

## **A FOURTH WAVE IN WORKPLACE COUNSELLING – ITS PROFESSIONAL SPECIALISATION?**

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# A FOURTH WAVE IN WORKPLACE COUNSELLING – ITS PROFESSIONAL SPECIALISATION?

## ABSTRACT:

200 words

As an experienced Workplace Counsellor and as a Counsellor Trainer, I want to know if it's time to establish Workplace Counselling as a "*Professional Specialisation*". This paper explores the counsellor-training and counselling-skill development needs of the Employee Assistance Programme Agencies and compares them with the Workplace Counsellor training currently available in the UK Higher Education Sector

Results of my research so far, indicate that investigating new theoretical modelling, together with pursuing research-led/practice-based developments and innovations, could greatly benefit/improve the training of Workplace Counselling Practitioners. In turn, such an improved, "*Workplace Specialist*", training could be of benefit to the Employee Assistance Programme Agencies, their organisational clients and the individual workers.

My enquiries suggest that:

- 1) EAP Agencies, (and their "*customers*") want counsellors who: -
  - ✓ Provide "Added Value" counselling.
  - ✓ Are "*business aware*"
  - ✓ Understand the use of counselling methodology as a management tool.
  - ✓ See the needs of the employer and the worker as equally important
  - ✓ Understand organisations, their dynamics and their cultural structures
  - ✓ Offer a wide range of psychotherapeutic and psychological services
- 2) In the UK overall, the currently available WP training provision is very limited and may not yet be sufficiently structured to adequately meet these demands

## KEY WORDS:

Workplace; Employee Assistance Programmes; ; EAP; counsellor training; consultant; Higher Education; organisation; specialist; specialism; professional; employer

## INTRODUCTION:

This investigation is part of my on-going research activities and my current investigations into postgraduate level WP Counsellor training. This is where I am now but it's not where I started. So to begin at the beginning, it might help you to know that I've been a counsellor/psychotherapist for over 20 years and a Workplace Counsellor for the last 10 years. During my time in the employee-counselling sector I've graduated from being a practitioner who happens to see his clients in workplace settings, ("a counsellor in the workplace") to being a WP Counsellor/Consultant who offers psychological insights and psychotherapeutic inputs throughout the employing organisation's human resources structure. Much of my commerce/industry-based work has been either as an affiliate/associate with the major EAP Agencies or as consultant/trainer in various workplace-based settings. This experience has led me to **a growing suspicion** that many WP counsellors are confusing being generalist counselling practitioners, (who just happen to obtain their clients through workplace-based referrals), with being specialist workplace counsellors who might offer a whole range of psychological and psychotherapeutic services to employees, their managers and their employing organisations. In other words, I want to know if WP counselling could, or indeed should, become a "*counselling specialism*" in its own right. This, in turn, has led me to **a second suspicion** that if WP counselling were indeed to become a recognised professional specialism, then that recognition might have major implications for the training of a "*new breed*" of specialist WP counsellors.

## MY INVESTIGATIONS:

In order to advance the testing of my two suspicions I recently carried out two surveys: -

Firstly, I surveyed the overall current and future counsellor-training needs of the UK EAP Agencies. In conjunction with that survey I went on to use anecdotal evidence gained from employing organisations using EAP services as triangulation data that might potentially offer support for my main survey findings.

Secondly, I surveyed the WP counselling training courses currently offered within the UK Higher Education system. I also surveyed the services offered by commercial consultancy organisations that allegedly offer WP Counselling training at any level. This survey was carried out as an attempt to attempt to provide triangulation data for this part of my investigation.

### 1) EVIDENCE FROM THE EAP AGENCIES

There are 16 EAP Agencies on the Employee Assistance Professionals Association Providers Register, (EAPA 2004). Twelve of those so registered responded to my enquiries. In combination, these 11 Agencies provide external, (as opposed to in-house), therapeutic services to over 5.25 million employees and their significant others. In each case my point of contact was at Counselling Services Manager level or higher. The interviews were carried out using a semi-structured interview. The respondents were encouraged to be brief as this was only a preliminary investigation. Content Analysis, carried out as each interview progressed, provided the data given in my results section.

