

CIPD conference 2008: workplace wellbeing

Rick Hughes discusses the results from a questionnaire completed at the BACP/ACW exhibition stand

The 2008 annual conference and exhibition for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) took place at the Harrogate International Conference Centre on 14-16 September, and BACP/ACW were there.

We took a stand in one of the four massive exhibition halls. Each exhibitor was trying to entice dazzled delegates onto their stands with assorted freebies and goodies. At one stage, I saw someone dressed as a giant chicken giving out leaflets. I'm not sure what was on offer. Free range eggs?

With the crème of the human resource community in situ, BACP/ACW were ready to answer questions about counselling in the workplace. We got a few delegates who, when wandering past, clocked our reference to 'counselling and psychotherapy', and with head staring at the floor would power-walk past. But for everyone else, we really enjoyed meeting those who came up for a chat.

There were some interesting questions. Quite a few people wanted to know the difference between coaching and counselling. More were keen to find out about how to find a local counsellor or what advice we could give about counselling training.

To get a bit of intelligence, we invited delegates to complete a short 'wellbeing questionnaire'. We wanted to find out about attitudes towards wellbeing and counselling among the HR community. This wasn't a hugely scientific research study, nor was the sample randomly representative but it gave us some interesting nuggets of information.

And if the honour of completing an ACW questionnaire wasn't enough, we raised the stakes with a competitive element... all completed questionnaires would be entered into a draw to win a year's subscription to this *Counselling at Work* journal. You can imagine the stampede.

The following gives a flavour of the views from the CIPD 2008 delegates who completed our questionnaire, a modest but 'quality' 32 of them.

The first question sought to profile the size of companies represented by the questionnaire

population. Twelve respondents fell into the SME category, employing fewer than 50 employees. Yet a further 12 people worked in companies with more than 1,000 employees. This gave the research a bit of 'spread' (figure 1).

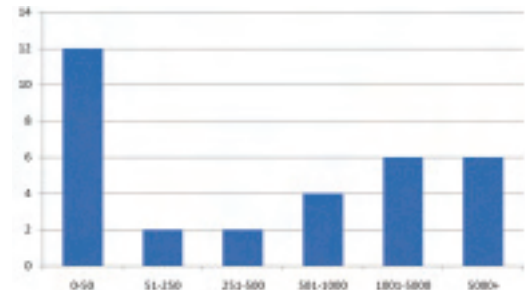


Figure 1. How many people are employed in your organisation? (n32)

Then we wanted to get an idea of the industry sectors represented (figure 2). This seemed to be largely split between the public and private sectors. The public sector representatives worked for large organisations, many of which employed more than 1000 people. The 'manufacturing/production' category was not particularly well represented here but this might have been due to an oversight in the question development. A respondent might have come from a 'private manufacturing' organisation and selected on the questionnaire 'private' rather than 'manufacturing'. Point noted for future questionnaires. 'Other' companies included utilities, counselling services and PR consultancy.

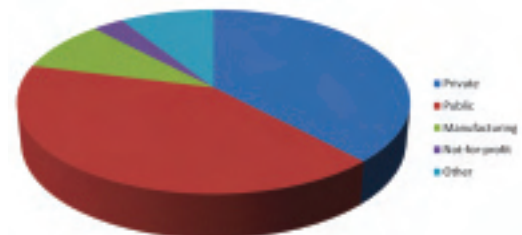


Figure 2. Which best represents your industry sector? (n32)

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We then wanted to find out about the interest and enthusiasm for 'wellbeing' (figure 3). This was a familiar buzzword throughout the conference and several seminars focused exclusively on this theme. It is often from the human resource function that 'wellbeing' is best or most championed but that doesn't mean there is universal regard and enthusiasm for it. So we asked 'How is wellbeing rated in your organisation?'

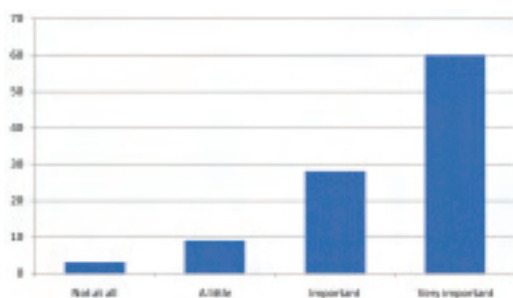


Figure 3. How is wellbeing rated in your organisation? (%)

Fortunately, 60 per cent of our sample rated wellbeing as 'very important'. Perhaps a little bit concerning is that 12 per cent felt it was not rated at all or only a little bit. Yet this also translates to 88 per cent pitching wellbeing as important or very important.

