

'I'm a scientist and sceptic at heart'

Ian Florance talks to **Bryan McCrae** about his work in the psychology of sales

Apart, possibly, from human resources, sales is the business function most likely to benefit from psychological input, and that's the area where Bryan McCrae works.

What are you doing now?

I've developed an application of cognitive behavioural coaching for sales. If you have mild or moderate depression or anxiety, subject to the NHS postcode lottery, you may be prescribed free access to *Beating the Blues*, an interactive CBT-based programme which is shown



to work as well as face-to-face CBT. I thought this approach could be applied to developmental as well as therapeutic areas, so I trained in cognitive behavioural coaching and created Sales-Motivations. It helps people who sell to develop their motivation, resilience and ability to cope with pressure, all of which result in higher performance, reduced stress and increased job satisfaction.

I run a business, www.sales-motivations.com, that offers this service, as well as in-person workshops, through a range of partners, which includes occupational psychologists. This development was a collaboration with Dr Judy Proudfoot, who is the author of *Beating the Blues*, an Associate Professor and Director of the Black Dog Institute. Judy is also an experienced management consultant and this dual perspective was invaluable.

As an integral part of the programme we've created three characters: Ben, an entrepreneur; Kate, who works in telesales; and John, a sales professional in his late 40s. We commissioned professional videos and the programme features people and stories, as well as rich interactive multimedia content. Users then apply the techniques to their normal sales activities. People are much more engaged by this approach than a theory-based one.

Do you have personal contact with the people who use the system?

We brief managers on how they can coach, mentor and support their people

and then the programme is delivered distantly. People are sometimes sceptical that this new approach works; but it does, and there is a long list of reasons that explain why it is effective.

You also have another stream of business?

Yes. Cognitive Sales (www.cogsales.com) concentrates on sales and marketing performance, mainly with small and medium-sized enterprises that find selling the most difficult area of their work. In fact we're helping a number of psychologists who have started up on their own.

Tell me about your background

I studied the sciences at school and might have studied science or engineering at university but I was always more fascinated by what made people tick – what made them choose A rather than B. So I studied psychology at Hatfield Poly and was really interested in more scientific areas, such as cognition and neuro-physiology.

Did you think of a career in psychology?

At the time the options seemed to be clinical or psychometric work, neither of which appealed to me. Obviously things have changed since then. I had no firm idea of a career so I decided to try and make as much money as I could while I made up my mind what I wanted to do.

I worked as a programmer on huge IBM mainframes, went into systems analysis and design then got interested in database and systems technology. I was part of a team that worked on a huge integrated project for British Home Stores on their payroll, pensions and personnel systems. It was suddenly cancelled and it struck me as an enormous waste of time, money and energy.

I got into sales after working for a software vendor in customer support, followed by pre-sales support. I wasn't great at it at first but gradually I got the hang of it, became a Sales Manager then a Sales and Marketing Director. I got hands-

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on experience of managing, coaching and developing teams. We were closing huge deals and I was making big money.

Technology is obviously important to you.

I was always interested in the interaction between people and technology, an area where psychology can offer huge insights. Managing people gave me more experience of this and so did riding motor bikes! I'm a bike rider, and years ago I did an advanced course with the police, which was my first experience of proper coaching. I was impressed with the techniques used and felt that these could be applied to other areas and in my own work.

How did you move into your present role?

Eight years ago I was working for an IT company and I was successfully developing sales into the government sector. There was a change of executive management and they decided to pull out of that area of activity after we'd developed it really well. Once again it struck that I wanted to be the master of my own destiny rather than let someone else control it.

I decided to try a portfolio career combining my three big interests: photography, running motor bike tours and sales and marketing consultancy. As you can see, only one of them actually worked, though I did sell a photograph to a friend!

Psychology seems central to much of what you do.

The foundation of what I do is the scientific application of evidence-based psychology to solve problems. There's a lot of snake oil around in popular psychology, psychiatry, sales training and business consultancy. I'm a scientist and sceptic at heart, so I demand evidence to back up things I do. That's part of my differentiation – I'm evidence-based in a field where that quality is in short supply. All of my services are, in effect, scientific experiments. We do something, measure the effects, attempt to replicate the outcomes, draw conclusions and improve. My education definitely strengthened that preference.

It's why I've adapted cognitive behavioural psychology to a novel application area – the evidence base for its effectiveness is so strong.

Are you interested in other techniques? I'm interested in meditation and mindfulness and plan to learn more about them when I get the time.

Are you a member of the BPS ?

