

'So what do you do?'

Sarah Dale gives a personal view on overthrowing a collective impostor syndrome

'So what do you do?' The question always leads me to take a deep breath before embarking on an answer. At a local networking event, or meeting friends of friends, my answer is something like: 'I'm an occupational psychologist. I work mainly with senior managers and professionals on a one-to-one basis, and have developed my own coaching programme. How about you?'



(I'm usually quite keen to deflect the question away from me.)

But if I'm at something like the Division of Occupational Psychology conference, my reply takes on a more hesitant tone. 'Oh, you know, I do a bit of coaching and 360 and stuff like that. Only part-time, I'm busy with the kids and we've just built an extension and that took up all my time last year because the builders went bust and then we got married in October and, erm, do you know where the toilets are?'

Why such a difference?

My career hasn't taken a straight line. I left school in the early eighties to do a psychology degree at Nottingham University. Daunted by the prospect of years of postgraduate study and supervision that becoming a psychologist of any sort required, I somehow ended up doing even more by joining what was then Deloitte, Haskins and Sells (now PriceWaterhouseCoopers) to train as a chartered accountant. I certainly wasn't alone in that abrupt career decision – our intake was full of history and psychology graduates, many of whom have since made career changes, so I know teachers, nurses, even smallholders who are ex-accountants. None of us have ever regretted it though. The business training and professional consultancy skills that the experience gave us are transferable to just about every environment, and gaining chartered status really did feel like an achievement after all those weekends and evenings sacrificed to

mastering the finer points of tax law and nominal ledgers.

After some years there, approaching 30 and considering my options, I took the plunge and left to do a full-time MSc in occupational psychology. It felt like a new lease of life. I had spent the accountancy years working with a huge variety of client organisations, and occupational psychology started to explain what was going on in many of them. My answer to 'What is occupational psychology?' (for those who aren't so easily deflected when I've given my first answer to 'What do you do?'), is usually an only slightly flippant 'Anything to do with people and work'. I am particularly interested in the well-being of people at work as it relates to how they make sense of what they do and how they contribute to their organisation and/or their world – but, to be frank, that is a huge and vague area to explain to people. Hard to describe but endlessly interesting to me. The accountancy training isn't wasted either – how we measure performance both individually and at an organisational level underlies most of our work practices in a Western capitalist economy so it's always there, even as silent assumptions that influence how we work and what we do.

To bring it together, and apply these interests in as coherent a way as I could manage, I developed a coaching programme which I have called Creating Focus (see www.creatingfocus.org). It consists of face-to-face coaching sessions, written feedback via e-mail and a series of exercises structured around a three-stage programme (taking stock; clarifying direction; sustaining progress). I piloted it with ten senior professionals from a variety of organisations with greater success than I had dared to anticipate. A couple of years on now, some of those participants even now partly attribute their successes (becoming a professor,

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being promoted to head teacher, setting up a successful architecture practice, being invited to international conferences) to the programme.

I am delighted when I hear these things, though I immediately wonder if that means I am doing this for my own gratification, or – heaven forbid – allowing myself to get sucked into attribution errors left, right and centre. It feels like ‘real’ psychology, but would it stand scrutiny?

I have brought together a whole range of interests into the programme – Myers Briggs, 360 feedback, positive psychology, mindfulness, some cognitive behavioural ideas. In addition, I have widened it out to help participants view their work and performance in a realistic context – family, friends, food, drink, sleep, exercise – it all adds to or takes away from work performance and the well-being (or not) associated with that. I write a series of short reflective pieces for interested participants to show them some snippets of research and thinking on topics ranging from food (for the body!) to e-mail use and procrastination. I am working on bringing these together into a blog and a book called *Keeping Your Spirits Up* (www.keepingyourspiritsup.org.uk). I am inspired by books such as *The Skilled Helper* by Egan, and *Relational Coaching* by Erik De Haan. I am hosting the regional Special Group in Coaching Psychology group for peer supervision, and doing CPD activities rarely feels like a chore but instead is energising and useful (which is more than I used to say about CPD as an accountant).