With a positive enthusiasm for wellbeing, we wanted to see where counselling fitted in. The next question asked 'What type of counselling service do you have?' Figure 4 demonstrates that just over 60 per cent of our sample have access to some form of counselling, the majority via employee assistance programmes. While it might be worrying to see that some 34 per cent do not have access to counselling in the workplace, some 38 per cent of our questionnaire population work in organisations employing less than 50 staff. Perhaps we should be knocking on the doors of these smaller enterprises and offering more ad hoc, pay-as-used services?

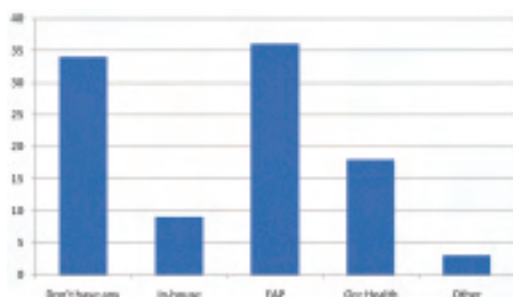


Figure 4. What type of counselling service do you have?

On the basis that counselling might only be one of many interventions offered in the workplace, the next question asked was 'What wellbeing services are available at your place of work?'

We selected a range of wellbeing services that we hear are offered in organisations. Figure 5 shows the range of services offered, so in many cases respondents ticked several services. It is interesting to see that 'alternative health' services seem to be most popular, including massage, yoga, Reiki etc. Furthermore, counselling services are pipped to the post by coaching and mentoring. If we consider that coaching and mentoring represents the secondary intervention stage (behind the developmental primary stage) of people support and development, then are we seeing a trend towards the more proactive interventions against the traditionally more reactive counselling interventions?

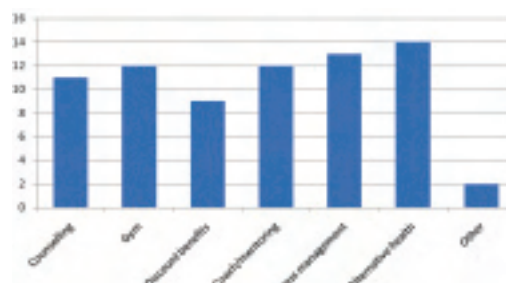


Figure 5. What wellbeing services are available at your place of work? (n73)

However, as counselling services are often bought in as a packaged product or on an outsourced annual contract, it may be that alternative health, stress management, coach and mentor practitioners can be brought in more easily on an ad hoc 'as needed' basis.

We thought counselling might be at the top of the pile but as it wasn't, fortuitously the next question sought to find out the motives for bringing in a counselling service provision. Question 6a asked, 'What was the reason for your company choosing a counselling provision?'

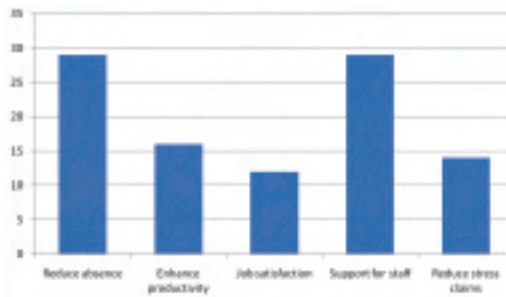


Figure 6a. Why did your company choose to have a counselling service? (%)

The two most popular reasons were 'to reduce absence' and 'to provide support for staff'. It would seem logical that each has an impact on the other, providing support is likely to reduce absence and vice versa. Many counselling service providers have promoted their services to organisations on the notion that having a counselling service might reduce the threat of stress-related negligence claims. While previous legal rulings have suggested this may be the case, it would appear that the trend is to offer a package of support and wellbeing services, a portfolio approach, rather than relying on one intervention.

We then considered that some respondents might not have access to a counselling service. And eight of our respondents didn't. We asked 'If your company doesn't offer access to counselling, what is the main reason?' Figure 6b provides some answers.

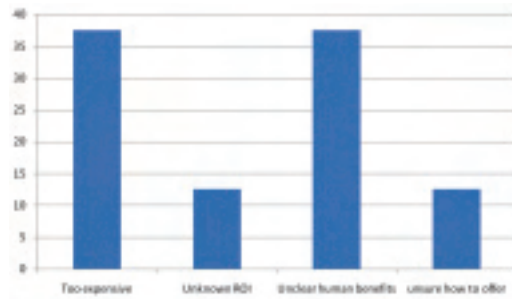


Figure 6b. Why doesn't your organisation have a counselling service provision? (%)

The two main reasons for not having a counselling service provision included 'too expensive' and being 'unclear of the human benefits'. On the price issue, there seems to be anecdotal evidence that counselling service providers are being squeezed on price and that some purchasers are opting for telephone counselling over face-to-face counselling simply because it is cheaper. The unknown cost benefits (or return on investment) seemed to be less of a reason not to have a service against being unclear of the 'human benefits'. It would be interesting to find out from those who felt the services were too expensive, whether they were unclear of or unconvinced about the cost or people benefits of such a scheme. Most research seems to suggest that counselling services at least cover their costs. The human benefits are probably best quantified by absence reduction figures and qualified by an increase in personal wellbeing.

