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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### WORKPLACE COUNSELLING ROLES: EVIDENCE FROM TURKEY

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#### ABSTRACT

Aim of this study is to gather participants' views about the service of workplace counselling and lighten some issues about expectations from a workplace counsellor with regard to career counselling and counselling roles. Workplace counselling has been widely used in United States of America and European Countries. However, usage of this service has been recent in Turkey. Even though there are researches conducted in this area, there has been a gap and dissensus in the literature about the aims, responsibilities and roles of workplace counselling. This study aims to contribute to this gap. First of all, literature survey on workplace counselling and counselling roles will be mentioned and research questions with demographic information of the participants will be presented. Findings of the study in reference to the previous research and essential points that should be investigated in the future research are also discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing interest about work and well-being; with regard to the link between workplace related variables and work-life balance, mental health, attitudes towards organizations and employee behaviors (Meleod, 2010). Recently, scholars realized majority of life time is spent in workplaces; as such workplace related variables have a major impact on psychological health (Athanasiaades, Winthrop and Gough, 2008). In order to diminish the negative impact of stress on employees and improve productivity, workplace counselling is highly recommended (Arthur, 2000). Workplace counselling was started to be implemented through the end of 19th century. First, named as Welfare Services in England, the aim of the service was put forth as to help employees solve their personal problems and improve their well-being. The organization was responsible for counselling costs; as such employees did not spend any of their financial resources to receive the counselling service. Additionally, employees received the message "your organization cares about your well-being" (Kinder, 2005). In other words, psychological counselling financed by the organization provided employee benefits in both tangible and intangible ways. Psychological counselling services is also known as employee assistance programmes. Employee assistance programmes cover the therapy implemented with the aim of solving personal, emotional and psychological employee problems as well as the

informative service support about medical, financial and legal issues. Employees are able to speak with counsellors via telephone and if needed; they are invited for face-to-face meetings (Arthur, 2000). This procedure is named as external counselling. The organization hires the counsellor, and this counsellor should be someone who works outside of the organization. The governments are also able to provide the external counselling services. For instance, Australian Government implemented an employee assistance programme in 1977; with the aim of treating alcohol and drug addiction (Kirk and Brown, 2003). In Turkey, psychological counselling is not provided by the government under the name of employee assistance programmes; as such it should be financed by the employees' themselves. Especially on that occasion, organizations should implement employee assistance programmes in order to improve employee well-being by solving work-related problems.

Despite the variation in procedures, one can summarize the procedure of employee assistance programs as follows: (Arthur, 2000)

- Top management supports the employee assistance program
- Written guidelines are prepared on the functioning and implementation of workplace interventions
- Counsellors are in close contact with unions
- Managers are trained so that they can identify employee problems
- Employees are informed about counselling services

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- Confidentiality on employee problems is secured
- Counselling costs are financed by the organization
- The efficiency of counselling service is evaluated

Stereotypes on the counselling services should be eliminated with the support of top management, since negative managerial attitudes towards counselling services would cause employees to hold off from receiving counselling services (Athanasziades, Winthrop and Gough, 2008). Written procedures about the scope of assistance programmes would protect the privacy and interest of employees as well as protecting the organization's interests. Those written guidelines could also help to solve disagreements and ambiguous situations that could arise among employees and managers. Counsellors who are in contact with the unions can serve to protect employee rights, the training of managers can help managers make correct decisions with regard to the selection of employees who need counselling. Privacy issues on counselling service is another topic that should be cared.

The information of clients should not be shared with their managers, as this is highly essential for employee privacy and the ethics of counselling profession. Since workplace counselling is financed by the organization, managers might think that workplace counsellors should share employee information with the organization. However, this is not ethical. As such, written guidelines on privacy is highly essential. According to the study of Milne, Blum and Roman (1994), employee perceptions on the privacy of counselling services have a huge impact on the decision of receiving workplace counselling services. As can be seen, trust in counselling service is the starting point. Finally, evaluation of the counselling services' efficiency can help to improve the quality of the service and calculate the return of investment (Carroll and Walton, 1997).