So far, over 50 people have completed the Creating Focus programme. None have dropped out, and many cite lasting benefits. Looking back over the comments, I often find ones like this:

‘It has awakened the strength that was dormant in me... In the past, I used to fear that I would get confused... There was always this fear that someone might out stage me. Because I felt like that about myself, there were times where I felt confused and out of control during meetings. Not any more!’

I am struck by how many (not all) the people I have been working with seem to demonstrate a form of impostor syndrome (see p.380). All highly qualified, very experienced, but with a nagging doubt somewhere that their weaknesses would overwhelm any positive strengths they knew they had. And I myself react like this in the company of other psychologists. To begin with, I thought this must be because I had changed career and was therefore a ‘newbie’. But I have been chartered and

FEATURED JOB

Job Title: Full Time Clinical or Counselling Psychologist

Employer: Starfish Health and Wellbeing

Iain Caldwell is Chief Executive of Starfish Health and Wellbeing, a primary care mental health service founded in August last year. He talks with huge enthusiasm the organisation, already operating in Cannock, with Stafford due to go live next month and plans to take the approach and ideas more widely across the country.

Iain comments: ‘We have developed the ‘Whole Context Approach’, providing individual therapy with a focus on the person’s social and environmental experiences. The first element of this is that we don’t see physical and personal health in isolation. They’re affected by community and social context, so we try to link the two areas and work on personal and community solutions. Second, we don’t use one way of intervening. Our work involves a toolkit of techniques including cognitive behaviour therapy, interpersonal techniques and solution focused therapy.’

Iain has a degree in psychology and has trained in a number of therapies. Starfish’s approach reflects his deeply held views in the area. ‘The real difference between a good and an average therapist isn’t the use of one particular technique. Good therapists are passionate about really finding out about the person in front of them, then reaching into a wider toolkit to find an approach that fits. I’m interested in employing people who are absolutely committed to getting the best out of people and who don’t give up.’

Why are you advertising for a clinical or a counselling psychologist? ‘They have different skill sets and we’ll need both in the future. It’s not critical which we get first, since we are looking for a particular type of person. This will be the first full-time psychologist we’ll employ. Many of our other staff have psychology degrees so this person will support them and be involved in training. He or she will also work with individual clients – delivering interventions and carrying out assessments. But there’s a wider role which this person will pioneer. You can’t link community to individual issues without getting out into the community. A huge part of the role is developing and informing social support infrastructures. He or she will research, develop and deliver new techniques. We genuinely want someone who is creative, confident and self-motivated in taking on new challenges.’

Starfish have big ambitions. ‘We want to make an impact, both nationally in provision, and internationally in thinking about the area. We’re presenting at the first conference on clinical excellence later on this year in Kansas. The successful candidate can help realise those ambitions, and we hope they will stay around for a long time and really influence the direction we take.’

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“We want to make an impact both nationally... and internationally”

running my own business for some years now. I was struck by Antonia Dietmann’s address as incoming Chair at the Division of Occupational Psychology conference, where she urged people to ‘Get our work out there’.

Her exhortation to really explain to family and friends what an occupational psychologist does is also thought-provoking. My husband is a civil and structural engineer; I can see and touch the buildings he has designed. My father was a graphic designer; on my way to school, I used to pass the theatre posters

he had designed. I used to be an accountant; I can trace through Companies House (if the desire overcame me) the records for businesses that I helped to audit. All chartered professions, like ours.

But occupational psychology is less tangible (apart from psychometrics perhaps, which is probably a large part of any public understanding of what we do). My own feeling is that occupational psychologists can be many different things (as can engineers, designers and accountants), but I am slightly

intimidated by a sense that what I do isn't academic enough.

The academic/practitioner divide has been endlessly debated, and I don't want to add to that, except to wonder if in and of itself it produces a kind of collective impostor syndrome. There are – rightly – some strong opinions in the profession about what counts as good work in the field. Challenge is good, but somewhere along the line I wonder if this takes on a more dismissive tone, which tends to undermine confidence. At the DOP conference, it's not uncommon to hear papers being introduced apologetically if they follow a keynote with strong messages about methods or approaches that are dismissed as not up to the mark. On the other hand, papers following an equally sound and well-researched but more enthusiastic keynote (for example,

the excellent keynote in Brighton on the topic of trust by Donald Ferrin) tend to be much more confidently presented.