There has been growing concern that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) might

slap taxation charges on counselling, aligning it with other taxable benefits. While there appears to be an understanding that counselling is not a 'benefit' in terms of how benefits are normally defined by HMRC, there is still a chance that this might change. So we wanted to check with our respondents whether any change might impact on their use of a service.

Question 7 asked 'If counselling became a taxable benefit would your company still provide it?'

There are several interesting points that emerge

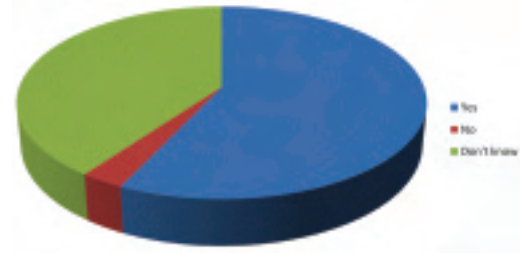


Figure 7. Would your company provide counselling if it became a taxable benefit? (%)

from figure 7. The majority of our sample, 57 per cent, suggested that they would utilise a counselling service if it became a taxable benefit. Perhaps this is a worryingly low percentage. While only one respondent (three per cent) said they would *not* use a counselling service, some 40 per cent (12 respondents) suggested they 'didn't know' if they would engage with a counselling service if it became a taxable benefit. Clearly, the 'don't know' votes can go either way but it does suggest a potential added threat to providers in the future.

In question 8, we wanted to pull back from counselling in the workplace and reflect on the wider environment, so we asked 'What are the positive attributes of having a wellbeing strategy?'. We wanted to find out the perceived motives for adopting a wellbeing strategy and, by virtue, how counselling might fit within this. Respondents were invited to select more than one option, if several applied to them.

The most popular or positive attribute for having a wellbeing strategy was to 'demonstrate a commitment to staff' (figure 8). This reflects one of the most popular reasons for having a counselling provision, namely to provide 'support to staff' (figure 6a). Collectively, there seems to be a strong push to support people at work, to give them the back up when needed. Perhaps this recognises the 'duty of care' organisations need to provide or maybe this is connected with the 'psychological contract'.

'Reducing absence' was regarded as the second

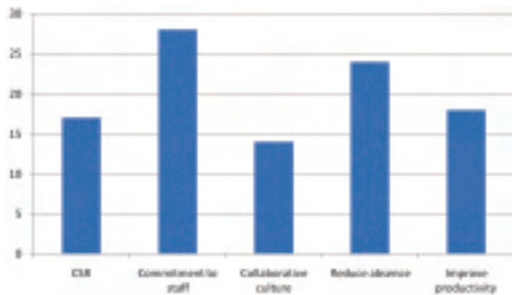


Figure 8. What are the positive attributes of having a wellbeing strategy? (n100)

most positive attribute of having a wellbeing strategy, followed by 'improving productivity'. It makes sense that reducing absence would have the knock-on benefit of improving productivity. Interestingly, some 17 respondents felt that a positive attribute of having a wellbeing strategy was 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR). Perhaps this shows 'wellbeing' as more than just an internal strategy to support employees and one which could impact on the wider community, business and social. Does wellbeing now start to play a part in becoming an employer of choice?

'Employer of choice' reflects the attractiveness to work in an organisation. And it can help companies attract the best talent and skills. But once in a company, how can people work best, what helps? So for question 9, we asked 'What do you believe contributes most to employee engagement at work?' Our 32 respondents selected some 59 reasons, suggesting that for a few, there was more than one option.

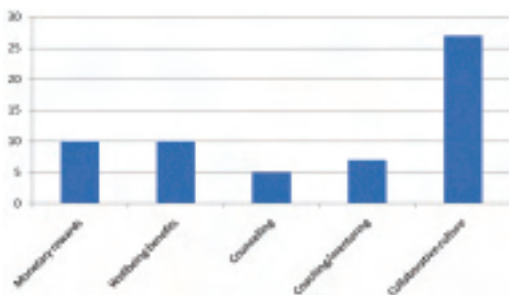


Figure 9. What do you believe contributes most to employee engagement at work?

