

## **THE UNDERSTANDING OF WORKPLACE COUNSELLING: A STUDY ON UNIVERSITY SAMPLE**

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### **Abstract**

*Uncertainty becomes a major problem for employees in today's unstable economy. Stress creates a negative psychological impact on employees at workplace, and it is one of the main reasons of declining performance of employees. No matter what causes the stress at workplace, managers of an organization should be aware of the need for a support program for their employees (Hindle, 1998:61). The purpose of this study is to form a base for further quantitative studies by discovering the perspectives of employees of a university towards the workplace counselling programs. In this study, focus group technique is used as one of the qualitative research methods. Sample of the study consist of 16 participants from one of the universities of Istanbul. The objective of the study is explained in detail to the participants to make them aware of the mentioned subject. Different types of Employee Assistance Programs are discussed, and it is argued that universities might benefit from introducing such programs.*

**Keywords:** *Workplace Counselling, Social Support, Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), Organizational Stress*

**JEL Classification: D23**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Last decades, employees' ambiguities about personal and private life ascend because of the increasing rates of competition, economic fluctuation, crisis and unemployment rates. All these changes made it important to cope with the employees' mental and psychological health as well as their physical health issues. To cope with anxiety, people have to get a social support.

Managers should be aware of the need of employees who work under stress, pressure and whatever the stress is caused by, for the social support programs (Hindle, 1998:61). This social support can be provided either by the social support personnel or professional consultants.

#### **1.1. Social Support Programs**

To cope with stress, the best way is getting social support. Social support is the physical and emotional relief given to employee by their family, friends, and peers. The most efficient way to deal with stress is to get social support during each level of lifetime. "Social support means to satisfy the basic needs of a person in the hierarchy of needs, such as belonging, love, self-esteem

etc... by interacting with other persons (friends, family, subordinates or professional consultants etc...)" (Ekinci, Ekici, 2003:27).

## **1.2. Employee Assistance Programs**

It is obvious to have problems at workplace since we spend most of our time over there. "Employee Assistance Programs" are the programs which solve the personal problems of employees, and by doing that it aims to increase the performance and productivity of the employees which create both short and long term mutual benefits for the organization and the employees (Torun, Çağlar, Özaktepe, Uslu and Saruhan, 1999). Workplace counselling may be defined as the provision of brief psychological therapy for employees of an organization, which are paid by the employer.

In the late 70s, Employee Assistance Programs began with a scant scope as dealing with addiction problems and alcoholism issues. Today, Employee assistance programs (EAPs) are covering the personal, couples and family counselling, legal and financial services, information and advice.

It also includes workshops, short training sessions, days on specific topics, alcohol awareness, stop smoking campaigns, stress management, taking care of your health etc. (Mcload and Handerson, 2003). Also, counselling service helps employees in dealing with problems efficiently (Ertekin, 1993:93).

The psychological counselling at workplace can be provided by either internal or external services. An 'external' service is a way of outsourcing the counselling service from a service provider company. In an 'in-house' service, counselors are directly employed by the organization. He/she is a permanent part of the company. This is also called internal provision. Some organizations prefer to take the counselling from the internal service (Lee and Gray, 1994:223).

Continuous but short time periods are recommended in workplace counselling services (Carroll & Walton, 1997). Lee and Gray (1994) mentioned that workplace counselling services are different from the other psychological consultancy services. The increase in performance and productivity should be targeted as a priority by the counselling program because solving the performance problems are the basic criteria to apply therapy at workplace.

Over the past twenty years, 75% of medium and large organizations in Britain and North America provide workplace counselling programs to their employees (Carroll & Walton, 1999; Oher, 1999). The level of stress caused by the problems and the anxieties of employees has experienced a decrease in employees who get counselling services (Ertekin, 1993:93).

## **2. METHOD**

In-depth interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of 16 people employed by a private university which is founded in Istanbul. The study consists of two different study groups. 8 academic staff (research assistants) from different faculties involved in the first focus group, and 8 administrative staff from different departments come up in the second focus group. In both studies number of males and females are equal (4 women and 4 men per each study). The instruments used for data collection included a demographic profile form and an interview guide. The interview guide included questions about the opinions of employees about workplace counselling. Aim of the questions is to discover the perspectives of employees towards workplace counselling.