As one of my participants on the Creating Focus programme reflected: 'My leadership skills are much stronger because I have stopped questioning my own abilities and started being confident to use the strengths I have rather than focusing on my weaknesses.'

Maybe I, and possibly our profession as a whole, should take note. Physician heal thyself!

With that confidence, surely we will naturally define our work out in the 'real' world. There is more than enough to get our teeth into. Every single day, I hear

"Topics need to be presented in a digestible way"

something on radio or TV, overhear a conversation or read something that is absolutely to do with people and work (or these days, lack of work too). All the time people are trying to make sense of what their contribution is, how they will or do make a living, how they keep their sanity (or don't) in some of the insane work situations that we manage to put ourselves and each other into. Occupational psychologists could be commenting on radio and TV every day. After all, economists are and theirs isn't exactly a tangible field either.

I thought about role models whilst I was writing this. Two people spring to mind: Professor Tanya Byron (a clinical psychologist) and Gerry Robinson (a one time accountant). I admire both for their

Being positive

Ian Florance talks to **Jan Stannard** about the 'light-bulb moment' that led her into psychology, and her quest to be sure of her ground in her new field

Funding shortfalls; lack of training places; there are enough negative issues for psychology. So it was good to interview Jan Stannard, who transmits enormous enthusiasm about psychology's potential to address real and significant problems. I had been introduced to her by a well-known occupational psychologist as someone 'who is taking a different route into the subject, after a successful career in a very different discipline.' Jan answered my questions carefully above the noise of a very busy coffee shop.

'I grew up in a stable family: we're innately cheerful, which perhaps explains my eventual route into positive psychology. I went to a local comprehensive – I was too home-loving to travel to a really academic school some distance away. I was usually near the top of the class and I was the first member of my family to go to university, where I studied geography with some geology. I met my husband there on the

first day. You can't highlight a difficult childhood or a desire to understand myself as a primary influence on my professional life.'

Your first career was very different from applied psychology. 'Yes, especially if you put working as a chalet girl on my CV! But my first 'proper' job was in public relations. I worked my way up, moved, and by 29 was on the board of a major PR company.

'In 1984 I came to the conclusion that technology was going to be hugely important: it's difficult to realise that there was any uncertainty over that issue, given how central new technology has become in our lives. I began to specialise in technology clients and working with Michael Dell to launch Dell Computers in Europe was one of the highlights.'

In 1991 Jan set up her own consultancy with a colleague and it eventually achieved a million pound turnover, including a website company as

a subsidiary. 'At this point I sat back to consider where I was going. PR has a negative reputation in some quarters.



Some of that is deserved, some the result of programmes like *Absolutely Fabulous*. I'd long been interested in strategy and in how and what people communicate – you could say I always worked in communications rather than PR, with all that that term entails. I'd loved my time in the industry, including international

projects such as working with Texaco in the USA. I'd stayed for long stable periods with certain firms, which is unusual in the sector, and this gave me a more in-depth view of how organisations develop over time. But you can't deny that PR has a definite age profile. I was outside that and it felt like time to change direction.'

Was psychology an obvious choice? 'It was serendipity. I had thought about it on-and-off but when I was growing up psychology wasn't as developed a profession as it is today. I first consciously came across psychological ideas about personality on a sales training course in the '90s and was also fascinated by a book called *Brainsex*, which looks at biological and physiological differences between the male and female brain.

'I decided to change career in 2005. By then we had merged our PR company with another, and I had moved sideways to become MD of our now-independent website company while continuing to do some PR work. My work situation became more flexible and I was

style of working with people – calm, thoughtful, challenging, sympathetic, passionate and accessible. Feet on the ground at an individual level as well as operating at a policy level too. In Tanya Byron's case a very accessible academic – her website alone seems to be an example of how to cross the academic/practitioner divide if there is one.

