

## Podcast transcript

### Career conversations: Rachael Daniels

#### **Hannah Spencer:**

Hi everyone and welcome to this podcast recorded and produced by the Royal College of Occupational Therapists.

This is one of a series of podcasts which really focus on hearing and sharing the career narratives of our diverse workforce and highlight a whole range of possibilities in occupational therapy.

My name is Hannah Spencer and I'm an occupational therapist that's had the absolute pleasure and privilege of facilitating and capturing these conversations with members of our occupational therapy community.

So let's start with some introductions. Do you mind just giving us a brief introduction to yourself and your role or roles?

#### **Rachael Daniels:**

Yes. My name is Rachael Daniels. I am an occupational therapist. My pronouns are she and her. I am currently in a band six occupational therapy role within a community physical health team. However, that having been said, I handed my notice in earlier this month.

#### **Hannah:**

What drew you to occupational therapy, Rachael?

#### **Rachael:**

For me, in a way, I think it was right place, right time in terms of being exposed to occupational therapy and what occupational therapy is. I was working as a rehabilitation assistant within a community falls prevention team, kind of more working alongside the physios than the occupational therapists, if I'm honest, although they were part of the team. I had been in the team a couple of months, and was pulled aside by the team manager who said, you really should consider going back to university and just getting your physio training done and out the way, to which my response wasn't overly enthusiastic. I've never really been that interested in being a physiotherapist, so the thought of going to study physio just wasn't for me. When I explained this to the team manager, she said, oh, that's interesting, maybe you should go and spend a bit more time with the occupational therapists and the rest is history, as they say.

#### **Hannah:**

So, thinking about that career journey, that river, can you kind of explain how you got to this point, the different roles and experiences you've gained along the way?

## Rachael:

You're taking me down memory lane. I can indeed.

So I, against the grain, took a gap here between my GCSEs and A levels. I had been placed into foster care just before completing my GCSEs, so I went into foster care kind of for the last time so to speak in the January of 2005, then sitting my GCSEs, kind of the May through to July time. I had always been fairly academic. I think I threw myself into education and that was just the way it was. So, yeah, I threw myself into education. Education was my way out, got my GCSEs, there were the grades that I was expecting, but just had this moment of, I don't actually know what to do next. I'd always thought, oh, education has been my way out, I must want to be a teacher, so if anyone else is in my position, I can maybe help. Quite quickly started to reconsider that. So rather than picking my A levels, and taking myself down this road I wasn't necessarily sure I wanted. I took a gap between my GCSE and A levels, went back to my A levels at that point for, no, I definitely do want to teach. I'd always had an interest in sport and PE was where I excelled. So natural progression was to be a PE teacher. Obviously at a careers event at sixth form, I was essentially told, go and do a sport science degree that will open up more doors for you, and then just add a PGCE on the end.

Not really having anyone to bounce that off of, I took the advice and went and did a sports science degree. It was okay, I didn't mind it, but there was no kind of teaching element within that. So I spent three years doing something that wasn't going to take me to where I needed to be.

I finished my undergrad degree and found myself working for a pawn breaking company. A complete kind of turn in the river again for me, I went from that to supply teaching. So essentially, working as an unqualified teacher, I started off in what was called back then a pupil referral unit, say, for children that had essentially been expelled from mainstream school and were sent to these pupil referral units. So I spent a good few months there. It was challenging, but I loved it and it was really rewarding, those small little breakthroughs and also seeing some of the kids go back into mainstream school as well because of the progression they've made. Like, yeah, I've got some really fond memories at that time.

So I left the pupil referral unit and went to work in a residential home for boys aged eight to 18. It was a private home, six beds, and essentially the boys that were there were there because they couldn't be placed anywhere else. Fostering had broken down, adoption broken down; some of the boys had had criminal charges brought against them. It was a very, very hostile environment a lot of the time, but again, incredibly rewarding. Building those relationships with the boys and seeing some of them go back to their parents, or go back and, and go back to their adoptive parents or to be readopted, so to speak, was amazing. I think, especially having been through the care system myself, it really was a nice place to be.

Unfortunately, funding became quite a bit of an issue and staffing reduced and for lots of different reasons, staying there just became unsustainable. So I then went back to the drawing board. What do I do? I have this undergraduate degree that I haven't used. What next? And I found myself working in a falls prevention team, a community falls prevention team for the NHS, as a rehab assistant. Not really where I'd ever imagined winding up, but there I was and I loved it. I loved going out and working with the patients, working with the other team members and learning it was a constant learning environment.

