EMPLOYEE OPINIONS ABOUT WORKPLACE COUNSELLING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Employee assistance programs (EAPs) and workplace counselling schemes are becoming commonplace in large Western organizations. However, information about their prevalence in non-Western cultures is scarce. Hence, this research has been conducted to provide a deeper understanding about employee perspectives related to counselling at work in Turkish organizations. The study was implemented with a convenience sample of thirty-nine employees working in a variety of organizations. Seven focus groups were conducted for an in-depth discussion of workplace counselling. Analysis of focus group discussions revealed the following categories: willingness and preferences about the uptake of counselling service, issues to be brought forward for counselling, counsellor qualifications deemed as desirable, expected counselling benefits, and sources of social support. Research findings indicated that most of the participants perceived workplace counselling in a positive way. Nevertheless, concerns were stated about confidentiality, trust, and professional skills. Cultural differences, ethical issues, and knowledge about organizational dynamics appear as important factors to be considered for encouraging employees to seek help when needed.

Key words: Workplace counselling, employee opinions

Introduction

Counselling services as instruments developed to support the well-being of employees are rapidly expanding in North American and European countries. Highly stressful circumstances of today's workplaces have led to increased concern about employee health. Consequently, counselling schemes for employees have been set up where they can get free access to psychological aid. Besides improving the mental health of organization members, these schemes also provide benefits for the organization such as reduced rates of sickness absence. Although the relevance and usefulness of counselling services have been widely examined for Western users, there is little knowledge of employees' views of the role and dynamics of counselling in Turkish organizations. Thus, the aim of the current study is to obtain an insight into the attitudes of employees towards workplace counselling and suggest cues for employers who are planning to establish such a provision.

1. Literature on employee benefits provided by the organization

Dramatic changes faced by organizations such as global competition, downsizing, temporary workers, new composition of workforce, technological complexity, demands of service sector, and cognitive overload related to knowledge work present several challenges for employees. The influence of these factors on employee well-being, performance, and work-related attitudes is of serious concern for researchers and practitioners. While researchers are conducting systematic studies for the purpose of understanding, predicting, and controlling the effects of these changes; practitioners are developing interventions in an effort to eliminate the negative consequences posed by them.

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Research on employee anxiety and depression revealed high workload, insensitive management, poor communication, poor industrial relations, and low awareness of mental health issues as contributing factors. The consequences of mental ill-health are poor staff morale/unhealthy organization, sickness absence, increased staff turnover, accident proneness, and reduced productivity. Such findings imply that management of mental health problems at work is an issue that needs to be seriously taken into account (Haslam, Atkinson, Brown, and Haslam, 2005: 213-214).

In Western societies, employers, encouraged by the government have started initiatives to protect the well-being of their employees. Among these, EAP's (Employee Assistance Programs) are well-established provisions that are beneficial for both the employee and the organization (Athanasiades, Winthrop, and Gough, 2008: 258). Work-life programs are among the prominent examples of such initiatives. Glass and Finley (2002: 321) categorized family-responsive policies into three broad groups: Parental leave (policies and benefits that reduce work hours to provide time for family care giving), flexible work arrangements (policies designed to give workers greater flexibility in scheduling hours), and employer-supported child care (policies designed to provide workplace social support for parents). The authors assert that such policies usually have positive consequences for the organization and the worker. A quite important function undertaken by these programs, on the other hand, is counselling provided to employees for their emotional problems (Athanasiades et al. 2008: 258).

Netto (2006: 594), has provided a definition of counselling which is based on the description offered by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy: "The purpose of counselling is to provide an individual with the opportunity to discuss his/her problems with a suitably qualified person. This person does not judge the individual, give him/her advice or talk about his/her situation to anyone else. He or she tries to understand the individual's situation from his/her point of view and helps him/her to see oneself and one's problems in a new light. This can help the individual to cope with problems better and bring about necessary changes in his/her life." Organizations which make counselling service available to people who could not normally afford to pay for such a service seem to obtain an opportunity to demonstrate their interest in the workforce. However, a challenge is also presented since in workplace counselling there is one other "person" involved–the organization. Thus, the workplace counsellor needs to listen to both the client and the organization which entails the art of balancing different roles (Kinder, 2005: 22, 24).

