

Podcast transcript

Career conversations: Robert Workman

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.

Robert Workman:

So, I'm Rob Workman. I'm Deputy Head of Occupational Therapy for my organisation, Swansea Bay University Health Board in South Wales. So that's my substantive role, but I also am Chair of Calon, which is the organisation's LGBT plus Allies network, so that's kind of an additional role that I do, as well as my substantive role as an OT leader.

Hannah:

Well, great to have you here with me today for this conversation.

So the purpose of our conversation is around kind of career journeys, thinking about your occupational therapy career, your experiences and getting to this point. I've used kind of the Kawa model and the analogy of career journey as river to guide some of the questions throughout. So let's start right at the beginning. What drew you to occupational therapy? Can you, in a sense, pinpoint the source of that river? How did it all start?

Rob:

Yeah, I can. Very clearly, the start of my OT journey was in 1996, because that's when I heard about OT. I'd never heard of it at all before. I was always drawn to a career in healthcare, but really all I knew was medicine, nursing and physio. None of those careers really appealed to me for a number of reasons. So I ended up going down a completely different route. Ended up doing conservation work, doing a degree in conservation and environmentalism, and then after that degree, still wasn't happy with that decision and went travelling and ended up being exposed to a lot of different therapies as part of that and therapists and spoke to a couple of OTs and I thought, that sounds like a really, really... That sounds right up my street, that career. It's all the healthcare stuff, but it's the creativity stuff which I enjoy. It's the communication, it's really getting involved with people and it just absolutely appealed to me. And that was the start of it, really.

I did research in it and applied for some courses and yeah, it's crazy. Absolutely not knowing anything about it until I actually met an OT and who explained what he did and it was just, why is it taking me 25 years to actually hear about this? That's crazy.

Hannah:

So can you tell us a bit about that journey so far? Kind of what's contributed along the way, the skills, experiences, opportunities you've had, what your career looks like at this point?

Rob:

Yeah, so I started right at the bottom again, I'd done a degree, as I've said, and I then found out about it. So I heard that they did postgrad courses. So this is in the late 90s, so there weren't that many of them. Got an offer on one of the courses, but I'd missed the intake and they said, you've never worked in OT, go and get a job in an OT department and just come back to us in nine months time and apply, and you should tick all the boxes, but you haven't got that tick box yet. So luckily enough, at that time, my local health board was in my local hospital, was looking for an OT support worker. I got that in my interview. I was young and naive, I was a little bit obvious, and I said, my plan is I'm only going to work you for six months and then I'm going to go off and do my training and by some miracle they said, oh, we fund a part time course in Wales. If you got the job, would you consider doing that? But you'd have to commit to us to four years training two years afterwards. And I was like, well, yeah, of course I will, that sounds like an amazing opportunity. And I've been in the same health board ever since and I've had a fantastic career.

I've had opportunities that have come my way. I think the main thing about it is just saying yes to the opportunities that have come my way. They're the tributaries that have come in that I've networked. I've spoken to people, I've heard about something, I've explored it. Somebody has got to know me and they've thought of me when they've heard about a project or an opportunity and they've, in the old days, picked up the phone and tell me and then text and email each day. So I went through that, I graduated, I went on rotation as a band five back in my organisation. I quickly got a band six in an area that I loved working, which was older people's rehab and opportunities have come my way, where there was a lecturing opportunity that I took up at Cardiff University, which opened a lot of doors for me, but I was missing clinical work. So then I came back to the health board and, well, I've been here, what, 23, 24 years now, and no plans to move on. Very happy.

Hannah:

Great to hear.

How has your environment enabled or restricted that career journey? It sounds like it's enabled it in a lot of ways.

Rob:

It has more recently. Initially, as I mentioned earlier, I didn't know about OT. I didn't really know about any healthcare professions. Even though when I was a teenager, I always did work in nursing homes. I worked with people with learning disabilities in the schools I was with. They always had units for children with learning disabilities that I linked in with so I always was drawn to that, but none of my family or friends worked in healthcare. They were all teachers and engineers and very different careers. So actually, apart from medicine, healthcare wasn't seen as a viable career, really, because nobody really knew about it, nobody could direct me to what I needed to know.

So it was only for the fact from an environmental perspective, even though I wasn't being channeled down that route, I was very lucky that I come from a background where we were comfortably off. I was well educated, I had educational opportunities and social opportunities that allowed me to do a

degree in something, to then take some time off and go travelling and find myself and find what my purpose was going to be. Then to be in a position where I could go back and retrain and to do the thing that I really trained.