There are some 6.5 million employees and their dependents who are provided with counselling/psychotherapeutic services by external EAP Agencies, (Beer, 2003). My data came from EAP Agencies servicing 5.25 million of these. Therefore is it reasonable to suggest that my results are a fair representation of the overall views of the external EAP Providers. However, this survey does not take into account the views of those who provide in-house WP counselling services. Furthermore, the extent of the in-house services is not yet clear to me nor do I yet have an overview of the “*who, how and why*” that underpins the in-house WP counselling services. These omissions limit my findings.

### The Triangulation Support

Triangulation was attempted by using anecdotal evidence to highlight the apparent current and future needs of the EAP Agencies’ client “*customers*”. It was amassed from an overview of my follow-up notes from a series of consultative inputs, policy-advice provision, mentoring sessions, counselling-skills and emotional-awareness training interactions and so on with more than 25 major UK employers over the last 10 years. In all, more than 50 relevant professionals directly employed by those organisations, (HR/OH staff, managers), indirectly provided data during their general conversations with me. These conversations took place during informal, post-input, debriefings. This data offered me an opportunity to see if I could find triangulation evidence in support of my analysis of the information gathered from my EAP Agency survey. In other words, I wanted to know if the emerging needs of the EAP Agencies’ client “*customers*” and the ways in which the EAP agencies foresee the developing, or the potential, WP counselling “*specialists*”, were likely to coincide.

It must be noted that these anecdotal findings are very subjective. They were not primarily gathered for research purposes and so my collection method was neither rigorous nor bias-

free. Furthermore, interpretations other than mine are possible. Therefore, this evidence on its own is not offered as substantive “*back-up*” to my survey findings. However, taken in context, it is reasonable to see this data as being useful for suggesting a confluence, or a reasonably close triangulation, with my survey data gathered directly from the EAP Agencies.

## 2) CURRENT UK HIGHER EDUCATION PROVISIONS

This was an investigation that once begun “*fed itself*”. Many of the Universities contacted were able to suggest other HE Institutions who might have more information for me. In all, 33 HE establishments were investigated, and the results are also summarised in the relevant section below. Because I am coming to the belief that WP counselling training is probably a specialism that should only be undertaken by experienced counsellors, I have confined my investigations to existing postgraduate level training provisions. Further research may, or may not, support such an exclusive attitude.

There are two obvious major weaknesses in this part of my investigation:

- 1) Despite extensive background enquiries, (Association for Counselling at Work, EAP Association, Internet, personal contacts, etc.), I cannot be sure if my investigations sufficiently covered enough of the available PG courses to claim that they are properly representative. A more comprehensive investigation into WP counselling training in Higher Education will be the subject of future research.
  
- 2) Some institutions may have seen my enquiries as potentially leading to the publication of information that might weaken their perceived competitiveness in the “*educational*

*marketplace*". Therefore, I cannot be sure if this might have skewed or limited any of their responses, either consciously or unconsciously.

Nevertheless, even bearing the above objections in mind, I believe that at least for now, this part of my investigations was sufficiently inclusive to suggest that my findings are probably representative of current WP counselling training provision within the UK Higher Education system.

### The Triangulation Support

I extensively searched the web and located over 800 potential hits. With two exceptions, (see below), I could not locate any apparently suitable HE-level equivalent training courses provided by any of the commercial consultancies. However, I cannot be sure that all of these agencies are listed on the web.

## **MY RESULTS:**

### 1) THE EAP AGENCIES

#### Pilot Questionnaire – RESPONSE SUMMARY

Q1. Do you feel that offering training in the use of counselling methodologies, as a general "workplace management tool", is sufficiently understood by workplace counsellors?

*EAP Providers' View:*                            *No*

Q2. Are WP counsellors sufficiently aware of the need to provide demonstrable “*added value*” to employers investing in counselling?

*EAP Providers’ View:* *No, but training/indoctrination helps*

Q3. How “*business aware*” do you feel WP counsellors are?

