Short Article

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Ethics in Canadian career development: Reflecting on lessons learned

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Abstract

The Canadian Career Development context is presented as a case example of how a professional code of ethics can be developed, disseminated, and regularly renewed, as a tool to strengthen ethical fitness. Using the four stages of learning model, the progression from unconscious incompetence through to unconscious competence is examined, illustrating the importance of a systematic approach to building awareness of relevant ethical codes, developing competencies in ethical decision-making, and engaging in open discussions about ethical dilemmas. This case example has applications to the UK and beyond as the challenges of non-regulated contexts, lack of awareness and support from employers and funders, and working under multiple ethical codes are also explored.

Keywords: ethical fitness, ethical practice, career development, career development practice

Introduction

Following a prescribed Code of Ethics is a cornerstone of professional practice (Otterlei, 2018). However, for Career Development Professionals (CDPs) in non-regulated occupations and sectors, regardless of a deep desire to be perceived as professional, and extensive efforts by professional associations and other organisations to provide ethical standards and guidelines, there remains a lack of consistency in awareness of those standards and implementing them into ethical practice. In this article, we offer a brief reflection on our experiences spanning the past four decades within the context of ethics training within the Canadian career development sector in the hopes our insights can support similar challenges facing professionals in the UK and beyond.

The Canadian career development context

Within Canada, since the mid-1990s, there has been a consistent focus on the professionalisation of the career development sector (Godden & Borgen, 2024). Several provincial professional associations were formed to support the emerging profession, with some developing their own unique Code of Ethics (e.g. British Columbia Career Development Association [BCCDA] now Western Canada Career Development Association [WCCDA]; Ontario Alliance of Career Development Practitioners [OACDP], the precursor to the Career Development Practitioners Certification Board of Ontario [CDPCBO]). Early professionalisation efforts included nation-wide consultation to inform the Standards and Guidelines (S&Gs) for Career Development Practitioners (S&Gs; McDonald, 2019), which included a Code of Ethics. In 2018, work began to update and expand the S&Gs and Code of Ethics (McDonald, 2019). This resulted in the first competency framework in the career development sector to align with the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and to include clearly defined standards that could be measured and evaluated to confirm entry-to-practice competencies for Career Development Professionals® (CDPs; Nova Scotia Career Development Association, 2026). In December 2024, the National Career Development Certification (NCDC) programme was launched (Hopkins et al., 2025) and, 1 year later, 977 Certified Career Development Practitioners® (CCDP®) have been conferred from 12 of the 13 provinces and territories, with many more applications currently being processed (Career Certification, 2025).

However, except for the province of Quebec, certification of CDPs is not required across Canada – certification remains voluntary (Godden & Borgen, 2024) and not fully embraced by employers or funders. As CDPs enter the sector from various other professional backgrounds and fields of work (Bezanson et al., 2009; CERIC, 2025), it is not safe to assume that they are operating from a shared code of ethics or standards of practice. As with the UK, although they tend to bring many transferable skills with them and their diverse work experience can be very valuable in supporting their clients' career exploration and development, their transferable skills may not be specific to the career development sector. Even at the leadership level, there is inconsistency in terms of attachment to the sector. Many leaders have been appointed from within and have a significant level of front-line experience, but may not have had any formal training in either career development practice or programme management; other leaders have been imported from other sectors and may bring well-developed leadership and management competencies but have little specific grounding in the theories, ethical principles, or standards of practice for CDPs (Pickerell & Redekopp, 2025).

Although the career development sector has made headway in Canada, despite having an established code of ethics for two decades, awareness of the code and formal adoption by organisations and/or professional associations remains mixed. Further, in Canada, there is currently no formal mechanism for adjudicating ethical issues, nor are there penalties for ethical breaches unlike in the UK where the Career Development Institute's (CDI) Ethics and Professional Standards Committee (EPSC) maintains the Code of Ethics and manages the complaint process (CDI, n.d.). In Canada and other contexts without a system in place for reporting and adjudicating ethical complaints, there is no clear consequence for unprofessional behaviour or other ethical violations.

