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## **Career guidance in challenging times: An investment in the future**

### **Interview with Pedro Moreno da Fonseca, ILO Technical Specialist on Lifelong Learning, and Glenda Quintini, Senior Economist Specializing in Skills and Adult Learning Policies at the OECD**

#### **Introduction by host:**

Welcome to the ILO Employment podcast series, Global Challenges, Global Solutions: The Future of Work.

I'm your host Tom Netter, and today we're going to look at the increasing importance of career guidance in the labour market.

The world of work is being buffeted by a host of disruptive trends. From public health crises, to accelerated automation, digitalization, and climate change, labour markets are under stress.

This is causing rapid expansion in the kinds of skills and re-skilling needed to help workers stay employed, and enterprises stay competitive.

Career guidance has emerged as an essential element in both recovery plans and forward-looking strategies for navigating through such disruptions.

And in both developed and emerging economies, there's increasing demand for career guidance services such as labour market information, job-search assistance, counseling services, reskilling opportunities, and training.

Here to discuss this today are my guests Pedro Moreno da Fonseca, ILO technical specialist on lifelong learning, and Glenda Quintini, Senior economist specializing in skills and adult learning policies at the OECD.

We're going to examine the role of career guidance services in helping individuals to achieve their potential, make economies more efficient and societies more inclusive.

Pedro, Glenda, welcome to the programme.

**Tom: Let's start with Glenda. Can you define what we mean by career guidance? Also, can you tell us how the current waves of disruptions have impacted the nature and delivery of career guidance in both developed and developing countries?**

**Glenda:** Thank you, Tom. Yes. Career guidance describes the services that help young people of all ages to manage their careers and to make education, training, and labour market choices. It allows them to reflect on their ambitions, on their aspirations, on their interest, look at their qualifications and skills, and see how they relate to where they want to be in the labour market. It includes career information, personalized guidance and counseling, skills assessment, and developing careers management skills. Despite this very important role, only 40 per cent of adults access career guidance every year, and only half of 15-year-olds tell us that they have seen a career guidance advisor.

Now, during the pandemic, the demand increased, particularly from the side of newly unemployed workers, of workers in sectors that were particularly affected by the pandemic and also young people who were in the last year of schooling. Despite this, the offer was lower, so in fact, there was less availability of services because of the lockdowns. Also, many of those services were moved online. From 6 per cent of online services before the pandemic, 80 per cent of providers reported they were providing services online during the pandemic, and most of them expect that this will continue. After the pandemic, most of them, half of them consider that a lot of the provision will be virtual.

**Tom: Thank you, Glenda. Now, over to Pedro. You have some comments on the growing centrality of guidance and how the approach has changed.**

**Pedro:** Yes. I can pick up just directly on what Glenda said. I think that, one, the data we gathered during the pandemic has shown us that there was a very unequal access also to career guidance. The digital divide really has shown its teeth. We identified a great need, in fact, for people to be supported in accessing digital services in many countries. But, I would like also to focus on aspects linked to the evolution of this idea of what career guidance is. I mean, the approach itself to career guidance has evolved a lot from this type of medical approach where individuals are seen as having deficits, problems that need to be corrected so that they fit into a job, to a more empowering approach based on the acknowledgement of people's potentials in which you try to work on them, create self-awareness, help people pursue activities which are meaningful for themselves.

In a way, the services that we have now are more truly centered around the individual with a holistic vision of the person. Also, trying to avoid transferring the full responsibility of what is their careers to the person. So, there is an understanding that there needs to be an enabling environment. Career guidance is not the silver bullet, let's put it like this.

**Tom: Thanks, Pedro. These rapidly changing mega trends roiling labour markets such as increased digitalization, changes in work organization, greening of jobs among others, and unforeseen disruptors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have posed unique challenges for career related decision-making, by both young people and adults. How might the career guidance and counselling needs of young job seekers differ from those of adults and, or older workers who might be moving between jobs? Glenda?**

**Glenda:** Yes, absolutely. Obviously in the context of these mega trends, the needs are changing. Young people are making more decisions, because they're staying in education far longer, and they're also facing a very dynamic labour market. They need to prepare for frequent changes in jobs later in their career. And older adults are also affected because technological advances, the green transition are changing the way we do things, the tasks at work, or jobs and skills are disappearing or radically changing so they need upskilling and reskilling, and they need guidance for this. People are working longer, and they are also moving between countries more frequently. There's new forms and ways of working, which also mean that individuals are expected to take responsibility for their own education and training. Finally, guidance is essential for recognizing and validating the skills that older adults might have acquired outside of education.

