

Title: Encouraging personal development for occupational psychologists

Brief description: Due to the lack of employability generally reported by graduates of MScs in occupational psychology, it was decided to engage with employers at a number of levels. This engagement would consist of collecting my own personal thoughts on improving the employability of graduates, as well as engaging with the Division of Occupational Psychology as part of their employers' forum, and engaging with employers themselves through personal contact and via a careers fairs held in London.

Outline of the issue being addressed by the engagement: The engagement was made so that students could be employable after their MSc in Occupational Psychology. When the Head of the Department of Social Sciences suggested creating a British Psychological Society (BPS) Accredited course in Occupational Psychology, it was agreed that employability would be a unique selling point of the course. Part of my former role as consultant at Atkins Management Consultants was to recruit graduates. However, most of the occupational psychology students were virtually unemployable, because they did not have basic competence in essential knowledge and skills such as project management, let alone significant business acumen.

The exceptional individuals the consultancy firm did employ tended to need a lot of development and few survived to be employed long term. Typically, a new consultant would not see the inside of a client's office for months. This meant frustration on both sides. The consultant would get frustrated as they tended to complete the tedious work that involved no client communication. This, after a while, would result in them leaving and probably accounts for the average tenure of a psychology consultant being two years in some firms. The consultancy firm would also get frustrated as the fee revenue potential for graduates was limited. In some organisations this could get become unpleasant with bullying, sexism, and ageism being employed to 'encourage' consultants to leave.

The MSc in Occupational Psychology was thus set up to sidestep this issue by providing a module that would introduce the knowledge and skills that employers needed from their graduate consultants.

How does it work?

Establishing a substantial professional skills component to a course that would produce employable and sort-after consultant occupational psychologists is not an easy task. My own knowledge was based in the late 1990s and early 21st century so to ensure my knowledge was up-to-date I attended various recruitment fairs and got in touch with my previous employers. Drawing on these contact, I developed the professional skills module element of the MSc in Occupational Psychology. The content of this module is in three sections. First, the knowledge and skills required by consultants are detailed listing important techniques for performing consultancy. Secondly, business acumen is imparted on the students by detailing the ways in which businesses are run, financed and how the people are managed from the human resources perspective. Lastly, the module looks at the students own professional development listing the ways in which someone can become a Chartered Occupational Psychologist or other routes that graduates may take. Often students are from the profession already and their contribution in the class supports

the overall aims of the MSc. OPY401 often has guest speakers from occupational psychology who also discuss the importance of general business knowledge and consultancy skills. The MSc in Forensic Psychology also adopted a module similar to this when they developed their course and indeed were commended by the BPS for promoting professional skills.

One further issue was the lack of texts available for this course. Many of the texts in the area were not suitable either being too academic, not detailing the real challenges to the industry or too practical and difficult for students to understand. Thus, with publishers CEngage Learning I am now writing a textbook that satisfies the need for an academic yet practical text built on years of experience and recent research within the industry.

Benefits of the engagement for students, staff and employers: In terms of employment, 100% of our first and second cohorts gained jobs in occupational psychology. Considering that in many UK universities only a fraction of their students enter the industry directly, it is a really important selling point for potential students. On this basis, we currently charge higher fees than universities such as City, Nottingham and Leicester.

Logistics of the engagement: The engagement was set up by contacting previous employers and professional bodies (primarily the Management Consultancies Association and the Institute of Business Consultancy). It was also made possible via topconsultant.com who publish a newsletter for the industry but primarily work as an employment agency for both permanent and contract consultants. The engagement was initially for the OPY401 course, but now it has influenced the forthcoming textbook too.

Hot tips: Engaging with employers and professional bodies initially is difficult as many resist the type of “win, win” situation that is being proposed, e.g., for my new book putting in a good case study with the consultancy firm’s logo advertises that consultancy firm. Most employers soon realise this but it takes a while to convince them.

Other things to note: The module of OPY401 (details available on the web) and also the textbook, ‘Management Consultancy: a guide for students’ to be published later this year are direct results out of this employer engagement.

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