



The workplace counsellor's toolbox

Elspeth Schwenk takes a closer look at our multitasking skills and role within organisational settings and the implications for our identity and training

distinguishes employee counsellors from counsellors in other contexts is the requirement that they fulfil a number of roles', writes Michael Carroll⁴. He goes on to say: 'little consideration has been given to how workplace counsellors combine the roles and responsibilities that characterise their work'.

We know it is imperative to recognise that our counselling work is not just confined to the tight boundaries of a one-to-one relationship with supervision once a month. We have long since realised the necessity to consider our counselling from a broader, systemic point of view: that the essence of what makes workplace counselling different is the tangled relationships and roles we undertake with the organisation. In a recent article Kinder⁶ writes: 'Workplace counselling is different to traditional counselling or therapy in the sense that whenever a client is seen, there is one other "person" present – the organisation'. And we are well acquainted with the delicate balance between the needs of the client and the needs of the organisation and the possibility for conflict within this triadic relationship (see English's⁷ three-cornered contract). But in what other ways does this systemic paradigm affect our work and what we do?

Core training and practical experience

Our core training teaches us to explore ourselves from an internal perspective. It enables us to begin to develop new listening skills and enter the journey of theoretical understanding that underpins our work. We then go on to gain practical experience, to learn how to use supervision and to monitor our

In the usual flow of my various networks and professional support environments, and from discussions and interviews associated with my research exploring career development for practitioners, a recurring theme has become apparent: the multitasking role of a workplace counsellor and/or supervisor. 'Nothing new in that', I hear you say, and yet I think there is something new to be acknowledged and explored regarding the range and demand of these tasks in tandem with our counselling role. The issue of multitasking comes in many forms and we each experience them in our own particular workplace ways. Yet there is a common thread that binds us; despite our different workplaces, we all have to adjust to and integrate a host of 'other' skills, roles and responsibilities in addition to and alongside our therapy task.

As either in-house, external or EAP workplace counsellors and supervisors, we are now familiar with the systemic nature of our work. Pickard and Towler¹, Orleans², Coles³, Carroll⁴, Schwenk⁵ and Kinder⁶, to name just a few, have all reflected on the wider perspective of our work that incorporates the relationships and obligations with a range of stakeholders. 'One of the main features that

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work on a number of levels relating to duty of care, fitness to practise, ethics, outcomes, organisation perspective, contract, and so forth. More often than not, we undertake yet more study and specialise in a particular theory or field of working, eg brief solution-focused therapy or systems theory or CBT, to enhance our work; and by so doing, we continue to develop our clinical skills. Finally, as accredited counsellors, we are required to fulfil our annual obligation of a minimum of 30 hours of continuing professional development – but in this entire programme of professional development have we neglected some of the non-therapeutic but nevertheless essential, and I think, growing, ‘nuts and bolts’ element around what could generally be called ‘other duties’?

Returning to Carroll⁸: ‘To date these [other duties] have not been articulated clearly and workplace counsellors are asked to fulfil roles that counsellors in other settings find anathema to their work. It is rare that employee counsellors have one single role with clients; rather, they are often asked to be trainer, welfare officer, home visitor, information giver, advocate, consultant to managers, personnel adviser, organisation change agent, as well as being counsellor.’ Drawing on Carroll’s⁸ *what?*, he outlines a list of diverse and multiple roles experienced by workplace counsellors, shown in Table 1.

