

Counselling for Career Innovation, National Development and Sustainability: Be Your Own Boss

¹Olabisi Titilayo Precious Killian

holabisikillian@gmail.com / killian.olabisi@lcu.edu.ng,
<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-64085252>

² Deborah Olufunke Ayeni

Ayenideborah56@gmail.com

^{1&2} Department of Arts and Social Science Education
Faculty of Arts and Education
Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria

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Abstract: *This position paper examines counselling for career innovation, national development, and sustainability through the lens of being one's own boss. In response to increasing labour market uncertainty and the declining capacity of formal employment systems, self-employment has emerged as a significant career pathway across diverse contexts. Drawing on Life Design Theory and Sustainable Career Theory, the article explains being one's own boss as an intentional process of career construction that requires adaptability, meaning-making, and long-term viability. An entrepreneurship counselling-focused perspective was adopted, arguing that self-employment outcomes are shaped not only by economic conditions but also by psychological readiness, career self-management skills, and access to structured guidance. Using a Nigerian context as an illustrative case, the article demonstrates how career counselling can support individuals to develop entrepreneurial mindsets, navigate uncertainty, and align personal aspirations with broader development and sustainability goals. Particular attention is given to counselling approaches, strategies, and responses that promote innovation, resilience, quality of life, and social contribution. The paper advances the position that career counselling should be redefined as a strategic intervention within employment, education, and development agendas, capable of supporting sustainable self-directed careers. By integrating counselling theory with sustainability and development concerns, the article contributes to global discussions on the future of work and the role of career guidance in fostering inclusive and resilient labour markets.*

Keywords: career counselling, self-employment, sustainability, life design, national development

INTRODUCTION

The changing nature of work in Nigeria has continued to generate serious concern among scholars, policymakers, and career development practitioners. Persistent youth unemployment, underemployment, and the shrinking capacity of the formal labour market have made traditional career pathways increasingly unreliable for a large segment of the population. Within this context, the idea of *being one's own boss* has gained prominence as a practical and psychological response to structural labour market constraints. For many Nigerians, self-employment and entrepreneurship are no longer viewed as last-resort options but as intentional career choices shaped by the desire for autonomy, economic survival, and personal fulfilment. Career counselling therefore becomes critical in helping individuals make sense of these choices, align them with their skills and values, and translate aspirations into viable career actions within a challenging socio-economic environment (Ball, 2024; Nota, Soresi, Di Maggio, Santilli, & Ginevra, 2020).

Beyond individual career concerns, being one's own boss carries significant implications for national development and sustainability in Nigeria. Entrepreneurial activities contribute to job creation, innovation, and economic diversification, especially in contexts where public-sector employment remains limited and private-sector absorption is weak (Oyinlola, Kolade, Okoya, Ajala, Adefila, Adediji, & Akinlabi, 2024). However, without adequate guidance, many self-employment ventures remain fragile, short-lived, or disconnected from broader development goals. Contemporary career counselling discussion therefore emphasises the need to promote not just entrepreneurship, but sustainable careers that enhance long-term employability, well-being, and social contribution (Guichard, 2022; Maree & Di Fabio, 2018). This article examines counselling for career innovation, national development, and sustainability through the lens of being one's own boss, drawing on established scholarship to explore how career counselling can support Nigerians in constructing resilient, meaningful, and development-oriented self-directed careers.

Being One's Own Boss in Career Counselling

Labour market instability and career uncertainty have increased scholarly attention to self-directed career pathways within contemporary career counselling. Within this context, the notion of being one's own boss extends beyond the narrow interpretation of entrepreneurship as business ownership to encompass a broader process of career self-direction and life planning. In the Nigerian context, this idea reflects the deliberate effort by individuals to assume responsibility for their career trajectories in response to limited formal employment opportunities and persistent labour market uncertainty. Being one's own boss therefore represents a form of career self-management in which individuals actively mobilise their skills, interests, and social resources to create work opportunities that align with their personal values and socio-economic realities. Career counselling plays a central role in clarifying this process by helping individuals understand self-

employment as a structured career pathway rather than an improvised survival strategy (Ball, 2024).

