

Stakeholder Interview 1

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Title: Career Counselor & Youth Mentor

Organization: Istanbul Youth Employment and Career Center

Location: Istanbul, Türkiye

Focus: Career Guidance and Digital Empowerment for Youth

1. How did you first become interested in youth career counseling?

It all started during my undergraduate studies in psychology. I volunteered at a youth center and met so many bright, capable young people who felt lost when it came to their future. They weren't lacking talent—they lacked direction. I realized that the difference between thriving and struggling often came down to having someone who listens, who reflects back their potential. That's what career counseling means to me—it's not just giving advice, it's being a mirror and a guide.

2. What are the most common worries or questions youth bring to you?

Most young people I meet are unsure of what they want, and even more afraid of choosing the “wrong” path. They worry about choosing a degree they'll regret, not being good enough for their dream job, or disappointing their families. Social media has made things worse—everyone seems successful at 22, which creates anxiety and unrealistic expectations. Many of them also have no one to talk to seriously about these things, especially if they come from disadvantaged or migrant backgrounds.

3. How have digital tools changed your approach to career guidance?

Enormously. Ten years ago, we used paper-based interest inventories. Now we're using AI-driven assessments that can analyze strengths, personality traits, and even recommend suitable career tracks. But it's a double-edged sword—while these tools can be incredibly helpful, they can also overwhelm young people if they're not guided through the process. That's why digital empowerment has to go hand-in-hand with human mentorship.

4. Do you think young people understand the role of AI in career planning?

To be honest, most don't. They associate AI with robots or social media algorithms, but not with personal growth or job planning. That's where education gaps really show. If we teach them that AI can help with skills mapping, job matching, and even building a CV—suddenly, it becomes a tool of empowerment rather than something abstract or intimidating.

5. How do you adapt your approach for vulnerable youth—refugees, migrants, or youth with fewer opportunities?

The key is building trust. These young people often come from environments where they've experienced loss, instability, or exclusion. Before we talk about careers, we talk

about their lives, their values, their dreams. We spend time understanding their cultural context, language needs, and even emotional state. Career planning must be personalized. Otherwise, we risk reinforcing the very inequalities we're trying to fix.

6. What role do emotions play in youth career decisions?

A huge role. Career decisions are often perceived as rational, but they are deeply emotional. Fear of failure, desire for validation, identity struggles—all of this plays out when a young person makes life-changing choices. That's why we blend coaching with counseling—helping them not only understand the market but also themselves.

7. What makes a project like *EmpowerInclusive* valuable to your work?

It fills a massive gap. Career guidance is still underfunded and undervalued in Türkiye, especially for disadvantaged youth. Having a multilingual, interactive, and inclusive OER platform as part of this project means we can reach more young people with meaningful content. It's not a lecture—it's an invitation to explore. Plus, the involvement of real stakeholders and practical resources gives it depth that most digital tools lack.

8. If you could redesign the Turkish education system to better support youth careers, what would you add?

I would introduce mandatory career education starting in middle school, but not in the form of lectures. It would be project-based, interactive, and personalized. We'd integrate digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and mental well-being from a young age—so students don't just prepare for jobs, but for life.

9. Can you share a real success story that inspires you?

Definitely. A young Afghan boy named Reza, who had fled conflict and arrived in Istanbul at age 16, joined one of our mentorship programs. He didn't speak Turkish well, had no formal documents, and thought he had no future. Through our workshops and individual guidance, he discovered a talent for repairing electronics. We helped him get an internship with a small tech firm. Today, he's employed full-time and training others. His transformation reminds me why I do this work.

10. Finally, what is one thing you wish every young person could hear?

That confusion is not failure—it's the beginning of discovery. You don't need to have it all figured out. Just keep moving, stay curious, and surround yourself with people who believe in you. That's how clarity—and confidence—comes.