McInness (2007: 12) has reported the results of a comprehensive review about the effectiveness of counselling interventions as follows: Over 90 per cent of employees who make use of workplace counselling are highly satisfied; in most cases, levels of work-related symptoms and stress return to the 'normal' range for more than 50 per cent of clients following counselling; generally sickness absence rates in clients have been reduced by 25-50 per cent; and although minor, positive effects on job commitment, job satisfaction, and substance misuse have been recorded.

Counselling services provided by private and public organizations are getting widespread. Carroll and Walton (1997: 2) believe that more people in Britain are having access to professional aid through counselling schemes set up by an organization than obtaining help by means of a private counselling setting where the fee is paid by the individuals themselves. Since the role and dynamics of counselling in organizations is quite different from that experienced in private practice, the need for exploring the characteristics of workplace counselling is obvious (Carroll and Walton, 1997: 4). However, it is reported that the number of studies which have concentrated research interest on this issue is quite few (Alker and Cooper, 2007: 187).

The studies on employee assistance programs and/or workplace counselling have focused on aspects such as individuals' tendency to accept or reject change, stigma about seeking help, perceived negative career repercussions, and precise benefits of getting help.

According to Bouckenooghe (2010: 501, 504), individuals experience change in unique ways. Although change can be a source of joy, benefits, or advantages for some, it can produce suffering, stress, and disadvantages for others. Those who view change as something negative, are driven to maintain the status quo and hinder the successful implementation of change. Hindering efforts range from mild forms of opposition to aggressive acts. Mulki, Jaramillo, Malhotra, and Locander (2012: 81) assert that due to routine seeking, emotional reactions evoked by significant change, short term thinking, and cognitive rigidity, the individuals state preferences about doing things in a habitual way over trying new ways, thus, resist to change. Therefore, it is not surprising to observe hesitant attitudes on the part of employees when the organization undergoes a major change or a new initiative like counselling at work has been started.

Stigma about seeking help is another potential factor constraining the spread of workplace counselling practices. Haslam et al (2005: 213) reported that employees who suffered from mental health problems were unwilling to share this information with their colleagues and managers. The employees believed that people at work would not display a considerate attitude towards them due to a lack of understanding about the nature of poor mental health. Szetoa and Dobson (2010: 42, 43, 54) have also indicated that some barriers exist which prevent those with mental disorders from seeking the help they need. One of the barriers is the stigma and discrimination associated with mental disorders. Since the workplace is an important constituent of one's psychological and social functioning where he/she spends most of his/her time, the authors believe that it is critical to implement workplace anti-stigma interventions to complement existing large scale campaigns for increasing awareness about the issue. Reducing the stigma is expected to create safer and more supportive workplaces. Whereas the inability to get help is likely to produce emotional and financial burden for the organization, earlier help-seeking is hoped to reduce costs associated with short and long-term disability claims, decrease absenteeism, and increase productivity.

In a study conducted by Torun, Çağlar, Öz Aktepe, Saruhan, and Uslu (2009: 3), Turkish managers interviewed about the drawbacks to setting up a counselling service, mentioned that employees could be anxious about asking help from a counsellor due to a possibility of being

stigmatized as a person with mental problems. The anxiety of the employees in Turkish organizations might be stronger compared to Western counterparts because research has revealed a negative relationship between adherence to Asian cultural values and help seeking attitude (Hamid, Simmonds, and Bowles, 2009: 69).

Downes and Koekemoer (2011: 232), after a literature review about the related challenges and benefits of work-life policies, point to the possible stigma or career penalties associated with using flextime. A study by Secret (2000) revealed that employee utilization of benefits such as flexible work arrangements and childcare services were not very high (in Dulebohn, Molloy, Pichler, and Murray, 2009: 99). Robroek, van Lenthe, van Empelen, and Burdorf (2009: 5, 6, 10), in a systematic review, examined the participation levels in health promotion interventions at the workplace. Study results indicated that participation in worksite health promotion programs about issues such as physical activity, nutrition, weight control, smoking cessation, stress management, back care, cholesterol control, and cancer risk factors were below 50%. The authors suggest that worksite is an appropriate context for promoting healthy behaviors since it is possible to reach large groups. Therefore, they underscore the importance of exploring the determinants of desirable behaviors and developing programs suited to the particular needs of employees.

