

Supporting clients through career shocks: metaphorical thinking, scenario-based role play, and career narratives

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Abstract

Purpose – This practitioner insights essay examines how career development professionals can support individuals in preparing for, navigating, and recovering from career shocks.

Design/methodology/approach – Grounded in scholarly research and enriched by practice-based insights, the essay presents three applied and accessible tools for integration into everyday career guidance settings.

Findings – Practitioners who integrate (1) metaphorical thinking, (2) scenario-based role play, and (3) career narratives into their work can enable clients to prepare for, navigate, and recover from career shocks. Metaphors help normalize uncertainty, role play builds behavioral preparedness, and narrative work fosters reflection and re-authoring of career direction.

Practical implications – Career professionals can enhance client outcomes by embedding reflective and experiential tools into their practice. These tools help clients anticipate change, navigate transition, and recover with purpose, while contributing to fostering career sustainability.

Originality/value – While the concept of career shocks has gained traction in the scholarly literature, its translation into practical guidance remains limited. By addressing individual and systemic dimensions of support, this essay bridges that gap, offering a practice-oriented, theory-informed contribution.

Keywords Career shocks, Career guidance, Sustainable career, Sustainable career ecosystem, Career development

Paper type Practitioner insights

Setting the scene

Think back to a time when a significant event largely beyond your control disrupted your life. What comes to mind? Did it prompt you to reflect on your career? If so, you have experienced what researchers call a *career shock* (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018; 2021b), a disruptive event that triggers deliberate reflection about one's career and may, though not always, lead to career change. Career shocks can arise from a wide range of sources. They may stem from global events such as the 2007–2008 Global Financial Crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic. They can also occur at an organizational level, such as an unexpected company restructuring, or from personal events like divorce, illness, or the death of a loved one. Recognizing the diversity of events that can lead to career shocks and the equally diverse ways people respond to them is essential for career development professionals. Supporting clients through these disruptions

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requires not only empathy and insight but also a practical, flexible approach that fosters long-term adaptability and purpose.

Crucially, the same event can produce vastly different outcomes depending on the individual. For one person, a restructuring may be accompanied by an unexpected promotion, thereby constituting a positive career shock. However, another person may face redundancy from the same event, experiencing a negative career shock. Importantly, even when people experience the same disruption, their interpretations can vary. One person might regard an unexpected layoff as a serious setback; another may see it as an opportunity for growth. Some may not interpret the event as a career shock at all if it does not prompt active career reflection. While not all disruptions lead to change, they often catalyze a reassessment of values, goals, and direction. How a person experiences a career shock depends on a complex interplay of timing, context, and personal circumstances (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020).

Building on this foundation, career shocks also unfold over time. Research shows that positive career shocks usually lead to positive career outcomes, and negative shocks to negative outcomes. However, this is not necessarily the case. An unexpected promotion may initially appear to be a step forward, but can result in burnout or misalignment if not well supported. Conversely, a layoff might provide the time and space to pursue a more fulfilling path or start a new business, reframing a negative experience as a positive turning point (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020, 2021b).

Although the concept of career shocks has received significant scholarly attention (e.g. Akkermans *et al.*, 2021a, b), its translation into everyday career development practice remains limited (for an exception, see Korotov, 2021). Addressing this gap is essential because career shocks play a pivotal role in an individual's career sustainability, often causing significant disruptions that can strengthen or undermine people's ability to preserve and expand their (personal) resources (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). Given that careers are increasingly characterized by disruption and change, it is crucial to understand how individual, contextual, and temporal factors jointly contribute to how people navigate career shocks and shape sustainable careers, characterized by a dynamic balance between happiness, health, and productivity over time (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, career development professionals are increasingly recognized as pivotal actors in shaping sustainable careers and career ecosystems that foster career sustainability. Such sustainable career ecosystems focus on the variety of interconnected and interdependent actors across higher education institutions and workplace contexts, emphasizing sustainable outcomes for the individual, organizations, and broader society (Donald *et al.*, 2024).

Early intervention and ongoing support from career development professionals are essential for helping individuals prepare for and navigate unexpected career challenges (Donald *et al.*, 2024). In the UK, Hooley *et al.* (2023) found career guidance yielded a return of £2.50 per £1.00 spent in schools, rising to £3.20 for unemployed adults. Support provided during employment also delivered positive, though smaller, returns. Ma *et al.* (2025) similarly advocate for career support across the life course, especially for precarious and self-employed workers who often lack access to development resources. As careers become longer and more complex, individuals must develop the capacity to manage ambiguity, adjust to disruption, and make purposeful decisions; needs that highlight the growing importance of accessible, proactive, and sustained career guidance.

