



THE RESILIENT ADULT GUIDANCE PRACTITIONER

A Study of the Impact of High Touch Work in Challenging Times

Dr. Lucy Hearne

Department of Education and Professional Studies, University of Limerick. lucy.hearne@ul.ie



IRCHSS

INTRODUCTION

This report is a summary of an IRCHSS (New Ideas Award) funded research project carried out between December, 2011 and March, 2012 in the University of Limerick. The aim was to investigate resilience for adult guidance practitioners involved in high touch work during a time of unrelenting economic challenges. High touch is “highly skilled professional attachment, involvement, and separation over and over again with one person after another” (Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2011, p.106). It involves

respect, constant empathy, one-way caring, understanding and energy for the client. Twelve practitioners from a range of adult guidance services in the Republic of Ireland and England participated in the study between February and March, 2012. The ten Irish practitioners work in the Adult Educational Guidance Initiative (AEGI), the Local Employment Service (LES) and a VEC VTOS Centre. The two English practitioners work in a University Careers Service and a Public Employment Service (NextStep).

CONTEXT OF STUDY

A key tenet of current guidance policy is the centrality of career guidance services to support citizens’ development of lifelong career transition competencies (Cedefop, 2009; Council of the European Union, 2008; Watts et al, 2010). In times of economic crisis national authorities need to integrate a co-ordinated lifelong guidance policy within national human resource strategies (Cedefop, 2011). Recent Irish policy emphasising recovery, sustainability and growth through the reformation of institutions reflects such a proposition (Government of Ireland, 2012). The adult guidance profession now finds itself in the midst of a transitional process involving the reconfiguration or rationalisation of client services and greater departmental collaboration.

As high unemployment increases the risk of social exclusion and alienation from the

labour market, individuals need to be more adaptable, resourceful and resilient (Bimrose et al, 2011; Blustein, 2006). The challenges for practitioners are that they are expected to be specialists in all areas of working life and capable of supporting clients with complex needs, including mental and physical health problems (Bimrose, 2010; Launikari et al, 2011; Blustein, 2006). Practitioners are still required to respond to the increasing demand for their service from all stakeholders in spite of cutbacks (Brady, 2009). Furthermore, the encroachment of a target-driven culture has increased daily work pressures and perpetuates the view that guidance needs to prove its economic worth (Douglas, 2011; Hearne, 2011). Such expectations require practitioners to be both professionally and personally resilient alongside their clients.



Gate Masts
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Professional resilience and burnout prevention are pertinent to guidance practitioners exposed to clients' traumatic stories over time. According to Skovolt and Trotter-Mathison (2011) professional hazards in high-touch work are:

- the inability to say 'no' (the treadmill effect);
- dealing with an 'ocean' of stress emotions;
- the covert nature of the work;
- constant empathy and one-way caring;
- elusive measures of success; and
- regulation oversight and control by external unknown others

The characteristics of burnout are extreme dissatisfaction at work, excessive distancing from clients, impaired competence, low energy, increased irritability, depression and physical, emotional and mental

exhaustion (Morrisette, 2002). A lack of internal hardiness, inadequate levels of organisational support, unrealistic demands and policies, little positive feedback, poor management and inadequate supervision can also contribute (Corey and Corey, 2007; Reid, 2010; Stebnicki, 2008). Safeguarding against burnout involves maintaining oneself personally in order to function professionally (Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison, 2011). It requires emotion regulation in the form of adaptive coping strategies that enhance productive functioning (Leahy et al, 2011). Some specific strategies include various forms of supervision, CPD and new approaches such as mindfulness. The research interviews uncovered some of the significant issues faced by practitioners involved in high touch work in the adult guidance sector

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

An interpretive approach was used in the study. Table 1 provides information on role, gender, length of time in service, type and location of service and the average weekly 1-to-1 sessions with clients over a twelve month period.

Professional Role	Gender	Years	Current Role	Service	Location	wkly 1-to-1 sessions
P1. Guidance Counsellor	Male	7	Singular	VTOS	Urban	40
P2. Guidance Coordinator/Counsellor	Male	7	Dual	AEGI	Urban & Rural	15
P3. Guidance Coordinator/Counsellor	Male	7	Dual	AEGI	Urban	15-20
P4. Guidance Coordinator/Counsellor	Male	4	Dual	AEGI	Urban & Rural	15-20
P5. Careers Adviser	Male	3	Singular	HE	Urban	12-20
P6. Nextstep Adviser	Female	3	Singular	PES	Urban	30*
P7. Guidance Counsellor	Male	13	Singular	LES	Urban	25
P8. Mediator	Female	12	Singular [§]	LES	Urban	15-20
P9. Guidance Coordinator/Counsellor	Male	5	Dual	AEGI	Rural	15
P10. Guidance Coordinator/Counsellor	Female	11	Dual	AEGI	Urban & Rural	12#
P11. Guidance Coordinator/Counsellor, Information Officer	Female	4	Triple	AEGI	Urban & Rural	12
P12. Guidance Coordinator/Counsellor	Female	5	Dual	AEGI	Rural	20

Table 1: Participant Profiles

*this is the specific weekly target set by the NextStep Company #specific service target of no more than 4 clients per day § works a 4-day week

There was quite a level of variation in the number of client sessions. The VTOS practitioner has the highest number of meetings which can be from ten minutes upwards, whilst the Careers Adviser has the lowest as he is also involved in group delivery work. The NextStep Adviser has a target of thirty clients per week in her company. The AEGI and LES practitioners have an average of between 15 to 20 client meetings per week.

