



Online Group Employment Counselling During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Role of Attitudes Toward Online Counselling

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RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 pandemic, community-based employment support organizations in Quebec, Canada have had to reorganize their services very abruptly to keep providing them. In these employment support organizations, services are notably provided in group counselling. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some of these organizations have decided to offer online group services while others have not. Based on an online survey (N = 149), this article has two objectives: 1) to investigate whether attitudes toward online counselling have influenced the choice to implement online group employment counselling during the pandemic; and 2) to investigate whether attitudes toward online counselling influence the intention to pursue or not pursue online group employment counselling after the pandemic. Attitudes toward online employment group counselling were assessed using a French adaptation of the Attitudes Toward Online Therapy Questionnaire (Békés & Aafjes-van Doorn, 2020). This questionnaire contains six subscales: facilitating conditions, performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, attitudes toward using technology, and anxiety. The results indicate that 97 counsellors (65%) have implemented online group employment counselling during the pandemic and 52 have not. A total of 57 counsellors (38%) intend to pursue online group employment counselling after the pandemic, 48 (32%) are undecided and 43 (30%) do not intend to pursue this practice. Logistic multiple regressions indicated that performance expectancy, attitudes toward using technology, social influence and facilitative conditions, taken together, explained a large proportion of the choice to have implemented online practice during the pandemic and the intention to pursue this practice in the future (47% and 48% respectively).

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INTRODUCTION

During the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the unemployment rate degraded from a situation approaching full employment to a situation of 17.6% unemployment in Québec, Canada (April, 2020) (ISQ, 2021). Although the employment situation has improved since, the pandemic has particularly affected some groups, including young women and those without a first diploma (Bourdon et al., 2021) as well as certain industries (e.g. hospitality and catering, arts, aviation). Faced with numerous job losses, many people have needed career guidance or help in their job search. Due to the pandemic context and to government requalification policies and programs, many workers have also changed their career plans (Tremblay, 2021). Nevertheless, in this context, due to social and health constraints, community-based employment support organizations in Quebec have had to reorganize their services very abruptly to keep providing them to the population. In these employment support organizations, many programs are provided via group counselling. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some of these organizations have decided to offer online group services while others have not.

In this emerging context, we lack scientific knowledge about the motives that have guided organizations or counsellors in adopting, or not adopting, online group employment counselling. In the field of psychotherapy research, several authors have pointed out that psychotherapists may be reluctant to implement online practices due to practical, clinical and organizational considerations (Békés et al., 2021a; Poletti et al., 2021) or the lower perceived effectiveness of these practices (Schulze et al., 2019). According to many researchers, attitudes toward technology and online counselling are factors that can influence the acceptance of a technology and by the same token, the choice to implement or not implement online psychotherapy, or, more broadly, online psychological intervention (Poletti et al., 2021; Schröder et al., 2015). However, to our knowledge, these factors have not been investigated in online employment groups or in the specific national context of Québec, Canada.

Given that few studies have assessed the effects or benefits of online group employment or online group career counselling, it appears worthwhile to understand the factors that affect counsellors' acceptance of online group employment counselling, as well as their intentions to use this practice when the effects of the crisis recede. The few studies conducted on this practice suggest that online group employment counselling may have both advantages and limitations for the participants. Some results suggest that this mode of intervention provides social and informational support (Felgenhauer et al., 2021; Pordelan et al., 2020) and has significant positive

impacts on career development and on its components (career planning, positive career attitude) (Pordelan et al., 2020) as well as on career indecision (Thul-Sigler & Colozzi, 2019). It may also facilitate access to counselling, particularly for people with reduced mobility (Kozłowski & Holmes, 2014; Pordelan et al., 2020). Among the limitations of online career counselling group, Holmes and Kozłowski (2015) point out the perception of lower social presence in online groups as opposed to in face-to-face groups. This last study notes lower perceptions of safety and emotional connection, which, according to the authors, in turn hinders group cohesion. Herman (2010) notes a very high level of attrition, as only 20% of participants completed all the meetings. A difference in commitment also seems to emerge in contrast with face-to-face groups, but this observation needs to be validated by more comparative studies. Also, we acknowledge the research limitations on this subject, as very little research has focused on online group employment counselling and the samples of the reviewed studies are mainly composed of women attending university. A broader variety of educational and socio-demographic backgrounds are observed in the group employment counselling offered in Canada.

