

# Working with the workforce

Counsellors need to be 'organisationally aware' to work successfully with employees, employers and employee assistance providers, says *Nicola Banning*

Employee counselling is a fast-growing sector, with thousands of therapists working as affiliates for employee assistance providers (EAPs) or in in-house staff counselling services. Almost 50 per cent of the UK workforce is now supported by an EAP, representing 13.79 million people.<sup>1</sup> Working as therapists, coaches, trainers or educators, we bring a wealth of expertise to support good mental health at work, help to reduce sickness absence, increase resilience and contribute to psychologically healthy workplaces.

Yet, throughout a decade of involvement with the workplace sector as therapist, writer and editor of the BACP Workplace journal *Counselling at Work*, I've heard a consistent message from EAPs and counselling service managers: many therapists work successfully with EAPs and employers, but too many are insufficiently organisationally aware or don't understand the complexities of working with clients referred via their workplace.

This article highlights how the workplace context impacts on the counselling we provide when working short-term with employees, employers and EAPs. It includes perspectives from workplace specialists, EAP case managers and counselling service managers who understand what the workplace sector needs from the counselling profession, and outlines the opportunities for practitioners to develop expertise in employee support.

## **The organisation is your client**

If your caseload includes clients referred to you via an EAP or a local employer, then you're engaged in providing workplace counselling. Despite this, it's not unusual to meet counsellors who are completely unaware of this and remain under the illusion that their EAP clients

are no different from their private practice clients.

'The counselling profession attracts independent thinkers,' says Vicki Palmer, Clinical and Managing Director of the third sector provider Oasis-Talk. 'This is a positive for the intra-psycho work we do but it can create blind spots where we fail to see the significance of contexts surrounding our work. At best there may be two hours of input on working with and in organisations during two years of training, which does not equip counsellors for organisational work.'

## **Skills gap**

The skills gap becomes all too apparent when it comes to recruiting counsellors for staff posts, says Anne Scoging, Head of Counselling and Wellbeing at the London Fire Brigade: 'Out of 100 applicants for a counselling post in our organisation, I will discard 30 because they are not accredited; 60 don't meet the criteria or give enough information about themselves, and just 10 are skilled enough on paper to be offered an interview. Of those, six will turn up for interview.'

Workplace counselling always involves a relationship with more than one client. The client is your client, and so too is the organisation, because the client's employer is funding the counselling sessions. This means that both the client and the client's employer are invisibly 'in the room'. If you add an EAP into the process, the room becomes even more crowded. This can prove a particularly difficult concept to grasp for counsellors schooled only in working one to one.

EAPs and in-house counselling services tend to ask for a minimum of two years' post qualifying experience, professional indemnity insurance and accreditation with your professional body. Beyond this, there is an

expectation that counsellors should understand the organisational culture and workplace factors that might impact on the psychological health of people at work.<sup>2</sup>

Affiliate counselling suits particular therapists, explains Sharon McCormick, Chief Executive of The Listening Centre, an EAP based in the Midlands. 'Ideally they will hold at least a level 5 qualification, with experience of short-term work; have a good understanding as to how the business world operates, particularly regarding the "quadrilateral" relationship of practitioner-case manager-client-employer; work with us as an organisation to deliver a first class service, encompassing timely responses to calls and emails; keep organised notes and invoices and, very importantly, have a sense of humour!'

Aware of the specific needs of the fire service, Anne Scoging raised her minimum entry standard to four years post-qualification experience. 'Our client groups can present with high levels of trauma and this demands that we have counsellors who understand responses to trauma, have broad client experience and a good understanding of diversity and equalities issues. Our clients are not always 'the worried well', so our counsellors need to know the mental health spectrum, from stress and mild depression and anxiety at one end to schizophrenia and bipolar at the other.'

### **Short-term work**

Counsellors need to build rapport and develop working relationships quickly in the workplace context. Work is short term (usually four to eight sessions) with EAPs, although in-house counselling services may offer more.

Understanding the contract with the EAP and being able to work within it while managing the client's expectations

is a vital task for the therapist. It's also a potential area for misunderstanding, says Sharon McCormick: 'When clinically it may be in the best interest of the client to extend the sessions, affiliates need to equally appreciate that employers have limited budgets, which is why a working knowledge of short-term approaches is essential. Challenging, yes, but not impossible.'

However, there is a growing need to be capable of working even more briefly and to be open to the potential value of this. Brief interventions can work particularly well in the workplace setting when counselling would not be appropriate, as Vicki Palmer points out: 'Less can be more. We become so accustomed to our ways of working we may not see how empowering it is for a client to have one hour of focused, undivided and hopefully unconditional attention.'