The only reason I know of these people is through television. I think, as a profession, we could benefit from such a presence ourselves. Why



Tanya Byron

haven't we already got that? It could be because it's a rare person who is telegenic enough (I watch Tanya Byron and weep), and I believe both she and Gerry Robinson had links with the media in the first place. So – who you know is inevitably part of that (would one of them mentor one of us?). Also, I think topics need to be presented in a digestible way, which is an area both my role models are extremely good at. But could it also be that we need to shake off the impostor syndrome and focus on our strengths? Isn't that one aspect of what occupational psychologists do?

web

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able to develop my psychology interests at the same time. Here's where the serendipity came in – in late 2005 I was asked to do PR for Wellington College, which celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2009. Anthony Seldon is a very high-profile Master – he's a leading authority on contemporary British history and the author or editor of 25 books on, among other subjects, Blair, Thatcher and Major. He also has a very firm vision about what a school should offer its pupils.

'By chance, within a month of beginning to work with Anthony, I was invited by friends to attend a lecture on the science of happiness by Professor Felicia Huppert, who is a psychologist involved with Cambridge University's Well-Being Institute and the International Positive Psychology Association. It was a light-bulb moment. The idea of evidence-based practice in a positive but not simplistic framework really appealed to me.'

What did you do about it? 'I e-mailed Anthony saying that I thought the children at the school would really benefit from positive psychology. I found out more, wrote a paper and within nine months we had a course running. Go on the college website you'll find a very strong

statement about attitudes to well-being among pupils (<http://bit.ly/b5m00u>).

With my other hat on I issued a press release 'School to give children lessons in happiness'. It was covered in numerous countries and I still get journalists wanting to visit the school – probably the most successful bit of communication I've ever created.'

You sound very proud but slightly guarded in how you explain your interest in positive psychology. 'First, I think people misunderstand the subject. They sometimes see it as a fad but it is evidence-based and the subject of continuing research. Also, enthusiasm can be mistaken for lack of thinking. It sometimes seems we only take negative messages.'

Jan feels that positive psychology 'meets an unaddressed need, so seeing it in action is very inspiring. Schools should be about developing human beings to their full potential, not just filling a container with facts. It can be argued we lost that understanding for a while but it's a central tenet at Wellington and other schools.'

"It sometimes seems we only take negative messages"

Despite her success in introducing the positive psychology course, Jan felt she needed to know more and 'be surer of my ground. I read widely: Howard Gardner's work on multiple intelligences influenced my thinking and has also been adopted by Wellington. In 2006 I did an AS-level in Psychology to test my resolve to embark upon an academic background in the subject. I'm now in the third year of an Open University degree in psychology, I've attended the world's first international positive psychology conference in Pennsylvania and have done the University of Pennsylvania's online positive psychology course, which was excellent.'

You obviously feel you need academic credentials. Do you believe positive psychology is something new? 'I think it's an example of taking existing knowledge, giving it a new vocabulary, researching it in a modern way and seeing if it works. It's not a new field of psychology so much as an extension of the psychological continuum. I asked a psychologist friend if she thought you could become a

'clinical positive psychologist', and she said 'of course'. Positive psychology gives you an approach, a theoretical base and a set of tools that you can use appropriately with different client groups or in defining research. I know there are occupational psychologists who train in the area. But it has limits. Some techniques don't work with everyone, but I see no reason why it shouldn't become part of the basic psychological toolkit.'

And the future for you? 'I'll be at the Open University for six years and then I want to get accepted to train as a clinical psychologist. It's a long haul but I have found that patience is a valuable quality of people training to be psychologists. I'm a social animal, so I need to find a 'home' for my work. If clinical positive psychology proves difficult, cognitive behaviour therapy offers an alternative, as well as consulting and teaching in positive psychology in organisations. The combination of my experience as a communicator and my training should open up possibilities. Given how career structures are changing, more people may opt to study psychology after working in a different area, just as I have. And that can only be a good thing for the profession.'