OBJECTIVES

As stated earlier, previous findings suggest that online group employment counselling may have both advantages and limitations for the populations using this service. It thus appears important to understand the factors that affect counsellors' acceptance of online group employment counselling, as well as their intention to use this practice after the pandemic. As such, this article has two objectives: 1) to investigate whether attitudes toward online counselling have influenced the choice to implement online group employment counselling during the pandemic; and 2) to investigate whether attitudes toward online counselling influence the intention to pursue or not pursue online group employment counselling after the pandemic.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This article draws on the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) framework (Venkatesh et al., 2003) as a comprehensive model to understand counsellors' choice to engage with and pursue online group employment counselling. This model has been used by many researchers, including to understand technology implementation in psychotherapy (Aafjes-van Doorn, Békés & Prout, 2021; Békés et al., 2021a; Békés & Aafjes-van Doorn, 2020). In this model, the concept

of acceptance is linked with positive attitudes toward such interventions. Attitudes toward using technology are defined as “an individual’s overall affective reaction to using a system” (Venkatesh et al., 2003: 455). This affective reaction may predict whether the person will use technology or not. The original UTAUT model is based on a comparison of eight models that integrate determinant variables of new technology acceptance and use. Venkatesh et al. (2003) incorporate the most empirically established personal and contextual elements of these models in their comprehensive model. Four factors were originally selected: performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitative conditions. In subsequent research, the model was extended to include other factors that have been found relevant to predict technology use and the intention to subsequently use (Békés et al., 2021a; Békés et al. 2021b; Békés & Aafjes-van Doorn, 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2019), namely anxiety about using technology and attitude toward using technology. Table 1 defines each of these factors, which form the theoretical basis of the Attitudes Toward Online Therapy Questionnaire described below.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The sample of this study included 149 French-speaking employment counsellors from the province of Québec, Canada who were recruited online via the four major provincial employment organizations’ association email lists. They completed an anonymous online survey between March and May 2021. Counsellors were eligible to participate in this research if they had provided group employment counselling sessions before or since the start of the pandemic. This inclusion criteria was state in the consent form at the beginning of the survey. Most of the participating counsellors identified as female (82%) while 14% identified as male

(13%) or trans (1%) (4.7% of the sample declined to answer). The average age of the counsellors was 39.49 years (SD = 11.53) and 81% were born in Canada. Only 9.7% of the counsellors in this study reported prior experience (i.e., before the start of the pandemic) with providing online group employment counselling. The present research was approved by the ethics board at the author’s institution.

ATTITUDES TOWARD ONLINE GROUP EMPLOYMENT COUNSELLING

To assess the counsellors’ attitudes toward online group employment counselling, the present study used a French adaptation of the Attitudes Toward Online Therapy Questionnaire (ATOTQ; Békés & Aafjes-van Doorn, 2020). The ATOTQ, which contains 22 items, is based on UTAUT (Venkatesh et al., 2003) and has been adapted to therapy by Békés and Aafjes-van Doorn (2020). For the aims of the current study, which addresses group employment counselling settings, we changed the words “online therapy” to “online group employment counselling” in each item. For example, the item “I enjoy doing online therapy” from the ATOTQ is worded as “I enjoy doing online group employment counselling” in our adaptation. The questionnaire used in this study measures six types of attitudes toward online group employment counselling: performance expectations (3 items), effort expectancy (3 items), social influence (3 items), facilitative conditions (3 items), attitudes toward using technology (4 items) and anxiety about using technology (5 items). Counsellors were asked to rate their level of agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. One additional item adapted from the ATOTQ was used to assess counsellor’s intention to pursue or not online group employment counselling after the pandemic. In the present study, alpha coefficient were .65 for performance expectancy, .55 for effort expectancy, .73 for social influence, .49 for facilitative conditions, .73 for attitudes toward technology, and .70 for anxiety.