Above mentioned findings indicate that although employees have access to initiatives that have the potential to make life easier for them, they are hesitant about using the alternatives. Benefits such as leaves, flexible work arrangements, and childcare services are not widely utilized due to concerns about career advancement. Employees believe that when they take advantage of work–family benefits, they will not be seen as individuals who are inclined to pursue long-term career aspirations (Dulebohn et al. 2009:99).

Glass and Finley (2002: 329) assert that due to methodological shortcomings, it is difficult to clearly convey the particular effects of specific family-responsive policies. Thus, according to the authors, their influence may be attributed to a generally supportive and innovative work environment. Dulebohn et al (2009: 87, 99), on the other hand, report that studies related to the relationship between benefit level and employee satisfaction with the benefits package do not indicate a positive association between the two. They also add that since the utilization of benefits is low as displayed by research results, it is not reasonable to expect desired outcomes for employees or employers.

2. Rationale of the study

Inconclusive findings about the effectiveness of interventions, inadequate knowledge about the reluctance of workers in relation to using employee-friendly opportunities, and limited investigation about how to encourage employees to maintain their well-being suggest that new research on these issues is necessary. Besides, as Bhagat, Steverson, and Segovis (2007: 222) indicate, employee assistance programs (EAPs) are becoming commonplace in large Western organizations, however, information about their prevalence in non-Western cultures is scarce. Hence, this research has been conducted to provide a deeper understanding about employee perspectives related to counselling at work in Turkish organizations.

3. Method

Focus groups were formed for an in-depth discussion of workplace counselling. The duration of the discussions was approximately an hour and a half. Seven focus groups were conducted. A convenience sample of thirty-nine employees took part in discussions. The participants were employed in a variety of areas including telecommunication, education, finance, pharmaceutics, metal, technology, IT, market research, production, and retail. There were twenty-two female and seventeen male respondents. The age range was between 23 and 39. Twenty-one participants were single and eighteen of them were married. Thirty-one interviewees were university graduates and eight interviewees had graduate degrees. Tenure of the respondents in the present organization ranged between 1 and 9 years and their total tenure ranged between 1 and 17 years.

The instruments used for data collection included a demographic profile form and a focus group interview guide. The study was introduced as an investigation concerned with employee opinions about counselling at work. The information given to the participants before the focus group discussions was as follows:

"Workplace counselling is an initiative implemented for helping employees to relieve their difficulties experienced in private and/or work life. Employees have access to professional aid for which the organization pays. Such initiatives conducted through a short-term approach are also expected to provide positive consequences in terms of employee performance and productivity. In-house counselling service (within the organization) and out-house counselling service (outside the organization) are the basic ways in which the provision can be set up. Although workplace counselling is a more common practice in United States and Europe, it is yet a relatively new practice in Turkey. Therefore, this study is planned to search the opinions of employees about counselling practices in Turkish organizations."

The interview guide included questions about the opinions of employees in relation to the following aspects of counselling service delivery:

- Employee problems that lead individuals to apply to counselling
- Preferences about the characteristics of the counselling provision
- Expected benefits from counselling

The data has been analyzed through a qualitative methodology. Qualitative research examines phenomena within the cultural and social context in which it takes place (Salkind, 2003: 310). Qualitative studies assuming the grounded approach investigate situations without trying to fit the data to any preconceived theory, framework, model or dimensions (Schemel, 1995: 35). The researcher generates categories which lead to an understanding or explanation of the phenomenon studied (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2002: 138). Following this approach, data, based on meanings expressed through words (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2003: 406) were classified into categories and sub-categories for the purpose of clarifying the concepts explored. The final classification was based on a consensus between the author and a colleague.

