

The training gap



Employee support is a growth area in the therapy world, but the opportunities for trainees to find placements are scarce. **Nicola Banning** finds out how one pioneering EAP is responding to bridge the gap

The mental health at work agenda is growing and increasingly there are opportunities for our profession, providing that therapists equip themselves with the necessary skills, competencies and attitude to work in the field of employee support.¹ While promoting the BACP Student Event, 'Bridging the Gap', BACP reported on Twitter that 47 per cent of student counsellors were looking to find out more about employment opportunities. Over 400 students attended the event in February in London, and the hunger for knowledge and guidance on how to take steps to move into the sector was clear. Trainees with a background in business and an understanding of how organisations tick expressed a particular interest in bringing their transferable skills from the world of work to their future role as therapists.

They evidently have a good deal to bring. Along with my BACP Workplace colleagues, I spoke to students all day on the BACP Workplace stand and we ran a taster session on 'Seven practical steps for getting started in the field of employee counselling'. The most frequently asked question was (and often is): how can I get experience of counselling in the workplace without being accredited? An astute question, rarely addressed in general counselling diplomas, was about the three-cornered contract: how do you work with the client without colluding with the employer?

In the last decade, I've written about the skills gap in our sector in which too many trainees leave with diplomas and go on to become experienced counsellors without sufficient skills and competencies to work in an organisational context.^{2,3} For therapists working one-to-one in private practice, this need not be a problem. However, it's a different story as soon as the counsellor begins to work with any organisation, including affiliate counsellors who are engaged by employee assistance providers (EAPs) to top up their private practice work. The organisational context always impacts on the work that takes place between the client and counsellor when the employer is paying for the counselling.^{4,5} This raises questions for how our sector, BACP, existing in-house services, training providers and EAPs could respond to bridge the gap.

Someone who's already finding solutions is Sharon McCormick, Counselling Director of The Listening Centre, an EAP, based in the Midlands, providing occupational support services to employers, from large public sector NHS Trusts and local authorities to small private companies. I first met Sharon at a BACP Workplace conference in 2012, where she voiced her concerns that there were too many students leaving counselling training lacking the specific skills to be able to provide short-term workplace counselling to business and the commercial world.

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 – Sharon McCormick

Five years on, how true does Sharon think this is today? 'If anything, the problem is getting worse. With more organisations recognising the value of occupational counselling, the demand has risen, but I've found the supply of quality practitioners who can deliver remains unchanged. The result is that appropriately qualified and experienced counsellors can cherry-pick the cases they take on, demanding higher rates of pay from EAPs, who are under pressure from their customers to remain competitive and yet still deliver a good service.' For the newly trained therapist looking to expand their skill-set and grow their therapy business, it's worth heeding the value attached to these vital skills on the part of the therapist.

Placements that work

Aware of the lack of opportunities for trainees to learn workplace counselling 'on the job' and keen to give something back to the profession, Sharon began providing placements to trainees, offering experience, mentoring and support, and significantly, paying a modest fee too. Started over 10 years ago, Sharon explains how it now works: 'Our counselling placements are only possible due to the full collaboration of our existing customers. We offer a great opportunity to develop a trainee's counselling career in a highly professional and supported placement within the workplace. We approach a local university and carry out screening interviews and when a suitable trainee is identified, we offer a 12-month placement based at one of our consulting rooms or at the customer's premises. A trainee's rate is charged at a 50 per cent reduction to our customer, while at the same time, we provide insurance, supervision and mentoring, and we pay the trainee £10 per session.'

Finding suitable trainees

Counsellors who particularly enjoy the cut and thrust of organisational life and go on to thrive as an EAP affiliate counsellor tend to have the qualities Sharon requires: 'I engage trainees who can understand our expectations working in this setting. The live environment can be very different to a classroom and often isn't what they anticipate. I look for a reasonable understanding of how the business world works and how this impacts on the client's presentation. I believe this is very important. Furthermore, a sound grasp of how many parties are 'in the room' (client-counsellor-EAP-employer) is key, and to be able to work within this dynamic professionally with all parties concerned.'