Yes, I've got GBR membership and was on the committee of the Special Group in Coaching Psychology, but I'm not a committee sort of person. I think the Society could usefully re-invent itself, looking at basic questions about what its aims and goals actually are, who it seeks to address and what it offers them, given

the changes in the regulatory environment.

We can't overestimate the potential usefulness of psychology in areas like sales and marketing nor the need for more evidence-based services. I think we are just seeing the tip of the iceberg in how useful psychology can really be in most fields of life.

Out of the shadows

Aon Dillon, Assistant Psychologist with the Challenging Behaviour Psychology Service, St Albans Childrens' Centre, on the concept of autonomy in a role

One can wonder at times what is truly classed as autonomy within a role and what could be interpreted as 'overstepping the mark'. I would say that in the past I have most definitely 'understepped the mark' out of a fear of 'overstepping the mark'. Does that make sense? A good metaphor may be that I placed myself well and truly in the shadows.

There is a saying that hindsight is a wonderful thing... In hindsight, I agree. Although perhaps it is the psychologist in me that encourages a deeper analysis of hindsight. This infamous saying is usually associated with a degree of sarcasm, but I think that hindsight truly is a wonderful thing, for it allows us to look back and evaluate what we have learned from a process. Hindsight is what perhaps contributes to my looking back on the slightly apprehensive, somewhat fearful 'shadow' not with regret but with fondness, for without that 'shadow' I may have never developed a true understanding of the potential autonomy that one can apply to a role.

As my journey within the field of psychology began, I clearly remember being attracted to the prospect of a profession where freedom of thought was embraced. I relished the idea of being able to apply my own thoughts and formulations to current psychological models and to adapt a theoretical stance according to those thoughts and formulations. As I proceeded through my journey I found my ideas shifting. I'm not quite sure how or why this shift occurred, but I started to doubt that autonomy could be truly embraced. Instead I found myself starting to interpret the discipline

of psychology as 'aiming to produce an army of uniform psychologists who must all practise within the confinements of existing models and who never challenge



or contradict those models'. I remember going into sessions scared to speak, scared to make a contribution, my mind buzzing with thoughts and ideas and desperate to voice them. I would leave a session feeling frustrated and contained.

I have since realised of course that the only person containing me was myself, with a little help from my preconceived ideas. Several sessions later and I found myself starting to develop the courage to 'whisper' my thoughts to others, slowly allowing me to realise that perhaps those thoughts could be valid and, dare I say, even make a valuable contribution to thinking and formulation. I started to

realise that rather than looking at my 'lack of experience' as a negative, I was starting to see it as a potential positive; it could be argued that a fresh, slightly inexperienced and newer perspective could prove invaluable to reflective thinking within intervention. I would say that alongside this shift in my thinking about how one should embrace the opportunity for autonomy within a role, I have also come to realise the relative 'bravery' that it can require for one to be able to embrace that autonomy.

So what facilitated the change in my thinking? Was it a natural process that may have occurred with time and experience regardless, or is it a case that through my self-analysis I was able to unlock the mental processes required to assist with this development? I propose that although the former is undoubtedly a key factor in any consideration of personal growth, the latter is possibly the

crucial factor. Hardened behaviourists may argue that self-analysis and thus the discussed potential change in mental processes is at the core of any behavioural change. But I suggest that although there is no doubt that the key principles of behavioural theory are extremely valuable

"never lose sight of what exactly attracted you to a role"

in the process of cognitive change, so are the principles of a more psychodynamic approach. Surely it is the case that without the deeper analysis of our innermost thoughts, emotions and experiences we would not be successful in facilitating a true change in behaviour?

Through developing this new understanding and thus my new-found ability to apply autonomy to my role, I have come to re-realise that autonomy can indeed be embraced. Of course, there will always be considerations about ethics and protocol, but these considerations

should not bind us to a particular theoretical stance or indeed bind us to the practice of our peers. In fact, it is an amalgamation of ideas, thoughts and existing models, which are most definitely open to new thoughts, ideas and challenges, that we should be bound to.

So, my advice if you find yourself experiencing difficulties in applying autonomy to your role? Trust your instincts, look within and question why you feel the way that you do, ask yourself what you can do to change your current thinking? It is very important to never lose sight of what exactly attracted you to a role or indeed attracted a role to you. Apply your freedom of thought to self-analysis and then apply it to your role, this could help you to shape both a successful and an influential career. For surely, when you allow yourself to 'emerge from the shadows', what may ultimately determine the level of your success is your capacity for thought, creativity and autonomy.