Explaining being one's own boss within counselling practice also requires attention to the psychological dimensions of career choice and adjustment. Self-employment demands a high level of autonomy, decision-making confidence, and tolerance for ambiguity, qualities that are not automatically developed through formal education alone. Career counselling interventions support individuals to reflect on their career interests, capabilities, and readiness for self-directed work, thereby reducing the risk of premature or ill-informed entrepreneurial decisions. This reflective process is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where social pressure and economic necessity often push individuals into self-employment without adequate preparation. Through guided exploration and meaning-making, counselling enables individuals to view self-employment as a consciously constructed career identity rather than a forced alternative (Nota, Soresi, Di Maggio, Santilli, & Ginevra, 2020).

Furthermore, being one's own boss is increasingly linked to innovation and creativity within contemporary career frameworks. Self-directed careers require individuals to identify unmet needs, develop unique value propositions, and continuously adapt to changing market conditions. In this sense, innovation is not limited to technological advancement but includes creative problem-solving and adaptive thinking applied to everyday economic activities. Career counselling supports this innovative orientation by fostering curiosity, resilience, and proactive career behaviours that enable individuals to respond constructively to uncertainty. Such counselling-led innovation is particularly significant in the Nigerian context, where informal and emerging sectors constitute a substantial portion of economic activity and require flexible, context-sensitive career solutions (Guichard, 2022).

In addition, conceptualising being one's own boss within career counselling also involves situating self-employment within broader development and sustainability considerations. Self-directed careers have the potential to contribute to national development through job creation, income generation, and economic diversification when they are intentionally aligned with societal needs. However, without guidance, many self-employment efforts remain short-lived and vulnerable to external shocks. Career counselling therefore provides a framework for aligning individual aspirations with sustainable career principles, emphasising long-term employability, well-being, and social responsibility. By framing being one's own boss as a sustainable career choice rather than a temporary economic response, counselling reinforces its relevance to both individual fulfilment and national development objectives (Maree & Di Fabio, 2018).

Theoretical Foundations

This article is guided by two complementary theories: Life Design Theory and Sustainable Career Theory.

Life Design Theory, advanced by Jean Guichard, is based on the assumption that careers are no longer linear or predictable but are actively designed by individuals through reflection, adaptability, and meaning-making in response to changing social and economic conditions. In the context of this study, being one's own boss is explained as a life design project in which individuals intentionally create self-directed careers that align their values, competencies, and aspirations with contextual opportunities and constraints. Within the Nigerian labour market, characterised by instability and limited formal employment, this theory helps explain why self-employment emerges as a rational and agentic career response and how counselling can support purposeful career construction (Guichard, 2022).

Sustainable Career Theory complements this perspective by shifting attention to the long-term outcomes of career choices. The theory emphasises that careers should be assessed not only in terms of immediate economic returns but also in relation to long-term employability, well-being, productivity, and social contribution. Applied to this study, being one's own boss is examined as a career pathway that must balance autonomy and innovation with stability, quality of life, and ethical responsibility. Career counselling therefore becomes critical in helping individuals develop adaptive competencies, resilience, and realistic expectations that support the sustainability of self-employment over time, particularly in contexts where income uncertainty and limited institutional protection are common (McDonald, Hite, & O'Connor, 2022).

Sustainability and Self-Employment

The growing emphasis on sustainability within career development discussion has reshaped how self-employment and entrepreneurial careers are understood and evaluated. Sustainability, in this context, extends beyond environmental considerations to include economic stability, social responsibility, and quality of life over time. For individuals who choose to be their own boss, sustainability becomes a critical concern, as self-employment often exposes them to fluctuating income, limited social protection, and heightened work demands. Career counselling provides an important framework for addressing these challenges by helping individuals evaluate self-employment not only as an immediate income-generating activity but as a long-term career pathway that must be intentionally managed to remain viable (Guichard, 2022).

