

Can AI coaching extend career support?

Findings from an Irish pilot

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Contributors

Nessa Maguire – Project Lead and Author
Christoph Burnicki – Technical Lead and Developer
Dr David Tee – Data Analysis and AI Coaching Advisor
Allison Kuschel – Assessment Development

Testing was conducted by **Nessa Maguire**,
Dr David Tee, and **Allison Kuschel**.

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Executive Summary

Europe faces a talent paradox. Critical sectors cannot fill roles whilst millions of young people and people with disabilities remain outside the workforce. Professional coaching typically costs between €75 and €400 per session (MindShift Zone, 2024). Our research PathWise explores whether AI career coaching can extend coaching-style career support to people who might not otherwise access it.

Between April and September 2025, we conducted rigorous scenario-based testing followed by a pilot with 21 participants in Ireland. Our findings are tentative but highlight important questions about extending career support and the design decisions that matter when building AI tools for people navigating barriers.

Three insights emerged from this work

- **Job seekers want support with reflection and direction-setting, not just tactical skills.** When asked about their biggest challenges, 38.5% identified 'lack of clarity about next steps', whilst 80% of those exploring networking goals cited confidence barriers.
- **In an era where AI provides instant answers, designing for reflection requires deliberate choices.** One participant observed that career direction is 'a question that really needs to be experienced through a long process of trial, error, and pondering', not solved with quick recommendations.
- **Responsible AI development requires the same rigour as any intervention for vulnerable populations.** Our two-month testing process caught serious failures (hallucinations, inappropriate tone, premature advice-giving) before they could reach real users.

This white paper presents our methodology, findings, and the open questions that emerged. Building on these insights, PathWise will expand testing across Europe in 2026 to explore how reflective AI coaching can serve a broader range of users, from students and job seekers to those re-entering the workforce. We invite collaboration from organisations, researchers, and policymakers who share an interest in making career support more accessible, reflective, and evidence based.



The Talent Paradox Facing Europe

Europe faces a paradox. For the region to remain competitive, it needs talent in critical sectors. Yet millions who could fill these roles remain outside the workforce.

Healthcare systems face chronic understaffing (World Health Organization, 2016). Construction requires more than two million additional workers by 2030 (International Trade Union Confederation/European Federation of Building and Woodworkers, 2023). The semiconductor industry projects a shortage of more than 75,000 workers by 2030 (European Chips Skills Academy, 2024). The renewable energy sector anticipates needing over 200,000 wind industry workers by 2030 (WindEurope, 2024).

At the same time, unemployment persists amongst populations who could fill these roles. Youth unemployment across the EU stands at 14.8% in September 2025 (Eurostat, 2025). In July 2025, Ireland's youth unemployment jumped to 12.2%, described by economists as a warning sign (RTÉ, 2025). People with disabilities experience significantly lower employment rates. In the European Union, only 51.3% of persons with disabilities are employed, while the employment rate for women with disabilities is even lower at 49% (European Disability Forum, 2023).

This is not simply a matching problem. Amongst those who are employed, many report being in roles that do not match their skills or aspirations (OECD, 2023). In Ireland, 83% of employers struggle to find candidates with the right skills (ManpowerGroup Ireland, 2025). Across Europe, 54% of employers expect talent shortages to worsen (World Economic Forum, 2025).

Traditional career support services exist, but access is profoundly uneven. Professional coaching is expensive, university career services are often overstretched, and public employment services vary widely in quality and availability. Many people navigating career transitions, particularly those facing barriers, do so with limited personalised support.

Enter PathWise

PathWise was developed to explore a specific question: can AI extend coaching-style career support to people who may not otherwise access it?

The tool uses Anthropic's Claude large language model combined with custom prompts designed by accredited coaches and psychologists.

PathWise offers two distinct pathways, each addressing different career support needs. **The career exploration and goal setting pathway supports users who feel uncertain about their career direction.** Through reflective questioning, it helps users clarify their values, interests, and long-term goals. **The networking and personal branding pathway is designed for users who know their direction but need support building professional confidence and presence.** It focuses on helping users articulate their value, develop their professional identity, and approach networking with greater confidence.

Between April and September 2025, we conducted systematic scenario-based testing followed by a pilot with 21 participants in Ireland, facilitated by the Open Doors Initiative, an organisation supporting marginalised job seekers. Future pilots are planned across Europe.