CHALLENGES OF HIGH TOUCH WORK IN THE CURRENT ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

Four specific challenges were identified:

(i) Volume and diversity

The progressive increase in numbers has seen prevalence towards ‘skimming’ as opposed to ‘depth’ work with clients. One practitioner (P12) stated “high touch interaction, I find that very challenging. ...not having the chance to build a relationship with somebody”, especially when “not knowing will they ever engage with you again”. Furthermore, the increase in older adults accessing services, especially males who require significant counselling support, can be demanding when numbers are escalating.

The numbers issue is particularly pronounced in the target-driven employment services where the conveyor belt system of client work is evident. The weekly practice of dispersal of a new group of clients amongst practitioners in the LES places considerable pressure on them to support vulnerable clients in approximately three to four sessions, although two sessions are often the maximum now. This poses challenges for a practitioner who has to “be on the ball...up to speed on information from so many different sources” (P7). Although client data inputting is beneficial, it is a key challenge for the majority of the practitioners in the study, especially for those required to enter data in “real time” as it is time consuming and impacts on the one-to-one intervention (P6).

Finally, relationship building and the creation of more streamlined referral systems has exacerbated numbers with a limited need to over promote some guidance services. Furthermore, the impact of the Irish recruitment freeze means practitioners are finding it increasingly difficult to meet the needs of socially-disadvantaged clients as their workload has become expanded.

(ii) Complexity of client issues

A complex range of inter-related issues emerged including financial struggles, urgency to get work, variant qualification levels, and problems such as addiction, depression, anxiety, poor confidence and a sense of hopelessness about the future. The desire for quick, concrete outcomes is prominent. Conversely, the economic crisis has also offered some clients opportunities to pursue new options. The indiscriminate nature of the recession means clients are presenting with a broad range of qualifications, from basic skills to PhD’s, as well as undiagnosed learning difficulties and negative education experiences. However, the continuous deficiency of education and training places and provision black spots in some areas hampers progression and constrains the work. Clients can only be brought so far and, in spite of their readiness to ‘move on’; poor progression options are impeding their progress and fuel mental health problems.

In the LES, the corrosive impact of unemployment is manifesting itself in depression, anxiety, anger and poor motivation. Some clients are traumatised from job loss, and there is “a lot of grief through a lack of opportunities...it sits in the room” (P7). HE students are also stressed about the future; more so international students who have “invested a lot to come here and some have their dreams of getting a real job....so we work really, really hard” (P5).

Finally, the nature of referral for dealing with mental health issues varies across the services with some practitioners experiencing quick access to counselling services, while others are put in the position of ‘holding’ clients until an appointment becomes available. Clients in the LES have access to an internal counselling service, whereas NextStep clients are provided with information on support agencies for self-referral.

(iii) Managing expectations

A significant element of high touch work involves the management of stakeholder's expectations, i.e., clients, management, staff and Government departments. In many instances, clients expect a directive approach that involves fixing their situation for them. The practitioner is viewed as the "expert", "sorter", "course creator", and "job finder". Practitioners have to be clear about their specific role, resources available and boundaries of their provision.

The expectations of management vary across the services. For some AEGI practitioners, strong collaborative and dialogical relationships with management help manage expectations and deal with the swelling numbers of adult learners needing help. Nonetheless, there are also examples of unrealistic expectations by management in some services, namely; pressure to achieve targets, manage heavy caseloads and cover large geographical areas.

There is also divergence in the expectations of colleagues with some viewing it as a "catch-all" role where practitioners are expected to be able to deal with all types of issues, meet large numbers of clients and regularly attend outreach centres. Other colleagues are more supportive and work collaboratively with the practitioner as part of a team. Nevertheless, in some cases the constant need to educate staff of the guidance function is a repetitive feature of the work.

Practitioners view the expectations of the relevant government departments in terms of the requirement to fulfil their job description, support target groups, manage numbers and record client data. However, the possible requirement of sharing confidential data within streamlined services to monitor client activity is a concern for some practitioners.