Building on what we are, not what we're not

Ian Florance talks to **Kay Buckby**, a director of The Development Company, offering management and corporate training

Psychology informs more areas of life and work than ever before, to the extent that some people take a psychological qualification later in their career. Kay Buckby is a director of The Development Company (www.thedevco.com) which offers management and corporate training. She took her psychology degree during her time at the company. When we talked on the phone she spoke enthusiastically and vividly about her life.

'I grew up in Northamptonshire, a county I love and where I still live and work. I inherited many things from my childhood including my parents' laid-back attitude and an interest in the arts and creativity.'

Kay had to delay taking up the offer of an English literature degree at Liverpool. 'I was ill for two years then had a year's respite during which I temped. I was nanny for a well-known actress, which was an extraordinary experience. Temping sets you up for life. You learn to cope with crises. Being able to take on new challenges and responsibilities is a skill and gives you adrenaline. You discover what you want

from a job and, in my case, it's variety, autonomy and responsibility. When a role becomes too systematic or bureaucratic, I turn off.'

Kay's web biography details an unusual combination of accountancy and psychology. 'My career has been a journey into understanding people. For instance, I worked for Chef and Brewer centralising their accounting group. This, and their takeover of Berni Inns, gave me experience of the pain of change. The whole process was task-oriented, ignoring emotional support for the people affected, a paradigm still used in UK organisational

"When a role becomes too systematic or bureaucratic, I turn off"

change. I and the other people handling the process were young and inexperienced and the affected staff were suspicious. I suppose this captured my interest in the psychological aspects of business.'

'Later, I discovered I work well with volatile, unpredictable people who let me get on with things. An example was an extraordinary American boss, Bob, who was great at vision and having fun. I learnt

bookkeeping in that job but was told I would be good in HR. I did my IPD qualification in personnel work when working at Texas Homecare. Systems ruled at first but training the TOM package, an initiative that sought to change the culture in the organisation, got me involved with people at all levels in the organisation. In other jobs I became interested in work on culture and engagement.'

Kay did her psychology degree when she joined The Development Company. 'I was initially interested in forensic psychology but it was too biologically oriented for me. I finally chose University College Northampton because they described themselves as rebel thinkers.' What interested you in the course? 'Areas such as parapsychology, transpersonal psychology, Buddhist approaches like mindfulness and spiritual intelligence. I enjoyed talking to people grounding this talk in the real experiences I'd had during my career, not just theory. During that time I developed my own approach to psychological work – that we should celebrate and build on what we are, not what we're not. I did my dissertation on near-death experiences. I'm proud of that and, one day, would like to build on my research in a PhD.'

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Kay Buckby

anecdotes and stories, reflecting Kay's description of what interests her in psychology. Putting this simply, she's plainly fascinated by people. 'Yes, and this led on to coaching. I've got a certificate in life coaching and am studying for the diploma.'

The Development Company runs open, bespoke and train the trainer courses as well as management workshops. How does her psychology training and interest affect these activities? 'It underpins how we train and the things we train in, as well as areas like how we contract and the interpersonal skills we use and teach. As I said, I enjoyed the arts at primary school and this informs

our work. I recently used an actor in some work with a firm of estate agents. I feel fairly free to use different techniques and never use the dreaded "death by PowerPoint" and simply talking at people. I use activities to make skills and attitudinal shifts vivid. The psychology degree, coupled with real business experience gives me real credibility with clients.'

You're not chartered with the Society. Does this lead to ethical problems? 'Yes. I offer coaching not counselling and occasionally an issue will come up which I can't and shouldn't address. At that moment you have to pass the person across

to a differently qualified person. This can be emotionally challenging for both parties, but I'm very serious about ethics. Acting outside your training and expertise could cause real damage to people.' But you didn't think of going further with psychological training. 'No, though as I say I will do my PhD later. I suppose I don't like some of the bureaucracy associated with psychology as a profession.'

Where can psychological approaches to work be improved? 'We need to use more social psychology and transpersonal approaches. We don't experience lives as individuals. We are connected and (in my view) more than physical entities.'

You seem proud of your psychology training. 'I am. It took me nine years to get my degree, partly because I was a working mother while I was studying. Psychological knowledge is a central part of what we offer and, as you can tell I love the fact that there are always new things to learn - I often go back and sit in on lectures. I'm particularly proud of my dissertation which was a unique subject for undergraduate research when I did it.'

Kay's comments and opinions set me off thinking of my own career in management when I often felt that every manager should have some psychological training, allied to varied experiences. Kay confirmed me in that view. Aldous Huxley is reported to have said, 'Who am I and what, if anything, can I do about it?' I can't really sum it up any better!