Our findings are tentative as sample sizes are small. But the process of building, testing, and piloting PathWise surfaced important questions about how AI coaching could extend career support, what responsible development looks like, and where the genuine barriers lie.

Building PathWise: Coaching Principles and Testing

The coaching foundation

PathWise is grounded in established coaching principles. The system is designed using the GROW model (Whitmore, 1992), a widely used coaching framework that structures conversations to help people clarify goals, assess current situations, explore options, and commit to action. The design reflects the principles from the European Mentoring and Coaching Council's Global Coaching Competence Framework (EMCC, 2018).

Research on coaching effectiveness shows that structured interventions can support goal attainment and wellbeing (Grant, 2003; Theeboom et al., 2014). This evidence informed a critical design choice: **PathWise asks questions rather than giving answers, reflecting core coaching principles that encourage self-directed learning. This approach differentiates PathWise from typical AI chatbots that provide information and solutions.**

Testing before launch

Before piloting PathWise with real users, we conducted systematic scenario-based testing between April and June 2025. Three testers with backgrounds in **coaching, psychology, and disability advocacy** role-played nine distinct user personas including a confident job seeker, a marginalised worker facing barriers, an emotionally vulnerable person, a student uncertain about direction, and a neurodivergent user with specific communication needs.

Testers documented their experiences in detail, assessing tone, accessibility, coaching adherence, and practical usefulness. When the system worked well, testers described it as 'frighteningly relevant' and 'incredibly fit for purpose'. But testing also surfaced critical flaws.

Critical issues identified

- **Tone formality.** The default language was too formal. Testers described it as 'patrician' and 'textbook-like'.
- **Jumping to solutions.** The AI frequently gave advice rather than maintaining a coaching stance, particularly when users said, 'I don't know'. One tester noted: 'The one thing I'd love to change is it not to provide solutions so quickly.'
- **Information overload.** The system sometimes asked multiple questions simultaneously (up to four in one response), creating cognitive overload.
- **Hallucinations.** In one scenario, the system suggested specific companies and locations that did not exist.

Systematic resolution

Refinement of system prompts (the foundational instructions that guide AI behaviour) was done iteratively to address issues as they were identified.

Key refinements included trauma-informed and neurodivergent-responsive design with mandates to reduce cognitive load and maintain psychological safety, structured session architecture (contracting, exploration, closure), mandate for accessible language with minimal jargon, requirement for one open-ended question per message, prohibition against directive intervention (advice, examples, suggestions), improved handling of uncertainty and 'I don't know' responses, enhanced verification protocols to eliminate hallucinations, and tone consistency mechanisms to ensure non-judgmental, person-led exploration.

These refinements were implemented through iterative prompt refinement before the pilot commenced. **The testing phase proved essential: it caught failures that would have undermined the tool's credibility and potentially caused harm.**

The design challenge: reflection takes time

This design choice creates tension. Users arrive expecting AI to provide solutions. One participant reflected on this after using PathWise. **When asked about the experience of not receiving immediate answers, they observed:**

“It took some getting used to, but it makes sense that you wouldn't want to provide answers. I think it speaks to this new AI era where everyone wants easy immediate answers. If some people are frustrated maybe their deeper frustration lies with not knowing their path forward and wanting an easy answer to a question that really needs to be experienced through a long process of trial, error, and pondering.”

This observation captures a core tension in designing AI career support. PathWise deliberately resists providing instant answers. Whether this approach serves people navigating barriers effectively remains an open question, but it represents a deliberate stance about what career support might mean.

Pilot Findings

Who participated and what we measured

Twenty-one people participated in the PathWise pilot in Ireland between July and September 2025.

Participants were facilitated by Open Doors Initiative via an email to their members. All participation was voluntary.

Participants represented diverse backgrounds. Twelve identified as female, eight as male, and one as non-binary. The majority (11) were aged 35 to 44, with six aged 25 to 34. Three identified as neurodivergent, and one as having a disability. **Most reported high comfort with technology and frequent AI use.**

We collected four types of data: pre-pilot surveys asking about needs and expectations, post-pilot surveys, usage analytics tracking engagement patterns, and qualitative interviews. What follows describes what participants said they needed and how they engaged with the tool.

What participants said they needed

Pre-pilot surveys asked participants what challenges they faced. The responses revealed consistent themes.