It was really interesting to find out that an overwhelming majority of respondents, 27 out of 32, believed that 'creating a supportive, collaborative culture' contributed most to employee engagement. Less than a third of respondents felt that 'monetary rewards' contributed most to employee engagement. This reflects the perception that while people

do want remuneration for the work they do, the wider picture demonstrates that people want more than this – that sense of contributing, of being heard, of collaborating, of feeling valued. I'm sure many counselling practitioners reading this will be familiar with clients who have presented with apathy and loss of motivation because they have not felt valued or with those who have felt bullied because of an autocratic culture etc.

The final question was split into two parts. For those respondents who had a counselling provider, we asked, 'If there was one thing you'd like to make your counselling service provision better, what would that be? Responses included:

- make more employees aware of the counselling facilities
- create awareness
- raise the profile within the company
- communicate the service better so all staff are aware of the opportunity
- better access to all
- communication – better awareness
- effective communication of the counselling facility
- on-site visits, build a relationship
- ways of increasing usage, ways of highlighting the service
- more confidentiality for users.

A theme is emerging here, something about the need to better promote the service, to communicate the values and benefits and to build an ongoing relationship. Most outsourced service providers I am aware of say they do all this as a matter of course. But then maybe there's a preoccupation with 'winning contracts' at the expense of nurturing and supporting existing ones?

The second part of the question was given to those who didn't have a counselling service: 'If there was one thing to encourage your company to bring on board a counselling service provision, what would that be?'. Answers included:

- information to educate managers of the benefit to the organisation
- understand how it works
- increase support from management, educate/awareness, raise throughout the management structure
- commitment from the top towards counselling
- education and awareness of the options
- greater management awareness.

Here, we're looking at a need to better educate and inform potential customers about what counselling in the workplace is, what it does (and

‘We need more evidence-based research. We need to show that counselling in the workplace is not isolated from the organisation but inter-connected’

what it doesn't), how it can make a positive contribution to life at work (and home) and why. It's well recognised that a counselling service needs 'top management commitment' for it to be successful, yet it seems we need to communicate better with management.

In conclusion, 'wellbeing' is recognised as important in organisations and there are several interventions and initiatives that can feed into the mix. Counselling in the workplace remains high on the agenda. But with the potential threats attached to regulation, practice-based commissioning and benefit taxation issues, there seems to be even more of a need for us in the counselling community to show that what we do actually works. We need more evidence-based research. We need to show that counselling in the workplace is not isolated from the organisation but inter-connected. We're part of the solution rather than mired in the problem. And that rather than being just a 'cosy chat' or a 'place to moan', counselling is about change and empowerment, a private, safe place to explore real options and a chance to contribute significantly to positive personal wellbeing. ■

Many thanks to those who hosted the BACP exhibition stand – Debbie Delves, BACP membership development officer, Tracy Marson, BACP secretary, CEO secretariat, and Pam Ludlow, BACP HR advisor.

Improving ac

Megan Brown reflects on how Rochdale Mind supports

The change in the Government healthcare strategy through the Layard report¹ and the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) policy had implications and raised opportunities for workplace counselling. The focus of the reform on early intervention and prevention is reflected in the language of mental health practice with the move from crisis management to looking more holistically at wellbeing, and at mental health rather than mental illness. Aside from semantics this change is reflected in society as people are increasingly looking for alternatives to medication, even if they are not wholly clear what these alternatives are.

Levels of information

Increased access to self-help information through the internet means the public have the ability to self-diagnose. However, as the internet is largely unchecked, leaflets through venues such as libraries and doctors' surgeries remain a crucial way of ensuring useful self-help information is available to the general public. While self-help information is a good starting point it does not replace the need for assisted information. As services and provision in the world of mental health change rapidly, a central point for up-to-date information and queries is invaluable and many local information lines can fulfil this signposting function. Many take this one step further: they may offer emotional support but also advice, defined in part by Adviceuk² as:

- listening to clients and asking appropriate questions designed to establish the relevant facts of the situation
- diagnosing, ie correctly identifying the problem(s) and assessing whether there is anything that can be done about it/them – ie does the client have a legal right to be upheld?
- explaining the options a client has and the implications, and giving information that will allow the service user to make an informed choice about what should be done next
- describing further action that the client might take
- contacting third parties to seek information or clarify issues
- signposting or referring clients where appropriate to another advisor or solicitor who has greater knowledge or experience of the particular area of law in which the client requires advice.

The guidance in the following paragraphs incorporates definitions in an Adviceuk London region briefing, 'What is advice?'