From an economic perspective, sustainable self-employment requires the capacity to maintain productivity and relevance within changing market conditions. Many self-employed individuals in Nigeria operate within highly competitive and informal environments, where business failure rates are high and access to institutional support is limited. Career counselling supports economic sustainability by encouraging realistic goal setting, continuous skills development, and strategic career planning. Through counselling interventions, individuals are guided to anticipate career transitions, diversify competencies, and adapt their work activities in response to economic shifts. This forward-looking approach reduces vulnerability and enhances the likelihood that self-employment can provide stable livelihoods over time (McDonald, Hite, & O'Connor, 2022).

Social sustainability is equally central to understanding self-employment as a career choice. Being one's own boss carries implications for social inclusion, community engagement, and ethical responsibility. When self-employment is aligned with societal needs, it can contribute to service provision, local development, and reduced inequality. Career counselling facilitates this alignment by supporting individuals to reflect on the social impact of their work and consider how their career choices affect others. In the Nigerian context, where informal enterprises often serve as community anchors, counselling can help self-employed individuals integrate social responsibility into their business practices, thereby strengthening the developmental value of their careers (Nota, Soresi, Di Maggio, Santilli, & Ginevra, 2020).

Quality of life represents a further dimension of sustainability that is particularly relevant for self-employed individuals. While autonomy and flexibility are often cited as benefits of being one's own boss, these advantages can be undermined by long working hours, stress, and blurred boundaries between work and personal life. Career counselling addresses these risks by promoting self-awareness, work–life balance, and adaptive coping strategies. Counsellors assist individuals in setting boundaries, prioritising well-being, and recognising signs of burnout, thereby supporting healthier and more sustainable engagement in self-directed careers. By integrating economic, social, and personal considerations, career counselling reframes self-employment as a sustainable career option that supports both individual fulfilment and broader development objectives (Maree & Di Fabio, 2018).

Counselling Approaches for Supporting Being One's Own Boss

Effective support for individuals pursuing self-employment requires counselling approaches that address both practical career concerns and deeper psychological processes. Being one's own boss involves navigating uncertainty, managing risk, and sustaining motivation in the absence of structured organisational support. Career counselling therefore draws on multiple therapeutic approaches to help individuals clarify goals, strengthen agency, and develop adaptive responses to challenges. These approaches do not function as rigid techniques but as flexible frameworks that counsellors adapt to the specific needs of individuals seeking to construct self-directed careers within complex socio-economic environments (Ball, 2024).

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy offers a pragmatic approach that aligns well with the immediate concerns of individuals considering or engaged in self-employment. This approach emphasises strengths, existing resources, and achievable goals rather than prolonged focus on problems. In career counselling contexts, solution-focused techniques help individuals identify past successes, recognise transferable skills, and set realistic short-term objectives that support entrepreneurial action. For Nigerians navigating constrained labour markets, this approach fosters optimism and forward momentum, enabling individuals to focus on what is possible within their current circumstances rather than becoming overwhelmed by structural limitations (Nota, Soresi, Di Maggio, Santilli, & Ginevra, 2020).

Cognitive-Behavioural approaches contribute by addressing the beliefs, attitudes, and thought patterns that influence career behaviour. Many aspiring self-employed individuals experience fear of failure, self-doubt, and unrealistic expectations that can undermine decision-making and persistence. Through cognitive restructuring and behavioural planning, career counselling helps individuals challenge limiting beliefs, develop confidence, and adopt more adaptive ways of responding to uncertainty. This is particularly relevant in self-employment contexts where psychological resilience and self-regulation are critical for sustaining effort and managing setbacks over time (Ball, 2024).

Narrative approaches provide an additional layer of support by enabling individuals to make sense of their career experiences and construct coherent career identities. Self-employment journeys are often non-linear and shaped by diverse life events, especially in contexts marked by economic instability. Narrative counselling encourages individuals to reflect on their personal stories, identify recurring themes of strength and agency, and re-author their career narratives in empowering ways. This process supports the development of entrepreneurial identity and enhances commitment to self-directed careers by situating work choices within broader life meanings (Guichard, 2022).

