person-organisation fit can evolve across the lifespan).



### **Phase Three: Outcomes and Benefits for the Client**

Phase three comprises a meeting between the client and the career development professional to discuss the report generated in phase two, fostering a highly participatory environment that empowers clients to take ownership of their decisions. Such an approach allows the client and career development professional to explore various creative opportunities that enhance the focus on and enjoyment of the exploratory process. Consequently, AI and career development professionals can play a pivotal role in promoting the sustainability of the career ecosystem (Donald *et al.*, 2024).

Furthermore, the process is highly personalised, enabling career development professionals to tailor their support to each client's needs at any given point in their life. The approach highlights the interplay of the person (the client), context (circumstances/objectives), and time (life stage) dimensions of a sustainable career (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015). By offering ongoing support rather than only intervening during times of transition, such as moving from school to work or navigating unemployment, the process aligns with calls for continuous career support (Donald *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, these positive outcomes for the client transcend to other actors in the career ecosystem, including employers and broader society (Baruch, 2013, 2015), thereby contributing significantly to the sustainability of the career ecosystem.

### **Ethical Considerations for Career Development Professionals**

Career development professionals must consider ethical implications when using our three-phase approach with clients. It is crucial to provide information to the client about what data is being collected and how it is being processed. This allows them to ask questions and subsequently provide informed and written consent. For example, how will the written or voice forms of the

personal narratives be shared with the career development professional in stage one? What software can the career development professional use to transcribe voice-form narratives into text form? Is the client happy for their personal narratives to be loaded into an AI for processing? Should this be a free or paid version of the AI? While data processing can often be restricted to the local computer using paid versions of AI tools, free versions frequently use the data to train the AI tool. Is the client happy with the prompts that will be run? Do they want a copy of the report showing the AI outputs? How long can the career development professional keep the narratives and the reports? Can these narratives and reports be used for training or research purposes? Can they be used to help other clients? If so, in what way(s)?

Career development professionals should also know that AI tools can provide inaccurate information (hallucinations) and give biased or discriminatory outputs. They should also ensure that the prompts used are inclusive and that all outputs are checked before sharing the final version with the client.

It is important to remember that algorithms mean AI lacks human intuition, inspiration, and imagination. In response to this concern, we show how AI can be combined with established approaches to career guidance, such as narrative storytelling, to enhance the client's experience alongside support from a career development professional. However, the notes provided in this section should serve as a basis for further discussion and debate to establish best practices for the career development community. They are not meant to be an exhaustive list but rather examples of some ethical considerations that career development professionals might face when using our three-phase approach with clients.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

The three-phase approach presented in this essay draws on an established method of career counselling (narrative storytelling) and new technology (AI) to offer an innovative strategy underpinned by sustainable career ecosystem theory (Donald, 2023a). The approach yields a comprehensive report catalysing further dialogue and exploration between career development professionals and their clients. Specifically, this pragmatic approach, underpinned by ethical considerations and practical insights, represents an early attempt to acknowledge the role of AI as a new actor within a sustainable career ecosystem and spotlight the role of career development professionals in enhancing the career sustainability of their clients (per the observations of Donald *et al.*, 2024). Specifically, our approach can help individuals consider various career-related options as well as identify strengths and opportunities for personal development throughout their career.

To conclude, we offer suggestions for career development professionals to refine and expand upon the three-phase process set out in this essay. In particular, we encourage reflection on the commentary by Targett (2024), writing for ‘The Careers Writers Association’ who observes how

“AI can help us seek answers to straightforward questions on what the possible options and pathways are (indeed it may become a vital tool for many of us – career development professionals included), but it can’t help us see what is meaningful when we are struggling to decide or find a direction and purpose. Personal career guidance, counselling or coaching from a trained career development professional can.” (Online, Paragraph 19).

Consequently, we encourage fellow career development professionals to experiment using various prompts based on the interplay of the person (client), context (circumstances/objectives), and time

(life stage) dimensions of a sustainable career (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015). Such prompts should be shared with other career development professionals (such as the example in Figure 1) via communities of practice or professional accreditation bodies to identify best practices to foster a sustainable career ecosystem.

Finally, we do not endorse using any particular AI tool since each has unique capabilities and limitations. The availability and prevalence of such tools will also likely change over time. We encourage career development professionals and scholars to explore different AI tools and use different prompts to form an evidence base and provide empirical testing of these various approaches. We also encourage additional discussion and exploration regarding the ethical considerations when using AI with clients to set clear policies and guidelines for career development professionals. These discussions could be led by professional bodies for career development professionals, such as the Career Development Institute (CDI) in the UK or the Canadian Education and Research Institute for Counselling (CERIC) in Canada.

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