So I'm very aware of how fortunate I am to be in that position. I've been able to change around and swap and choose while I've been in my career. I think the environment of having people around me who I look up to, that I respect, that have seen potential in me and have really pushed me to achievements that I didn't even know I could, even on my radar, I would say that is probably the most important environmental aspect for me. It's the people around me and what they make me believe that I can do.

Hannah:

What role of supervision had in that for you?

Rob:

Supervision has been absolutely essential in that for those reasons and I'm very lucky in my organisation and my service, where even when I started my career in 1999, I had monthly supervision with my line manager and there were appraisals and that is something that isn't just a tick box exercise it was a protected time where we would sit and have a coffee, go for a walk, whatever it was. And sometimes it was discussing personal issues, sometimes it was discussing development issues, sometimes it was just discussing more day-to-day clinical issues, however that developed and whatever came up. But having that time with somebody I respected throughout my career, who took the time to get to know me, got to know what was bothering me, got to know what my aspirations were, would work with me on finding ways to actually achieve things.

And sometimes just sitting there and being an open ear for me to rant and rave about something that is doing my head in or just pushing my buttons, which is natural for all of us, which I think we feel guilty about. In a workplace environment, particularly in healthcare, we are allowed to get angry are allowed to get upset and annoyed at what's going on around us. And it's important to have a safe space and a safe person to be able to vent that and then have some productive conversation about it. And I've been absolutely fortunate that the supervisors in the most part that I've had throughout my career have been role models. They've always been people that I've aspired to be as good as them as what they do. I've learned a lot. From some I've learned how not to do things, some have been very good and I've learned, yeah, that's a really good way, but it's not the way that I work. So what you're aiming for is great, but I wouldn't actually go around it in that way because that's not the way my mind works and that's not the way my personality would deal with it from that perspective, and particularly that formal recording, which I think is something that people kind of think it's an add on for supervision. You have the discussion and that's it. It is that formal recording of actions; it's that accountability for my supervisor or for the people that I'm now supervising, it's not their account... It's my accountability in a position of authority to actually do what I've said I'm going to do and not just say, yeah, that's great, and be a little bit wishy washy about it. If there's something that I can do that needs to be recorded, it needs to be agreed. And then I need to come back the next time and say, yes, I've acted on it and I'm held to account just as they are held to account, because it's a very supervision shouldn't be hierarchical. You're there as a unit, as a team, and it should be very open. Yes, there is a power balance there, of course, unless it's peer supervision, but absolutely there's a responsibility of everyone involved in that supervision to do what they say they're going to do.

Hannah:

Absolutely.

Rob:

I think in my career I've only ever had one supervisor that I didn't have that relationship with and it was a tick box exercise for that short period where we got on personally, but they didn't challenge me and then I wasn't performing the way that they wanted because I wasn't clear about what was expected of me. So I've been through that situation where even with somebody that you get on with personally, that relationship supervisor, supervisor doesn't work for whatever reason and it needs to be explored...

Hannah:

Like a shared understanding?

Rob:

Yeah, shared understanding and talk to, well, you're not challenging me enough, give me things to do, or if I'm not performing, tell me why I'm not performing, not just that I'm not performing. So yeah, there's an openness and transparency and an honesty that has to come with supervision.

Hannah:

What about, kind of building on that, about boulders along the way, what about challenges in your career journey?

Rob:

It's a really challenging question to answer, actually, because I'm a positive mindset and whenever there's a challenge, I find some way of twisting it, spinning it, so it becomes an opportunity. I know that sounds a bit trite and it doesn't always work, obviously, but it's a matter of making the best of it, really, is what I'm saying. Yeah, I suppose work has been fantastic for me because when there have been boulders in my challenges in my personal life, I've really focused on work as a way of distracting myself from it or finding feelings of self-worth and really building my confidence and my self esteem through work. That's something I know I'm good at. Whereas sometimes in your personal life there are things that you're not in control of and it can have an impact, obviously.

I suppose the other ones. There's been times when I've missed opportunities where I feel that maybe earlier on in my career I was overlooked or I felt I was being taken advantage of because I was really keen to do things and I was happy to say yes to things. That maybe people were coming to me because they knew I'd say yes to taking something on and not really giving me the credit that I deserved for it. But again, that's a perspective issue and when I look back on it now and I think and now that I'm in a position of most seniority and authority myself and I can see the challenge that those people had because I didn't understand what their role was and what challenges they were undergoing. So when I was thinking I was being overlooked or something, actually there were another ten people in the service who had exactly the same skills as I did, needed the same opportunities as me, but I didn't know them and I didn't know that they were in the same position as me. So I was just internalising it all and thinking I've been overlooked for that and dealing with that 'I'm not good enough' when it's not that you're not good enough, but there are lots of good people

outthere and everybody deserves an opportunity and sometimes you get the opportunity and sometimes you don't and that's only fair as well sometimes.