4. **Results**

The findings of the study are presented under the following titles: willingness and preferences about the uptake of counselling service, issues to be brought forward for counselling, counsellor qualifications deemed as desirable, expected counselling benefits, and sources of social support. Narrative examples are also included.

Willingness and preferences about the uptake of counselling service

Views about a counselling provision set up by the organization. Most of the participants were in favor of a counselling provision set up by the workplace. According to the participants, the initiative would lead to a perception about "being considered" by the organization. It would be a symbol of "good" working conditions. They believed that at times people may experience emotional problems and they would welcome such a service which could be instrumental in relieving distress. One participant stated that:

> *"It is no different than a physician employed to treat medical problems."*

They suggested that the service should be provided for blue-collar workers and non-managerial personnel as well as white-collar and managerial staff. Some participants even stated that providing counselling for employees should be a legal requirement.

A few negative opinions were also expressed. One participant was against the service since he believed that it would be a waste of financial resources to start a counselling provision when one considers the more important and urgent needs that require attention. Another participant mentioned that problems experienced by employees are mostly caused by the organization system and psychological aid will be far from eliminating such complicated difficulties.

Communication of the provision. Several means to inform employees about the service were suggested: Human Resource Department activities, company guidelines, e-mails, intranet notification, company magazine and brochures, posters, seminars by counsellors. It was also mentioned that if workplace counselling service is integrated to a benefits package as a form of extended health insurance benefit, employee awareness about the issue may be increased. Another option recommended to communicate the service is the introduction presented during the orientation process of newcomers.

Concerns about applying to a counsellor. Some participants stated that they would have no reservation about applying to a counselling service. However, others, were anxious about being stigmatized as "mentally ill" by coworkers and harming their career advancement based on a managerial perception that they are "disturbed". They felt that those who get such a service may be isolated from their colleagues.

Participants also presented doubts about the counsellor's intentions and were unsure whether he/she was "on the organization's side" or "on the client's side". A drawback stated was that the counselling service might be transformed into a process of controlling employees and

reinforcing behaviors desired by the management. Since the participants questioned the position of the counsellor, they believed that confidentiality was at stake. Some stated that they would refrain from sharing particular problems with the counsellor:

> *"I would see a private counsellor, if I do not want my problem to be known by the company. It is not about the untrustworthiness of the systems provided by the company. I just can not take that risk."*

Participants emphasized that there should be clear guidelines about how to keep confidential information so as to secure the trust of employees and develop a positive image of the counselling service.

Preferences about the adoption of an internal or external counselling provision. Majority of the participants suggested that the service should be provided externally. They said that they would be much more comfortable with an outsider than someone they work in the same place. An external counsellor is expected to be more objective and trust in the confidentiality would be higher with an out-house counsellor. The drawback about seeing an internal counsellor was stated as follows:

> *"When you see an in-house counsellor, it is highly probable that information will be shared with the managerial staff. The counsellor may be advising two people who are in conflict with each other which makes it difficult for him/her to be impartial. Moreover, everyday there will be a contact between the counsellor and the employees. Friendships developed between the counsellor and my colleagues would make me feel uneasy."*

A smaller number of participants, on the other hand, preferred an internal counselling arrangement. They believed that an internal counsellor would understand them better and have greater knowledge about the organizational dynamics. In such a case, in their opinion, the counselling process would be much more time saving and effective.

Overcoming resistance to counselling. Participants suggested that instead of using the word "counsellor", titles such as coaches and mentors can be preferred. This can make people more comfortable and provides an escape from being stigmatized.

It was expressed that there should be a guarantee about confidentiality. They wanted to be sure that the content of the sessions would not be reported back to the organization. A clear counselling contract was seen as an effective tool for relieving the concerns about confiding in the counsellor.