*EAP Providers’ View:* *No – training needed*

Q4. Do you find that WP counsellors are capable of responding to the needs of the employer as well as to the needs of the employee?

*EAP Providers’ View:* *Mostly no, however, one company felt that if WP counsellors can’t acquire this ability then they should stop EAP work*

Q5. Could WP counsellors usefully expand the range of services that they offer employers and their employees?

*EAP Providers’ View:* *Yes but only if properly trained*

Q6. What would be the key ingredients that you would want to include in any WP Counsellor training programmes?

*EAP Providers’ Views:*

*Cluster 1: Organisational awareness, dynamics, systems & issues; Understanding the world of work; Awareness of different and differing workplace cultures and environments; Putting counselling into context*

*Cluster 2: Ethical issues/dilemmas around the 3-way contract; Understanding the dual client-employer relationship; Confidentiality & law; Employer best practices (HR, employment law, discipline etc)*

*Cluster 3: Client assessment; Mental health assessment; Risk assessment; Risk management*

*Cluster 4: Critical incident work; Time-limited therapy; Mediation work; Stress analysis*

Q7. Any other comments

*EAP Providers' View      Good EAP agencies train their counsellors but WP training prior to recruitment would be helpful*

Q8. Approximately how many employees are “serviced” by your EAP contracts?

*Total = 5,100,000 approximately including “significant others”*

#### Triangulation Support

This is anecdotal evidence gathered while I have been working in an organisational counselling consultative capacity throughout the UK and Eire. My client organisations have ranged across the employment world, (heavy industry, public service, manufacturing, leisure, finance sector, voluntary sector, emergency services, retailing etc). After each professional encounter, I noted the reactions to my inputs from various individuals at all levels of the organisation concerned. A review of these notes has highlighted three common attitudes apparently held by many in the world of work: -

- 1) There is apparently a general lack of awareness of the potential power of therapeutic modelling, emotional awareness and counselling-skills applications for helping with issues arising in everyday workplace situations. Once aware, most of those interviewed were very keen to undergo further and more extensive training in the necessary theoretical and skills-based inputs.
- 2) Employers and their workers are seemingly unaware of the range of services that WP counsellors could potentially offer. For nearly all of them, counselling is usually seen a "*last ditch refuge for the weak*". Again, once they were aware of its potential universal applicability, employers and their employees wanted WP counselling services to be taken up much more. This applied not only to troubled individuals but also to persons seeking personal development. They wanted counselling to be proactive as well as being reactive.
- 3) My overall impression was that nobody had ever considered including counsellors as part of the initial planning/steering teams that are commonly set up to oversee the development or implementation of new projects. Counselling was at best a low-priority afterthought and usually not even on the "*radar screen*". Yet again, once managers and their employees became aware of the usefulness of involving counsellors and counselling methodologies in proactively designing the "*human structure*" of the workplace, those interviewed were eager for more information.

## 2) CURRENT UK HIGHER EDUCATION PROVISIONS

It appears that in the UK, only two HE Institutions are attempting to provide Postgraduate WP Counsellor training that is openly available to any suitably experienced and qualified counsellor.

### 1) University of Bristol, (PG Diploma/MSc - Counselling in Organisational Settings).

Bristol approaches WP counselling as being a service to the troubled individual and how organisational issues might impact on this process. This course appears to be mainly aimed at generalist counsellors who happen to operate in workplace settings.

### 2) University of Southampton, (MSc in Professional Studies - Workplace Counselling)

This is a purpose-designed course for experienced counsellors who wish to progress to becoming Workplace Counselling Specialists. It has recently been validated and will be available from October 2005. It is being designed in accordance with the author's ongoing research into the needs of the suppliers and users of workplace counselling. Its underlying ethos is the promotion of the WP Counsellor as a recognised, and recognisable, Counselling Professional Specialist.

In addition, the University of Surrey offers PG Workplace counselling training but only on a "one-off" tailored basis to specific clients who purchase its services. These courses are only available to students from the purchasing organisations.

