Workplace Counseling in Hong Kong: A Pilot Study

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The present research aims to explore perception of Hong Kong employees towards workplace counseling and workplace counselors. This preliminary exploration adopted a qualitative approach. Two individual face-to-face and semi-structured interviews were conducted, and thematic analysis was used for data analysis. The interviewees showed very little knowledge about workplace counseling, but had concerned about confidentiality and workplace counselors' independency and neutrality. Furthermore, they preferred workplace counselors to be well familiar with internal operations, business management and organizational culture. This study suggests that workplace counseling at a strategic level may play a pioneer role for developing caring organizational culture. Further, it spells out the interaction of workplace counseling and healthy workplace. The discussion may enrich public awareness about how counseling at work can help both staff and organizational development to cope with workplace challenges and life difficulties. The study also discussed on workplace counseling and work-life-balance that may contribute to not only healthy workplace but also a healthy society.

Sudden Public Attention to Workplace Counseling

In May 2010, the shocking news of continual suicidal tragedies happened in the plants of Foxconn in southern China (Chang, 2010; Yawney, 2010), the largest contract electronic manufacturer in the world. In these tragedies, more than twelve workers had committed suicide within six months (Xie, 2010; Zhang, 2010). The Company was blamed for its rigid and rude management style and tough working environment (Ramzy, 2010; Watts, 2010; Xie, 2010); in short, a psychological blood and sweat factory. Facing severe criticism from the public, the Company seemed to be forced to a joint committee with various local governmental agencies (Hille, 2010; Xie, 2010; Xinhua, 2010b) together with a psychiatrist from Taiwan, and formed an investigating team to examine the causes of the suicides.

Promptly responded to the problems and the public attention, the Company has been improving the tangible system such as a sharp pay rise (Associated Press, 2010; BBC News, 2010; PersonnelToday, 2010; Zhang, 2010). Moreover, it has immediately gone further to adopt more caring practices such as mutual

support groups reporting potential crises or possible suicidal cases, help desk hotline and a new in-house employee counseling center (Xie, 2010). It then has urgently offered psychological training to a hundred medical staff to observe emotional instability of the workers. It has also planned to establish a professional service team comprising a thousand of psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, psychotherapists and counselors (Benitez, & Yuandagencies, 2010; Bushell-Embling, 2010; Xinhua, 2010a). It has tried and started to cultivate humiliating culture. This organizational cultural change involves different aspects of counseling and has stimulated the public curiosity to workplace counseling.

Workplace counseling, as a functional role, could help organizational development from a more humanistic perspective rather than solely from a management view (Cheng, 2010). That is, workplace counseling might have potential contribution to the business growth. Despite of the matter that the awareness of caring and staff support has been increasing, there is little elaboration on the needs and functions of workplace counseling in Hong Kong. Seemingly, research on workplace counseling in Hong Kong has received limited scholarly attention even though the topic is well-addressed in other developed countries. The present project observed the significance of this subject, and explored the embryonic proposition in Hong Kong which it is still an orphan in local organizational phenomenon. The objective of this research, therefore, in order to provide a starting platform, serves the purpose to study workplace counseling in Hong Kong. It thus intends to explore how the local employees perceive workplace counseling, and to better understand their expectations from workplace counselors.

A Call for Workplace Counseling

Work and Workplace

Work is a prominent occupancy in individuals' life. The concept of work composes of economic, societal and psychological contexts of an individual. Work is not just a single concept relevant to an individual, but is a collective issue related to a cluster of stakeholders generating dynamics and expected outputs (Cheng, 2010).

A workplace broadly refers not only to a physical setting, but more importantly a network of relationships and interaction among staff, organization, jobs, systems, inter-relationship and intra-relationship (Cheng, 2010). The understanding of workplace counseling is different from various schools. Social Darwinism focuses on the law of fittest surviving (Coles, 2003). Taylorism pays attention to money-driven motivation (Coles, 2003). The theory of social betterment, as a kind of welfarism, aims at retaining workforce by providing staff welfare but reducing influence of unions (Coles, 2003). The Hawthorne studies crucially prove that group pressure is a force to enhance staff performance under evaluated standards (Coles, 2003). It is observed that the attention of these theorists inclines to the functionality of human beings while humanistic concerns seem not to be worth as much as deserved.

In Hong Kong, many studies have reported that working more than one-

fifth of the international average weekly working hours is not rare (Public Opinion Programme [POP], 2006, 2009, & 2010), especially for the professional employees (Continuing Professional Development Alliance [CPDA], 2009), due to heavy workload. One of the destructive impacts of long working hours is stress (MacDonald, 2003). The stress level is even worse in dual-career families (Sekaran, 1985) where the mode of dual-career family is popular in domestic market. Another negative effect is a sharp reduction of family time (Family Wellness Centre [FWC], 2010) that fatally affects family cohesion (Siu & Philips, 2006). Less family cohesion will lead to family dysfunction. The dysfunction is detrimental to spousal relationship and parent-child interaction (Barling, 1995).