Reflection, I think is one of the best tools for development and I know it's a big thing in healthcare in general, but I think as OTs, I don't think anybody, any profession talks about personal reflection as much as we OTs do, to be honest with you. And I don't think that... I think there are lots of people this is my own personal perspective there are lots of people that go into OT, are drawn to it because they are quite reflective people. So I think there's a skill set there for many of us that we've got already and then it's potentially putting it into some kind of format and following some kind of model. But absolutely what I've learned about reflection and mindfulness, particularly through work, is useful, but absolutely useful across my whole life and in my personal life and I've learned how to deal with situations because of the skills I've learned as an OT.

And it is that self-reflection perspective, actually thinking about trying to understand what the other person is going through and why did they act like that, why have I been overlooked for that opportunity? Why did that person behave in that way towards me or behave in that way towards somebody else? And it's very easy to get very judgmental about it, but reflection helps with that. And reflection can if you do it... I'm not saying do it properly because everyone does it in a different way and there's no right way or wrong way, but I mean do it effectively. Sitting down and spending a minute thinking about something may work.

But if there are deeper things there, you really need to take that time out. And whether it is just sitting with a cuppa, or going out, taking yourself out of the office, or wherever you're working... I mean, I'm lucky, where I work, it's five minutes from the beach, so sometimes it's great. You can just say, I just need to clean my head and you can go for a walk and grab a cuppa at the lunchtime where you're not surrounded by the usual things in my office and the phone. And that really, really helps, taking that time out works. But in the work time sometimes because you need it, you can't leave it all until 05:00 and then deal with it. Sometimes you need to take a snippet of your day just to ground yourself and reflect and move on for the rest of your day in an effective way. That was a longer answer than I'm sure you were expecting.

Hannah:

It was a brilliant answer as well and I heard in your answer how that kind of synthesis of you as a person and you as a therapist like they're inseparable, aren't they?

Rob:

Absolutely.

Hannah:

And that leads me on to kind of do you feel that you've been able to be or to bring your authentic and best self to OT?

Rob:

I do absolutely feel that. It's been a journey. I mean, I identify as a gay man and I was out on my first day of work, I'd been out for years and years before that. I wasn't going to go back into the closet in work. I knew there were protections in health care that if somebody had an issue with it, there would be things I could do about it and I thought, no, I'm not going to do that pussy footing around and it'll

come up naturally. If somebody asks me about my personal life, I'll mention partners, I'll mention boyfriends, whatever it is and because of that, I think I've never really felt any discrimination from that perspective and that's really helped.

I'm aware that being my authentic self in work is not just about me being able to feel safe and be gay because there is so much more to me than that but yes, I feel that I have been able to be my authentic self like any of us. We monitor it sometimes when I be earlier on in my career, when I was more clinical, I may not have been quite so open with some of the patients because of the work we were doing. I was building up a relationship. I didn't want to put barriers in the way with certain things about my life, but I would make a judgement on that and I would think about it and I would again, in supervision, I would speak to my supervisors about the decision making around that and me making assumptions about how people would react to me. But I suppose I've been, again, very fortunate to be my authentic self in that respect. But also with the supervisors, I've had I've always felt safe to be able to give an opinion, give a challenge, to give support to people and things that I believe in.

And particularly now, I'm in a position where I'm able to really do something about that. I've been involved in the LGBT plus network for six or seven years now, and more recently, I'm chair of that. I'm very active and we link into a lot of networking. It's February now, so it's LGBT history month. There's been a lot of LGBT events in the local community. We ring them up and say, 'have stall, will travel. Can you give us a table?' and we'll set up our stall. We want to be there when people are coming in. We want them to know that we're here and what we do, and we get great support. And we've been at lots of different events locally where we've just been able to talk to people in the community about that.

But I suppose even from that perspective, even though it's an LGBT+ network, the message that we give is always, we're focusing on the LGBT+ community but that's not what this is about. This is about supporting, understanding people, being non-judgmental, allowing people to be their authentic selves, acknowledging that people have got challenges and maybe facing discrimination for a number of ways. I mean, poverty discrimination at the moment is absolutely rife and judgments about that. It's not just about being having a protected characteristic. There's so many more challenges that people are dealing with. And as part of our work, we try and expand that and we try and make people think what we've said to you about the LGBT community can apply to anybody, so just think, be kind and be thoughtful. I say it's as simple as that. It's not as simple as that, because if it was as simple as that, we'd all be doing it all the time.