In this essay, we offer practical guidance for helping clients prepare for, navigate, and recover from career shocks. We focus on three applied strategies: (1) metaphorical thinking, (2) scenario-based role play, and (3) career narratives, before concluding with reflections on their broader relevance.

Metaphorical thinking

Metaphors are a powerful tool in career development practice (Amundson, 2015) that have been used to help clients navigate career transitions (Rochat and Borgen, 2023) and negative

career outlooks (Creed *et al.*, 2021). Despite offering clients a way to make sense of the uncertainty and emotional intensity that often accompany career shocks, metaphors have yet to be sufficiently utilized for this purpose. By turning abstract or overwhelming experiences into tangible, relatable imagery, metaphors can help clients reflect, communicate, and take purposeful action.

When supporting clients to prepare for potential disruptions, metaphors can normalize the idea that unexpected events are a natural part of contemporary working life. For instance, Inkson (2004) discussed nine different metaphors of careers, including a career as an inheritance, a journey, or a story. Other recent career metaphors include weather circumstances (WCM; Donald, 2022; Donald *et al.*, 2025) and a winding mountain path (Akkermans, 2025). Such metaphors can help promote a mindset of career readiness and adaptability without inducing fear, and can lead to practical strategies for managing change.

Metaphors also prove invaluable when clients are navigating a career shock. For positive events, such as a sudden promotion or a funding opportunity, the metaphor of a lottery win can be apt. It captures the surprise and elation, but also acknowledges possible side effects of confusion, pressure, or feelings of isolation. This dual lens opens space for emotional exploration and adjustment.

Conversely, when dealing with negative shocks such as redundancy, organizational collapse, or interpersonal conflict, clients often resonate with metaphors drawn from natural disasters. They may describe the experience as an earthquake, feeling like “the ground has shifted,” or liken it to “picking up the pieces” after a tornado. These metaphors validate the disruption and support clients in naming losses, identifying resources, and planning recovery steps.

Crucially, metaphors work best when they are co-created with clients (Thompson, 2021). They should emerge from the client’s own language, culture, and emotional world. Practitioners can gently introduce metaphorical thinking and revisit it across sessions to ensure it continues to resonate. By doing so, metaphors can help clients consider the interplay of the three dimensions of a sustainable career: person, context, and time (De Vos *et al.*, 2020).

Scenario-based role play

Scenario-based role play is a dynamic, experimental technique that helps clients to prepare for, navigate, and recover from career shocks by simulating real-world disruptions in a safe, supportive, and controlled environment. Through guided enactment of imagined or anticipated situations, clients can explore how they might respond to various career shocks, whether positive or negative, either before they happen or as they unfold. Scenario-based learning has shown significant promise when used in the teaching of medical students, leading to positive effects on satisfaction, deep learning, and attitude towards professionalism (Mianehsaz *et al.*, 2023).

Used as a preparatory tool, role play builds psychological readiness and confidence. Practitioners might introduce scenarios such as receiving an unexpected job offer in a different city, facing a sudden team restructure, or grappling with an industry downturn. Clients are encouraged to deliberately reflect on their career paths and goals, and practice articulating their responses, such as making decisions under pressure, and identifying the values and priorities that shape their choices. These rehearsals often surface strengths and vulnerabilities, allowing clients to develop key skills in communication, negotiation, and boundary-setting. Confronting complexity in a low-stakes setting helps cultivate adaptability and equips clients with a toolkit of strategies to draw on when real career shocks occur.

When clients are navigating career shocks, role play becomes a tool for reclaiming agency. A client facing redundancy might simulate how such a shock could impact their careers, after which they could practice a conversation with their employer, or frame their experience when speaking with a recruiter. Someone newly promoted may rehearse how to address shifting team dynamics or negotiate for additional support. These enactments create space for emotional processing, intention setting, and safe experimentation with different responses or outcomes.

The role of the practitioner is critical. To be effective, scenario-based role play must feel psychologically safe and contextually relevant. Practitioners should tailor scenarios to the client's lived reality and provide a structured debriefing afterward. This reflection phase is essential, where clients are encouraged to notice what felt authentic or uncomfortable, how their thinking evolved, and what insights emerged. Such reflection deepens learning and enhances self-awareness.