The study of Mcleod (2010) puts forth that workplace counselling diminishes the anxiety, stress, depression and absenteeism while increasing work commitment and satisfaction. As desired, workplace related problems can be solved with the workplace counselling financed by the organization. Performance and well-being will be improved; which are desired consequences for organizational productivity and workers' health. Based on the arguments presented so far, one can conclude that workplace counselling could be a profitable investment if implemented carefully. As previously mentioned, external counsellors could be hired by the organization or the organization could hire an internal counsellor. In that case, counsellor will be in close distance to the employees. The counsellor will also be familiar with the organizational culture so that workplace related problems could be cared with the awareness of the characteristics of the organization's culture. The difference between external and internal counselling is that internal counsellors are able to focus on problems caused by organizational variables (Kinder, 2005).

Employee assistance problems should be aware of the distinction between person-related variables and organization-related variables that lead to employee problems; so that they can be effective (Kirk and Brown, 2003). Careful examination of the organizational culture can shed light on the causes of

employee problems. As such the counsellor can make correct decisions with regard to intervention techniques. The point is: does the organization need an intervention or the employee needs treatment? Quick solutions might be implemented for the problems related with corporate culture; however this does not really solve the problem itself. Therefore, workplace counsellor can be a "change agent", in order to solve organizational problems by the support of top management (Carroll and Walton, 1997).

The change agent role of the workplace counsellor could be contradictory to other workplace counselling roles. For instance, if the workplace counsellor is a psychologist who provides therapy for mental problems, the information received from employees could not be revealed to recommend organizational change. The privacy code prevents the counsellor making suggestions to the top management. In the literature, the agreed responsibility of workplace counsellors is to conduct interviews with employees. Other than that, counsellors have conflicting roles such as advocate, manager consultant, welfare worker, trainer, change agent and organizational development agent (Carroll and Walton, 1997). Stress management counsellor, health counsellor, employee counsellor, support counsellor and work-life balance counsellor are other names given to workplace counsellors. Depending on the characteristics of the organization; workplace counsellor can implement psychological therapy, group meetings and telephone interviews. On times of trauma and crisis, counselling is called in (Kinder, 2005).

Career counselling is also implemented in organizations (Carroll and Walton, 1997). Career counsellors can help to draw the career path of employees by identifying their weak and strong characteristics, needs and competencies (Gothard, Soc and Dip, 1999). Career development is conceptualized as life-long learning, personal development and improved self-confidence that guides the individual to walk through a brighter future (McMahon, 2006). Individuals search for meaning at their work. Meaningless work can lead to depression by increasing levels of perceived stress (Dollarhide, 1997). From this standpoint, this study aims to investigate employee expectations towards workplace counsellors as a means of someone who can contribute to the career development and to the search of meaning at work. Sample characteristics, research questions and procedure is presented in the method section.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### *Sample*

Five voluntary participants were interviewed; two females, three males, four single, one married, ages ranged between 26 and 31, work experience ranged between three months to seven years. All participants were employed in separate organizations that had more than 250 workers. However, only two of those five organizations had human resources department. Three participants were employed in private sector, rest were in public sector. All participants had master degree. There was an auditor, an engineer and three academicians in the sample.

## Research Questions

Preliminary study was conducted in order to determine the research questions that were going to be used among the main study. In the preliminary step, three participants were interviewed. They were asked what they could do and what their organization could do to improve their personal and career development. Main research question for the study was about the implementation of workplace counselling services in order to support the career development of employees. In this respect, below listed are the questions that were asked to the participants:

- “Can you recognize your own strengths and weaknesses? What could a workplace counsellor do to help you and others in your work organization to identify your strengths and weakness?”
- “Do you have goals that are beneficial for yourself development? How could a workplace counsellor help you develop and internalize those objectives?”
- “Do you have long term goals? Are there any changes that you should implement in your life to reach those long term goals? What kind of a contribution do you expect from a workplace counsellor?”
- “How can a workplace counsellor guide you to participate in activities that would enhance yourself development?”
- “Do you think that a workplace counsellor can be someone who would contribute to organizational change in terms of training and coaching activities as well as the establishment of a compensation system in your work organization? How and why?”

## Procedure

Interviews were conducted in a quiet room. Participants were notified that the interview results were going to be used for a scientific study, participant and company names were going to be kept confidential. Permission to take notes were taken from each participant. Aim of the study, information about workplace counselling and how workplace counselling could contribute to career development was mentioned to each interviewee. Next, each participant was asked the same questions. In the flow of answers, additional explanations were given throughout the interviews. As such, the sequence of research questions varied among interviews. Semi-structured interviews took 40 to 90 minutes. Results are presented in the next section.

## RESULTS

For each research question, participant answers are summarized and some direct sentences are given in quotations.