Ensuring counselling provision
Advising line managers on approaching troubled employees
Employee counselling
Training and health education
Advising the organisation on policy matters
Managerial responsibilities
Welfare
Casework supervision
Facilitating organisational change
Critical incident de-briefing
Research
Advising on equal opportunities
Publicising the service
Educating staff about the role of counselling
Developing counselling provision
Monitoring effectiveness
Administration
Referral
Mediating between client and organisation

Table 1: Multiple roles of workplace counsellors

In my work as a workplace counselling supervisor, I come across counsellors doing considerably more than even this awesome list would suggest, for example:

- report writing and record keeping – including service statistics
- case conferencing and presentation
- conducting stress audits and compiling audit reports
- stress management training
- trauma debriefing, reports and admin
- information and guidance to clients and other stakeholders
- assessment and risk management
- legal documentation or consultation, for disciplinary, capability, bullying, harassment, sexual or other forms of abuse
- mediation
- coaching
- speaking to and working alongside multidisciplinary teams
- committee work and cross-organisation representation
- policy making
- defending the service, marketing and promotion
- management training on a range of issues:
 - absenteeism
 - staff appraisals
 - assertiveness
 - relationships
 - communication skills
 - mental health awareness
 - bespoke projects
 - managing trauma
- bidding for funding, new work
- maintaining a budget
- office management
- annual reports
- evidence-based audit and evaluation
- clinical governance
- developing and contracting new business.

I’m sure we can all add to this list other tasks that we routinely undertake – but even from this list it is apparent that workplace counsellors and supervisors need to develop, and be prepared to develop, a substantial raft of skills in addition to their therapeutic acumen. For example, such responsibilities as PR and marketing the service, IT and administrative skills, strategic thinking, staff management and recruitment, being able to ‘defend’ and justify the service, budget keeping and so forth. This broad range of tasks is acknowledged by BACP in its information sheet on the challenge of working in a multitasking job⁹.

Some of us may come with these skills while those of us attracted to the field of counselling because



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of its therapeutic focus may feel a little dismayed at having to divide our time and deploy our energies thus. However, because of the therapeutic nature of our work, it is not simply a matter of adjusting or accepting this additional aspect to our workload – it is essential that we develop an understanding of the practical and ethical implications and the relationship between our counselling and this ‘other duties’ aspect of our employment.

This brings into sharp relief that challenging questions ‘who is my client?’ and ‘whose side is the counsellor on?’ in Kinder’s⁶ recent article. He offers a series of challenging questions about the workplace counsellor’s role and task, and beneath this lies both a sophisticated skill set and a clear ethical and contractual understanding. Report writing, for example, is a prime situation when we need to carefully consider our contractual responsibilities and obligations, ethical framework, duty of care and so forth. Sometimes it is difficult to square the circle and hold together the polarities of the various interested parties while maintaining service neutrality.

Additional skills and CPD

For those of us who have trained and worked extensively in the counselling world, but not gained any of these additional skills, the demands of workplace counselling will only increase and these demands bring pressure and stress and perhaps role confusion. For years we have accustomed ourselves to case notes and simple forms of record keeping. But for those counsellors already involved in service management and the IT technicalities of evidence-based counselling, data protection, and the range of PR/marketing, policy making and training demands, they already appreciate how they have either rapidly begun to develop these skills or re-engineered skills gained in a previous occupation.

Either way, perhaps it is time to acknowledge the broader remit of a workplace counsellor and/or

supervisor and the implications this has on counsellor training and CPD. Since these ‘other duties’ can consume a considerable portion of our time and workload, they need to be more fully acknowledged and integrated into core training and advanced training. It is no longer sufficient to have highly developed counselling skills and theoretical understanding without the capacity to deliver on these other, increasingly essential and frequent, aspects of our work. It is time now to consider creative and accessible ways of providing bespoke CPD that enables practitioners to gain these essential skills and introduce a greater awareness of this growing element of our work during training and professional development.

Having taught counselling from certificate to diploma level for many years, I can well appreciate that making room in the curriculum for a non-therapeutic module on this topic might not be well received. However, as we consider ‘fitness to practise’ and ‘fit for purpose’ against the backdrop of our ethical framework, these issues do come into focus. If we are to contribute to organisation policy on employee wellbeing, be called upon to prepare proposals and bid for new work, defend our service, participate in areas of possible litigation and manage the service and thus represent the profession of counselling and psychotherapy to other disciplines, then we must take on board the seriousness of these tasks and not eschew them in favour of our therapeutic preferences.