A brief definition of workplace counselling was provided to the focus groups before the interviews to familiarize them to the issue. Participants were interviewed at work, and each interview lasted approximately in one and an half hour. During the interviews, notes were kept with the permission of the respondents. Two sessions were done on the same day. One researcher asked the questions and the other took the records. All the participants were assured about keeping the confidentiality of the information they supplied and were informed that it would be used for research purposes only. Questions are about;

- Opinions and attitudes about introducing a counselling provision
- Drawbacks, avoidance and question marks
- Preferences about the adoption of an in-house or out-house counseling provision
- Individual (emotional)/ Work related issues covered by the counselling service
- Confidentiality

### **2.1 Sample**

The sample of the study consists of 16 people who are from both administrative and academic staff of a private university in Istanbul. The number of females and males are equal in both focus groups.

In the first study, the interview is made with 4 female and 4 male in total of 8 research assistants from different faculties of the university. The age of participants varies between 25 and 39 (Mean: 30, 5). The education level of the participants is either master's degree or doctorate level. Only two research assistants are married and have children. The average working years of the sample is 3.75 years, and it varies between 1 to 8 years.

In the second study, the interview is conducted with 4 females and 4 males in total of 8 administrative staff. The age of the participants varies between 20 to 42 (Mean: 29,87). The education level of all participants is high school. 5 of the participants are married and have children. The average working years of the sample is 4.75 years, and this varies between 1 to 15 years.

## **3. RESULTS**

In order to understand the results of the study, findings were categorized under six topics:

### **3.1. Opinions and attitudes about introducing a counselling provision**

Since they have already been aware of this kind of services, the participants of the first group (academic staff) mention that providing that kind of a service will be much more beneficial to the employees than the administrative staff.

All participants in the first group suggest that if they get consultancy from a professional during hard times in academia, they will get through this difficult process more easily. Also, they think that besides the problems caused by the work itself, by getting counselling, the problems can be

solved faster and more effectively. Getting help from a professional in their personal problems will also affect their performance and productivity at work place.

The participants of the second group also look to get this kind of service from their organization in favor. This shows workplace counselling is not a very well-known or considered concept for the administrative staff. Although they were given a brief definition of the concept they had to recall the information. But in both of the studies a positive attitude is observed. Main reason for the positive attitude was about "being considered" by the company.

### **3.2. Drawbacks, avoidance and question marks**

The opinion of the academic staff towards applying to get consultancy services is more positive than the administrative staff's opinion. None of the participants thinks that they will be regarded as psychologically unhealthy, if they get consultancy. Major problem for the administrative staff was the issues about confidentiality.

### **3.3. Preferences about the adoption of an in-house or out-house counselling provision**

All the participants of the first group (academic staff) mention that employing someone from inside of the organization will be more beneficial to them since this person would know their problems and offer better solutions to them.

They believe that the person who will be employed from outside the organization would not understand their problems and provide efficient solutions.

In contrast with the first group, the participants of the second group prefer to get the consultancy service from outside the organization because they think that they will feel more comfortable and safe. Not surprisingly, in accordance with the major drawbacks, majority of the participants preferred an external counselling arrangement. They said they would be much more comfortable with an outsider than someone they work in the same place.

### **3.4. Individual (emotional) issues covered by the counselling service**

For each study, depression and stress were listed as the most significant personal issues that could be covered by the counselling service. Private life problems and family issues were other issues followed by them.

### **3.5. Work related issues covered by the counselling service**

The problems of the academic staff can be listed like that:

The problems that occurred during the orientation, and adaptation process to the new job, waiting for promotion and the problems caused after getting a promotion (such as dealing with negative attitudes of colleagues towards the person who gets promotion), lack of job satisfaction, lack of motivation, unfair job distribution, difficulties in coping with stress, inexistence of authorization for decision making and taking responsibility, having stress during peak times, difficulties in the process of passing to the permanent staff status, unfair approach of the management.