**Question 1:** Can you recognize your own strengths and weaknesses? What could a workplace counsellor do to help you and others in your work organization to identify your strengths and weakness?

On the overall, four participants said that they knew their own strengths and weaknesses whereas one participant said that (s)he was not really aware of her resources. Three participants

stated that a workplace counsellor could contribute to increase their awareness with regard to their strengths and weakness. Some sayings are as follows:

*“I do not exactly know the weak and strong sides of mine. Through personality tests, I could raise my awareness and a counsellor could suggest subject areas that I need to receive training.”*

*“Even though I know myself, I would like a counsellor to evaluate me with an expert survey. People should realize how they are seen by others. For instance, if I made a mistake, I need advice about the causes of that mistake and what I can do to not to repeat that kind of a mistake. On your own, you may not fully recognize everything.”*

*“I already know myself. However, if privacy is guaranteed, I would like a counsellor evaluate me.”*

Two participants said that a workplace counsellor could contribute to increase their awareness. However, they were skeptical about that, saying their family and friends would be more competent to identify their strong and weak points. One participant mentioned the trust and privacy issues between counsellor and client. Direct statements are as follows:

*“I do not think that it is possible for a stranger to get to know me in four to six interviews with the information I give. A workplace counsellor can identify strengths and weaknesses with observation rather than personal declarations, and this would be possible in small companies that employ like 30 to 40 workers.”*

*“I already consult others around me in every three months, I ask for feedback and evaluate myself through their opinions. I can not trust some stranger. In our society, everything can be revealed. Thus, neither for my health problems nor for increasing my awareness, I would consult a counsellor. In workplace, privacy and trust are very important for me...”*

**Question 2:** Do you have goals that are beneficial for your self development? How could a workplace counsellor help you develop and internalize those objectives?

Each participant said they had personal goals such as becoming a manager, doing high quality work, becoming an expert on technical subjects. Participant with the goal of becoming a manager said that (s)he already internalized that goal. However, (s)he was not aware of the competencies that would be needed to receive that kind of a promotion. According to the participant, a workplace counsellor would be beneficial. Two participants said that someone who do not do the jobs they do, can not suggest realistic paths.

*“Five years ago, I needed a counsellor to internalize my work goals and I tried to compensate that gap by taking advice from my colleagues. But for now, I do not think that someone who does not do the job I do can guide me.”*

*“I think someone who knows the sector and the market can guide me better.”*

On the other hand, two participants said that a counsellor can evaluate their work goals, provide valuable feedback and guidance.

**Question 3:** Do you have long term goals? Are there any changes that you should implement in your life to reach those long term goals? What kind of a contribution do you expect from a workplace counsellor?

Four participants said that they did not have long term goals because conditions were highly unstable. Instead, they had short term goals. One participant said that (s)he needs lifestyle changes to reach her/his long term goals. In this respect, (s)he needs to develop some personality characteristics. By means of that, counsellor advice would be beneficial.

*“If I had a chance to receive professional advice, who knows, maybe I would rise to the stage in two days rather than 10! I would like advice about planning and regulating my life, being more bold and political.”*

One participant mentioned that (s)he does not have long term goals, however still needs to change his/her lifestyle. By means of that, (s)he said that (s)he could take guidance from a workplace counsellor.

*“I could be less social, I would like to decide by myself of course. However, I could take advice...”*

**Question 4:** How can a workplace counsellor guide you to participate in activities that would enhance your self development?

Answers to this question showed a huge variety. One participant said that (s)he would like to receive training if organizationally financed, however did not know what kind of training (s)he needed so (s)he needed guidance. One participant mentioned knowing the activities that (s)he must participate but still needed guidance on different topics such as work-related problems. One participant said that someone who had technical expertise in his/her work area could provide valuable guidance and that (s)he did not need personal development. Another participant said that (s)he would like to take suggestions from a workplace counsellor on the topics that needs research and careful examination so that instead of spending time to search for information, direct counsellor advice would help to save more time. Only one participant said that (s) he needed guidance for self-development activities. However, this need varies among person to person, (s) he thought.

*“It would be beneficial for me for sure... However, I think the need to take professional advice is related with the personality. Some need more guidance, some like to act on their own. They have very high self-confidence so they might not want to take advice...”*

**Question 5:** Do you think that a workplace counsellor can be someone who would contribute to organizational change in terms of training and coaching activities as well as the establishment of a compensation system in your work organization? How and why?