'We don't know what we don't know': Why a code of ethics matters

Otterlei (2018) highlighted how ethical guidelines were among many components that make a profession just that – a 'profession.' The development of profession-specific ethical guidelines contributes to supporting the broader trust and legitimacy of the sector, as well as to maintaining quality assurance – an important element for publicly funded, client-focused industries like career development. Ethical codes have long been viewed as a method for balancing accountability to the public with the need for professional autonomy (Frankel, 1989).

The four stages of learning model originally developed by Noel Burch of Gordon Training International in the 1970s (Leader Lab, 2023) acknowledged that all learners begin in a state of not recognising their own incompetence – they are in the zone of *unconscious incompetence*. In this zone, they are not seeking new knowledge; neither are they concerned about acquiring new skills/competencies, nor consulting about ethical dilemmas, as they truly believe that all is well. This is imperative when discussing the importance of a Code of Ethics to the day-to-day practice of CDPs. Without exception, the CDPs whom we have taught, mentored, and worked alongside over the past several decades have all considered themselves to be both competent and ethical. We have yet to find a CDP who has a desire to harm their clients, their organisation, or their profession. However, ethical breaches and violations occur daily in practice, across occupations. One source reported that over 40% of working Canadians have witnessed an ethical violation in their workplace, yet less than half of them reported it (Tedesco, 2013). Within the career development sector, when asked what ethical codes they follow, many working CDPs are unaware of any formal codes to guide their work. Instead, they respond with statements like 'my personal code,' 'my internal compass,' or 'our organisation's code of conduct.'

Revisiting the four stages of learning model, the second stage is *conscious incompetence*. Sometimes this stage is reached through reflection (i.e. that internal compass indicates that something did not go as planned). Often, however, it is through observations by, or conversations with, others that ethical concerns surface. Such observations or conversations may be either informal or formal; for example, they may result from scheduled supervision or evaluation, invited consultation, or uninvited feedback from colleagues or clients. Regardless of what brings incompetence into consciousness, it is generally an uncomfortable experience. It is not uncommon for people in this stage to become defensive, deflect the feedback, or make excuses. It is only by working through this stage, to the third stage, conscious competence, that positive change will impact future practice.

Beyond 'print, post, and pray': Strengthening ethical fitness

A common criticism of ethical codes is that organisations, professional associations, and sectors simply print them, post them, and then pray that nothing goes wrong (Ethics Resource Center, 2009). However, in an unregulated field, as career development is in many parts of the world (including much of Canada), one needs to step back even further in building ethical fitness. Such *fitness* includes ensuring awareness of ethical principles and standards of practice that are intended to guide the day-to-day work of CDPs, setting personal and professional boundaries to help avoid ethical dilemmas, and engaging in skill development to help address dilemmas when they occur.

Ethical codes are not useful guides to practice if CDPs are unaware of their existence. Because CDPs come from a variety of professional backgrounds, it is important to introduce a Code of Ethics early on, before the CDP even begins to see clients. It needs to be a key component of orientation for all employees within the organisation, so that everyone is aware of expected standards and the process for addressing ethical dilemmas and concerns.

Whether or not CDP certification is a requirement or voluntary, training on ethics and a formal evaluation of competency developed through that training, is essential. Our experience in Canada has demonstrated that if a professional association required a 10-hour ethics course, individuals pursuing certification sought out the bare minimum to meet the certification requirement; they would not take a 20-hour course. When our national certification removed the training requirement, focusing solely on demonstration of competencies through a structured interview and examination, interest and enrolment in even the 10-hour courses dropped significantly. This illustrates the important role that sector leaders, funders, and employers have in ensuring that CDPs are aware of ethical principles and standards and consistently engage in ethical practice.

