

Safety first

Ian Florance interviews **Tim Marsh** about his work as the Managing Director of a company dealing in the psychology of industrial safety

Dr Tim Marsh's PhD supervisor apologised for a phrase in his reference. It read, 'Tim isn't very interested in theories for which he can't find a practical application.' Tim couldn't understand the apology – he saw the phrase as a compliment.

He's now Managing Director of Ryder Marsh (www.rydermarsh.co.uk), a company whose strapline is 'The Psychology of Industrial Safety'. They have an international blue chip clientele and have worked with more than 300 companies around the world.

Tim, what is safety psychology?

Many organisations are safety compliant:

they meet legal requirements and have good systems and processes. But they're left with a rump of accidents which, when you investigate them, seem to be caused by people. Typically managers say: 'If only they followed the rules we'd be OK.' The safety professionals who know the technical issues – how to operate a nuclear reactor or design a train signalling system – just can't understand why people are willingly taking risks. Safety psychology addresses these human dimensions of a safe working environment.

Why do people consult a safety psychologist?

Some high-profile organisations, especially in potentially dangerous industries, will employ human factor specialists to look at this issue. Safety is also sometimes rolled up in management movements like 'continuous improvement' or 'quality circles'. Other companies bring in a consultant to set up programmes or to enhance existing programmes with best practice.

At a practical level, improved safety saves money, reduces absenteeism, increases turnover and improves organisation citizenship. But there are also personal motives. A company I know had a terrible safety record and finally someone was killed in an accident. After the funeral, the CEO and Head of Operations sat down for a coffee in

a Little Chef and agreed it would never happen again. They put in a very aggressive programme to improve standards. Safety becomes a very powerful emotional issue. Ideally, though, organisations will be motivated to address issues proactively.

Safety is not a well-known application of psychology. How did you get into it?

I studied psychology at Hull. Hull had a really good psychology department: it was also known as a happy, cheap place to live with a high beer intake! I originally also studied philosophy but it seemed esoteric and otherworldly. I've always been a big reader and I like books about people – Iain Banks' work for instance – and found that psychology answered some of my basic questions about why people do what they do. I remember reading research findings and thinking 'of course'. I find psychology a practical subject which enables you to do useful things – in my case preventing the pain and trauma of suffering or witnessing an accident.

But I didn't go straight on to practice. I spent some time working as an accountant in Jersey – it was that or join the Foreign Legion – but decided to go back to do a master's in 1988.

Which area of psychology did you study?

Occupational. A friend warned me against educational and clinical specialisms: too much work, too much responsibility, not enough money she said!

I think my own experience predisposed me to occupational psychology. I studied my degree as a mature student having been thrown out of a terrible comprehensive school at 16. Six years of doing dead-end jobs predisposed me to learn and gave me huge empathy with people who are treated badly by their employers. Every



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occupational psychologist ought to do a few years working in unfulfilling jobs for disgraceful employers! It should be a mandatory training experience.

I went to Manchester, which had an excellent reputation. I did a basic master's and then Dr Mike Smith employed me to look at suicidal behaviour in army recruits for which he had a grant. It was also the basis of my PhD and it was fairly clear what was going on – the army, at that stage, took the people who turned up and let basic training sort them out. It was also clear what they ought to do – give much more realistic job previews which emphasised hard training and danger as much as skiing and running along exotic beaches.

I and a colleague, Paul Ryder set up an occupational consultancy while we wrote up our PhDs. We offered a basic menu of solutions – assessment centres and development work for instance.

Ray Duff, the Professor of Building Engineering, and Ivan Robertson of the School of Management were running the first European project into behavioural safety at UMIST. Ivan asked me to come in and take over the psychology part of the project. My first site trip was to Blackburn Rovers new football ground where I was led up rickety ladders, across a half-finished roof to a wind-swept drop. 'From here,' said my guide, 'you can spit on the penalty spot.' 'Why would I want to do that? What are we doing up here anyway?' I asked. 'We wanted to see if you were stupid enough to follow us up here!' I was hooked.

Presumably part of the skill of working in the industries you work in, with the people you work with, is to win their trust.

It's quite simple. Most of the people who work on the 'shop floor' know their jobs, have huge experience, native wit and tacit knowledge. Often they could solve a problem but, given the number of times they've been let down, aren't prepared to offer solutions – at least not until they know the person in front of them is telling it like it is. They've seen lots of managers come in, promise the earth and leave a couple of years later. They've also met lots of consultants who promised a revolution. They can spot nonsense from a hundred yards. I remember working on an oil rig and going out for a drink with some of the team. One of them – who happened to be a former band mate of Billy Connolly's and who had since become a druid – confronted me with 'Can we trust you?'. It got quite heated. When the company later won an award for their safety work I gently reminded

FEATURED JOB

Job Title: Consultant Occupational Psychologist
Employer: Criterion Partnership

'That we're based in Brighton can be seen as a sort of shorthand for our differentiated culture and approach,' says Alan Redman, a director of Criterion Partnership. 'I'd define that as more idiosyncratic and relaxed than larger consultancies. We work hard but we make room for people to be individualistic. Our consultants don't take a hard-edged approach and that's a key reason why our clients chose us. We're looking for someone to contribute to and maybe extend that culture, so the successful candidate's personal skills are incredibly important.'