Existential and Gestalt approaches further enrich counselling for being one's own boss by focusing on personal responsibility, authenticity, and present-moment awareness. Existential perspectives support individuals to confront uncertainty, make value-driven choices, and take ownership of their career decisions, while Gestalt approaches emphasise self-awareness and holistic functioning. Together, these approaches help individuals engage more fully with the emotional and experiential dimensions of self-employment, promoting congruence between personal values and career actions. By integrating these counselling approaches, practitioners are better positioned to support individuals in constructing resilient, meaningful, and sustainable self-directed careers that contribute positively to personal well-being and national development (Maree & Di Fabio, 2018, Killian, 2019)

Counselling Strategies

Beyond theoretical orientation and counselling approaches, effective support for individuals who aspire to be their own boss requires deliberate and context-sensitive counselling strategies. These strategies translate counselling principles into practical actions that enable individuals to move from career exploration to sustainable self-employment. In the Nigerian context, where many individuals enter self-employment with limited preparation, career counselling best practices emphasise gradual development, reflective planning, and continuous evaluation rather than rapid, high-risk transitions. Such an approach allows individuals to test ideas, build confidence, and adapt their career plans in response to emerging realities (Ball, 2024).

Career assessment and exploration form a foundational counselling strategy for supporting self-directed careers. Through systematic assessment of interests, skills, values, and personal circumstances, counsellors help individuals gain realistic self-knowledge that informs entrepreneurial decision-making. This process reduces the likelihood of misaligned career choices driven solely by economic pressure or social expectations. For individuals considering self-employment, assessment-based counselling clarifies areas of strength, identifies developmental needs, and supports informed exploration of viable career options within local and broader labour markets (Nota, Soresi, Di Maggio, Santilli, & Ginevra, 2020).

Business planning and skills development represent another critical area of counselling intervention. While career counsellors may not function as business consultants, they play an important role in helping individuals translate career goals into structured plans. Counselling supports goal setting, opportunity evaluation, and the identification of required competencies, including communication, problem-solving, and self-management skills. In Nigeria, where access to formal business training is uneven, counselling-based guidance helps individuals connect career aspirations with learning opportunities and realistic timelines, thereby strengthening the foundation for sustainable self-employment (Oyinlola, Kolade, Okoya, Ajala, Adefila, Adediji, & Akinlabi, 2024).

Networking and relationship building are also essential best practices for individuals pursuing self-employment. Many self-directed careers depend on social capital, mentorship, and collaborative partnerships. Career counselling encourages individuals to recognise the value of professional networks and actively engage with communities of practice relevant to their career interests. Counsellors support clients to develop networking skills, seek mentorship, and leverage existing social connections responsibly. This strategy is particularly important in contexts where informal networks play a significant role in accessing opportunities and sustaining entrepreneurial activities over time (Guichard, 2022).

Effective counselling strategies emphasise adaptability, resilience, and continuous evaluation. Self-employment pathways are rarely linear, and individuals must be prepared to revise goals, acquire new skills, and respond constructively to setbacks. Career counselling supports this process by fostering reflective practice, encouraging feedback, and promoting learning from experience. By prioritising adaptability and resilience, counselling reinforces best practices that enable individuals to sustain self-directed careers while maintaining well-being and alignment with broader development goals. Through these strategies, career counselling positions being one's own boss as a purposeful, supported, and sustainable career pathway rather than a precarious individual endeavour (Maree & Di Fabio, 2018).

Challenges and Counselling Responses

While being one's own boss offers opportunities for autonomy and innovation, it also presents significant challenges that can undermine career sustainability if not adequately addressed. For many self-employed individuals, particularly in developing and transitioning economies, financial uncertainty remains one of the most persistent concerns. Irregular income, limited access to credit, and exposure to market fluctuations create conditions of vulnerability that can negatively affect decision-making and well-being. Career counselling plays a critical role in helping individuals anticipate these realities, develop realistic expectations, and plan career pathways that accommodate financial risk without compromising long-term goals. Through structured reflection and planning, counselling supports individuals to approach self-employment with informed caution rather than impulsive optimism (Ball, 2024).

