

Occupational psychology and the new

Jon Sutton and Christian Jarrett report from the Division of Occupational Psychology's Annual Conference in Brighton

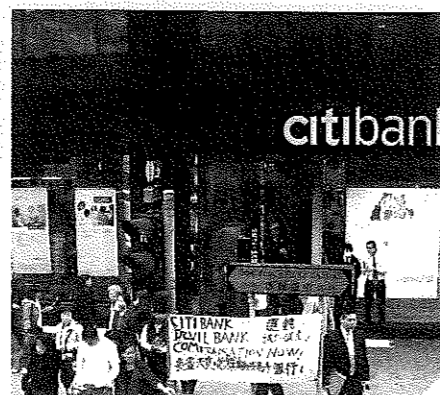
Chairing the opening symposium of this conference, on the past, present and future of occupational psychology, Professor Fiona Patterson (City University) promised to find lots of things to be optimistic about. The speakers were not so sure, with Professor Rob Briner (Birkbeck) warning that there was nothing he liked more 'than to give a moany, depressing rant to start a January conference'. Occupational psychologists, he said, had 'lost our way a bit. We're in a bit of a mess, but can we fix it?'

Professor Don Ferrin (Singapore Management University) certainly thinks occupational psychology has the tools. Just think – we can measure something as intangible and ethereal as trust,' he enthused. Yet he bemoaned the fact that 90 per cent of occupational psychology's empirical evidence is laboratory based and cross-sectional, and we don't have the research on the effectiveness of interventions. Academics have to start collaborating with practitioners more, and ensuring that knowledge produced is applicable cross-culturally – otherwise, in a globalised world, it becomes increasingly irrelevant.

In the midst of a move back to the UK from Holland, Professor Neil Anderson flagged up some cultural differences between the two in terms of occupational psychology. There is a split between science and practice in the Dutch professional body, but Anderson's impression is that links are better and

occupational psychology consequently has a stronger influence on government policy there. He also warned that the migration of UK occupational psychology departments to become part of business schools raised challenges for its independent status.

Briner followed, saying that occupational psychology is 'churning out boring, pedantic, badly written and



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irrelevant research – and that's me trying to put it nicely'. There is no attempt to pull together and evaluate what we know and do not know about a range of important issues, he said. 'We peddle fads rather than killing fads.' Briner called for more 'practice-based evidence', and said that 'we shouldn't allow ourselves to be defined by technical competence'.

More confident in the profession's ability to put things right in organisations was Professor Mike West (Aston Business School), who said we should be training occupational psychologists to be leaders in organisations. 'If not us, then who?' He agreed with Briner that occupational psychologists shouldn't just be technicians, saying that the failure of the entire capitalist system internationally has been about values, and the profession should therefore be values-based.

Providing graphic illustrations of that the following day, Professor Don Ferrin returned to talk about the rise and fall of trust: 'A great leader has to have absolute integrity in everything he or she does...' said Ken Lay, founder and CEO of Enron.' But according to Ferrin, 'Only 51 per cent of employees have trust and confidence in senior management, and there has been a huge drop in trust in recent years. Competence, concern and character are what is needed, and if a leader has these traits there will be a strong correlation with their employees' commitment and job satisfaction, but less so with performance.' However, Ferrin argued that trust problems are not automatically an indictment of character, and we should remove the taboo on talking about trust. Leaders need to be much more inquisitive about how they are perceived: if your employees are reluctant to accept vulnerability in your presence, you may have a trust problem.

Trust was also identified as crucial by Will Hutton (Executive Vice Chair, Work Foundation), who gave an enthralling account of just what a state we are in. He said that a 10 per cent increase in employees' trust in management has the same effect on general levels of satisfaction as a 36 per cent increase in monetary reward. There are clear opportunities for occupational psychology, he said, in increasing control and autonomy in the workplace, developing a skills agenda, improving employee engagement and organisational development, and helping employers and employees deal with a changing relationship. This would be based on 'flexicurity': ease of hire and fire must be matched by high benefits and investment in active labour market programmes to equip unemployed people with the skills

economic world order

they need to find work in a rapidly changing economy. The approach is well established in Denmark and has contributed to high levels of growth and employment over the last decade. Perhaps most of all, Hutton said, Britain needs a thriving 'knowledge economy', driven by an 'innovation system' that can create knowledge and disseminate it into business: a clear role for occupational psychology.

The economic downturn remained on the agenda the final day, with Kamma Braham of PDI Ninth House, a 'global leadership solutions company', recalling how last year's conference was all about the expected 'doom and gloom' of the coming year. Her own organisation responded by leaving empty roles vacant, freezing freelancers, and inviting staff to take voluntary salary reductions, though thankfully Braham said there had been no occupational psychology redundancies in the UK.

Another consequence of the recession was a change in demand from clients, with more money spent on selection and assessment and less on talent programmes. 'I've actually been doing more assessment work than I've done for the last ten years,' Braham said, as clients wanted to make sure that the few empty posts they did have were filled successfully.