So as to encourage employees to take the service, timely and correct information provided by the organization has been emphasized. Such an effort is hoped to reduce the negative attitudes towards counselling. Besides, the participants believed that there should be role models about attending counselling:

> *"If we see that upper and middle managers go to a counsellor without any hesitation, we would be much more motivated to utilize the service."*

Issues to be brought forward for counselling

Personal problems. Participants mentioned a variety of individual problems that could be discussed with the counsellor. Family problems, low self-esteem, anxiety and depression, psychiatric problems, sleep disorders, physical health problems, stress, financial problems, alcoholism, smoking, drug abuse, loss of concentration, and loss or death of a loved one were among these.

Job-related problems. Several difficulties experienced at work were stated by participants as issues to be handled during counselling sessions. Workload, supervisor-subordinate disagreements, conflict among employees, communication problems, sexual harassment, mobbing, burnout, person-organization clash, work-to-family and family-to-work conflict, injustice, loss of trust, workplace romance, low performance, harsh competition, fear of failure, role conflict, and uncertainty are examples of problems seen at the workplace.

One participant, on the other hand, indicated that it is not possible to divide problems according to their origin:

"Human life should be considered as one entity which can not be departmentalized into work life and non-work life."

Career-related issues. Some respondents stated that career development issues should be covered by the counselling service because they experienced a great deal of uncertainty and indecisiveness about their future positions. As one participant expressed:

"Sometimes employees may be confused about what they want and why they want. A counsellor may be helpful in terms of rising the awareness of the employee about his/her drives and aid the person to determine realistic goals. The motivation and self-esteem of the employee in relation to pursuing career objectives may be increased during the course of the sessions."

However, others argued that it is an issue of specialization which needs to be handled under the guidance of human resources department within the scope of coaching, mentoring, and other systems. One participant who believed that psychological counselling should be differentiated from career counselling stated that:

"The counsellor's suggestions for a client about his/her carrier may disrupt the relationships among the client, counsellor, and the organization. It may pose a role conflict for the counsellor."

Counsellor qualifications deemed as desirable

Desired qualifications mentioned by the participants referred to characteristics related to the personality, expertise, and ethical attitude of the counsellor. The respondents preferred a counsellor who was reliable, secretive, honest, objective, modest, respectful, emphatic, charismatic, cheerful, warm, friendly, and genuine. They emphasized that it was quite important for the counsellor to be an experienced professional with appropriate training. The participants expected him/her to suggest effective solutions to employee problems, be informed about organizational dynamics, and maintain good relationships with both the client and the organization. The most critical issue was about confidentiality, as one participant stated:

"A counsellor who keeps confidentiality strictly, may change the perceptions of all employees even when the service is provided in-house. In such a case, the anxiety of employees about going to a counsellor may be eliminated."

As to the gender of the counsellor, there were different opinions: Some participants said that a male counsellor would be more successful. Other respondents stated that the counsellor has to be from the opposite sex. Still others emphasized that the gender of the professional would not make any difference in terms of the therapeutic relationship between the client and the counsellor.

Expected counselling benefits
Participants' expectations about the possible benefits of the counselling service were basically related to personal well-being issues and positive outcomes related to work life. The respondents hoped to gain increased self-awareness, feel better and relaxed, and develop effective coping skills. At work; motivation and productivity, work-life balance, clarity of career goals, and interpersonal relationships were among the areas that they mostly looked for improvement.

Sources of social support
Participants mentioned that resources in their private lives and at the work environment provided social support to them when they were in such a need. Family, close friends, colleagues, coaches, mentors, and human resource professionals were the major agents of support. Although the participants agreed that these sources were valuable for them for dealing with several difficulties, they believed that such alternatives could not replace professional psychological aid.

5. Discussion and recommendations

The present study was conducted with the purpose of obtaining information about the opinions of employees in relation to workplace counselling. Analysis of focus group interviews revealed that employee responses could be grouped under the following categories: willingness and preferences about the uptake of counselling service, issues to be brought forward for counselling, counsellor qualifications deemed as desirable, expected counselling benefits, and sources of social support.