And that was it to me. That was my, I guess, first step onto the rung of the occupational therapy ladder.

I went into that job I started in May 2014, and I had no idea what occupational therapist was. I had never even heard of one. I remember so vividly going for my interview, and they sat me down and

said, oh, right, there's two pieces of paper on the desk, you need to label what's on there for us and we'll be back in 10 minutes and can we have your phone, please, because we don't want you to use the internet. I was like, okay. They left and my word have I never, ever been so thankful for that sport science degree? Because it was two pictures of a human body, one that had bones and one that had muscles, and they wanted it labelled. Now, bearing in mind this is for a band three role, I don't know of any other band three roles that has had something kind of this intense, I guess, but lo and behold, did it, got through it...

And there was one question in that interview where they said, okay, so you're part of the MDT meeting and the occupational therapist says... and I don't even remember the rest of it because I just remember sitting there and thinking, what on earth is an occupational therapist? How do I blag this one? Got no idea. And obviously you hear occupation and automatically, as lots of people do, you think work. But I'm like, that's not related to this job so that doesn't make sense; it doesn't correlate for it to be work related. And I just looked back at the interviewing panel and said, all cards on the table, I have no idea what you're talking about and it's something they've never let me live down. Even now, when I'm in touch with some of the people that I used to work with or someone that was on that panel, they'll say, So what is an occupational therapist? I count myself very, very lucky to have been offered that job and to be where I am today.

**Hannah:**

So thinking about your occupational therapy journey kind of as a river course and your experiences in getting to this point, can you pinpoint the source?

**Rachael:**

Then I would say it was working in the NHS and going out alongside the occupational therapists and seeing that holistic approach, rather than going in... You might pick up so and so who'd had falls and now they're struggling with bathing, for example. But what I found really interesting going out with the occupational therapist was that they didn't focus on that bathing issue. It was, okay, let's go in, let's have a conversation; how's life in general? Kind of really broadening the scope of conversation and then allowing the individual to kind of narrow things down because I'm sure, as we're all aware, what one of us may perceive to be an issue for somebody when you speak to the individual themselves, actually, that's not their primary concern. It's way down on the list of priorities. So seeing that in action and seeing the individuals being empowered, I guess, to take the lead and to take control over their journey is what inspired me to want to be able to facilitate that.

**Hannah:**

So I'm thinking about what's contributed to the flow along your kind of occupational therapy career journey as a river. What skills, experiences, opportunities have contributed along the way?

**Rachael:**

That's a really interesting question. Flow; what an interesting concept. I don't know if my journey as an occupational therapist has flowed all that well. It's definitely moving. There's some sort of undercurrent, I think. I guess on reflection, actually, it's probably the stuff I do outside of occupational therapy that has aided the flow. Okay. Having studied the postgraduate diploma, gone out on placements there. I relied a lot on my NHS experience away from studying, and I think that's also true that then having qualified and gone into the workplace, there isn't, or I haven't experienced anyway, very much in terms of kind of continuing profession development opportunities or encouragement to flow, should we say, and progress down that river. It's very much felt quite stagnant at times, which, I guess, just coming out of that period of being an early career OT, I'm

going into my fifth year of practice post-qualification. I thought I would be exposed or have access to more opportunities to kind of encourage that flow as you refer to.

**Hannah:**

So, I guess, following on from that, how has your environment enabled or restricted your career journey so far?

**Rachael:**

Yeah, I think my environment for the most part has probably restricted my journey so far. Thinking more broadly about my location, for example, I currently live and work in the Midlands. I moved here, actually part way through my postgraduate diploma in occupational therapy. I moved away from London, which was driven by my wife and opportunities for her. It made sense for her to come away from London, whereas actually, even back then, I was very conscious that moving out of London probably meant moving away from where a lot of the opportunities are. There seems to be a lot more movement within London. Here one of the things I've noticed is that people tend to stay in their roles for quite a long period of time and there's no real encouragement to move on, which makes sense from a staff retention point of view. However, whilst there's no encouragement to move on, I think that also has a knock-on effect again on the opportunities that are afforded to you. So because the job market up here isn't necessarily as pressured, I guess would be the word for it, I think certain organisations or workplaces perhaps don't need to invest as much in their staff in order to facilitate staff retention, if that makes any sense. Is that physical environment? Is that more kind of organisational values? I don't know. I guess probably somewhere in the middle.