Hannah:

But it's also about that intersectionality, isn't it? And the complexity of human experience and our intertwining identities as well.

Rob:

Absolutely.

Hannah:

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

Rob:

Well, finding OT in the first place was a fantastic one. And then, as I mentioned, being offered the part time course because I'd been travelling abroad and I'd looked in is where I had come across OT and I'd looked into studying abroad, and that's what I wanted to do. So my plan was going to come back, I was going to do the two year postgrad course and then get on a plane and go somewhere and be an OT all over the world. And of course it didn't happen because that was like four or five years and then by that time I'd bought a house and I was settled back in the village I grew up in, which after I'd been away for ten years, I realised it's actually one of the most wonderful places in the world. And I absolutely am still there now. I absolutely love it from that perspective, but I suppose from a career perspective, I kind of had a plan that I was going to go through. I knew what area I wanted to work in and I did. I knew that I wanted to try lecturing, and I did. I knew that I wanted to be a really good clinician and I hope I achieved that.

I never, ever in my whole plan envisaged that I would go into management and leadership. It wasn't something that I thought I would enjoy, it wasn't something at all that I thought I'd move away from, because you kept hearing about, oh, as soon as you moved away into that, you move away from patient care and you lose touch with why you went into the profession and it's just, again, opportunities have arisen. And I thought, oh, well, I throw my hat in the ring. And then I got my first leadership job and then the next one came up and I thought, oh, I'll throw my hat into the ring, another craic, and then I got that job.

So I am in the senior leadership position and absolutely everything, which is what I never thought of. So that's been a massive turn in the river of my career, but absolutely everything that I had heard about leadership has turned out to be wrong. I never once feel that because I'm a manager, I'm not an OT. In fact, quite the opposite, because now I am interacting with lots of other professionals, lots of other people who have never gone through a clinical route because it's corporate and it's business finance, all that kind of stuff. But I still always feel that I'm addressing things from an OT and I'm using my OT skills of negotiation, of problem solving, of actually doing that environmental assessment, which may not be physically, but I'm still kind of looking at issues and thinking, what what are going to be the trip hazards in that business case? You know, what are the things that could make that thing fall down and what can we do about it?

I'm still feeling I'm having a massive impact on patients, because when you're a clinician or when you start your career, you don't realise, you see managers are sitting in a desk and you don't really know what they do. And then when you're in that position, you absolutely realise that it's the managers and the leaders that are advocating that are getting the money to be able to pay for services, that are advocating for space, to allow you to do clinicians, to do their work, advocating business cases to get more staffing in, to develop services. There is so much I feel, as I'm sat at a desk on teams meetings all day, that I am impacting, I'm doing OT and I'm impacting on clinical practice, that I don't regret it at all. Everything I was worried about being a leader and a manager was false. I'm still an OT.

Hannah:

For sure. And I guess, what has been most helpful or important for you in your development and progression as an occupational therapist? Keeping an open mind?

Rob:

Keeping an open mind, absolutely. Again. I think the most important thing and they're very interlinked, I think the most important thing for me and I mentioned it before, it's the colleagues that

I've worked with. They have been people that I've and I'm not just talking about where I mentioned before, having supervisors who are respected and are role models. It's people at all levels that inspire me and that work well with me and people that it's great when my supervisors tell me I'm doing a great job, but when people that I am supervising say to me, thank you for that. You did a really good job. They were really pleased with that. That means an awful lot. So it's the people that I've been with and how they have enabled me to be my authentic best self, given me the confidence and the support to challenge myself. I will take some of the credit for myself that I will challenge. I am proactive, I will look, identify what I want to do and look at ways that I can do it and try my best to make it happen. But I could never do that on my own without all those people around me giving me the belief in myself that I could do that and giving me the resources to allow me to do that, then none of it would have happened. It's the people around me that absolutely I that have role modelled good practice and that have, yeah, allowed me to to be what I hope is the best that I can be, really.

Hannah:

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

Rob:

I think what I wish I'd known at the start of my career I mean, we are in a very different place now, professionally, than we were 25 years ago. And I understand that. But it would be that OT is not the poor relation in healthcare, that as a profession we are very impactful and very insightful and bring a skill set that no other part of the MDT will bring. And whether it's a physical skill set or a knowledge base or a way of a perspective and that yeah, that we are a strong profession and that we deserve a place at the table and we deserve to be there and we've got a lot to offer. And that's not the message about OT. I mean, I didn't know about it 30 years ago. I didn't know what OT was, I'd never heard of OT. So understandably, it was a career in those days that wasn't very visible. But when I look back at how far the career, how far the profession has come in just the last 20 years, it's absolutely mind blowing. Absolutely mind blowing.

