

Why BACP Workplace?

Kevin Friery explains the thinking behind ACW's name change to BACP Workplace

'Energy is the capacity of doing work ... Work is the transference of energy from one system to another.' Clerk Maxwell

One hundred and fifty years ago, James Clerk Maxwell gave us a definition of work that still stands true today. As a physicist observes it, the definition is fairly watertight; as a social scientist looks at it, though, it is far from complete. Work does involve energy but it also involves a myriad of other elements – money, time, location, opportunity, cost, compliance, self-determination and many others. To some extent it could be argued that the definitive definition is contained within *Working* by Studs Terkel¹. It is definitive not because of the psychological analysis he provides but because it is the voices of people working that provide the story, and invite us to consider the question, 'What do we mean by working?' For a considerable time, the Association for Counselling at Work considered an allied question – 'What do we mean by counselling at work?' It was the answers to this question that have led us to change our name, our identity and our focus. Today, BACP Workplace emerges from these deliberations.

Counselling at work has a long history. From the beginning of the 19th century in the UK we began to see the introduction of works doctors, nurses and social welfare staff into the workplace. This was piecemeal, of course, and most workplaces did not benefit from such largesse. The chocolate manufacturing families of Cadbury and Fry were among the first to identify the need and benefit of a more philanthropic approach to the workforce (why does chocolate always seem to be there in any wellbeing process?!) but it took a number of social and legal changes to bring employers to the 'welfare' agenda. Two elements were particularly significant in this regard. The rise of trades unions helped to shift the focus from outputs to people and challenged many of the undesirable components of work. This brought about some demonstrable change, and to some extent this is an influence that continues today, albeit in a rather different context. The First World War, however, had a particular significance because it brought so many women into the world of work. While women had always worked, particularly in factories and mills, the war saw the need to recruit a large number of

women who had not hitherto considered themselves to be 'workers' and who brought with them some expectations and needs that had not previously been expressed or addressed on such a large scale. Some of the elements that emerged – works' social clubs, pensions, welfare officers, canteens, rest rooms – became embedded in the workplace culture for many, particularly in the manufacturing sector. The concept of 'looking after the workers' became part of an emerging sense of corporate social responsibility.

Thus, from the beginning of the 20th century, we start to see evidence of people whose role included the social wellbeing of employees, who would help workers deal with domestic, financial, educational and other needs. These early precursors of workplace counsellors were not necessarily trained in any recognisable way, but they were recognised as having an important part to play in the maintenance of a healthy and productive workplace.

Developments in America also influenced the growth of workplace counselling. Since Dorothea Dix in the early 1800s, there had been a growing awareness that there needed to be some sort of service for people with mental health issues. Workplace counselling in the US had really started as career counselling; it did, however, use psychological profiling and insights to assist the client make helpful decisions. The extension of the psychology of career choice to the psychology of career wellbeing was a natural step to take, and in the early 1900s there emerged a better understanding of how counselling for emotional problems could have benefits for both the employee and the employer.

For a history of how workplace counselling developed in the latter part of the 20th century, Shirley Cullup's essay² is an excellent description. In it, we find that the first workplace counselling skills training in the UK was launched in 1978. From this point forward, the concept of workplace counselling as a skilled activity supported by training began to gain ground; while not universal nor standardised, counselling was beginning to raise its head above the parapet.

Most counselling at work, in those times, did not sit with a dedicated counsellor – rather it was part of the role of a welfare officer, a personnel officer, an occupational health nurse or someone with other roles to fulfil. It was only very slowly that the idea of actually employing or contracting

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with professional counsellors started to take hold. As it did, we saw the emergence of a more structured approach to the psychological wellbeing of employees. The employee assistance movement had already grown in the States, but was often seen as a tool of management, particularly with substance use and misuse. In the UK, more organisations preferred to use their own counsellors – often on self-employed arrangements rather than with contracts of employment – and the confidentiality of counselling was recognised as a key determinant of a positive outcome.

For about 20 years or so, this is how counselling at work existed in the UK. Some employers ignored it, some had defined internal processes in place and others had external arrangements, often with an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). The EAP was normally a self-referral system, with employees accessing help as and when they wanted it without the employer necessarily being aware of their use. The Association for Counselling at Work came into being as a specialist division of what was then BAC. It has gone from strength to strength since then, supported by a number of unsung heroes and heroines who have given time, energy and commitment to the division without financial reward – they deserve our continued appreciation for getting us to where we are now.

A proactive approach

So let's fast forward to now. What is changing at work, and what are we doing about it?

Certainly, there has been a noticeable change in the way people perceive work. From being something people did to provide the money to fund their lives, it has now been embellished with deeper psychological and social importance and it is used as a social network opportunity, a forum within which an employee may feel stretched and challenged, an environment that meets the status aspirations of the worker, somewhere that helps an employee experience a more balanced life and something that brings a lot more than money to the employee's existence. Stability and staying power has been overtaken by opportunism and career development; commitment to the organisation has become, like footballers, a transferable asset and money is no longer the be-all and end-all.

