

## Ethics Case study: Discussing weight in a careers discussion

### 1. Identify the problem

You are a Careers Coach working for an outsourcing company in London mainly dealing with professionals who are being made redundant. You are asked to see a client who has been put on a programme by a major international company where she has been for many years since leaving university with a 2:1 degree in business. You look at her paperwork and everything seems straightforward. In the last couple of years, she has had some non-specific sickness but her references from her employer are good and she has been involved with some prestigious projects during her employment. As part of her redundancy package she has been signed up for 5 sessions with a Careers Coach and 3 workshops of her choosing.

When your client enters the room for the preliminary discussion, she has a professional appearance though you notice she is very overweight. She tells you she is upset about the redundancy and is looking for your support.

You are aware of there is data showing that those who are overweight find it harder to get work and can suffer from discrimination or bias, both conscious and unconscious. From her paperwork you can see your client has much to offer, is a loyal employee and you want to help her find work which will she will find satisfying and make the most of her talents. This is heightened when you find out that she has a mortgage and that the redundancy package is adequate, but will not last long.

You are unsure about whether you should make her aware that she will find it harder to find work because of her size, in fact it feels like deception to keep this information from her and you are not sure how to respond in her best interests. Indeed, she has already been to several interviews and not been hired. One potential employer looked at her online portfolio but did not interview her and she subsequently tells you that she never puts her photograph on anything. You are aware that many employers look at online profiles and if there is no photo they question why this would be, again putting your client at a disadvantage. You want to ask her about why she feels discomfort with her photograph but do not want to risk damaging the relationship at this preliminary stage.

You became a Careers Coach because you wanted to help people and feel everyone should be valued for who they are rather than their acceptability to society. The injustice for your client, in that she will be facing an uphill struggle on the basis of her looks you find unpalatable when she obviously has potential and value.

*What type of a problem is it?*

1. Professional – There is a dilemma between wanting to help the client and knowing that being overweight is a stigma in today's society making it more difficult to find work.
2. Societal – Although there are many forms of discrimination, these can be addressed head on as they are seen as not changeable for the client. This is not the same for

weight discrimination as it is perceived as changeable over time and self-inflicted. Talking about weight discrimination at work is often seen as “taboo”.

## **2. Apply the Code of Ethics**

*Principle 2 Accountability* - Members must act in the interests of society and at all times exercise integrity, honesty and diligence.

*Principle 3 Autonomy* - Members must encourage individual autonomy in making decisions and always act in the individual’s best interests.

*Principle 7 Duty of Care* – to clients, colleagues, organisations and self. Members have a duty of care and are expected always to act in the best interests of their clients.

*Principle 8 Equality* - Members must actively promote equality and diversity and work towards the removal of barriers to personal achievement resulting from prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination.

## **3. Review professional literature**

You do a literature search to try to find out if there are any guidelines or codes of practice that might support you with your discussion. You find that although there is a plethora of literature about weight discrimination at work, particularly for women. The first papers are from the 1960s and they show being overweight as detrimental at every stage in employment. Online you find articles in HR magazines and journals about how obesity impacts the workforce, stigmatisation and legal implications for organisations. There is, however, nothing written from the career practitioner’s point of view about how to manage a careers discussion with an overweight client.

## **4. Consult with experienced others**

At a supervision meeting with your colleagues you raise this issue and sense they seem to feel discomfort at discussing the topic. Most of the advisors in the room have come across this issue before and have different ideas as to how to manage it, but they all agree that they would not take the direct approach of telling the client about weight discrimination. This sits uncomfortably with you, particularly as you have searched the literature, are so aware of the scale of the problem and you are not sure of the depth of your colleagues’ knowledge around the subject. You tell them that you feel you are being less than truthful with your client and you are met with responses that it is beyond your remit, with warnings of “not to go there!”

You contact your professional body who acknowledge that there is weight discrimination in the workplace and say they will do their best to support you but acknowledge that they, like you, have no guidelines as to how to manage the discussion.

## **5. Generate potential courses of action.**

*Should you address the problem directly?*

Though ultimately this course of action would make the client aware of the difficulties she was facing then you could risk client rapport, cause offence or damage her self-esteem. You feel this might already be fragile because of her insistence on never using her photograph. You know she has had some time off sick and by reading the literature you have found out

more about the link between obesity and health, including increased risk of mental health problems. You fear this course of action could damage her wellbeing leaving her more vulnerable and less able to find a new job.

#### *Exploration of barriers*

After establishing a good working relationship you could encourage the client to think about what is stopping her finding work and help her identify the reasons why she feels unable to find employment. Taking the conversation at the client's pace, with the use of coaching techniques could lead to greater self-awareness which, in turn, may lead her to either do her own research or even raise the topic with you.

#### *Develop skills in difficult questioning*

Using a range of questioning styles including the non-directive and socratic style of questioning can lead to self-awareness by the client and techniques such as "What if" questioning and "3 positions" - where the client is asked to visualise herself in your shoes as an advisor and give herself advice, can be useful. Whilst usefully applied techniques can lead to insight for the client it is important that you remain non-judgemental and be mindful of your own expectations during the discussion.