The common problems of both academic and administrative staff are; to lose the enthusiasm towards the job, to be forced to do some other jobs which are not included in their job definition, working without a system, dealing with uncertainty, having conflicts caused by alignments among employees, lack of trust towards administrators, difficulty in expressing themselves.

### **3.6. Confidentiality**

The participants of the first group (academic staff) want the consultant to share their problems about the workplace with their subordinates because they believe that by doing like this, their subordinates will be aware of their problems and provide solutions. But in contrast with this, they do not want the consultant to share their personal problems with their subordinates.

On the other hand, the administrative staff wants the consultant to share none of their problems with their administrators. They believe that the all problems should be kept as confidential.

## **4. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION**

The opinions of employees about workplace counselling were generally positive. This shows that workplace counselling is getting familiar and popular.

Both study groups saw workplace counselling as an act of valuing and caring about the employees and as a determinant or symbol of quality of the workplace. The interesting part is that they were not interested in the benefits or effects of the service; they just thought it as a whole and said if only management would care about them that much.

When we look at the demographic characteristics of the groups, we see that most of the participants are under the age of 40. It is understood that the participants of the first group (academic staff) are highly educated while the second group's education level is high school. Both groups have shown positive approach towards getting psychological support from a consultant at workplace. No difference is observed among the participants due to age, gender, marital status, education level. Furthermore, participants are working in a university which has almost 2,500 employees with a strong HR department. Due to this reason, it is normal for the participants of this study to expect a psychological consultancy service from their employer.

The second question about drawbacks of getting psychological counselling services at workplace is answered by all participants by underlying the importance of confidentiality. Shea&Bond (1997) posited that private information which is provided by the consulted person cannot be shared with anyone without permission of this person. Also, they confirmed that, as long as it does not violate the ethical rules, some information about the run of the business can be included in the reports that are going to be provided to the top management.

All participants in the first group answer the third question as they want the consultant to be employed from inside of the university since they think the consultant from inside would understand them better while all participants of the second group answer this question as they want the consultant from outside the university since they would feel more comfortable and safe. Hopkins& Hopkins (1999) examined that most of the consultancy services are provided by professionals who are employed from outside the organization. Individuals and companies believe that the consultants that are employed from outside the organization have more experience since they have the opportunity to face with more different cases. Also, Carroll and Walton (1999) specified that the level of assurance of confidentiality principle is higher in the consultancy services that are outsourced from outside the organization. Another perspective says that the consultants who are employed from inside the organization can state the reasons of the stress at workplace more clearly since they know the organization itself better. But, of course, it is difficult to compose trust of the employees towards the consultant who is from inside the organization

(Ekinci&Ekici, 2003). Third question is the most distinctive one between the first group and the second group in the whole study.

Participants of the study list the subjects which can be included in the consultancy service program at workplace as follows; personal problems, abstraction, stress, deterrence, lack of communication, obsession, paranoia, kleptomania, and emotional weakness.

Common problems are listed by both groups as follows; lack of trust, low level of performance, lack of competency trainings, and conflict. But another distinction is observed between the groups of the study in defining the other problems. Academic personnel makes their own list as problems occurred during their thesis writing process, academic development, uncertainty in their career, and unfair job distribution.

Turkish people have not been interested in psychological consultancy services due to cultural and economic problems. But, the importance of psychological consultancy services at workplace has started to be recognized by institutionalized companies in Turkey since it is believed that this kind of consultancy services will be very helpful in increasing the productivity of employees.

The timidity of employees in getting consultancy services have started to decrease in previous years. Due to this reason, it is expected that the demand for such services will be increased in the following years. The institutionalized companies will be the forerunners in providing consultancy services at workplace.

With this study, some other findings can also be underlined. In order to provide counselling services, the needs and wants of the employees should be considered, and attention should be paid to the issues of ethics, confidentiality, honesty, and sincerity.

The limitation of this study is caused by using focus group technique as a research methodology, which requires limited number of participants. Due to this reason, it is not healthy to generalize the results of this study over every university personnel.

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