And I suppose the message as well would be that we shouldn't apologise for demanding things. That if people want our services, there's a cost that comes with it, and that's a cost of money, that's a cost of resource, that's a cost of respect, that's a cost of time. And as OTs, again I'm generalising, I don't think we're very good at blowing our own trumpet. We're very grateful for what we're offered but in many cases, and I think that actually we're worth more than that. And we need yeah, it's that it's that if you want us, then you need to invest in us. If you want us and everything that we can bring, respect that and give us what we need to be able to do that, because unless you do, we're not going to be grateful for scraps from the table. You need to invest in us and you will have a great service We will have an impact, but we can't do that if we don't have the resources available to us. I mean, it's like with every profession I know, but I think OT particularly is one that has been very slowly and gradually, which is great, just expanding our reach and expanding our influence and expanding our voice. And it's fantastic to see. It's really exciting, really is.

Hannah:

Where next for you, Rob?

Rob:

Do you know what? I am so happy where I am at the moment. It's ongoing, it's never resting on my

laurels and that's not the way healthcare works. There's always service development, there's always people development, there's always different things. There's expanding work with Calon, there's so much work to do, which I would just think is part of my everyday, my everyday now, you know what I mean? It's part and parcel that there's always work to do and there's always developments. We can always be different, do more, be better. Really.

The only thing that is on the horizon for me that I can think of. I'd love to do a PhD in an OT related subject, but that's not something realistically... When I do that, I want to enjoy it and I want to focus on it. I did my OT degree part time when I was working. I did my master's part time when I was working. I don't want to do that with a PhD. I really want to enjoy the experience of learning. So realistically I think that's going to be a post-retirement challenge so I've got quite a few years to go until I get to that point but yeah, no real career goals at the moment apart from keep on doing what I'm doing, enjoying the journey. Enjoying the journey and expand... And there's a lot of developments in my service at the moment, where we're put... where we're developing OT in areas where we haven't been before. And like I mentioned before, I'm absolutely excited about what is happening in OT and where we can be. And I want to play a part in facilitating that in my area so that people in my community can benefit from everything we've got to offer. Really it's important to me. I grew up in this where I'm working, I grew up in this area, moved away through my twenties and then settled back and it's really, really important for me that it's my community that my services are serving and they are providing support to people in the community, so there's a personal investment in it as well.

Hannah:

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

Rob:

Yeah, I suppose. I mean, I touched on it earlier, I'm reflecting on this. My life hasn't been without challenges like everybody else's, but I've had some fantastic opportunities in my life as well as my career, and I do take credit for a lot of that. And I'm proud that I've made things happen for myself, acknowledging as I have the support I've had to enable that to happen. But I suppose, particularly it would be really wrong of me not to recognise the privilege that I've had for this. Yes, I'm gay, but I'm white, I'm a man, I come from a comfortable social background where I had the opportunity to be well educated, and that has given me a confidence and an ability, a set of skills and experiences that enable me to achieve things. And I haven't had potentially as many boulders in my river that lots of other people I haven't had to do that negotiation for. Many things I haven't had to consider does my face fit? Am I speaking in the right way? Is this going to be interpreted in a way that is going to be negative? Do I have to actually work twice as hard to show my worth because of where I come from and what I am? I have been privileged that there's a lot of it that's been taken for granted, that you will succeed, you will do things, you will have opportunities, and it's expected that you do the best you can with them.

So again, I don't want to put it in a position that it's all been really easy and I haven't had to work for anything because I work incredibly hard for where I am and what I've got... But it's an acknowledgment that I think needs to be said. People struggle. They have a lot more challenges than I've had in my life. And I hope that I can do something about that, whether it's with Calon and supporting people who are LGBT+ or providing a bit of support or giving a bit of an awareness, providing some kind of acknowledgment that people are going through different things and have different challenges, and we have to respect that.

Hannah:

And I think even verbalising that, just like you just have and acknowledging it, that prompts people to reflect on their own experiences and privilege as well. So I think that's powerful in itself.

Rob:

Thank you.

Hannah:

Quick fire finish the sentence question to finish with. Being an occupational therapist is...

Rob:

It's what I am? It's not what I do. It's my job. But, yeah, that's it, I suppose. Quick fire answer. Being an occupational therapist is what I am, it's not what I do.

Hannah:

Thank you for talking to me today, it was really good conversation.

Rob:

Yeah, thank you. Thank you for asking. It's been it's been a good conversation.