

Health and Wellbeing @ Work 2011

Rick Hughes reflects on BACP's attendance at the exhibition and shares the results of a BACP Workplace questionnaire completed by delegates

Earlier this year, the National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham hosted the Health and Wellbeing @ Work conference and exhibition and BACP was there to wave the flag. Having attended the event a couple of years earlier, we felt it was important to have a visible presence for both BACP members who were there as well as the estimated 5,000 delegates who attended both days. The event is regarded as a major event in the diary for professionals in a range of disciplines including human resources, occupational health and health and safety.

BACP's exhibition stand was staffed by a mix of employees and divisional representatives, which enabled us to field a wide range of questions and queries from delegates.

The conference, located in adjacent premises, included keynote addresses from the likes of Dame Carol Black (National Director for Health and Work), Professor Mike Kelly (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence) and Dr Bill Gunnyeon (Department for Work and Pensions).

With 16 event themes, BACP Workplace fielded several executive committee members, who presented on a range of topics. Kevin Friery chaired the Tuesday strand on mental health, and fellow committee members Andrew Kinder ('Trauma support innovations within Royal Mail'), Jean Crispin ('Work-based counselling for relationship problems') and Mandy Rutter ('Psychological first aid in the workplace') took to the podium with their respective talks. Professor Derek Mowbray, who wrote an article in the previous issue of *Counselling at Work*¹, gave a keynote address on conflict resolution.

Even with this glittering array of speaking talent, for those of us on the exhibition stand, the most important people were those who came to talk to us. We estimated that we met some 500

delegates. And we were delighted to see so many BACP and BACP Workplace members. It was great to meet you!

For delegates who were not members, we were struck by the limited knowledge, awareness and understanding of counselling in the workplace. Many didn't know how to access counselling for their staff, whether counselling could be 'measured' or even if counselling was appropriate for workplace issues.

A snapshot summary of questions and comments from delegates included:

- accreditation queries
- how to find 'good' counsellors
- how to provide and implement a counselling service for staff
- does BACP provide training?
- how does counselling help with bullying?
- how do I train to be a counsellor?
- where do I find counsellors in my area?
- I'm not a trained counsellor but how can I join BACP or keep in touch?
- how can BACP help me promote counselling in my organisation?
- what's happening with regulation and what is BACP's role and position on this?
- how do I train to be a workplace counsellor?
- is CBT the most effective form of therapy?
- what's the difference between counselling and coaching?
- how do I check if a counsellor is a member of BACP?
- how do I become a member of BACP?
- I had no idea there were divisions; why don't we know about them?
- how can counselling best help rehabilitate absent employees?
- what information do you have to help me 'sell' the case for counselling to my bosses?
- what are the pros and cons of EAPs versus in-house counselling services?
- good to see BACP here championing counselling.

We wanted to capture an essence of the event, by gathering some feedback on attitudes surrounding wellbeing. In 2008, BACP Workplace (the Association for Counselling at Work, as it was known then)

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attended the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) conference and exhibition in Harrogate, with our own exhibition stand. We invited delegates who came to our stand to complete a questionnaire. As if this wasn't tempting enough, we offered to place each completed questionnaire into a draw, where a winner would be randomly selected. The prize... a year's subscription to *Counselling at Work*. Suffice to say, we successfully dealt with the excited and clamouring queue of delegates without the need for additional exhibition security staff.

At the NEC event, we repeated this questionnaire. It is not a hugely scientific research study, rather a flavour of views and opinions. We also recognise that the questionnaires were completed three years apart, during arguably different economic conditions and by slightly different target audiences. It's also slightly biased due to the fact that those attending events of a broadly wellbeing theme are likely to be converts or, at very least, keen to learn more about the subject.

‘Perhaps in times of financial austerity, wellbeing is perceived as less relevant than economic survival’

We received 22 completed questionnaires at the Health and Wellbeing @ Work event, compared to 54 at the CIPD event. For the 2011 event, just under half of respondents worked for organisations employing fewer than 50 staff, yet about a quarter had more than 5,000 employees. The public sector was the largest sector represented, with 35 per cent.