## The Triangulation Support

I searched the Internet extensively and located over 800 potential commercial-consultancy and voluntary-agency websites that claimed to offer WP counselling training. There was a huge variety in the stated learning objectives and the targeted student/customer population. Most of the programmes on offer were only basic-skills training and/or counselling awareness

programmes designed for interested non-counsellor managers. Only two organisations appeared to offer WP training to potential HE “specialism” standards. These were: -

- 1) Hoskinson Associates who provide “on-demand” courses for management personnel who are employed by Hoskinson Associate’s organisational clients. These are not open-access courses but programmes that are bought from Hoskinson Associates on a “tailored one-off” basis by employing organisations on behalf of their employees. It appears that from an HE point of view, Hoskinson & Associates are simply offering another route to access the Roehampton “closed access” course.
- 2) The KCC Foundation; this is an international agency that in 1999/200 apparently offered an MSc/PG Diploma course in Systemic WP Counselling and Consultation. At that time, KCC stated that the University of Luton had validated this course. However, enquiries at Luton University, and directly with the KCC Agency, have not yet produced any evidence that this course has ever run.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF MY FINDINGS:**

### WHAT THEY APPEAR TO MEAN

This survey suggests that the EAP Agencies assess current WP counsellors’ skills/abilities as being capable of significant improvement. They are clearly saying that they would prefer their WP counsellor recruits to have had further and specific training in the additional counselling/therapeutic skills that would be of major use to the EAPs’ organisational clients. These findings triangulate positively with the apparent needs of employing organisations as derived from the anecdotal evidence. Once aware of the potential, these organisations want

the full range of inputs that counsellors could, if adequately trained, offer them. Therefore, it's likely that if WP counsellors are prepared to "*think outside the box*" and to develop their professional specialist education, they will be able to respond to the employers' current and future needs. These "*specialists*" would be much more likely to provide the levels of "*real added value*" sought by industries/employers investing in WP Counselling and EAP Agency services.

If these perceived professional training needs, and in particular the three "*training clusters*" identified in my survey, are compared with the WP counselling training currently available in HE then some serious supply and demand gaps appear. It seems that the current training provision for WP counsellors in the UK will need considerable development before it can begin to meet the current and future needs of the EAP Agencies, their affiliates and their commercial clients.

Therefore, it seems to me that WP Counselling is in danger of finding itself stuck in a "*non-professional*" backwater unless it actively repositions itself to move forward and meet the future needs of the EAPs, employers/employees and indeed, the likely needs of my putative WP counselling "*Specialist Practitioners*". My initial investigations suggest that the emerging needs of the existing and potential "*WP counselling customers*" are much more comprehensive than current WP counselling theory and training allows for. Therefore, I am arguing that we should now be creating new types of theoretical models and counsellor educational programs to meet those needs. For me, the logical outcome of such a process would be establishing WP counselling as a Professional Specialism.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Well, we're much more likely to have a fair idea of where we're going if we have a fair idea of where we came from. How did we get to where we are today? I find it useful to visualise WP counselling as having developed in three "waves":

- 1) The First Wave, the "**Historical Wave**", (1890-1970'ish), rose up out of the original EAP schemes and mainly addressed employee addiction/absenteeism/welfare problems.
- 2) The Second Wave, the "**Employee Therapy Wave**", (1970's to 1990's), added individual therapeutic counselling programmes to the general EAP "package".
- 3) The Third Wave, the "**Breaking the Boundaries Wave**", is currently taking counselling beyond the needs of the individual employees to look at the overall organisational health of the employing institution. These developments are encouraging some WP counsellors to break the "*traditional boundaries*" observed by most UK generalist counsellors.

Nevertheless, although each of these three "waves" has apparently been of value, they don't necessarily support the notion that WP counselling specialists might have their own, unique, contribution to make to society. So, might WP counselling remain nothing more than routine counselling that just happens to be paid for by employers? I am arguing that this is a very self-limiting view of WP counsellors' actual or potential skills. This misconception might be corrected if WP counselling were to be developed into a "*Specialist Area of Professional Counselling Practice*"?