Criterion Partnership was set up in 1991 and had developed a range of assessment products, introduced consultancy services and, in recent years, has developed particular skills in online assessment and leadership development. Just before talking to Alan I'd received a brochure on COAST, the company's new wave of online assessments.

'We've been below the radar in a highly competitive market but in the last five years have accelerated, and that's why we're recruiting at the moment.' Given this situation, what are the actual characteristics a successful candidate should have?

'We're looking for people who are at ease in front of groups, since a lot of their work will involve facilitation and training. They need to be comfortable with the detail of psychometrics, statistics and online technology. And – this is important – he or she must enjoy developing a business stream. We've tried having separate sales and consultancy teams and it doesn't suit Criterion. Our consultants must enjoy selling.'

However, Alan says that he doesn't want to underestimate the importance of knowledge, qualification and experience. 'Being chartered or on your way to chartership is a key factor, as is the right level of experience – too little and it's a bit of a leap to acquire the right customer skills, too much and you'll have your own way of doing things which may cause strains within our culture. This is an ideal job for someone a few years into their career who has spent some time in HR or consulting.'

How do people progress? 'We're a flat organisation: the three directors are very hands-on. A lot of our work is built around test development and assessment. So we encourage individuals to follow their interests and expertise. Existing staff members specialise in areas such as resilience and innovation; others have got interested in management of back-office functions and test development. Deep relationships with clients throw up different approaches that people get more involved with.' As an example, Alan spoke to me from a train, on his way to a team-building event taking place on a yacht in the Solent!

'This is a Brighton-based post and we're a largely UK company at the moment. But if we work for a multinational company it may involve travel.' Alan also stresses that the three directors are all chartered occupational psychologists: 'So, we support chartership and offer some in-company supervision. The consultants have a development budget each year. You'll be working in a company that takes psychology seriously.'

How would Alan sum up the opportunities? 'We're looking to grow and you can be part of that. Look at our website and read our descriptions of ourselves. Would you want to work with these people?! If you think you would, get in touch.'

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"You'll be working in a company that takes psychology seriously"

him of the conversation!

I really like the humour that goes with the work and the variety of people you meet – one minute working in a UK factory, the next on an Indian oil rig.

We use the concept of a just culture in our work. It replaces the earlier 'no name, no blame' approach in which the issue of finding out who was at fault was replaced entirely by a focus on improvement. I was on an oil rig and someone commented: 'We have no name, no blame on this platform. It's just that management really like to know who they're not blaming'.

Another situation sums up these two elements – the humour and the need to overcome suspicion. I was giving a presentation explaining training to a group. I was, perhaps, overselling it, saying how wonderful it would be, what a difference it would make. One guy got up and said 'I'm volunteering' but he added 'Just one further thing. At the end of all this will I still have to bash bloody wooden palettes for a living?' The answer of course was yes. But he did do the training. He enjoyed it. It improved safety.

So what happened to your occupational consultancy?

After a couple of years I had specialised in safety work, but my partner was still committed to more conventional occupational psychology projects. So he moved on and I kept the name of the company. We started building up our client list because we were a local supplier, but are now probably the pre-eminent provider outside the US and our work has grown internationally. In the last year we've worked across the USA, in Brazil, Nigeria, Abu Dhabi, Algeria, Dubai and India.

Do you believe safety psychology is a separate discipline?

No. I think we've identified some basic psychological techniques as relevant to the area, then adapted them. We've

combined them and put them in a form that our clients can understand and then apply to make a difference.

Root cause analysis is the core of safety psychology. For example, why are so many people suffering from skin problems in a chemical plant; why did a rivet on a plane not get tightened? Central to this is an understanding of the

Working in a Greek family care centre

Stefania Papadaki on her route to counselling psychology work in Heraklion

I always wanted to be a psychologist. I decided to study the subject at 17, maybe because it had only developed in Greece recently or perhaps I just wanted to 'discover' the mysteries of the human mind! I graduated from the psychology course at the National and Kapodistriako University of Athens, then moved to the UK to continue with my postgraduate studies. I took my two master's degrees in Special and Inclusive Education and Counselling Psychology.

After returning to Greece, I applied for more challenging public service jobs. I was eventually employed in the Family Care Service of Heraklion, which is the capital

of Crete and, as it happens, where I was born.