We asked how wellbeing was rated in their organisation (figure 1). What is interesting here is that in 2008, the rating for 'very important' was 57 per cent, yet by 2011, this had dropped to 48 per cent. Perhaps in times of financial austerity, wellbeing is perceived as less relevant than economic survival.

We then wanted to get an idea of the availability of counselling in organisations. The largest proportion of respondents seem to use employee assistance programmes (EAPs). In 2008, the percentage for EAPs was 39. Whilst the various segments are similar in 2011 to 2008, what seems most significant is that in 2008, 26 per cent of respondents did not have any current counselling provision ('none') as opposed to 14 per cent in 2011. This encouraging sign suggests an increasing propensity to invest in a counselling service provision (figure 2).

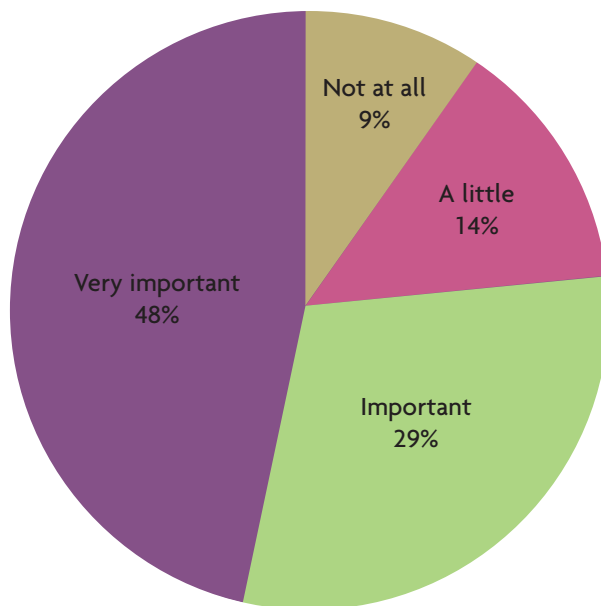


Figure 1. How is 'wellbeing' rated in your company?