Moving away kind of from my physical environment, my location; the people that we're surrounded by have a huge impact in the workplace, but also on a personal level as well. What's going on at home behind closed doors also has an impact on your flow, on your career. And that doesn't always get the acknowledgment it deserves. I don't think so. Yeah, I think environment has a huge impact for me for lots of reasons. I'd say it's more restrictive than enabling. Okay.

**Hannah:**

Have there been any other boulders along the way? By boulders I'm referring to challenges, I guess.

**Rachael:**

I'm currently in the process of trying to buy lots of power tools to work my way through those boulders. Having reached a bit of an impasse...

**Hannah:**

I wondered where we were going with that then....

**Rachael:**

Sorry, I apologise for the way my mind works; perhaps that in itself is a boulder at times. On a serious note, I guess sometimes I am the biggest boulder, actually. I'm somebody that is very curious, very analytical, and so every situation I go into, be that meeting a patient for the first time, a new workplace, at a team meeting, I quite often will sit back and observe and try and figure out the inner workings of what's going on. And then from that I'll make suggestions or sometimes say nothing at all because I just don't feel there's a place for me to do that. However, I think that often

gets misconstrued as me being disinterested or at the other end of the scale, feeling that my thoughts and opinions are more valid than others. Whereas actually that's not something I feel. I wouldn't say that's a trait that I associate with at all.

I think that has been impacted more since receiving a mental health diagnosis. I think that created a lot of boulders. I think the diagnosis itself was kind of the biggest boulder and that kind of river you spoke about earlier in that flow, it's like the boulder was dropped and there was no way around it. And I think now for some decisions that I've made, that boulder has been chipped away a little bit at and so that flow is starting again but where it now flows to, I don't know. Sometimes just as human beings, we can be our worst enemies in a way without trying to be that through a real lack of self confidence and being worried about disappointing people. So therefore not trying things, not suggesting that intervention because you're worried about how people are going to perceive that, because it's never been done before in that service through to sometimes having to almost put your hand up and say, actually, can we continue here? Is there any room for improvement? Or is it about now trying to manage expectations?

**Hannah:**

What helped you along the way or what would have helped you along the way with some of those challenges, other than your power tools?

**Rachael:**

I think networking has been a huge thing for me. The likes of Twitter have been amazing. I've met lots of really interesting people through Twitter. It's just a great place. It's really buzzing at times for lots of different things, be it special interests, be it connecting with like minded people. Yeah, Twitter for me has been great.

I think also, colleagues that you come along, come across along the way also can be really helpful sometimes to kind of confirm your thoughts or feelings, but also sometimes to challenge. I think it's good to be challenged. I think we need to be challenged and to avoid complacency.

And I think also more recently is the work that the Royal College are doing. I guess, in a way, the Royal College is starting to put their head above the parapet. I feel it makes things easier for us as occupational therapists and it makes it our challenges as well. When we're challenging things, it makes those challenges more valid, if that makes any sense?

**Hannah:**

Absolutely. It's really interesting to hear that perspective as well.

Has anything else helped you along the way? I'm really hearing the value of kind of community, connection, professional networking, kind of getting involved with your professional body as well. Anything else helped?

**Rachael:**

I guess the other thing in terms of what has been helpful, again, more recently, is being able to literally just be myself and not have to filter the versions of me that I allow people to see. When I was studying my cohort, there were 52 of us. I started the course and was very like, do I divulge anything about my sexual orientation? I got married the same year that I started my course. People saw a wedding ring, automatically assumed I had a husband. And from that moment, you have to make a choice of, I'm going to go with this narrative. I've got a husband and for the next two years,

Jade, my wife, will become Jake, because it's just easier that way. Or I can say, actually, no, I don't have a husband, I have a wife, and there was always a worry about how that would change people's perceptions of me and what impact that would have. I, fortunately, was very lucky with my cohort. I had no issues whatsoever. There was no homophobia that I was kind of on the receiving end of or even witnessed, which was great. However, going into my first workplace, it was the complete opposite in a lot of ways. So quite quickly, I started to regret bringing my whole self to work, and that took me quite a downward spiral. And I got lost between who I actually am at the core and who I was pretending to be and somewhere I got lost in between that, which caused issues inside of work and outside of work. And I had a real identity crisis, I guess. I decided to leave that place of work for lots of reasons, but that probably being one of the main ones. Starting a new place of work you have that same consideration again. How much of myself do I bring to the table and what are the implications of that?