(iv) Measuring outcomes


It is apparent that it is difficult to measure impact during times of increased activity. One practitioner reflected "sometimes I wonder, my goodness, am I making an impact at all or am I doing an effective job in the whole of society?" (P10). Follow-up is ad-hoc across the services with some more rigorous in their efforts to track clients' progression. AEGI practitioners are required to record progression information without a formal tracking protocol in place. The recording of client activity is a central aspect of the work of LES practitioners.

The emphasis on the hard outcomes of placement into education, training and employment is common across all services. Nevertheless, the belief is that soft outcomes are vital to understand progression but they are extremely difficult to measure and "don't count on our stats" (P7). In VTOS, client confidentiality means there are hidden stories, "the biggest success stories as people in great difficulty turning their life right around but quite often you can't identify them" (P1).

PRACTITIONER RESILIENCE IN HIGH TOUCH WORK

The definition for resilience in high touch work relates to qualities, dispositions and behaviours. Resilience was described as "bouncing back", "ability to cope", having a "healthy demeanour" and "balanced" perspective, and capacity to be "self-supporting" in the face of poor organisational support. Practitioners described themselves as confident, positive, having an "inner drive and commitment to the work", a "laid back, tolerant" outlook, and "not dwelling on failures". Resilient behaviour means having the capacity to deal with challenges, unpredictability, being psychologically armed to contend with the unknown of what "comes through the door" (P10). Furthermore, despite the sometimes repetitive nature of the work, "keeping the energy up" and maintaining an interest "to be able to do the work" each year is important. However, comparisons with clients' career fragility during a time of organisational cutbacks and reconfiguring of public services also emerged.

The creation of strict professional boundaries with all stakeholders is an essential task of maintaining resilience, albeit a difficult one for some. Whilst some practitioners are embedded in democratic organisations that allow a level of autonomy, others work in more repressive organisations that increase stress levels. Autocratic organisations lean towards excessive regulation, micro-management and unrealistic expectations of the practitioner's capacity to deliver a professional service.



A key finding is that resilience is reliant on having ‘balanced challenges’ in one’s professional life. Two conditions emerged: the value of having ‘an external life’ and ‘good professional support’. An external life refers to the range of different interests and hobbies outside of work which was common amongst all the practitioners. However, the capacity to “switch off” and “walk away” from the work at the end of the day can be difficult. For a small number, bringing work home, either by ruminating on particular issues or having specific work to complete is an issue.

The two aspects of ‘team member versus solo practitioner’ and a ‘novice versus old hand’ appear significant for professional robustness. Being part of a team that involves peer support or supervision helps to alleviate isolation. Practitioners who operate on their own due to combined roles, organisational constraints, and/or outreach work appear more isolated and stressed. However, for some, the continuum of experience helped them to become more resilient and self-assured. One LES practitioner felt he could handle anything that came through the door after 13 years in practice.

The matter of long-term resilience was mixed. Only three practitioners felt they had the resilience to do the work over a long period of time. Others are considering their future options including the pursuit of new challenges, and retirement for one. Three practitioners felt conflicted by the issue; whilst they enjoy their work they have concerns about stamina, lifestyle and burnout. One stated “I feel I get a lot more tired and I do worry about the long term sort of chasing my tail to the extent that I am doing it long term” (P11). Some practitioners also reported that they find it difficult to be empathic with clients at times, especially when exhausted due to the volume and complex issues. Nonetheless, being empathic is the core of the work, and “being kind to people” who are vulnerable (P8) and “may not be dealt with humanely” by other agencies (P3) is important.

Significantly, none of the 12 practitioners have experienced complete burnout that involved considerable time off work. A range of symptoms did surface though, such as distancing from clients, mild depression, anxiety and weariness. The most noteworthy was cumulative exhaustion (physical, mental, emotional) experienced by all of them. This appears to revolve around ‘peak and trough’ times during the academic year, such as CAO and autumn intakes after which they are exhausted or “totally wiped” (P4). A number of AEGI practitioners stated that the increased demand for their service has resulted in limited time during quieter periods for professional revitalisation and strategic planning.

Finally, all of the practitioners benefit from professional support to debrief, share practice and cope with stressful situations. The majority avail of supervision, either one-to-one external supervision and/or group supervision (external and internal). In total, six of the seven AEGI practitioners get one-to-one external supervision on a monthly basis which is subsidised by the AEGI. External supervision is viewed as necessary, restorative and helps to “unburden oneself of different problems” (P9). In addition, CPD in the form of courses, in-service training and newly emerging practices such as mindfulness were also deemed useful by a number of the practitioners.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study set out to develop an understanding of resilience for practitioners supporting adults during an uncertain economic period when the demand for guidance has increased but resources have been squeezed. The findings highlight the challenges involved for practitioners in dealing with escalating numbers and complex issues. There is a concern that the nature of this type of high touch work in an under-resourced sector may lead to a diminution of guidance counselling skills over a prolonged period, as well as disaffection due to the repetitive nature of the work and practitioners performing more like automatons than helpers.

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