

Occupational Psychology: Unanswered Questions & Future Research Agendas

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Introduction

Occupational psychology (OP), is the application of the science of psychology to the workplace [1]. In 2015, the British Psychological Society updated and refined the eight ‘key areas’ of OP to five areas, which are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Five ‘Key Areas’ of Occupational Psychology.

Key Area of Occupational Psychology	Focus and Tasks in Area
Psychological assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Selecting and assessing employees using a range of methods Profiling jobs and matching job requirements to future performance Developing and choosing valid, reliable, fair and suitable selection procedures
Learning, training and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training and employee development The training cycle (identifying needs, transfer of learning to the job, evaluation) Employability Talent and succession planning Innovation and creativity Occupational choice and career development Coaching, counselling and mentoring
Wellbeing at work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Measuring and promoting wellbeing in the workplace, including mental and physical health, work-life balance and resilience Unemployment and retirement Occupational health and stress Bullying, harassment and conflict Emotions in the workplace
Work design, organisational change and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design of jobs and work environments People and technology Human factors and ergonomics Workplace safety and risk management Organisational effectiveness, productivity and performance Communications Organisational structure, culture and climate Organisational and individual change and development
Leadership, motivation and engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work motivation, performance appraisal and management Leadership Power, influence and negotiation Employee engagement and commitment Citizenship and positive behaviours Derailment and counterproductive behaviours Psychology of groups, teams and teamwork

Adapted from BPS (2015)

This change to five key areas represented a timely shift in the approach to the curriculum for occupational psychologists in training in the UK, as the workplace is rapidly changing with increased globalisation for both organisations and individuals. Competition from newly industrialised and industrialising nations, as well as great strides in technology have allowed changes to physical presence in the workplace. There have also been

political and cultural changes to working practices such as the rise of the zero-hours and fixed-term contracts; or as they may also be perceived the ‘freeing’ effect of portfolio or protean careers based on self-direction for fulfillment [2]. We have also seen a greater focus internationally on the need for equality of opportunity [3]; this is strongly reflected in the new curriculum which includes equality and diversity as running themes. The age old questions of how ‘people can fit jobs’ and how ‘jobs can fit people’ still remain, however. The new curriculum is designed to support the development of OP to ensure it remains relevant and has scope for innovation in the current climate.

Despite these promising advances in the curriculum, there remain many unanswered questions for researchers and practitioners alike across each of the five areas. The remainder of this editorial will outline some of these, with a view to scoping a broad future research agenda for occupational psychologists and allied disciplines.

Psychological Assessment

Over the last ten years, this area has seen a shift away from selection tools which focussed on prior attainment (especially for entry-level roles) to focus more on *potential* to succeed than past opportunities. A particular concern in this area is that of widening access to the professions, as there is growing recognition that more ‘traditional’ approaches to assessment may not be fair and equitable to all individuals, regardless of background. Allied to this, assessment has moved away from being primarily ability-based to focussing on non-academic attributes and values. Psychometric tools such as situational judgement tests and logical reasoning ability have been shown to have lower between-group differences when it comes to socio-economic status, and, coupled with their scalability for high-volume assessment due to their technology-driven administration, are becoming increasingly popular. However, there remains a notable dearth of longitudinal, good quality research regarding how different assessments tools should be used in combination: the order in which they are used and the weighting at each stage [4].

Research question: Which combination of assessment methods should be used, in what order, and with what weighting, in order to promote social mobility?

Learning, Training, and Development

Whilst average per capita spend on employee training is steadily rising [5] this tends to be concentrated in the already skilled levels of the workforce, and there is a predicted skills gap internationally as graduate numbers increase and fewer are willing to take on skilled manual work as a result. At the same time, there is a growth in alternative self-development methods such as Massive Open Online Courses which employees can access at no cost to their organisation. Research is beginning to take account of these shifts but evaluation tools for measur-

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ing the effectiveness of online learning are still required, and the impact of generalist training versus specialist needs further consideration [6]. The impact of holding multiple job roles and therefore receiving appropriate socialisation into each is also under-researched; particularly given the moves to dispersed working where knowledge sharing may be more limited. Another area is the impact of outsourcing employee development to each individual in the ubiquitous requirement to undertake continuous professional development.

Research question: What is the impact of expecting individuals to manage their own development on meeting organisational skills gaps?

Wellbeing at Work

This area has given much attention to the concept of work-life balance (WLB) over the years, and there is recognition that WLB means different things to different people [7]. However, the rapid advances in technology in recent times has made it almost impossible for research to keep pace with the practicalities of individuals having access to smartphones, laptops, and tablets that can be linked to work 24 hours a day. Therefore the question remains as to what impact the constant access to work-related content is having on employees' wellbeing. Although some cross-sectional research in this area has started to emerge, there is much scope to assess the long-term impact of this across a plethora of wellbeing outcomes including physical and mental health and job satisfaction [8].

Research question: What is the long-term impact of having constant access to work content via technology, on employees' wellbeing?

Work Design, Organisational Change, and Development

Some would argue that one of the biggest changes in the syllabus review was the removal of ergonomics and human factors as an separate area of OP. In recent years ergonomics has grown as a discipline in its own right and as such this has been acknowledged in the review of OP. This has been replaced with a focus on work design which has been combined with organisational change and development into one broader area of consideration. This area focuses largely on the organisation as the context for a lot of the other activities we cover in OP. Broad issues such as globalisation are also important under this area as change in the political and economic climate. As such newer areas of psychology are also important to reference including consumer and economic psychology which are related disciplines to OP. Safety is a key component here too with a focus on risk management and error prevention.

Research question: How can organisations plan and prepare for the change in an uncertain economic and political climate?

Leadership, Motivation, and Engagement

Leadership is key for all areas of organisations and previous research has led to a wide range of theories and concepts of leadership that have been developed. In the current climate, there is a greater focus on authenticity in leadership, for example, the importance of trust and ethics [9]. There is also an increased focus on global leadership incorporating the effects of culture on leadership effectiveness. These fresh approaches to the leadership literature also give rise to new perspectives on how to motivate and engage employees, such as a shift towards more intrinsic rewards and value-based motivation, from the more traditional focus on pay and reward [10].

Research question: What does it mean to be a global leader and what competencies are required to succeed?

In summary, the pace of change in the workplace globally in terms of working culture, technology, physical working location and career 'types' is extremely rapid. This means that OP and its allied professions face a continuous challenge to identify and investigate the most relevant factors affecting individuals' and organisations' performance and experience in the workplace. While much high quality research exists and continues to emerge across the five key areas recognised in the new curriculum, there remains significant potential for investigation, which we have highlighted in this editorial.

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