Now an experienced therapist with a thriving practice near Birmingham, Sally-Anne Bubbers was one of the first trainees to secure a placement at The Listening Centre during the pilot phase: 'The placement gave me a solid background in professional workplace counselling. I saw clients across all levels of the organisation and was able to accrue my counselling hours in a very supportive environment.' Not all trainees are so fortunate, with too many stories of trainees being left without sufficient support, being given the most complex clients, and at risk of being exploited.

To find trainees capable of working with clients referred via their employer, who is paying for the service, Sharon initially screens potential trainees using role play of a typical workplace issue. Once the placement is secured, Sharon offers more than supervision to her trainees, as Sally explains: 'To ensure that I was working safely and to a high enough standard with clients, Sharon initially provided me with mentoring after every client and, subsequently, she spent time on my professional development on a weekly basis, which I needed. I didn't learn to work short term while on my diploma course and so I learnt 'on the job' in a challenging but supportive environment.'



Quality and standards

If you're running a therapy business, concerns about the quality of the counselling being delivered are never far away, particularly when the word 'trainee' is mentioned. So how does Sharon address potential concerns about the quality of counselling a client might receive from a trainee, either from the client or their employer? 'Honesty, integrity, great communication and transparency are at the heart of everything we do. In order to manage expectations, an agreement is put in place prior to any uptake of our Trainee Counselling Service. If our customer (or client) is uncomfortable with seeing a trainee, we would assign a member of our existing affiliate team to the case.'

Good counselling placements are much in demand, but paid counselling placements are almost unheard of. So what, I wonder, are the potential advantages to providing paid trainee placements, given all the associated responsibilities and risks involved? 'The advantages are three-fold,' says Sharon. 'Firstly, the trainee gets to develop their skills in a supported workplace setting and build up a portfolio of experience while beginning to recoup the thousands of pounds invested in their training. Secondly, the employer gets a service at a reduced cost. Finally, we can influence and shape the counsellors of tomorrow – which is incredibly rewarding!'

On the other hand, it follows that among the pressures of running a business and leading an EAP, providing a trainee placement can mean even more on a very long 'to do list'. Sharon agrees: 'Recruitment, induction and the ongoing mentoring generates intangible costs and time-consuming activities when done properly. Fitting that into an existing busy practice is a real challenge. With

insurance, supervision, trainee and mentor fees, we don't make a monetary profit, but we're not doing it for that reason. We work with customers who are equally passionate about training and development. Allowing a trainee to deliver a workplace counselling service is risky, but by working together, it can be done.'

Clearly, providing a placement is not without its costs or challenges. Yet I'm struck by how many times counselling service managers have expressed to me that they are considering or hoping to take on a trainee, 'to give something back to the profession'. Perhaps too there's the recognition that we were all a trainee once, and needed mentors. And that we would benefit from taking a longer-term view about our role in shaping and supporting good mental health at work. Sharon is enthusiastic about the potential benefits: 'If you have the infrastructure to provide a trainee with the opportunity to develop in this field, go for it! Demand for workplace counselling is only going to increase, so as a profession, we need to create opportunities to assist counsellors to develop their skills in order for them to deliver effective workplace counselling. Going on a CBT/brief solution-focused therapy course just doesn't cut it.'

Professional standards for the workplace

Aside from the issue of the need to develop good quality trainee placements for the employee counsellors of the future, I asked Sharon what BACP as our professional body could be doing to assist the process: 'I'd like to see some form of 'workplace licence' where counsellors have evidenced their competence at working in this setting, giving clients, EAPs and employers the peace of mind that they have the required skills and abilities for this specialism.'