The career exploration and goal setting pathway participants identified their biggest challenge as:

38.5%

cited 'lack of clarity about next steps' as their primary challenge

23.1%

cited 'fear of failure and rejection'

23.1%

cited 'limited resources and support'

15.3%

cited 'balancing career and personal life'

The primary need was directional and emotional rather than tactical. Participants needed support figuring out what they wanted, managing fear, and navigating with limited resources.

The networking and personal branding pathway participants faced confidence barriers. When asked about the biggest challenge in reaching out to new professional connections, 40% said 'I don't know what to say', another 40% said 'I'm not confident enough', 10% selected 'I'm afraid of being ignored', and only 10% reported no challenges.

Eighty per cent of networking participants cited confidence barriers around professional communication rather than skills gaps. They understood that networking matters but lacked confidence about initiating contact.

What participants said about support systems

Participants also identified barriers that a digital tool cannot address alone. One participant with prior coaching experience and a disability emphasised the need for more support organisations for people with disabilities. They described LinkedIn as increasingly essential but not always accessible or user-friendly and noted that not everyone owns a laptop or can easily navigate digital platforms.

This participant articulated a vision for 'a one-stop shop' where employment services, training providers, and support organisations could share information and coordinate support. They noted that there are too many scattered websites with inconsistent or incomplete information and that word-of-mouth and networks remain key in finding opportunities, which inherently disadvantages people without established professional networks.

These observations underscore a fundamental reality. **AI coaching tools may help individuals navigate fragmented systems, but they cannot fix the fragmentation itself.** They may build confidence, but they cannot address employer discrimination or inadequate support services.

How people engaged

Usage analytics revealed varied engagement patterns. Five participants created accounts but never started a coaching session. However, amongst those who did engage, all completed the initial intake process moving from initial questionnaire into actual coaching conversations.

Session length and frequency varied substantially. Some participants had brief interactions. Others engaged deeply, with the most engaged participant exchanging 69 messages over multiple weeks. Several participants returned to the tool multiple times over the one-month pilot period.

The career exploration pathway was more popular than the networking pathway. This aligns with the pre-pilot data showing that 38.5% identified lack of clarity as their primary challenge. **Many participants were not seeking tactical job search support. They were seeking help with direction.**



How PathWise Works: Technical Overview

This section describes how PathWise is built, how a coaching session runs, and areas to develop next. The aim is to provide a clear view of the technical foundations.

Current setup

PathWise runs on a secure cloud platform (AWS). The coachbot is implemented as a NextJS app that connects to AWS backend services and to Anthropic's Claude via AWS Bedrock. This architecture separates application logic from model access and supports security, scalability, and responsible data management.

The conversation design and prompts were created with professional coaches and psychologists, embedding recognised coaching frameworks so that interactions remain structured and coaching oriented.

How it works in practice

- ✓ **Introductory questionnaire.** New users complete a brief intake covering goals, interests, and coaching style preferences. This establishes initial context for the coaching style and focus areas.
- ✓ **Session initialisation.** The backend composes the system prompt from two elements: a fixed scaffold that encodes coaching structure and boundaries, and user context derived from the intake.
- ✓ **Open-ended coaching dialogue.** Users enter an open-ended session with the AI. Each turn is processed through the backend, which relays the conversation to Claude via Bedrock and returns the response to the client.
- ✓ **Dynamic adaptation.** The coach adjusts questions, pacing, and level of directiveness based on the prior questionnaire (which sets the initial stance) and live conversation signals. This adaptation happens turn by turn within the session.
- ✓ **Operational boundaries.** Guardrails in the prompt ensure the assistant remains supportive, avoids diagnosis or clinical claims, and redirects out-of-scope topics appropriately.

Data protection and governance

PathWise is built with privacy by design. Users access coaching sessions via secure, unique session codes without account creation, email, or personal identification. The architecture uses AWS cloud infrastructure with TLS/SSL encryption for all data transmission. PathWise follows data-minimisation and purpose-limitation principles and is being developed with attention to GDPR and data protection best practices.

Development priorities

Based on testing and pilot feedback, development priorities include:

- ✓ **Improve tone and communication style** adaptation for different users
- ✓ **Add progress summaries** and reflection prompts
- ✓ **Develop analytics** to observe engagement patterns and key themes
- ✓ **Strengthen accessibility** through design and language options
- ✓ **Further attention** to data protection practices

Implications and next steps

PathWise is an early-stage exploration. The findings presented here are tentative. However, several themes emerged that warrant further investigation.