However, beyond a solid introduction to ethical practice, keeping ethics top of mind and strengthening ethical fitness requires ongoing training and support. Within Canada, we have used a wide range of mechanisms to do this, including blogs and newsletter articles published by professional associations and career development thought leaders. Conference presentations (including pre- and post-conference workshops) have offered important opportunities for ongoing ethics-related professional development, especially when introducing the revised Code of Ethics, launched in 2021. Integrating ethics as a topic in introductory training for CDPs and offering ongoing continuing education training through webinars, in-house workshops, lunch-and-learns, and online discussion groups have, together, contributed to raising awareness and building ethical competency.

Moving anyone from an ethical place of conscious incompetence to conscious competence, however, requires safety and mutual respect. As mentioned, the tendency for someone who has become aware of their own incompetence is to become defensive, closed to further feedback, and inclined to hide. CDPs do not intentionally set out to be unethical. Rather, they encounter ethical dilemmas, where there is no clear 'right' answer. If they feel safe, and if they have been trained to expect dilemmas, to seek supervision, to consult with others, and to openly discuss the dilemmas they face, they can engage in conversations that will offer them multiple perspectives and opportunities to try out different ethical solutions and, also, to reflect on what worked well, what did not, and how a similar

situation could be handled better in the future. This, of course, requires that there are qualified supervisors and managers to facilitate those conversations. Given the diversity of career pathways to the career development sector, many managers/supervisors may be unfamiliar with the Code of Ethics and ill-equipped to support their employees to effectively navigate ethical dilemmas.

It is not 'one and done'

The fourth stage of the four stages of learning model is *unconscious competence*. This can be a challenging stage, especially for managers and supervisors who are unconsciously working to standards that they cannot clearly articulate to others; this is a bit like asking your grandmother to share a favourite recipe with you – she adds ingredients so naturally that she cannot list them or specify quantities!

For ethics to effectively influence day-to-day practice, ethical codes need to be regularly reviewed and adjusted to reflect changes within the profession and society overall. As already noted, the original Canadian code (published in 2004) was revised in 2021. It is currently undergoing another revision, with a specific focus on Artificial Intelligence (AI) and will be linked to other relevant sections of the current Code of Ethics and the National Competency Profile. From feedback at an initial focus group on the draft section on AI, CDPs stressed the need for a handbook with examples and scenarios of how to work with ethical dilemmas (i.e. to put the Code into action). With these changes, a new round of awareness-building will be needed – new blogs, articles, conference presentations, workshops, and revised courses.

In addition, given the diversity of roles and work settings where Canadian CDPs are employed (Blanchard & Taylor, 2024), many CDPs are concurrently working under multiple codes of ethics. For example, a career educator within the K-12 educational system may also hold their teacher certification and thus be subject to both the ethical codes for teachers and CDPs. The same situation can arise with CDPs who are also certified as a Chartered Professional in Human Resources (CPHR) or Certified Vocational Rehabilitation Professional (CVRP). Further, many CDPs hold certifications through international bodies (e.g. International Coaching Federation). The appropriate navigation of multiple codes of ethics and other jurisdictional legislation presents an added layer of complexity.

Some of these certifying bodies require dedicated ethics training as part of their credential management and recertification processes; however, at the moment, Canada's national certification programme for career development professionals does not. Ethics remains one of the required core competencies, but it is not privileged.

Conclusion

The Canadian experience is not unique; it has many similarities to the career development landscape in the UK and other international contexts. We offer this reflection as an example of the complexity of setting ethical standards within the career development sector and integrating those standards into the day-to-day practice of professionals with widely differing educational backgrounds, roles, and responsibilities. As the four stages of learning framework reminds us, 'we don't know what we don't know.' To strengthen ethical practice,

a solid foundation that includes an ethical code that fits for the contemporary context is essential, but insufficient. Widespread awareness and acceptance of that code is crucial, with ample access to safe training and supervision where ethical dilemmas are normalised and ethical decision-making can be practised. However, without mechanisms in place to ensure consistent and universal use of that code, and to address complaints about ethical violations and breaches, abiding by any Code of Ethics will remain voluntary and difficult to monitor and sustain.

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