All participants agree that organizations would not let workplace counsellors to be in the role of a change agent. Direct sayings are as follows:

*“I do not believe that could be possible, with regard to my experiences...”*

*“The culture of my organization is not available to the changes brought by a workplace counsellor...”*

*“My organization is very hulky. Procedures are determined by top management and government. In such organizations, change starts from the top levels.”*

**One participant had a different opinion:**

*“Why should a company listen the suggestions of a workplace counsellor if it already does not listen to its workers? Companies do not accept any change that is contradictory to their interests. The nature of the career stages and jobs require some difficulties and those difficulties can neither be eliminated by workers, nor counsellors.”*

**One participant mentioned trust and privacy issues:**

*“If counsellor implements change agent role, he or she loses her trustworthiness. She or he should only serve to people or only to the organization...”*

As can be seen in the results section, answers show huge variety among participants. General conclusion reached through those results are presented in the next section.

## DISCUSSION

About workplace counselling service, the confidentiality of interviews between clients and counsellors, as well as the trust among both parties were mentioned. In the literature, privacy is seen as a part of the counselling process (Arthur, 2000). Additionally, trust towards the counsellor and counselling services is one of the major factors that determine client choice on whether to take counselling services (Athanasiaides *et al.*, 2008; Milne *et al.*, 1994). In the research, short-term counselling was not seen as satisfactory to identify the strengths and weaknesses of clients. Consistent with the literature, the short-term nature of workplace counselling is stated as a limitation which is inadequate to solve employee problems (Kinder, 2005). As mentioned by the participants, the need to receive workplace counselling might depend on the personality characteristics of clients. Some individuals might really need more advice, guidance and support. As such, those individuals might really need and prefer more counselling service in comparison to others. Literature survey does not yield any information about this claim. However, it is confirmed that trust towards counselling services and top management support for counselling services predict the preference of counselling services (Milne *et al.*, 1994).

Some findings that support the roles of trainer, psychological and career counselling of workplace counsellors. Those findings could be summarized as follows: counsellor can implement personality tests and determine career goals, identify the strengths and weaknesses of clients in order to guide them through the development of required competencies, guide clients through training activities and make suggestions about personal problems. At this point, it should be highlighted that conflicting roles of the workplace counsellors create some dilemmas. Brown and Wallace (2004) state that role conflicts

of workplace counsellors increase burn-out levels, and the difficulty level of their counselling duties effect their inner motivation. One participant mentioned the informative role of workplace counsellors. As also seen in the literature (see Kinder, 2005; Ohsako, 2000), counsellor conducts face-to-face interviews with clients in order to determine their information gaps, and then gathers needed information, interprets the information, finally shares it with clients (Ohsako, 2000).

The need for career counselling could emerge for those who are at the starting stages. Just because those individuals will face many job alternatives and will have less awareness towards their knowledge, skills, abilities, personality characteristics and so on. For those who are at the mid-stages of their careers, career counsellor should have knowledge towards specific profession so that guidance would be more profession-related. This finding points to the mentoring role of counselling. However, still there is the need of detailed investigation whether workplace counsellors should have profession specific knowledge to provide realistic guidance. Another finding is related whether a counsellor could be a coach or mentor to help clients identify necessary changes to be implemented in their lives to fulfill their goals. Mentors are trusted colleagues, trainers, role models (Lauren, 2011), as such workplace counsellors could possess similar roles. In the light of study findings, participants do not see workplace counsellor as someone who help them find meaning in work or facilitate their career development. Instead, counsellor is someone who evaluate personality characteristics to give guidance through personal development and career counselling is for those who are at the beginning stages of their careers; not for those who are at the mid-stages.

In Turkey, job opportunities are limited, people do not always find jobs that are parallel with their needs and desires. On some occasions, one can think that jobs choose the candidate. Under those conditions, individuals might prefer not to have deep expectations from their careers. Of course, research questions might have guided participants to think in those terms. The major limitation of the research is the number of participants. Additionally, it has been seen that expectations from a workplace counsellor might vary from profession to profession and among career stages (especially for starting or mid-stages). As such, future research could pay attention to participant characteristics. In summary, workplace counselling helps to solve employee problems and improve performance. However, employee assistance programs raise some question marks. Determining the counselling service that fits to the organization's culture and identifying work-related problems in this respect, establishing trust towards counselling services and confidentiality are major issues that were highlighted by study findings.

Future research could investigate those issues in more detail, with the aim of diminishing negative attitudes towards workplace counselling.

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