### **Premises and appearance**

While EAPs do vary in their procedures, the more rigorous often run checks on a counsellor's premises or at the very least need to approve photographs of the therapy room where employees will be seen. Sharon McCormick explains: 'I expect therapists to make a concerted effort to give a good impression when I go to interview them. Prospective therapists have withdrawn their application purely because I wanted to visit their premises, which begs the question, what are they hiding?'

The answer in some cases, according to feedback from EAP case managers, is dirty rooms, a lack of privacy, children present, family/personal photographs on view, religious symbols or crystals in the room and pets roaming free.<sup>3</sup> However, it's not uncommon to find therapists offended by the suggestion that they might need to consider the suitability of their premises, or the need to adjust their

dress code when seeing clients for workplace counselling. This attitude is an example of the need for organisational awareness and sensitivity to both the client and the organisation-as-client, which differentiates workplace counselling from private practice.

### **Organisational tensions**

The multiple stakeholders involved and the potential for conflict between the needs of the client, the employer and the EAP add to the complexity of workplace counselling. Although clients may self-refer, they are also often referred by managers who are keen to support their staff with a personal or work-related difficulty. It's also not uncommon for managers to use counselling to try to 'fix a problem' – whether relating to workplace conflicts, sickness absence, or in situations involving grievance procedures or disciplinary processes.

In such cases, it helps to schedule sessions judiciously, advises Sharon McCormick: 'If an employee is referred for counselling while a disciplinary or grievance investigation is underway – which can sometimes take months – it may require the sessions to either be put on hold or spread out. Inexperienced practitioners don't take this into account until it's too late, they've run out of sessions, and they're asking for more.'

Counsellors need to understand that being 'organisationally aware' means having a different understanding of confidentiality, and this can be challenging. For example, it's not unusual for counsellors to provide feedback to the EAP about the client's attendance at sessions, or to be asked to write a report on the client. It's advisable to work transparently with these issues, involving the client in the feedback process, and to seek help from your EAP case manager if uncertain.

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## How to develop as a workplace practitioner

### Sharon McCormick

‘Convey a professional image in all elements of your practice, from what you call your website and how you answer the phone to how you dress. Don’t sell yourself short. I hear horror stories of counsellors ‘stuck’ in their placements years after being qualified because they don’t know how to earn money. Do not allow yourself

to be exploited; the funding is out there but, like any job, it won’t fall in your lap!’

### Rick Hughes

‘Talk to a workplace counsellor. We’re a busy but personable bunch and usually more than happy to inspire, motivate or educate potential entrants into the workplace counselling community. Join BACP Workplace,

where you’ll be able to meet workplace counsellors, network and get the real feel for what the role involves.’

### Vicki Palmer

‘Engage relationally with outcome measures as friend and not foe. They have the potential to benefit the client, therapist, supervision and organisation. To treat them as routine is

to miss a revitalising opportunity for practice.’

### Anne Scoging

‘You need to get accredited with your professional body, develop your tool box, top up your CPD with additional training relevant to the workplace such as brief solution-focused therapy, approaches to trauma, CBT and ACT.’

## Psychological threats

Counsellors are likely to encounter clients who repeatedly report a culture of bullying at work, and who feel victimised and traumatised in their workplace. This is inevitable when the counsellor is working with ‘the sick part of the organisation’; cynicism and burnout are a risk when counselling clients feeling the effects of budget cuts, reorganisation, redundancies or austerity. High quality supervision from a supervisor experienced in working with organisations is advisable to address the organisational dynamics that the counsellor will inevitably experience with workplace clients.

Vicki Palmer recommends: ‘Choosing a supervisor who will assist the counsellor to reflect on the dynamics of his/her relationship to the organisation is an essential ingredient to supporting this work. Supervision needs to give space to the quadruple or more relationship dynamics impacting on the therapeutic work subtly, or not so subtly.’

## Diversity, flexibility and knowledge

Workplace clients will come from every level in the organisation – from the office

cleaner to heads of departments.

Therapists need to be able to work comfortably with this breadth of client, and adapt the work to the client. Those of us drawn to workplace counselling enjoy the diversity of our caseload; for some it opens the door to a completely different client group.

Workplace counselling also tends to require more flexible contracting arrangements; it’s rarely about seeing clients at the same time and in the same place each week. Organisational demands on employees, such as shift-work, staff being ‘on call’ and travel arrangements, will all impact on a client’s availability for counselling appointments. However, workplace counselling is of course very convenient for the client, as it is at a time and place to suit them, and often in work hours. The waiting times are short too, reducing the likelihood of problems escalating.

