

NUDGE THEORY: SHOULD CAREER DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS HAVE A POSITION?



**NICKI MOORE
TAKES A FRESH
LOOK AT NUDGE
THEORY**

A new interest in Nudge Theory (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009) has left me both excited and wary about how easy it is to influence the behaviour of others. There are issues here for career development practitioners to consider.

Trainee career development practitioners need to be able to demonstrate that they ‘understand [their] role in influencing and informing policy’ and ‘understand the role of career development in social mobility and the raising of aspiration’ (CDI, 2019). A knowledge of Nudge Theory can help us to fulfil both requirements, Nudge Theory however, is not without its critics. The *CDI Code of Ethics* (CDI, 2019) acts as a lens through which to view Nudge Theory and ensure its appropriate use when developing and delivering career development services.

What is Nudge Theory?

Nudge Theory was developed by economic theorists to explain the often-irrational choices which people make. The theory proposes an approach which can be used to influence behaviours through positive reinforcement and indirect suggestions rather than through instruction or legislation.

Governments have adopted this approach to create positive changes resulting in healthy, socially acceptable and economically advantageous behaviours. David Cameron was a big advocate of Nudge Theory and established the world’s first Nudge Unit in 2010 aimed at improving public services and saving money.

The most famous example of using nudges to change people’s behaviour was the use of small transfers of house flies added to the inside of men’s urinals in Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam. Really. This inexpensive action had the effect of improving ‘men’s aim’ and reducing unwanted and unhealthy mess on the floors by 80%. This practice has now been adopted in many public men’s facilities around the world. People who engineer changes in people’s behaviour using nudges are referred to as choice architects.

Career development practitioners as ‘choice architects’

Nudge Theory suggests that if we understand people’s approach to decision making, we can influence it to improve their lives. Nudge Theory is targeted at those humans who make decisions based on rules of thumb (Thaler and Sunstein refer to this group as humans, as opposed to econs who make reflective decisions). These rules of thumb (Thaler and Sunstein refer to these rules of thumb as heuristics) provide us with quick solutions to decision making which avoid a great deal of rational

thinking but leave human decision-makers fallible. Whilst they can be useful in decision making, they can also lead to biases.

These biases can lead to negative consequences and have implications for career decision making, social justice and social equity. If you only experience failure as a child, your decisions may be based on the option which you think you are least likely to fail at. If you fail a maths test when you were young, you might believe you are bad at maths when in fact the failure was down to a bad cold the previous day. If your female school friends are all choosing childcare or hairdressing options, it becomes very difficult to go against the group norm and choose to become an engineer. By applying nudges, Thaler and Sunstein suggest that choice architects can influence those decisions.

So how do nudges work in career development?

Nudge Theory is not about reducing people’s options but rather it is about influencing their decision-making processes. This approach can be used in many positive ways to change a client’s career-related behaviour, for example, sending a reminder text the day before a careers interview can improve attendance. This kind of nudge is now regularly and successfully used to improve attendance at medical and dental appointments and reduces costs (Hallsworth *et al.*, 2015).

We can imagine a campaign in a sixth form which reminds students to complete their UCAS applications based on a running total of the numbers of students who have already done this. How influential would it be if teachers in a school had regular case studies prepared by their colleagues about how they were incorporating careers work into their curriculum subjects, thus nudging them in the direction of incorporating careers in to their own subjects?

Nudge Theory and ethical practice?

The *CDI Code of Ethics* acts a lens through which we can view Nudge Theory.

From a positive perspective, Nudge Theory could help us to fulfil the requirement to provide accessible services which are available to all. Text messages to prompt people to attend their careers interview would be a good example of this. Likewise, the wise application of Nudge Theory could be a great force for equality, social justice and social mobility by providing nudges which challenge status quo biases and mindless choosing. Campaigns such as ‘This Girl Can’ can have a positive effect on the choices which girls make about healthy behaviour and career choice, thus improving health equality.



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The *Code of Ethics* however, sets out standards for career development services to be provided impartially, transparently and in a trustworthy way and this is where Nudge Theory could be problematic. The liberal paternalism which underpins Nudge Theory suggests that it can be used to enact policies and processes which are deemed in the best interests of citizens. This does chime with the statutory guidance provided to schools and colleges which explicitly states that information, advice and guidance should be provided in an impartial manner, in a way which ‘the person giving it considers will promote the best interests of the pupils to whom it is given’ (DFE, 2018, p. 10).

However, it could be argued that Nudge Theory can be coercive and manipulative in that it creates change in such a way that it is not transparent and obvious (Hansen and Jespersen, 2017). Think of the urinals in Schiphol airport for example. Likewise, it is possible to imagine how the strategic placing of university prospectuses at eye level and information about apprenticeships at floor level could be less than impartial where it is done to increase applications to university at the expense of applications for apprenticeships, even if senior leaders genuinely believe that this is in a student’s interests.

Finally, the *Code of Ethics* makes it explicit that as career development practitioners we have a level of accountability which always requires us to ‘act in the interests of society and exercise integrity, honesty and diligence’. It is in this regard that we need to be mindful

of Nudge Theory and use it wisely, honestly and with due diligence to promote the interests of our clients and to monitor our behaviours accordingly.

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Nicki Moore RCDP is a senior lecturer in career development at the University of Derby