FACTOR		DEFINITION
Individual level factors	Performance expectancy	Individual beliefs about how the use of technology will help them to perform better
	Effort expectancy	Degree of ease and perceived required effort associated with technology use: online counselling
	Anxiety about using technology	Degree of anxious behavior when it comes to using a technology (understood as an inhibitory factor when high)
	Attitudes toward technology	Degree of the individual’s overall affective reaction toward using a technology, here online group counselling
Social level factors	Social influence	Degree of how the individual believes that important others, such as employers or colleagues, think that they should use the technology
	Facilitative conditions	Perceived level of available professional and technical support with using the technology

Table 1 Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology extended factors.

Source: Békés et al., 2021.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses were carried out to identify possible associations between dependent variables and potential confounding variables (age, gender, prior experience with online group counselling). None of the potential confounding variables were associated with dependent variables. For this reason, these variables were not included as control variable in further analyses. [Table 2](#) presents means, standard deviations, and the correlation matrix of the ATOTQ scores.

OBJECTIVE 1

The results indicate that 97 that 97 counsellors (65%) have implemented online group employment counselling during the pandemic and 52 have not. To investigate whether attitudes toward online counselling have influenced the choice to implement or not implement online group employment counselling during the pandemic, we ran a binary logistic regression, with the six types of attitudes entered in one block. [Table 3](#) presents the results of the logistic regression. The resulting logistic regression model reliably distinguished between counsellors who have implemented online counselling and those who have not ($X^2 = 61.39, p = 0.000$). The analysis shows that performance expectation (Wald = 4.13, $p = 0.04$), social influence (Wald = 7.85, $p = 0.005$), facilitative conditions (Wald = 7.90, $p = 0.005$) and attitudes toward using technology (Wald = 7.98, $p = 0.005$) significantly contributed to distinguishing between both groups. With the exception of the effort expectancy and anxiety subscales, counsellors who have implemented online counselling during the pandemic had higher scores than counsellors who have not on these subscales. The model accounted for 47% (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance in the choice to implement or not implement online group employment counselling during the pandemic. The model correctly classified 88.3% of counsellors who have implemented online practice and 65.4% of counsellors who have not. The weighted average of these two values indicated that the model correctly classified 80.1% of cases. When only the constant was included, the model

correctly classified 64.4% of cases. As can be seen above, this 15.7% increase was statistically significant.

OBJECTIVE 2

The results indicate that 57 counsellors (38%) intend to pursue online group employment counselling, 48 (32%) are undecided and 43 (30%) do not intend to pursue this practice after the pandemic. To investigate whether attitudes toward online counselling could influence the intention to pursue or not pursue online group employment counselling after the pandemic, we ran a multinomial logistic regression, with the six types of attitudes entered as predictors. The resulting logistic regression model was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 81.39, p = 0.00$) and accounted for 48% (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance in the intention to pursue or not pursue online group employment counselling after the pandemic. As shown in [Table 4](#), compared to counsellors who intend to pursue online counselling, those who are undecided had a lower score on the facilitative conditions subscale (Wald = 5.26, $p = 0.022$). Moreover, counsellors who do not intend to pursue online group employment counselling after the pandemic had significantly lower scores than those who do on three ATOTQ subscales: performance expectation (Wald = 6.59, $p = 0.01$), social influence (Wald = 8.72, $p = 0.003$), and attitudes toward using technology (Wald = 5.81, $p = 0.016$).

PREDICTOR	WALD	P
Have implemented vs. have not		
Performance expectancy	4.13	0.042
Effort expectancy	0.00	0.968
Anxiety about using technology	1.40	0.237
Attitudes toward technology	7.98	0.005
Social influence	7.85	0.005
Facilitating conditions	7.90	0.005

Table 3 Logistic Regression Predicting the Choice to Implement Online Group Employment Counselling During the Pandemic.