What we are learning

AI coaching tools may address a gap in career support ecosystems. There is a population of job seekers who want reflective, structured support but lack access to professional coaching. **PathWise suggests that AI could extend this type of support at scale and at low cost.**

Reflection takes time, and that may be valuable. Users need time to engage meaningfully with reflective tools. Quick fixes and instant answers may be appealing, but they may not support the kind of thinking required for career clarity. PathWise's approach of encouraging users to slow down shows value, though it requires patience.

Design matters enormously. Small design choices (tone, question structure, response length) significantly affect user experience. Tools intended for people facing barriers must be designed with care, tested rigorously, and refined iteratively.

AI cannot solve structural problems. PathWise cannot address fragmented information systems, employer discrimination, inadequate disability support services, or other systemic barriers.

It may help individuals navigate these systems, but it is not a substitute for structural change.

Open questions for further research

Several questions emerged from this pilot that require further investigation:

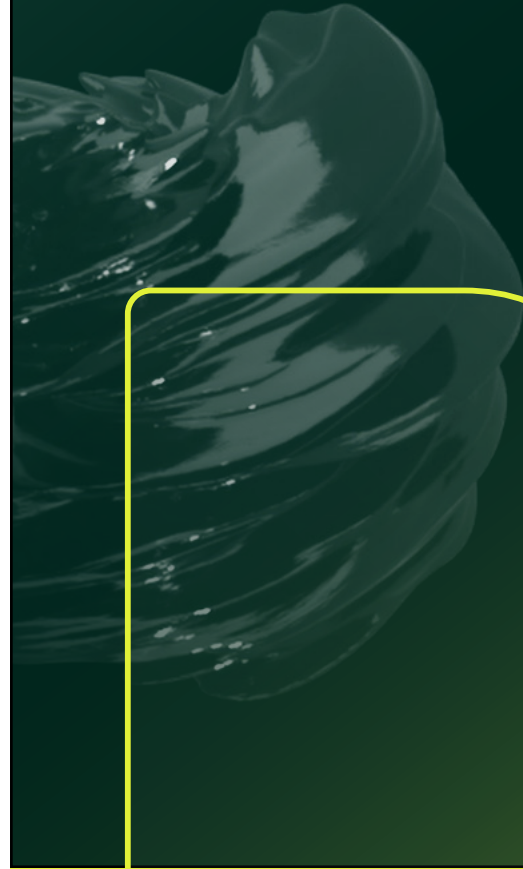
- 1 Does sustained engagement lead to meaningful outcomes?** We do not yet know whether using PathWise over time leads to improved career clarity, increased job search activity, or successful employment outcomes. Longitudinal research is needed.
- 2 Who can access AI coaching?** All participants were technology-comfortable and 90% were frequent AI users. PathWise remains untested with digitally excluded populations. Does AI coaching inadvertently exclude those it aims to serve?
- 3 How should AI coaching integrate with human support?** Participants suggested that AI tools work best alongside human services. What models of integration are most effective?
- 4 What are the risks?** Beyond the technical issues identified in testing, what other risks exist in deploying AI coaching at scale? How can these be mitigated?

Next steps for PathWise

PathWise will continue to develop through:

- **Further pilots:** Expanding testing to other European countries and diverse populations.
- **Partnership development:** Collaborating with training providers, employment services, and advocacy organisations to understand how PathWise can complement existing support.
- **Iterative refinement:** Continuing to improve conversation design, tone, accessibility, and integration capabilities based on user feedback.
- **Research collaboration:** Partnering with academic institutions to conduct more rigorous evaluation of outcomes and impact.

PathWise demonstrates that reflective AI coaching is both technically feasible and socially relevant, but its value will depend on collaboration. Extending this work requires partners who can test the model in different contexts, contribute diverse data sets, and help define standards for responsible use. The next phase will focus on building these partnerships and generating the longitudinal evidence needed to understand where AI coaching truly makes a difference.



Invitation to Collaborate

PathWise is an open exploration of how AI might extend career support. We welcome collaboration with:

- ✓ **Organisations** working with job seekers, students, returners, apprentices or people facing barriers to employment.
- ✓ **Researchers** conducting work on AI coaching, career development, or digital inclusion.
- ✓ **Funders and policymakers** exploring how technology can support labour market inclusion.

For more information or if you would like additional data contact us at

www.eudaorg.com



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