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As the leader of a business delivering employee counselling, Sharon is by no means a lone voice in seeking this. However, the BACP Workplace Competency Framework, intended as a potential curriculum for training as a workplace counsellor, post qualification after traditional diploma training, is on hold during the current BACP restructuring. However, also recognising this need, the UK Employee Assistance Professional Association (UK EAPA) is investigating the value of creating a training programme that provides counsellors with guidance on the principles of EAP work to ensure the profession has sufficient knowledge to work in the industry.⁶ Meanwhile, the BACP Workplace Executive Committee plans to run a continuing professional development day aimed at therapists who are looking to build their practice in the field of employee support.

For those trainees looking for alternative ways to bridge the gap, Sharon recommends: 'At the very least, every counsellor who wants to gain an income stream in the workplace sector should familiarise themselves with a document produced by UK EAPA: *Counsellors' guide to working with EAPs*.' Another valuable source of information about the sector, for trainees and commissioners, can be found in the recently revised *Counselling in the Workplace* guidelines, published as part of the BACP Good Practice in Action series.⁷

Closing thoughts

This article sheds light on some good practice with regard to trainee placements and focuses on one inspiring case of how it can and does work. But Sharon highlights the harsh economic realities that mean the potential for the exploitation of counsellors on unpaid internships is an obstacle that needs to be overcome: 'There are students who remain in (unpaid) placements in the workplace after they've qualified to keep up their clinical hours and are committed to the work – but on the other hand, they feel trapped and at a loss as to how to start recouping their

investment. If they challenge the status quo, the threat of terminating their placement hangs over their head, so they remain silent: classic exploitation. Meanwhile, services are delivered on the cheap, much to the delight of the commissioner. What other profession expects students who become qualified to continue working for free? I would like to see counselling managers focusing their energy on putting a watertight business case together, not only to ring-fence funding for trainee counsellors, but once they do qualify, to pay them what they're worth.'

It's an idea that's gaining ground. At the BACP Student Conference, Kevin Friery, Clinical Director with Right Management, spoke to a packed room of trainees about what employees are looking for and where the opportunities exist. He acknowledged the future possibility of paid internships being offered by EAPs, but he encouraged trainees to put together the business case about what the potential cost benefits could be, commenting that: 'Counsellors with good business skills are like gold dust'. My hope in writing this article is to generate debate about the quality of placements to enhance the professional development of the workplace sector. I welcome your opinions and experiences on how we can bridge the training gap to develop a community of practitioners, skilled, competent and engaged to work therapeutically with the workforce of the future.

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Tips to build your practice and get started in the field of employee support

Nicola Neath and Nick Wood, BACP Workplace Executive Committee

1 Create a professional support network

Find other practitioners locally who you can network with and who work with organisations and EAPs; join BACP Workplace and UK EAPA, explore online resources related to the workplace and find a supervisor who has experience of organisational work.

2 Professional presence

It's recommended that you are on the register and work towards accreditation with your professional body. Make sure your CV includes all your career experiences and highlights your transferable skills.

3 Undertake interesting and relevant CPD

Ensure your CPD is tailored to the workplace client, eg stress management, as so much of our work is related to workplace stress, followed closely by trauma.

4 Understand the key skills needed to work short term

Workplace counselling tends to be short term, but being 'outcome focused' rather than 'solution focused' can help us to manage the contract and not put unrealistic pressures upon ourselves or the client.

5 Develop competence with the dynamics of the third party contract

Learn to resist trying to keep everyone happy, but know your value and understand the organisational dynamics involved.

6 Understand the local procedures regarding confidentiality

Stay firm to your professional ethics – by definition an understanding of the *BACP Ethical Framework* is important.

7 Self-care

Know how you support yourself, take regular breaks and avoid over-working.

References

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Nicola Banning is a BACP accredited counsellor specialising in working with individuals and organisations, and is editor of this journal. She has a background in broadcasting with the BBC and writes on counselling, mental health at work and professional development.

Your feedback please

If you have thoughts about any of the issues raised in this article or would like to write an article of your own, we would like to hear from you. Please email the editor: counsellingatwork@bacp.co.uk