Counselling has also created new challenges. Whereas its roots lie in helping people address psychological and emotional disturbance in some way, there has been a growing realisation that merely helping to fix something that is broken can not be the only tool at our disposal in an ethical service. We have amassed enough information now, after decades of providing workplace counselling,

to predict some of the effects of work on the individual and to have a much better idea of the strategic steps an organisation can take to minimise work-induced discomfort. This fact has been well recognised by a number of government-led initiatives; the Health and Safety Executive Management Standards for work-related stress were born out of research looking at the factors in the workplace that induce stress and identifying preventative behaviours rather than remedial ones. Dame Carol Black³ has been hugely influential in outlining her thinking about wellness and the working population.

‘Clients are looking to us to provide something alongside remedial therapy’

The Government Office for Science published the Foresight report *Mental capital and wellbeing*⁴, setting out a very clear mission statement for psychological wellbeing for the next 20 years. There have been other activities as well: organisations such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) have become much more involved in concepts such as employee wellbeing; the Government has legislated about conflict resolution in the workplace; the HR community has been faced with the largest growth in legislation about the framework within which employees can be engaged; and what were once fringe activities – counselling, coaching, mentoring, mediation, critical incident support, trauma work, strategic corporate wellbeing protocols and corporate social responsibility (CSR) – have now become central components of all high-achieving successful companies.

The role of counsellors has changed. We recognise that we often work with emotional problems people bring to us, but in fact some research my own organisation conducted showed that up to 25 per cent of people accessing counselling through their EAP have no discernible clinical problem at the outset (using CORE as a measurement tool). This suggests that users are looking to us to provide something alongside remedial therapy; they are working with counsellors to look at life



choices, to consider the best ways of managing themselves. They are almost looking to counselling to be a part of their life management strategy. The skill set of counsellors therefore has to grow apace. While boundaries are, and will remain, crucially important to a counsellor there will be a growing need to offer a variety of relationships to clients and to be clear about exactly what is and what is not on offer. A counsellor may be engaged in a strictly psychotherapeutic relationship, but sometimes may also find that there is a place for coaching. A client may want to engage in a mentoring relationship with someone who has the skills that a counsellor brings, or an organisation may turn to the counsellor as a tool in talent development and engagement. However we slice it, counselling has become involved with business across a wide spectrum; workplace counselling is in a business-to-business relationship as much as it is in a therapeutic one, and we have to be clear about what we are doing, with whom, why and to what degree of success. The Government is committed to introducing mandatory regulation for the profession – at a level far below accreditation – and there is a need to maintain the quality of workplace counselling as a learned profession, helping the public, employers and clients alike to appreciate the value and the benefit we bring to them.

Who, then, is to set standards, support practitioners in this changing world, help to grow and position the profession? Who is to speak authoritatively on behalf of us, to present a public face of a complex profession? Step forward BACP Workplace, the new home of workplace counselling. We will offer guidance, leadership and support for counsellors and others concerned with the wellbeing of employees and of organisations. We will listen, consult and engage with our membership, and we will be central to BACP's understanding of the complexities of the workplace, bringing fresh ideas while sustaining professional standards.

We are BACP Workplace because we understand that it is about counselling but it is also about something more. We are working with our mission statement: 'Towards an emotionally healthy workplace'. ■

References

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- 3 Black C. Working for a healthier tomorrow. 2008.
- 4 Foresight mental capital and wellbeing project: final project report. London: Government Office for Science; 2008.

Putting the stress manager behaviours

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As workplace counselling professionals will know only too well, one of the determinants of whether an individual employee suffers work-related stress or not is the behaviour of that individual's line manager towards them. There is evidence to suggest that the line manager-direct report relationship is the most commonly reported cause of stress in the workplace^{1,2}. Over the last five to 10 years, there has been increasing recognition of and research interest in the line manager's role in determining employee stress levels. A number of studies have shown a link between particular management and leadership models (such as transformational and behavioural models) and the wellbeing of those being managed^{3,4}. However, the vast majority of these studies used *a priori* measures of management or leadership – which were developed in the context of management for good performance and productivity – meaning that they may not capture the full range of management behaviours that are important for staff wellbeing. There was therefore a need to conduct research that looked specifically at the management behaviours relevant to stress management.

From a practical perspective, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has been working towards reducing stress in UK workplaces for some years. In 2004, it introduced Management Standards for stress at work⁵, designed to give employers guidance on the workplace characteristics that present risks of work-related stress and how they can be effectively managed and controlled. While these Standards are driven from a health and safety perspective, much of the responsibility for implementation falls on human resources (HR) professionals and line managers. In addition, the content of the Standards is such that their achievement will be influenced, if not determined, by how line managers carry out their people management responsibilities.