**Tom: Again, thanks, Glenda. Now, Pedro, can you give us a few words about youth and adults? What do they need?**

**Pedro:** Part of it is quite common sense. I mean, youth are more like an empty glass, whereas adults have their glass at least half full, so they have different needs. In a way, what young people need is really more based on impartial information about occupation, instead of being informed by biased opinions, many times by family members. They need to understand the pathways to get to these occupations. They need experiential learning opportunities about the world of work. Frequently, especially young girls, might also need role models so that they understand that they can do any number of activities in the labour market.

Adults, on the other hand, they need to make sense of their pathways. Many times, they are in slumps in their careers, in the middle of their careers. They need to map opportunities for change. They need to see how they can reskill, pursue different choices that they might have. Sometimes they need to transform their vision of themselves and what they can do, which means that activities like individual counseling and this integration that that Glenda talked about with recognition of prior learning with flexible learning options acquires a great importance. So, very briefly, I would say these are the differences.

**Tom: Thanks, Pedro. In the wake of the pandemic, what do you see as the arc of future developments in career guidance services, Glenda?**

**Glenda:** Well, I think we've talked about the negative implications of digitalization on career guidance provision, but there's also some positives. For example, we see how AI has the potential to enable the provision of personalized career guidance at scale. Using AI makes it possible to build an individual skills profile and comparing to the skills required in available jobs. We know how this is possible, because AI allows for analyzing a larger set of data, looking, not just at qualification, but also at the skills background of individuals and the activities they might have done outside the labour market, volunteering, or skills they've acquired in everyday life, and then match it to what is needed. Similarly, AI can allow an analysis of skill requirements of different training programmes. So, what skills are developed by training programs so that we can use those training programmes to fill skills gaps?

**Tom: Again, thank you, Glenda. Pedro, can you talk a little bit about the context of career guidance such as HR, social protection, flexible training, lifelong learning?**

**Pedro:** In terms of what the future may bring, I think it'll be very important to have career guidance embedding itself in the context where it might be relevant, and where eventually there's less awareness about its potential, what the activities can do. I'm thinking concretely about employing career guidance tools and methodologies in human resource management, embedding them in social protection services of many types, really having career guidance supporting incentive systems to training. For example, looking at what's

happening in the European Union. That's the path, let's say that the individual incentives to training are taking. For example, embedding in outreach activities, in recognition and validation of skills. I think a lot of the future developments have to do with this smart utilization of career guidance where it is relevant and where it can actually reach the people.

**Tom: Now, what role can career guidance services play in promoting more just and inclusive societies? In other words, promoting social justice. What solutions, options exist for those countries with less resources to commit or invest in career guidance compared to middle-and-higher income countries? Glenda?**

**Glenda:** Yes. I think career guidance can help address some of the inequalities we're observing. For example, for young people, career guidance is very important to address differences in socioeconomic backgrounds. We know that children from disadvantaged backgrounds make worse choices because they lack the support and information that their better off counterparts can gather from their families and from the broader social network. Even among adults, social and family networks are very important to gather information about opportunities in terms of their careers.

In our survey, for example, what we find is that there are still very large gaps between socioeconomic groups in terms of access to career guidance. The largest gap is found between older individuals and younger ones. Twenty-two percentage points difference in participation in career guidance, differences between those living in cities and in rural areas to the disadvantage of the rural dwellers and differences between the high- and low- educated, and men and women in some cases. For example, workers in jobs that are really threatened by automation receive less career guidance than those in occupations at a lower risk, which again means that we are not reaching those who need career guidance the most.