While this topic seems mundane and detracts from our core sense of identity and *raison d’être* as a counsellor, counsellor-manager or supervisor, we would be wise to take a long hard look at the total package of our work and put in place training and development that will equip us for the whole job, and not just a part of it. Certainly service managers have their time and efforts well deployed in these non-counselling tasks, but individual portfolio practitioners, and workplace counsellors in non-management roles, will find themselves undertaking several of these tasks quite frequently. Coles³ draws our attention to some of the systemic relationship issues that are deeply embedded within this context of counselling work: ‘I believe that counsellors may have a certain fixed lifespan within an organisation and then they move into something else through promotion or demotion, through change of interest or when they finish their useful life in one organisation and leave to find another ... Working within organisations can feel like a struggling octopus where each of the eight arms grapples with a different problem. In order to cope with the different demands the workplace counsellor needs to have eight powerful arms, each with different

skills, suckers and muscles. He or she is not just a counsellor but has to be many things to many people in the organisation.' Copeland¹⁰ picks up on this remarkable multitasking as she explores the role or task of the workplace counselling supervisor, where links have been made with the roles of mentor, coach and consultant.

In a recent review of her book I wrote: 'This book ... should become essential reading for any supervisor associated with workplace counselling ... Copeland places the organisation as the central dynamic that impacts upon the work of both counsellor and supervisor ... She examines roles and responsibilities; ethics and the unique dynamics associated with the potential demands and dilemmas of workplace counselling; the systemic impact of culture, business, and management conflicts; the contractual process; the supervision rhombus; and finally, she outlines the task of reporting, evaluation and assessment.'¹¹ She advocates a more proactive role for supervisors working within organisations; promoting a developmental approach whereby 'supervisors, working initially through the supervisee and their line manager, can influence processes and systems that will not only benefit the clients but the organisation too'¹⁰. This reflects Copeland's understanding of the opportunity for new thinking regarding career development – targeting supervisors who are ready to widen their horizons and contribute their skills to benefit the organisation, thereby reflecting the emerging landscape of counselling supervision within organisations.

Understanding our identity

To date, traditional CPD has tended to focus on the acquisition of additional therapeutic skills and knowledge and ethical practice – all of which are essential ingredients. However, perhaps we should reassess this 'other' element of our workplace counselling and supervision, that has an increasing demand upon our time and for which many of us are substantially less than well equipped and trained. With regulation on the horizon, together with Agenda for Change and the Knowledge Skills Framework that is applicable within the NHS, it is timely to consider the whole package of what we do as workplace counsellors/supervisors. We are in an age where we must account for the detail of our workload and this includes those 'other duties' alongside our therapeutic work. It is time to broaden our understanding of our identity to include the wider remit of our multitasking role and reflect the full range of our toolkit in both the job description and possible banding of our job, and in the training that will support and underpin that work.

This also applies to the many 'portfolio' counsellors

who deliver EAP counselling or supervision. It is essential that we equip them with the organisational know-how: the systemic knowledge and understanding of working alongside and within an organisation, the contractual process that will safeguard their ethical and practice wellbeing, and offer clarity regarding the range of professional boundaries and duties, as outlined above. With the advances in technology, e-counselling, telephone counselling etc... more flexible ways of working are rapidly developing and the workplace counsellor and supervisor is at the forefront of this fast paced field and should pause to ensure that their training reflects these advances and that their identity and role description fully embraces and acknowledges the range of work they undertake.

Within the Association for Counselling at Work, we have been exploring this need alongside the natural stages of practitioner development set out by Stoltenberg and Delworth¹² developing a Career Development Matrix that begins to map out the sector specific development requirements for practitioners. What has become apparent however, is the significant lack of training and development opportunities available to workplace counsellors and supervisors to gain the necessary knowledge and business acumen they need to manage and respond to the range of 'other duties' outlined in this article. Clearly there is an opportunity in the training and development marketplace for bespoke, 'fit for purpose' CPD that will equip workplace counsellors and supervisors alike for the ongoing challenges found in this exciting field of work. ■

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