The results of this Pilot Exploration, together with the way that my research is developing, are leading me to wonder if it is now is the time promote a Fourth Wave, a “WORKPLACE COUNSELLING SPECIALIST-PRACTITIONER WAVE”.

In fact, a major part of my ongoing research will be an investigation into finding out if this really is the wave that will lead to WP counselling becoming widely accepted as a specialist profession. Again, I am arguing that such a “*professional specialism*” would clearly need its own theoretical underpinnings, its own evidence-supported practice base and its own professional standards.

## QUESTIONS

So, can we actually create a new generation of Workplace Counselling Specialists? As my enquiries progress I'll be trying to find out if developing such a specialism is indeed a realistic concept. These are some of the questions I'll be asking: -

- 1) **Can we prove that WP counselling is worthwhile?** McLeod's, (2001) research review, despite its limitations, suggests that workplace counselling is possibly effective in general terms along a range of personal and organisational measures. Furthermore, it's obvious that employers wouldn't buy EAP schemes if they didn't feel that they needed them. Yet buy into them, they clearly do because over the last 20 years, WP counselling services have expanded dramatically, (Oher 1999). The problem, as far as I can see for now, is that this expansion seems to be more based on hope than evidence. Shouldn't we now be re-addressing, and then rigorously testing, the whole concept of WP counselling?

**2) Is it time for WP Counsellors to “occupy their new territories”?** Of course, some counsellors already provide industry with a wide range of services that are not necessarily individual worker-centred but that respond instead to the employing organisation’s needs. For example, counsellors may be involved in team development, staff training, cultural change, assessment, out-placing, addiction awareness and so on, (Carroll & Walton, 1997, Towler 2002). However, my review of the publications on offer, (Amazon Book Search Services, 2004), suggests that the majority of the current suppliers of such services are not counsellors. It seems to me that these traditionally “*non-counselling*” areas are precisely the ones where counsellors actually have a great deal to offer. So, would a new breed of specialist WP counsellors be prepared to “*stake their claim*”?

**3) What if we were to put the needs of individual workers second?** Would we find new opportunities for using counselling methodologies as an integral part of management and organisational design? As a WP consultant, I’m unworried if the needs of the organisation supersede those of individual employees. However, such a value-judgement can generate conflict between counsellors who insist on being client-led and those who are more “*organisational customer flexible*”. There have been some limited investigations into the needs of the client companies, (Berridge et al 1997 etc.), but there is a marked reluctance throughout the literature to suggest that individual needs might sometimes be secondary issues and that organisational health might sometimes come first.

**4) What are the extent, the ethos and the underpinning theories, models and methodologies of the in-house WP counselling schemes?** They are obviously a very important source of WP theory and practice and their needs and views must form an essential part of any developments in WP counselling training.

**5) Is it even necessary that WP counselling specialists should be developed through the UK Higher Education system?** For example, would adopting the American “*Certified Employee Assistance Professional*” (CEAP) credential be an alternative way forward? One of difficulty would be one of semantics. The term “*EAP*” in the US often means something rather different to its meaning in the UK. Not only that, but the CEAP scheme’s entry requirements, syllabus content and assessment methods would need detailed assessment before they could be considered for their suitability for WP counselling practitioners in the UK.

## **CONCLUSION**

I’m very optimistic that WP counselling can indeed develop as a professional specialism that could meet the emerging needs of employers and their employees. However, that’s all in the future. Right now, the results of this Paper suggests that:

- a) The EAP Agencies are far from confident in the current ability of most WP counsellors to provide these extra skills and services. The Agencies all emphasise the need for much more WP counsellor training

b) The postgraduate HE training programmes that are currently available for WP counsellors will need considerable further development/augmentation before they could properly contribute to the development of the WP Counselling Specialist.

In this paper I have raised some serious questions about the current and future training needs of Workplace Counsellors. I have also highlighted some of the major controversies that I believe we'll have to face if WP counselling is to survive its next half-century. I have even “thought outside the box” myself and wondered if WP counselling should become a specialism in its own right! However, right now, the only thing I’m really sure of is that maintaining the status quo is not an option!

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