FACTOR	M (SD)	MIN-MAX	1	2	3	4	5
1. Performance expectancy	3.08 (0.80)	1.33–5.00					
2. Effort expectancy	3.53 (0.66)	1.67–5.00	0.48*				
3. Anxiety about using technology	2.88 (0.71)	1.20–4.60	-0.60*	-0.46*			
4. Attitudes toward technology	3.35 (0.76)	1.33–5.00	0.65*	0.54*	-0.55*		
5. Social influence	3.24 (0.69)	1.25–5.00	0.49*	0.42*	-0.30*	0.43*	
6. Facilitating conditions	3.51 (0.70)	1.67–5.00	0.40*	0.52*	-0.52*	0.55*	0.32*

Table 2 Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations Among ATOTQ Scores.

* $p < 0.001$.

PREDICTOR	WALD	P
Intention to pursue vs. no		
Performance expectancy	6.59	0.010
Effort expectancy	2.72	0.099
Anxiety about using technology	0.30	0.586
Attitudes toward technology	5.81	0.016
Social influence	8.72	0.003
Facilitating conditions	3.81	0.051
Intention to pursue vs. indecisive		
Performance expectancy	1.66	0.197
Effort expectancy	0.51	0.475
Anxiety about using technology	0.15	0.697
Attitudes toward technology	2.06	0.152
Social influence	3.28	0.070
Facilitating conditions	5.26	0.022

Table 4 Multinomial Logistic Regression Predicting Intention to Pursue or not Online Employment Counselling After the Pandemic.

DISCUSSION

The pandemic context has created an obligation to reorganize group employment services very abruptly to keep providing them. This context has demanded reflections and decisions about the use of these services. Indeed, our results show that a major transformation in practices occurred during the pandemic as the majority of our respondents (65%) implemented online group employment counselling, even though only 9.7% of them reported prior-pandemic experience with this practice. Beyond the forced nature of this change in practice, our first research objective was to offer some avenues for understanding the implementation of online group employment counselling.

In line with objective 1, our results showed that four factors explain a large proportion (47%) of the variance in the choice to implement online group employment in the pandemic context. Among these factors, two are related to individual attitudes and two have to do with social attitudes. Regarding individual attitudes, our results suggest that higher individual performance expectancies and more positive attitudes toward online counselling are linked with the choice to implement online group employment counselling. This means that compared to counsellors who have not implemented this practice during the pandemic, counsellors who have show a more positive perception of the effectiveness of online practice and a more positive affective reaction about using this technology. Our results are consistent

with those of other authors (Schulze et al., 2019) who found that doubts about the effectiveness of online practice and less positive attitudes toward technology are associated with lower acceptance and use of these practices (Poletti et al., 2021; Schröder et al., 2015). However, our results do not corroborate Békés et al.'s (2021b) assertion that anxiety about using technology may influence the use of online practice. On average, counsellors do not indicate being anxious about online practice, and no difference can be observed between the two groups. In addition, although on average counsellors perceived that online group counselling requires effort to use and implement, the factor of perceived ease and effort did not significantly influence the implementation of this practice.

As for social factors, counsellor perception of social influence and facilitative conditions significantly predicts the choice to implement online group employment counselling. These results support those obtained by Békés et al. (2021b) in the context of individual psychotherapy. Counsellors who feel that significant others, such as their colleagues or employers, support or think that they should implement online group practices are significantly more likely to choose to implement this practice. In the pre-pandemic context, many employment organizations were not technically set up to deliver online practice (e.g., lack of online licences or adequate computers/devices), which might explain why some counsellors considered that they did not possess adequate conditions for providing online group employment counselling. Similarly, not all clients were adequately equipped to participate remotely; significant discrepancies were observed by employment counsellors (Dionne et al., 2022).

Furthermore, in terms of the intention to pursue online group employment counselling after the pandemic (objective 2), it emerges that despite substantial implementation during the pandemic context, the intention to pursue is not so certain. The sustainability of the transformation in practice remains to be seen. Indeed, although 38% of counsellors have the intention to pursue online group employment counselling, 32% are undecided and 30% do not intend to pursue this practice after the pandemic. Performance expectancy, attitudes toward using technology, social influence and facilitative conditions, taken together, explained a large proportion (48%) of the variance in the intention to pursue or not pursue online group employment counselling after the pandemic while effort expectancy and anxiety were not associated with this intention. Counsellors who intend to pursue online practice after the pandemic have a more positive perception of the effectiveness of this practice and a more positive affective appraisal of this practice than counsellors who do not intend to pursue this practice. They also perceived more social influence