An occupational psychologist in the audience whose firm works with the public sector said they had noticed how organisations were increasingly taking work in-house. Another audience member had similarly noticed that clients wanted to be upskilled so they could take work in-house. 'It's good short-term work but could be damaging later on,' she said.

Looking forward, Braham said there was likely to be a 'résumé tsunami' as job openings begin to appear. There were already hopeful signs of more demand from clients, she said, but also an increased desire to see evidence for a financial return from occupational psychology services. On that note, Braham pointed to a recent study her firm had conducted on work they'd done with American Express. This showed that the blended training programme they devised and recommended (involving classroom and online study) led to increased sales among staff, equating to a 1.599 per cent return on the cost of the course.

In his keynote address, also on the topic of the recession, Dr John Mahoney-Philips, Global Head of Human Capital at UBS AG, sounded a less optimistic note. He warned that uncertainty still exists and that discretionary spending ('that includes us') will reduce further. 'It's going to be a tough time, and yet also an opportunity to become more relevant to organisations.'

How can occupational psychologists capitalise on the new economic world order? Mahoney-Philips candidly discussed various weaknesses that the profession needs to fix if it is to adapt rather than die:

- 1 Occupational psychologists often don't know enough about their clients and their clients' strategy, so make sure you do your research.
- 1 Get more involved in performance definition and appraisal: 'it's vital and core to management and engagement with staff,' Mahoney-Philips said, 'yet we're not thinking about this enough.' In particular, he added, there should be greater use of 360-degree rating scales (feedback about an employee from everyone who works with them).
- 1 Our assessment tests haven't changed much in years, besides putting them on computer, Mahoney-Philips said. 'We need to assess people's competencies for dealing with future uncertainties, not their competencies that got them where they already are.'
- 1 New forms of virtual communication are posing challenging questions about trust – this is a whole research area that could be exploited.
- 1 Bridge the practitioner/academic divide. At UBS, Mahoney-Philips has deepened links with the University of East London master's programme and initiated a project with Kings College. Post-docs have come into the organisation to work on UBS data on staff engagement.
- 1 There's a lack of a good independent outlet that reports occupational psychology findings in a language that's understood by those who can use and implement it at speed. [But watch this space for news of an occupational Research Digest]
- 1 Training needs to become more vocational, perhaps requiring MSc and PhD candidates to have work experience. 'We need real-world simulations of practitioner assignments', Mahoney-Philips said.

FUNDING NEWS

The ESRC in agreement with ANR France, DFG Germany, and NOW Netherlands are seeking to fund the best **joint research projects in social sciences**. Proposals should be for integrated projects by researchers from more than one of the four participating countries. The closing date for applications is 13 April 2010. tinyurl.com/ybsc3tt

In 2010 **MRC Programme Grants in Neurosciences and Mental Health** have closing dates of 21 April, 29 July and 16 December. Programme Grants provide larger, long-term and renewable funding. tinyurl.com/a39nsv

The Foundation for the Scientific Study of Sexuality has a Grants-in-Aid programme that provides up to \$1000 to support **scientific sexuality research in areas not likely to receive support from other sources**. Applications can be made at any time: grants are usually made in May and November. tinyurl.com/ye976uj

PhD studentships are available from the Alzheimer's Society. The studentships provide support for **postgraduate students, with a relevant first degree, who wish to pursue an academic career in the field of dementia**. The primary objective of the research must be to contribute to the understanding of the causes of dementia, the development of cures for dementing disorders, or to advance the evidence base for effective dementia care. Studentships should be applied for by prospective supervisors. The closing date for applications is 28 May 2010. tinyurl.com/yl2regw

Funding is available for healthcare professionals to undertake **research into obesity management, in either children or adults** (prevention of obesity is beyond the scope of the award). The National Obesity Forum is offering a £16,000 grant in partnership with WeightWatchers. Any healthcare professional with day-to-day contact with patients can apply. Research mentorship is also offered as part of the award. The closing date for applications is 20 June 2010. tinyurl.com/ygbkn9y

For more, see www.bps.org.uk/funds. Funding bodies should e-mail news to elibee@bps.org.uk for possible inclusion

IN BRIEF FROM BRIGHTON

Susan Paddock of QinetiQ described how her team applied a human factors approach to the design of a new data-processing control room for a security client. 3D visualisations, user interviews, mapping of desk to equipment and desk to window distances, consideration of shift-patterns all fed into the design. The client was so impressed with the end result they've asked for the same approach to be applied to the rest of the building.

A diary and interview study of 29 healthcare engineers by Kevin Daniels at Loughborough University found that effective problem solving was associated with a mix of high motivation, support from others and having the autonomy to change things when necessary. Poor problem solving tended to be associated with relying on past solutions, avoidance and low motivation.

From a survey of 188 UK clergy – an under-researched group in occupational psychology – Gail Kinman of the University of Bedfordshire found that greater job involvement, past training in counselling and social support all buffered against the emotional demands of the job. A mismatch between one's felt emotion and the emotion that must be conveyed on the job – known as 'dissonance' – was a particular threat. Younger clergy appeared to be at greater risk, even though they reported greater overall job satisfaction.