**Tom: Thanks, Glenda. Now over to you Pedro. Can you talk a little bit about career in low-income countries or contexts?**

**Pedro:** Yeah, sure, Tom. Let's say that guidance has to be a bit of a component in wider strategies and career guidance on its own will not solve the issues related to social justice and social inequalities. It needs to be part of wider strategies that include employment policies, social protection policies, et cetera. I think it's important to acknowledge that lower income countries have completely different contexts. Frequently they have higher demographic growth, and much bigger informal economy. Institutional development tends to be weak, there might not be an organized public employment service. You don't have career guidance. You might not have labour market information. It's important to identify the opportunities, the entry points to provide support.

In addition, you tend to have also substantial cultural differences about what work means, how you develop, what career might mean. It might have a much less individualistic society, more oriented towards family, towards the community. That needs to be taken into account. I think that it's also important to acknowledge that economic informality and learning and working in economic informality tends to be a career strategy in itself, in these environments. While thinking about the intervention of the ILO decent work remains a key target, these interventions need to properly acknowledge that there are local opportunity structures that people use. These opportunity structures need to be understood and need to be dealt with when you are providing the career supports. I'll leave it at this.

**Tom: Okay. Thanks. Well, this brings me to my final question. It's been said that career guidance should be seen as an investment rather than a cost. Can you elaborate on this, Glenda? Also, looking ahead, what are some of the policy recommendations on the role of career guidance, both in terms of recovery from recent disruptions, but also in addressing future challenges?**

**Glenda:** Yes. The majority of evaluations of career guidance activities show, in fact, that it has very strong, positive economic, education and then social outcomes for young people, for example. We see that there is a wage premium that goes with the idea that it should be seen as an investment. The wage premium of 10 to 20 per cent for young adults that have participated as teenagers in career guidance and also better outcomes in terms of math scores and more positive attitude towards school. For adults as well, we see that providing a personalized career development roadmap increases the chances of finding employment or entering education or training. To achieve this, of course, the quality of the provision matters a lot.

What we are seeing in terms of qualities that it's necessary to establish quality standards in the service delivery that describe the basic requirements for how career guidance is provided, setting up accreditation against these standards could be a requirement, for example, for funding received by the public purse. It's important to professionalize career guidance advisors through competency frameworks. Some countries already have that to standardize the offer and to allow adults also to understand who they are consulting. And then using good information, making sure that career guidance advisors have access to good information and timely on how labour market needs are changing.

**Tom: Thank you, Glenda. Now, Pedro, some final reflections on long-term impacts and the need to understand outcomes and impacts better.**

**Pedro:** Yeah. Perhaps I'll also focus a little about bit about other types of impacts. This general purpose, this big objective, for example, of creating more resilient societies, more environmentally aware societies, these objectives can be strongly empowered by career

guidance, because you can use career guidance to develop, let's say green attitudes, more civic attitudes, increase cooperation and solidarity in the world of work and inside of work environments. For example, this integration with human resource management that I mentioned just a while ago. It can contribute to, let's say, to generate a better cooperation between employers and workers inside of organizations. It can help establish also learning pathways that contribute to create true learning organizations that can deal better with productivity and innovation challenges. I also think that career guidance tends to have a very strong effect in terms of enabling labour market mobility, so directly contributing to break glass ceilings in the labour market, for example, for women, for people with lower income by increasing the information that people have access to, and also by increasing their capacity to act in the labor market.

As you said, the impacts and the outcomes of career guidance are still under-researched, so a lot of investment should exist in this area so that we have better monitoring and evaluation of systems, because we need to know really what works better with whom, in which context. For example, having trace studies on a more regular basis to understand how people have impacts of career guidance over their lifetimes and careers are an important type of research that can be undertaken.

## **Outro**

**Pedro, Glenda, thanks for this highly interesting overview of the role of career guidance services in today's labour economy.**

**So, where are we now in terms of the role of career guidance? From today's interview, it's clear that while access to these services is available to many, for several groups of workers – low skilled, low-qualified workers, people with disabilities, migrants, refugees and the self-employed – this remains out of reach.**

**We need to close these gaps and ensure that these critical services leave no one behind. In terms of meeting people's aspirations and in response to permanent changes in the nature of work and even the quest for social justice, one thing is clear: In career guidance is more important than ever.**

**I'm Tom Netter and you've been listening to the ILO Employment Policy Department podcast series, "Global Challenges, Global Solutions: The future of work". Thank you for your time.**