Psychological barriers such as fear of failure, self-doubt, and risk aversion further complicate the pursuit of self-directed careers. These challenges are often intensified by social expectations and cultural pressures that associate career success with stable salaried employment. Career counselling interventions address these concerns by strengthening self-efficacy, reframing failure as a learning process, and promoting growth-oriented mindsets. By supporting individuals to recognise setbacks as part of career development rather than personal inadequacy, counselling enhances resilience and persistence, which are essential for sustaining entrepreneurial efforts over time (Lee, Jung, Baek, & Lee, 2022).

Structural and regulatory barriers also shape the experiences of individuals who choose to be their own boss. Complex regulatory frameworks, limited institutional support, and inadequate infrastructure can constrain entrepreneurial activity and discourage innovation. While career counselling cannot directly alter these structural conditions, it can help individuals navigate them more effectively. Counsellors assist clients to seek relevant information, identify support networks, and adapt their career strategies to regulatory realities. In doing so, counselling empowers individuals to engage proactively with their environments rather than becoming immobilised by systemic constraints (Habiyaemye, King, & Tregenna, 2022).

Balancing personal and professional life represents an additional challenge that frequently emerges in self-employment contexts. The absence of clear boundaries between work and personal roles can lead to excessive work demands, stress, and reduced quality of life. Career counselling addresses this challenge by encouraging self-awareness, boundary-setting, and intentional role management. By helping individuals clarify priorities and integrate multiple life roles, counselling supports healthier engagement with self-directed work. Collectively, these counselling responses demonstrate that while the challenges of being one's own boss are substantial, they are not insurmountable when addressed through thoughtful, developmentally informed career counselling that prioritises resilience, adaptability, and sustainability (Maree & Di Fabio, 2018).

Practice, Policy and Education Implications

The discussions presented in this article carry important implications for career counselling practice, particularly within contexts experiencing labour market instability and expanding self-employment pathways. For practitioners, the findings underscore the need to redefine career counselling beyond traditional job placement functions towards supporting career self-management, adaptability, and sustainability. Counsellors are encouraged to adopt integrative practices that combine life design principles with sustainability considerations, enabling individuals to construct self-directed careers that are both personally meaningful and socially responsive. This requires continuous professional development for counsellors to enhance competencies in entrepreneurship-related guidance, innovation facilitation, and resilience-building within diverse career contexts (Ball, 2024).

The analysis highlights the strategic value of embedding career counselling within national employment and development frameworks. Policies aimed at promoting entrepreneurship and self-employment are more likely to achieve sustainable outcomes when complemented by structured counselling support that addresses psychological readiness, career planning, and long-term viability. Career counselling can serve as a bridge between policy intentions and individual action, ensuring that self-employment initiatives are aligned with broader development goals such as job creation, social inclusion, and economic resilience. Recognising counselling as a developmental intervention rather than a peripheral service can strengthen the effectiveness of national strategies targeting youth employment and innovation (Guichard, 2022).

Higher education institutions also occupy a critical position in shaping self-directed career pathways. Universities and training institutions are increasingly expected to prepare students not only for paid employment but also for entrepreneurial and flexible careers. Integrating career counselling into academic programmes provides students with opportunities to explore career identities, develop self-efficacy, and engage with innovation in meaningful ways. In contexts such as Nigeria, where graduate unemployment remains a pressing concern, counselling-informed entrepreneurship education can support smoother transitions from education to sustainable self-employment. This approach reinforces the role of higher education as a driving force for individual empowerment and national development (Oyinlola, Kolade, Okoya, Ajala, Adefila, Adediji, & Akinlabi, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study has examined counselling for career innovation, national development, and sustainability through 'being one's own boss', positioning self-employment as a deliberate and development-oriented career pathway rather than a temporary response to labour market constraints. Drawing on Life Design Theory and Sustainable Career Theory, the study has demonstrated how career counselling can support individuals to construct meaningful, adaptive,

and sustainable self-directed careers in contexts characterised by economic uncertainty and changing work patterns. By integrating innovation, resilience, and long-term well-being into counselling practice, the study highlights the transformative potential of counselling in shaping both individual career outcomes and broader developmental trajectories. The article therefore calls for greater recognition of career counselling as a strategic intervention within employment, education, and development agendas. By emphasising counselling as a driving force for sustainable self-directed careers, this study contributes to global conversations on the future of work, career development, and inclusive growth.

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