Therapists often provide additional services, such as coaching, training, critical incident management after a traumatic event or a sudden death, facilitating teams or running mental health events. Bumping into clients

in the lift, at lunch, or on a training course are part and parcel of the work, and negotiating these boundary issues with clients is essential, particularly if you are working for an in-house counselling service.

For those new to EAP work, it’s worth familiarising yourself with the array of services that your EAP may provide that could support your client further. Keith Baddeley highlighted this in his article ‘EAP Matters’ in the summer 2015 issue of *Counselling at Work*. These may include advice on a personal injury, medical and mental health conditions, finance and debt support, childcare, eldercare, support for sick relatives or family members with often complex medical and psychological issues, as well as medical referrals for scans or to see specialists.<sup>4</sup>

## Value of evidence

Measuring outcomes is routine and potentially valuable to client, counsellor and organisation. However, counsellors who do not hold in mind ‘the organisation as client’ can view outcome measures as an interruption to the therapy or as unnecessarily

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bureaucratic. 'Too often outcome measures are undertaken by counsellors without full engagement,' says Vicki Palmer. 'Outcome measures are friend and not foe when used therapeutically throughout the client's passage through brief therapy. Our clients spend time answering personal questions and are giving the therapist some valuable information about their current situation. They are friend to the therapist too, as they provide feedback about what is and isn't working in the therapy so these can be addressed collaboratively with therapeutic curiosity. Furthermore, they provide valuable evidence to the organisation about the impact of counselling interventions, so are friend to the organisation too.'

## Pay and training

When discussing EAP work, it isn't long before the subject turns to money and rates of pay, and understandably so, says Rick Hughes, BACP Lead Advisor, Workplace: 'A number of workplace counsellors report that affiliate fees have not only remained stagnant over the last decade; they have dropped in some cases. This does little to maintain the level of expertise and credibility that the profession requires.'

There is a growing threat from global health and insurance providers who offer EAP packages as a free bolt-on to wider health or insurance packages, warns Hughes: 'These have the potential to undermine the credibility and standards set by established internal counselling services and traditional EAP providers.'

Despite the downward pressure on costs there is a drive to continue to raise standards and support the professionalisation of the workplace sector. Work is already underway to support practitioners in their ongoing development, as Rick Hughes explains: 'The forthcoming BACP Workplace

Competency Framework will set out a potential curriculum for training as a workplace counsellor, and this will be regarded as a post-qualification after traditional diploma training.'

It seems there's agreement here, as the UK Employee Assistance Professional Association is also investigating the value of creating a training programme that provides counsellors with information and guidance on the principles of EAP work and the expectations and requirements.<sup>5</sup> The aim is to ensure that counsellors and psychotherapists have completed relevant training and have sufficient knowledge to work in the industry.

Meantime, keen to develop 'organisationally aware' therapists, Sharon McCormick has launched a paid placement agreement at The Listening Centre. 'We are passionate about nurturing and developing our profession to meet the needs of the workforce. Our referral pathway ensures that clients and trainees are matched appropriately, so clients do not present with issues beyond the trainee's capabilities. We negotiate a reduced rate with our customers and as such the trainee is paid for the work they do, which is something we are committed to. We also provide them with a mentor, line manager and supervisor, in accordance with BACP guidelines.'

In an economically competitive environment where trainees routinely work for free, it is heartening to hear of initiatives such as this that are contributing to the development of workplace practitioners.

## Concluding thoughts

Looking ahead, the scope for therapists with the right skills set to play an active role in the workplace sector is growing: 'Employers already recognise the benefits of using workplace counselling

and this need will only increase as evidence, education and awareness develops,' says Sharon McCormick.

Clearly, the complexities and idiosyncrasies of organisational work will not appeal to all therapists. It needs to fit your modality and practice. If it does, there are opportunities for counsellors who understand the corporate world to develop a specialism. The work is potentially massively rewarding both in terms of the client mix and the steady income stream from supporting the nation's workforce. ■

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*If you are interested in moving into the workplace sector, BACP Workplace can offer advice and information. Please visit [www.bacpworkplace.org.uk](http://www.bacpworkplace.org.uk) or email [workplace@bacp.co.uk](mailto:workplace@bacp.co.uk). The BACP Practitioner's Conference in London on 30 April will appeal to counsellors and therapists with an interest in the workplace setting. See [www.bacp.co.uk/events](http://www.bacp.co.uk/events)*

## References

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