#### *Work on the positives*

She has a good degree, relevant experience and great references. By focussing on these you could help raising her self-esteem which will make her a better job seeker and more resilient if she is turned down. Her increased confidence will also make her come across better at interview.

#### *Talk about appearance*

When you have rapport and trust with the client you could discuss appearance obliquely, such as dress for interview and how she can make the most of what she has got. This should be handled sensitively and you, as a coach, should gauge the level of discomfort for the client throughout the conversation making adjustments accordingly. You could encourage her to do her own research around appearance at interview and beyond.

#### *Focus on wellbeing*

Encourage the client to think about looking after her health for finding work and maintaining employment. Many workplaces now have schemes for helping workers with health and wellbeing, such as gym membership or longer lunch breaks to encourage employees to go outside with both CIPD and HR as key to introducing this to the workplace for the benefit of employees. This indirect route into the conversation could be an introduction to the topic and should again, be handled with vigilance and delicacy.

#### *Group sessions*

You advise her to attend one of the group sessions that are taking place on interview techniques. You are aware that there will be information given on appearance for interview and feel that some information on the topic could be imparted which would prompt reflection on the part of the client.

## *Reflection*

You appreciate that reflecting during the discussion is necessary to manage the conversation effectively and maintain rapport. You are therefore constantly reviewing and responding to the client's needs. After each discussion you take time to reflect to see how the conversation could have been handled differently. This reflection is helpful in protecting against unconscious bias and in developing new strategies. Having the opportunity to take this issue to supervision is also helpful in protecting against unsupported judgement of the client.

### **6. Select the most appropriate course**

Although you find it regrettable you decide that you could not raise the topic with the client directly unless she brings it up, though this does not sit well with you and wish you could.

You decide that you will opt for a combination of the other strategies and try to make a difference that way.

### **7. Evaluate the selected course**

#### *Test of justice*

Do you feel comfortable with the course of action you have decided upon? Although you do not feel entirely happy about not being direct with your client about the issue of weight at work, you think you have to balance this with societal norms. You consider this in terms of if your family member or close friend were your client would you be happy with this course of action. You decide you would prefer a gentler approach of using a combination of the other strategies (though you accept, it will be more difficult to assess her awareness of the extent of weight discrimination).

#### *Test of accountability*

Because of the sensitive and often deemed offensive nature of discussing the impact of weight at work you feel that if you were to address the topic directly and this was highlighted to your colleagues then they could see your handling of the situation as poor, beyond your remit and unprofessional.

#### *Test of universality*

You think that you would be prepared to advocate this course of action to other professionals as a way of dealing with the situation until society becomes open enough for a more direct discussion to take place.

In consultation with your colleagues you look at the implications for your client of taking this route. You decide that this is still a potentially risky course of action but better than the direct strategy and agree that this could be successful but care needs to be taken when even obliquely referring to this topic. You agree with them that you need to be prepared in case the client brings up the issue of weight discrimination at work and discuss how you will handle this discussion with sensitivity, using open ended questions leading to client self-reflection, making conclusions for themselves rather directly informing. When asked about how you will know if your intervention has been successful you reply that you will know this when the client has either brought up the topic with you for themselves or ultimately found work.

## 8. Implement the course

During the course of interviews, the client does not raise the subject of her weight and it does feel like an unspoken rule of the conversation that this cannot be mentioned, which is uncomfortable for both of you. You feel that she probably does have awareness at some level of the problem and you agree with her that a group session of interview preparation would be worthwhile. You have the sessions which seem to be working well and she has a positive attitude. Ultimately, however, she misses her last session with you and does not inform you why.

## 9. Monitor and evaluate

Throughout the process things seem to be progressing well for the client. She is taking more of an interest in her appearance and thanks to you she is aware of the strategies for finding work, improved her interpersonal skills, worked on her interview technique, re-written her CV and updated her online profile (though she still does not want to include a photograph). Missing her last appointment, however, leaves you with questions. You wonder if you pushed the boundaries a little too far in discussing appearance? Or perhaps she found out about weight discrimination at work and wondered why you did not inform her about this? Could she have done research and found out about weight discrimination and now feels despondent but unable to contact you for help as the topic went unacknowledged?

You later you find out that she did in fact get a new job and so did not need to come in for the last session. You are naturally very pleased about this but are left wondering if you were right not to talk about the topic directly ...

### Further reading:

[https://www.cipd.co.uk/images/health-well-being-agenda\\_2016-first-steps-full-potential\\_tcm18-10453.pdf](https://www.cipd.co.uk/images/health-well-being-agenda_2016-first-steps-full-potential_tcm18-10453.pdf)

Holden, C., Van Nieuwerburgh, C. and Yates, J. (2019). Um, Err, Ahh Careers Practitioners Perceptions of Weight: A Thematic Analysis. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 42(1), pp. 33-39. doi: 10.20856/jnicec.4206

Yates, J., Hooley, T., & Bagri, K. (2017). Good looks and good practice: the attitudes of career practitioners to attractiveness and appearance. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 45(5), 547-561. doi: 10.1080/03069885.2016.1237615.1237615

Yates, J., & Hooley, T. (2018). Advising on career image: perspectives, practice and politics. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 46(1), 27-38. doi: 0.1080/03069885.2017.1286635

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