What makes scenario-based role play particularly powerful is its ability to bridge the gap between thought and action. It moves clients beyond passive discussion into embodied practice, building self-efficacy and emotional resilience, potentially allowing them to preserve and expand their resource pool and, thus, their career sustainability (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). Over time, it helps normalize uncertainty and change, positioning clients as active participants in shaping their careers, even amid disruption. As such, it can help promote a sustainable career ecosystem by supporting clients in considering coping and defense mechanisms, as well as the balance between short-term (proximal) and longer-term (distal) outcomes that influence the subjective perception of person-career fit (Talluri *et al.*, 2025).

Career narratives

Narrative career counseling (McIlveen and Patton, 2007) is a predominant variant of career construction theory (Savickas, 2005), whereby storytelling helps craft identities (McMahon and Watson, 2013). Distinct from metaphors and scenario-based role play, which emphasize external disruptions or behavioral rehearsal, this method centers on inner narrative construction, inviting clients to actively shape the stories they tell about their possible futures, including those marked by disruption or surprise. Career narratives offer a powerful, forward-looking approach to help clients anticipate, interpret, and respond to career shocks with clarity and self-awareness.

The process begins by guiding clients to imagine and construct multiple versions of their future career stories. These might include their ideal path, as well as alternative trajectories shaped by unexpected events. One version might explore what life looks like if their role is made redundant; another might imagine an unforeseen opportunity to lead a project in a different sector. These narratives could include both desired and undesired disruptions, thereby preparing individuals for both positive and negative career shocks. Through writing, conversation, or creative expression, clients reflect on the emotional responses, decision points, and personal resources each scenario might demand and offer.

These “what if” narratives build psychological flexibility. By rehearsing various futures, clients learn to move beyond rigid, linear career expectations and embrace a more adaptive, story-based mindset. This process surfaces implicit beliefs, values, and priorities; insights that strengthen their ability to navigate ambiguity and make informed choices under pressure. Practitioners play a key role in helping clients identify recurring themes, patterns of resilience, and areas for growth across their stories.

When a client is already experiencing a career shock, narrative work becomes a tool for reframing. Rather than viewing the event as a failure or deviation, clients are encouraged to integrate it into a broader, evolving career story. This re-authoring fosters coherence and restores a sense of agency, even when external circumstances feel uncertain or destabilizing.

Career narrative work is also effective in group settings, where the act of sharing different “future stories” fosters empathy, reduces isolation, and normalizes the presence of uncertainty in modern careers. For more creatively inclined clients, the technique can be adapted using storyboards, timelines, or visual journaling.

Ultimately, this approach enables both strategic foresight and emotional resilience. It empowers clients as decision-makers and authors of meaningful, adaptive careers, capable of adjusting the storyline while staying anchored in their core values and sense of purpose. It also captures the interconnected and interdependent nature of different stakeholders (actors) within a career ecosystem (Baruch, 2013), further emphasizing the interplay of person and contexts over time (De Vos *et al.*, 2020).

Concluding thoughts

Career shocks are becoming an increasingly common feature of modern working life. As disruptions grow more frequent and diverse, career development professionals are critical actors in fostering sustainable careers by helping individuals not only manage immediate change but also build the mindsets and strategies necessary for balancing happiness, health, and productivity over time. Their work supports individual resilience and the development of sustainable careers.

This practitioner essay has introduced three practical, research-backed tools for everyday use. Metaphorical thinking helps clients make sense of uncertainty by turning abstract experiences into relatable imagery, normalizing disruption without fear. Scenario-based role play offers experiential learning and behavioral rehearsal, boosting clients' confidence and preparedness to respond effectively to challenges. Career narrative work encourages reflection on values, reframing of disruptions, and active authorship of one's career story.

Together, these approaches do more than help clients cope; they cultivate reflective capacity, psychological flexibility, and future-oriented decision making. Importantly, as career shocks happen to everyone and throughout people's careers, career guidance should extend beyond moments of crisis and be embedded throughout the career lifespan. Career development professionals, by supporting individuals and influencing career ecosystems, are well-positioned to foster a more equitable and adaptable world of work. As career shocks become more prevalent, embracing empowering tools is essential for effective career support.

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