Working as a counselling psychologist in a public service of a small island can be both interesting and challenging. The Family Care Service is one of the very few psychological services available to families and children in the whole municipality. Government social sector budgets are sometimes low. Reduced staffing means there are not enough services to offer real help to people in need. For instance, my service consists of two counselling

psychologists and a family counsellor who also supervises.

The Family Care Service of Heraklion offers parent counselling to more than 1200 families whose children are in the 14 public nurseries of the city. We can support anybody

who asks for help, whether they are parents or not. Apart from

psychological intervention and

counselling, we offer child personality assessment: we use psychometric tools such as the 'Draw A Man Test' and 'Draw Your Family Test'. This is often the first and only time that parents have access to scientific advice regarding their children's behaviour and the way they can

manage difficulties.

We also organise primary school and nursery talks, to raise awareness of different issues, such as divorce, death in the family and 'setting boundaries for children'. Parents really appreciate these. We often extend our activities beyond the city by visiting remote villages and local organisations, to talk to people who have never had the chance to ask for professional help. We also organise short-period seminars for teaching staff (nursery nurses) to support them in their work. Seminars on issues such as management styles, human relations and organisational problem-solving are attended by nursery managers, so you could say we move out of the specific realm of counselling psychology into

fundamental attribution error: that we'll tend to blame the person rather than the situation, policies, management attitudes, equipment. This is at the base of the 'just culture' idea where you step back from a problem to analyse it more objectively. More often than not the environment rather than individual irresponsibility is the root cause. But, the difference between just culture and no name, no blame approaches is partly that individuals actually are sometimes to blame and you have to acknowledge and act on that. It's fair.

We need a model to understand why people do what they do: that actions usually stem not from antecedents – training, policies, what they're told to do – but from consequences. We can also use some concepts from Freud to analyse why people rationalise when a major problem is presented to them.

This all leads to practical interventions. We do a lot of work with supervisors drawing on books like Cialdini's *Yes*. For instance, if someone looks you in the eye and says 'I will', they're three times more likely to keep

their promise. This is useful when you deal with safety. We also use a variation of Vroom's model of motivation – pointing out that managers won't do safety challenges if they feel they don't know what or how to challenge, feel they can't do it well or don't value the outcome. Many will have to be taught to value outcomes by feedback and appraisals.

In the course of all this we happily use any techniques and concepts that work – emotional intelligence for instance, or even some of the techniques wrapped up in NLP. For example we use transactional analysis techniques to encourage conversation that are adult to adult. This can be very powerful.

How would you sum up your contribution?

In essence, getting the organisational environment right is the most important thing, as safety failures are more often environmental than individual. Once that is the case you address psychological issues and show, through concepts like

"you just know that a hospital bed that would normally be filled is empty"

Gladwell's tipping point and Heinrich's triangle that you can make measurable changes to safety behaviour. Traditionally Heinrich's triangle suggests that for every 330 unsafe acts, 30 will result in minor injuries and one in a major one. The real figures are, in fact, rather different but the basic insight is that the bigger the number of unsafe acts the bigger the number of serious accidents – and vice versa. Often you won't even know who you saved – you just know that a hospital bed that would normally be filled is empty.

Do you have any final thoughts for those considering setting up a psychology consultancy?

Front-line supervisors are key people. Boardroom vision and commitment are essential for change, but real change takes place because of the body language, demeanour and follow-up of supervisors as they give toolbox talks at the beginning of a week or day. That's what we concentrate on. If you're consulting with organisations, it's these personal issues – winning trust and delivering – and the many small interactions that take place in offices, factories and plants which turn psychological ideas into genuine improvements.

more occupational areas at times.

Meeting people from different social groups is the most interesting part of my job; these include unmarried mothers, unemployed parents, drug addicts, prisoners and gypsies. We offer basic guidelines for home life to these groups, who often have nowhere to turn to for parent counselling.

The Family Care Service also works with other psychological services and children institutions, so many cases can be referred to specialist advanced support. We deal with many different problems that children

experience at school or at home: jealousy between siblings, aggression, anxiety and insecurity/shyness. This makes



my job varied and challenging, as does the need to keep up to date with new psychological ideas and research.

But there are drawbacks to the job. I'm one of the two psychologists for the whole service, so there's never enough time to do everything. I have to ration the number of sessions with some clients and the number of talks we can give in schools and nurseries because of time pressures. Shortage of assessment tools

is a problem: we look for them in other services or universities.

Like many psychologists internationally, I'd like us to recruit more staff. I'd also like more specific training to be offered to psychologists that work with children: particularly undergraduate- and postgraduate-level training in child development and psychopathology.

Counselling psychology is a neglected application in Greece, as there are no available courses in the local universities and institutions. That makes studying abroad an unavoidable necessity, as my experience shows. I'm sure this situation is not specific to Greece, and more international contact between counselling psychologists would, I believe, help all of us in our work.