As I started my new role, it wasn't long before the LGBTQIA+OTUK affinity group was founded. The BAMEOTUK affinity group had already been founded and I think those things have really helped me. And then now with AbleOT kind of existing, having received a mental health diagnosis, as well as having a long standing mental health diagnosis and seeing the narrative change within our profession from 'there are these minoritised groups and we're just going to park them over there because that's comfortable and we don't have to worry about it'. Whereas actually, now, I do genuinely believe that narrative is changing and it's that that has empowered me to challenge things more, I guess, in a professional sense.

**Hannah:**

Well, that real sense of empowerment through community. And in a sense, you've anticipated what my next question was going to be. I was going to say, do you feel you've been able to bring your authentic and best self to occupational therapy? And what I'm hearing from you is starting to be able to.

**Rachael:**

Yeah, totally.

**Hannah:**

Have there been points where your river has turned or changed course in a way that you're not anticipated?

**Rachael:**

Right now. I did not start this year thinking that I would be handing my notice in with nothing to go on to, however, that is exactly what's happened. And for the first time in a very long time, I have no idea what's coming next. And it absolutely terrifies me because I have a mortgage to pay, but at the same time, I also feel like I need to be true to myself. And as I've felt more empowered to bring my true, authentic self to the workplace and to the profession, then I need to stay true to myself as well and to my core values and my convictions and uphold those. I think part of that is the beauty of occupational therapy, though, being so diverse, you know, that there are those possibilities and opportunities out there. It's just the case of finding them.

**Hannah:**

Yes, totally.

What's been most important or helpful for you in your development and progression as an occupational therapist?

**Rachael:**

It's definitely the people you meet along the way, be that colleagues, be that people you meet for networking, but probably for me, most importantly, it's those we have the pleasure of working with. The patients, the clients, the service users, whichever term you want to use. It's those snippets, those moments where something dawns on you that you'd never considered before, but that one conversation with that one patient, a light bulb comes on and you go, that's it, that's what I've been missing and that's what I need to take forward. Yeah. Don't underestimate the power of people. And I think it's that true acceptance that as much as you can plan for things and you can do all of the research time allows, you never know what's coming next. And in order, I think, to bring our best self to the table, we have to be prepared to be unprepared. Does that make sense?

**Hannah:**

Yeah, absolutely.

What do you wish you'd known as an early career OT or prior to joining the profession? What would you say now to your early career self?

**Rachael:**

Push.

**Hannah:**

Push?

**Rachael:**

Yeah, push and push harder.

Change doesn't occur unless somebody is there asking for it. So for me, on a personal level, I wish I had started pushing sooner and then, I guess, more locally, more personally. Again, it's that pushing theme of when I've been in supervision is trying to take control of that situation and actually, rather than just allowing it to be a caseload review, is actually saying, hold on, I'd quite like some advice or input on this, or can we please discuss that? Because I feel that's what is of the utmost importance right now, especially as an early career occupational therapist, it's as though without years of experience chalked up, you cannot be in leadership roles, you cannot progress, because it's all based on time rather than life experience or anything else. And again, I think for me, it's to push back against that and say, actually, no, I don't have 20 years of experience as an occupational therapist, but I do have 33 years of life experience and the jobs that I've held before that. So why are we ruling that out?

**Hannah:**

Where's next for you, Rachael?

**Rachael:**

Would you tell me, please?

**Hannah:**

Next question, please.

**Rachael:**

Honestly, I don't know. And that's terrifying and exciting all at the same time. The one thing I do know, and I'll be honest, I question this for a while, is whether actually occupational therapy is the right profession for me. Do I belong here? But actually, one thing I'm sure of now more than ever is that this is exactly where I belong. I may not have been in the right roles or the right places just yet, but this profession is exactly where I need to be and perhaps more importantly, where I want to be.

**Hannah:**

Is there anything else that you'd like to add to anything we've discussed today?

**Rachael:**

I think getting people's stories out there and their accounts of their journey so far is really important to hear the positives and the negatives. If this reaches just one person and they think, oh, yeah, I kind of feel a bit like that, is that acknowledgment? That it's okay. It's okay not to know what's coming next.

**Hannah:**

A quick fire finish the sentence question to end with...

**Rachael:**

No pressure!

**Hannah:**

Being an occupational therapist is...

**Rachael:**

Challenging but fulfilling.

**Hannah:**

Thank you, Rachael. Good chatting to you today.

**Rachael:**

Thank you.