in connection with the implementation of this practice. It might be hypothesized that counsellors who do not intend to pursue online practice prefer face-to-face group employment counselling, but the survey did not include this question. Indeed, as Holmes and Kozlowski (2015) note in their research, many counsellors perceive social presence, safety, emotional connection, and group cohesion to be lower in online groups than in face-to-face groups. This might be the case for counsellors who do not intend to pursue online counselling. The perception of more facilitative conditions was the only factor that distinguished counsellors who intend to pursue online practice from those who are undecided. These results are in large part consistent with those of Békés et al. (2021b) in individual psychotherapy who found that performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence and facilitative conditions, taken together, explained 42% of the variance in the intention to use online practice in the future. Anxiety was not associated with this intention while attitudes toward technology were not assessed.

IMPLICATIONS

The pandemic has transformed the work context of many employment counsellors in Québec, Canada, as in other countries around the world. Many counsellors have experienced a new practice, online group employment, in a context where they were “forced” to. Even so, this practice may continue to change the landscape of employment services after the pandemic context, as a third of the surveyed counsellors intend to pursue online group employment counselling after the pandemic situation. The results of this study have several implications for online group employment practice. Our results suggest that the likelihood that employment counsellors will use online group practice in the future might be raised by targeted interventions on the factors that were found to be significant predictors of actual use and potential future use of online practice in this study. Our results potentially raise a need for specific training along these lines for counsellors so that they feel more competent in this practice and develop a more positive attitude about it. As the practice was new for many counsellors – only 9.7% have prior experience with the practice from before the pandemic – some of them may need to develop their competencies with this specific practice to have higher performance expectancies. As Bandura (1997) mentions, a previous mastery experience is an important influential factor for performance expectancies. This mastery experience can be sustained by specific training on online group employment counselling, and counselling in a time of shared crisis, which in our country is a first for many counsellors.

Our results also reinforce the importance of having facilitative conditions and the support of others in order to

implement a new practice and technology. Employment organizations—and the government agencies that fund them—can play an important role in providing adequate professional and technical support for using online group employment counselling. Our results also suggest that providing more facilitative conditions for online group practice might substantially increase the number of counsellors who pursue this practice in the future. Indeed, 32% of counsellors in our sample were undecided about using online practice in the future, and the perception of a lack of facilitative conditions was the only factor that set them apart from counsellors who intend to pursue this practice.

LIMITATIONS

The results and implications of this study should be interpreted in light of its limitations. A first limitation is related to the fast-changing evolution of this pandemic. Indeed, counsellors completed the survey in 2021 and the pandemic is still ongoing in 2022, which means that counsellors’ intention to pursue online group employment counselling may have changed. For this reason, it will be important to replicate this study outside the unique pandemic circumstances when counsellors felt forced to transition to online practice (Békés et al., 2021b). A second limitation is related to the fact that the sample size was relatively small and specific to the context of employment counsellors from four employment organization in Québec, Canada who mainly work with adult job seekers. Further research should thus take into account other types of career counselling (e.g., career choice counselling) and other populations (e.g., adolescents).

CONCLUSION

Despite the above-mentioned limitations, the present study has shown that suddenly, the pandemic as transformed the work of employment counsellors and has enhanced the use and acceptance for technology in their group counselling practices. It has also depicted significant difference in the use and acceptance of online group employment counselling between counsellors, which implies that this work transformation does not affect all employment services in Québec in the same way. Furthermore, our results have more specifically contributed to addressing one of the questions in this special issue: Which forms of work or practice will persist when the effects of the crisis subside? Our results suggest that the practice of online group employment counselling might increase in the future and that four factors: facilitating conditions, performance expectation, social influence, and attitudes toward using technology, can explain counsellors’ intention to pursue this practice.

However, considering that it is still unclear whether online group employment counselling is as effective as face-to-face employment practice, our results highlight the need for more research on this topic. It also raises the need to understand how this potential change in their work, might affect employment counsellor's individual careers and mental health at workinequi.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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