> Holistic career conversations consider the whole person, acknowledging that life and work are inevitably interconnected.

HOW HOLISTIC CAREER CONVERSATIONS HELP US TO THRIVE AT WORK

KATE MANSFIELD WRITES ABOUT NAVIGATING THE OVERLAP BETWEEN CAREER AND PERSONAL ISSUES

A word I often notice people using when talking about their careers is the word is *'should'.*

Traditional career conversations focus on skills, strengths and aspirations. In the workplace, managers may be reluctant to engage in a dialogue about career-related issues that they lack the skills and confidence to navigate. Individuals, like Jana (see the Case Study below), may be concerned that sharing personal issues limits career development.

Yet there is a risk that if career conversations focus too narrowly, without acknowledging how life impacts career, information essential to the ability to thrive at work may be overlooked. It is a bit like ignoring the 'elephant in the room'. At an organisational level, this could contribute to disengagement, burnout and the loss of talented individuals who feel that their needs do not align with the needs of the organisation.

But what if we could have better conversations that aligned the needs of personal and professional with benefits for all?

What is a holistic career conversation?

Holistic career conversations acknowledge the overlap between emotion and life issues and go beyond a traditional career discussion focused on skills, strengths and aspirations. (Nathan et al., 2025)

At Career Counselling Services (CCS), we define holistic career coaching as a process which enables people to identify and utilise their resources to make career-related decisions and manage career-related issues (Nathan & Hill, 2006).

Holistic career conversations consider the whole person, acknowledging that life and work are inevitably interconnected. Career-related issues may be age- or gender-related and include challenges such as mental and physical health, family, caring responsibilities, neurodivergence, menopause, bereavement, divorce and more. These holistic issues can impact on an individual's career well-being at work, engagement, motivation and performance.

There are many benefits to this approach. Rather than view life issues negatively, a holistic approach encourages individuals to notice what has been gained from life experience in the form of additional strengths resulting from parenting, caring, or because they are neurodivergent. It can empower them to integrate work and life better, and to feel more motivated and engaged.

For employers, this approach can encourage more inclusive and cognitively diverse workplaces, with better alignment of individual and organisational goals.

How can we approach a holistic career conversation?

'Offering a holistic "career-related" approach implies the need to acknowledge and respect any emotion or personal issue which arises in a work-based conversation, but also to know the limits of this approach and to refer to someone for more specialised help if the personal issue becomes the dominant consideration.' (Nathan et al., 2025)

Career professionals can play a vital role in these holistic career conversations, yet mindful of boundaries and the scope of their professional role, they may be cautious about straying too deeply into life issues. To be clear, a holistic approach does not advocate for direct or misguided questioning about life issues or to encourage deep exploration.

The approach described in-depth in *The Holistic Career Coaching Handbook* (Nathan et al., 2025), instead enables people to explore their strengths, skills and aspirations *and* to consider ways in which their needs and aspirations can align to their wider life issues and needs.

Career coaches, as well as managers, can cultivate

CASE STUDY

JANA, 51

Let's take Jana, 51, a Manager within the Healthcare sector. Jana's Manager is aware that she is highly skilled and wants to develop. He has designated her as a director in the team succession plan. She feels she should be grateful for the opportunity to 'move up the career ladder'. What her manager is unaware of is that Jana has an elderly father living alone who is increasingly reliant on her; she has 2 teenage children studying GCSEs and A-levels and is struggling with sleeping due to menopausal symptoms. Jana feels increased responsibility at work will tip her over the edge but worries that turning down the opportunity will be career limiting.

psychological safety through establishing a deep foundation of trust, rapport, empathy and listening with curiosity, not judgement. It is from here that individuals can explore what really matters and how career and life can co-exist in the best ways for them.

Practical tips for the career professional
The following ideas may be useful in helping to sensitively and professionally navigate these conversations with those we support.

- **Set clear boundaries and objectives** for the career conversation. The goals should be focused on career-related issues or career-related decisions, which enable the dominant issues to remain career-focused and on track.
- **Respect emotion** with empathy and create an environment of psychological safety where individuals can acknowledge the impact of personal challenges upon their work. This can be cultivated through active listening and reflecting what has been said. Simple questions are often the most powerful in making space for other issues to emerge: *'Is there anything else?'*
- **Adopt a strengths-based approach**, enabling your clients to notice positives. We are often conditioned to notice deficiencies and gaps, particularly if experiences shared are accompanied by negative emotion.
- **Stay aware of your own biases** – to what extent have you considered the strengths of diverse groups of employees and what they might contribute because of varied life experiences?
- **Educate clients about transition** – building on a strengths based-approach, the work of William Bridges, teaches us that personal growth is gained through the experience of transition. Recognising that life issues are not fixed can help individuals avoid knee-jerk reactions and plan more long-term goals.
- **Encourage self-care in those you support** – career growth shouldn't come at the cost of well-being; we can help those we support to see self-care as an essential career management skill that benefits their career, not just a nice-to-have.
- **Use career tools wisely –** let assessments and frameworks support, not control, the process. Any career tools used should have a clearly considered rationale and purpose, linked to the individual's goals for the career coaching, and used sensitively for the individual's own insight and to aid reflection.

Finally, it feels appropriate to conclude by noting the importance of our own self-care when we are navigating holistic career conversations. During this privileged yet demanding work, we will be exposed to people's feelings and emotions. Ensuring that we, as career professionals, have support such as supervision and shared learning groups is essential to managing our own well-being in our work.

For a full exploration of a holistic career coaching approach, please see *The Holistic Career Coaching Handbook* (Nathan et al., 2025).

References:

Bridges, W. and Bridges, S., (2019). Transitions: *Making Sense of Life's Changes*. New York: Balance.

Nathan, R., (2025). *The Holistic Career Coaching Handbook: A Guide for Managers and Employers.* Abingdon: Taylor & Francis.

Nathan, R. and Hill Estate, L., (2005). *Career Counselling*. London: Sage.

> "At Career Counselling Services (CCS), we define holistic career coaching as a process which enables people to identify and utilise their resources to make career-related decisions and manage career-related issues (Nathan & Hill, 2006)."

Kate Mansfield, RCDP is a Career Coach and Director of Career Counselling Services, who offer individual career coaching, career coach training and career solutions to employers.

kate@career-counselling-services.co.uk