Research findings indicated that most of the participants perceived workplace counselling in a positive way. They saw an initiative like counselling at work as a sign of the organization's caring attitude towards employees. The respondents believed that the provision should be communicated to employees through several oral and written means since there is a need to increase the awareness of potential receivers of the service, overcome the resistance about getting help, and reduce concerns about stigmas, confidentiality, and manipulation. Carroll (1997a: 161-162) asserts that if a counselling service is not known by almost all employees in an organization, the effort spent for starting the provision will be futile. The researcher

suggests that publicizing counselling skills through clear written formulations, articulate presentations, and meetings with key people in the organization plays a critical role in educating the organization about counselling.

Participants' preferences about an in-house or out-house provision revealed that most of them were inclined to feel themselves more comfortable with an external service. This finding is in line with research reports concluding that with an external service, it is easier to avoid suspicion of collusion and breach of confidentiality (Reddy, 1997: 77). However, some participants mentioned that employee problems would be better understood by internal counsellors. This is an advantage attributed to the counsellor's opportunity to be in touch with the culture of the company and it is evaluated as one of the strengths of internal service in the related literature (Carroll, 1997b: 14).

Issues to be brought for counselling included a combination of personal and job-related problems. Consequently, benefits expected from counselling also pertained to these work and non-work areas. In a study by Highley-Marchington and Cooper (1997: 282), it is reported that problems of clients fell into the categories of marital, work, health, family, colleagues, legal, and financial. This finding implies that although the social and cultural contexts change, the difficulties that lead employees to seek help do not change much. As to the effectiveness of the service, the same research participants stated that rather than resolving the problem, counselling had enabled them to better manage their difficulties (Highley-Marchington and Cooper, 1997: 283).

As expected, the participants in this study attributed positive traits to a counsellor in terms of personality and technical skills. It was also emphasized that knowledge related to the organization was vital for the counsellor's success. Counsellor educators underscore that organizational counsellors have to be equipped with skills to cope adequately with diverse activities and display an understanding of the organizational context where they will utilize their professional capacities. Diverse activities of counsellors may cover several responsibilities such as mentoring, consultancy, and career guidance (Pickard, 1997: 326). The boundary roles occupied by workplace counsellors seem to be demanded by some participants of this study as well who have stated that it is the duty of a counsellor to help an employee develop career objectives.

Research participants have mentioned that they have both informal sources of support derived from their social networks and formal support provided by the workplace. Although they appreciate the presence of such resources, they believe that it is not possible to see them as substitutes to counselling initiatives. In spite of the fact that the respondents have expressed some concerns about going to a counsellor such as the risk of being stigmatized as having mental disorder, they seem to have realized that skills for coping with problems may be acquired by means of professional aid.
Findings of this research suggest that participants are generally in favor of the counselling provision. However, there might be some cultural barriers that need to be taken into account when evaluating the preparedness of employees from a collectivist society. In a study which

examined the attitudes of Asian Australian university students toward seeking professional psychological help, it was found that there was a negative relationship between adherence to Asian cultural values and help seeking attitude (Hamid et al. 2009: 69). Individualism and freely expressed emotions are encouraged in psychotherapeutic sessions which seem to contradict with Asian people's collective tendencies and preferences for restricting emotions (Leong and Lau, 2001; in Hamid et al., 2009: 74). Also, it is reported that factors like fear of change, fear of embarrassment, fear of negative judgment (stigma) experienced in relation with searching help for emotional difficulties appear to be responsible for the reluctance of Asians (Kushner and Sher, 1991; in Hamid et al., 2009: 74). These research findings indicate that people of Asian origin may be hesitant about getting professional help and encouraging them for help-seeking behaviors seems critical.

Concerns stated about confidentiality, trust, and professional skills imply that service providers and counsellors need to be quite sensitive about these issues in order that the provision is welcome by employees. In this respect, published ethical codes and guidelines can be seen as valuable instruments that facilitate ethical decision-making. However, ethical matters are said to become much more complex when counselling takes place in an organizational setting. Therefore, counsellors working in organizations are expected to be competent and well-trained in terms of keeping the track of organizational dynamics (Shea and Bond, 1997: 187, 204).

The present research has been conducted with a small group of participants from a variety of organizational settings. Thus, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Future studies with larger samples using further methods of data checks may provide a better understanding of the concept of workplace counselling.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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