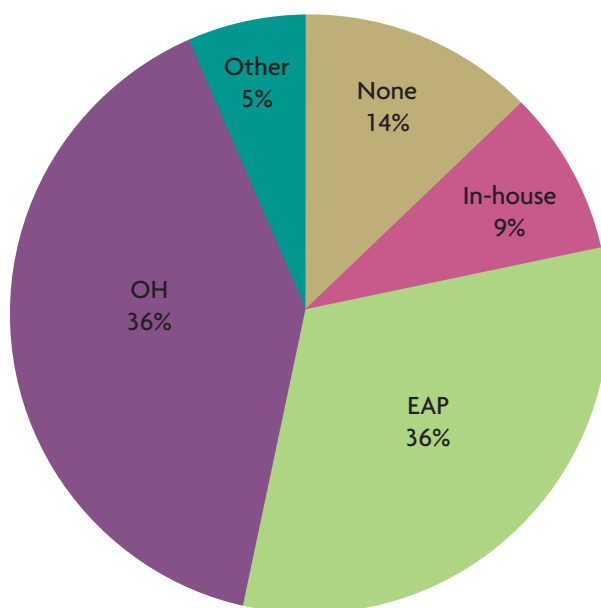


Figure 2. Prevalence of counselling service provision

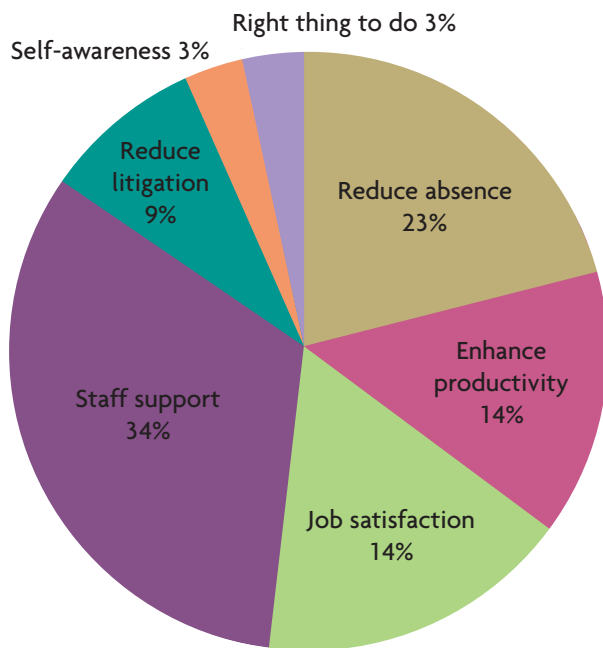


Figure 3. Reasons for investing in a counselling service provision

For those organisations that were offering a counselling provision to staff, we wanted to understand the motivations for investing in such a service. In 2011, the top reason was to provide 'support for staff', with 34 per cent. Yet in 2008, the motivation was to 'reduce absence', with 30 per cent. There was a lesser perception in 2011 that counselling was offered to enhance productivity. It makes sense that in more volatile economic conditions, employees have a greater need for staff support. Perhaps there is less sickness absence evident nowadays as employees remain in work, trying to hold on to their jobs – yet where presenteeism becomes a greater condition to contend with (figure 3).

‘In 2011, organisations are offering counselling to provide support for staff; in 2008, their motivation was to reduce staff absence’

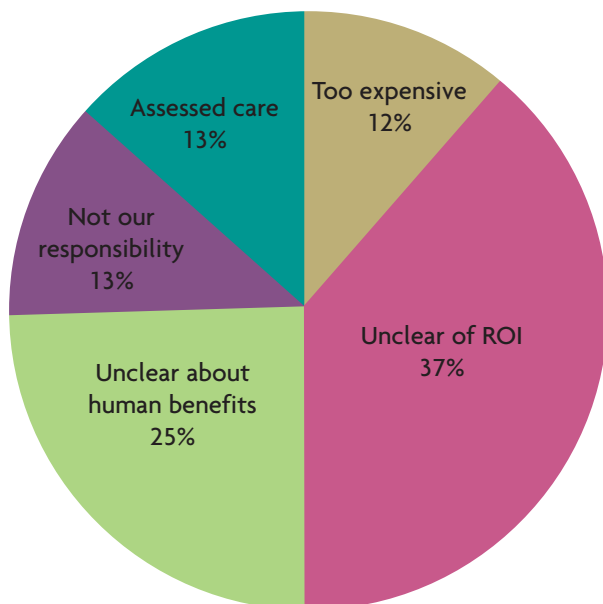


Figure 4. Reasons for not investing in a counselling service provision

For the eight respondents in 2011 whose organisations did not have a counselling service for staff, we asked why not. The results in figure 4 reflect a degree of lack of understanding, namely that respondents were unclear about the return on their investment (37 per cent) and about the human benefits (25 per cent).

Back on the wellbeing theme, we wanted to explore the thinking behind a wellbeing strategy, so we asked what factors contributed to the most positive attributes of such a strategy (figure 5). The responses in 2011 broadly matched those in 2008, though corporate social responsibility (CSR) measured four per cent lower in 2008.

Having a wellbeing strategy seems to be part of a wider commitment by organisations to make the experience of life at work as pleasant as possible. But as part of the psychological contract that motivates staff to do their job, we wanted to find out what contributes most to employee engagement. The results (figure 6) are perhaps not surprising. In fact, the results for this question were pretty much identical for 2008 and 2011, the only difference being that in 2011 coaching fell a couple of percentage points in favour of wellbeing benefits.

Finally, we wanted to get a sense of what improvements could be made to make existing counselling provision better, or, for those organisations that don't have such a service, what might encourage them to consider one. The feedback was similar in both 2008 and 2011. The 40 responses to this question have been aggregated into the following five key points:

- 1 If we saw more organisations investing in counselling then so would we.
- 2 We need our provider to offer greater flexibility to provide extra support during times of crisis.
- 3 Evidence and awareness of the effectiveness and benefits (both for those with, and those without, a service).
- 4 With some stigma surrounding accessing counselling, we'd like a greater emphasis on confidentiality and more effective promotion of services.
- 5 We'd like accessibility to a more diverse range of services on a one-to-one basis.

‘If we saw more organisations investing in counselling then so would we’
(exhibition delegates)

Thanks to all who completed the questionnaire and to those we met on the exhibition stand. Further thanks to those BACP staff and divisional colleagues who gave up their time to work on the stand, including Pam Ludlow, Jean Crispin, Linda Aspey, Mary Jones, Jayne Hildreth, Gus Wilkinson, Janette Newton, Patti Wallace and Richard Smith from BACP Events.

And the lucky winner of a year's free subscription to *Counselling at Work* is Judy Raynor, wellbeing manager at Essex County Council. Judy says: 'I am delighted that my questionnaire was selected. Like so many other local authorities we are currently going through a transformation process which has resulted in our service being in even greater demand than usual and the valuable information contained in the journal will assist us in the support of our clients.' ■

Reference

1 Mowbray D. Corporate depression. *Counselling at Work*. 2011; 72:2-11.

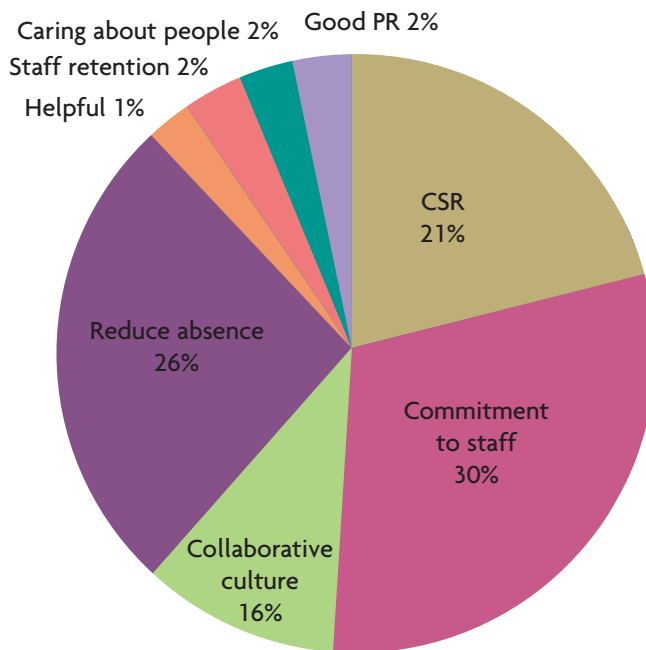


Figure 5: Positive attributes of a wellbeing strategy

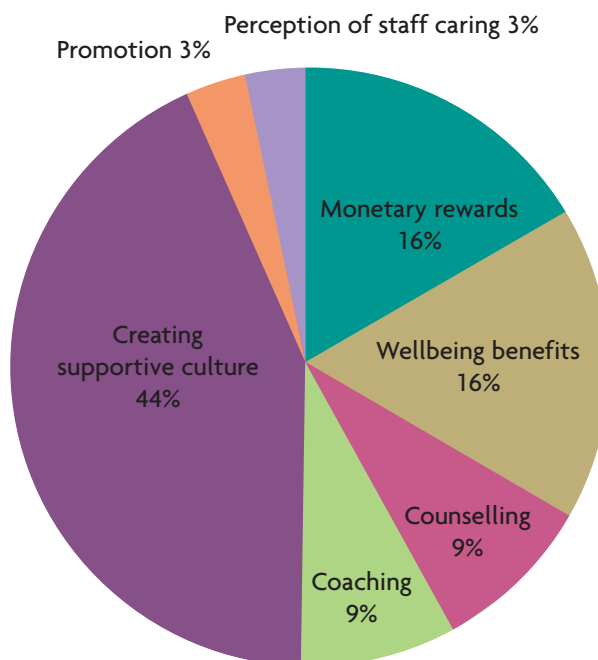


Figure 6. Factors that contribute most to employee engagement