Academia has drawn much attention to balance between work and private life, for example, Apgar (1998). The public has discussed remedies such as flexible working arrangement (Economic Opportunities Committee [EOC], n.d.; Siu & Philips, 2006) as a cushion lowering tension (Campbell & Charlesworth, 2005). The Hong Kong Government has made efforts in educating work-life balance (HKG, 2009). However, counseling for personal or family crises plays a significant role for work-life concerns (Toomer, 1982) but is very little provided locally. With reference to foreign experience, some organizations offer Employee Assistance Program, for instance, Urban Group (Labor Department, 2009). However, such provision is very limited in domestic workplace.

Counseling, Workplace Counseling and Workplace Counselor

Counseling is primarily, in accordance with British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (2006), to 'explore a difficulty the client is having, distress they may be experiencing or perhaps their dissatisfaction with life, or loss of a sense of direction and purpose.' It deals with fundamental impasses of human functioning (Orlans, 1989) resulting from in-depth understanding of the authentic self (Coles, 2003) and basic restructuring of personality (Orlans, 1989). Since workplace is a significant domain of a person's world, the inner world of a person and family life may be reflected by work relationship and vice versa (Walker & Jacobs, 2003). Thus, employees' private incidents will naturally but covertly affect organizational effectiveness. The cases in Foxconn presented the disastrous outcomes of negligence of workers' distress incurred by either personal or work troubles or both. Counseling looks after this area.

Workplace counseling is a sub-stream in counseling professions and works for employees' mental health. Its development is roughly conceived into three stages (Pickard, 1997). The initial stage is counseling in organizations applying counseling to organizational settings. The second stage is counseling for organizations blending organizational needs with counseling services where Employee Assistance Program is commonly employed. The latest stage is organizational counseling. The development of workplace counseling indicates a swift of management philosophy towards employee care. Workplace counseling, therefore, represents a partnership relationship with organizational management which conforms to 'micro-climate facilitating enhanced management' (Hill, 2000, p.16). A point to be noted is that different organizational management may have different management philosophy whilst different organizational philosophy will

be decisive on its acceptance level of workplace counseling adopted.

Carroll (1996) has addressed that the objective of workplace counseling aims at facilitating individual autonomy and encouraging self-care. Significance of counseling at work consists of: first, workplace counseling is likely to help employees attain pleasure and maturity in their working lives (Coles, 2003). It also helps assist employees in understanding their problems at work and enables them to better understand their own selves (Coles, 2003). Second, its underlying dynamic is that employees' self-understanding associates with their work performance and workplace interaction (Carroll, 1996). It implies that physical and mental healthy workforce will vitally be internal resources to cope with the cyber-speed changing business environment (Carroll, 1996). This restates the importance of counseling at contemporary workplace.

Franklin (2003) has clearly delineated that employees will consciously or unconsciously stipulate a 'psychological contract.' Employees will expect 'psychological equilibrium' (Franklin, 2003, p.18) such as equitable remuneration, adequate contents of work matching their capacities (Bevan, Kattley, & Patch, 1997). Highlighting their demands, workplace counseling has facilitated staff to explore major work dilemmas, and to help employees to be developed as humans (Coles, 2003). As a result, counseling for individuals has exhibited potential benefits such as increased job and life satisfaction, improved mental well-being led by their upgraded capability and interpersonal relations (Highley-Marchington & Cooper, 1997).

Research done by John McLeod has encouragingly displayed the benefits of workplace counseling for organizations such as reducing stress, sickness, absence but increasing job commitment and satisfaction (Coles, 2003). Other scholars, for example, Highley-Marchington and Cooper have added more positive messages such as lowering turnover rate, accidents and formal grievances but rising staff morale and job performance generated by improvement of interpersonal relations (Carroll & Walton, 1997). Whereas counseling at work has shifted to a more problem-focused means (Orlans, 1989) with limited number of sessions (Walker & Jacobs, 2003). In short, honoring the values of employees as an organizational asset is not only one of employers' responsibilities, but also corporate social responsibility beneficial to the relief from risks and legal claims through counseling as a kind of welfare (Carroll, 1996).

It is agreed that advantages of workplace counseling contribute to both employers and employees. The next discussion is the source of provision. The existing ways include internal source, external source and combination (Tehrani, 1994). The internal source model advocates that organizations hire counselors. Internal counselors will be familiar with the organizational culture. Communication with staff will be more effective. However, staff may not be willing to have open talk to some extent. Many counseling cases are related to poor management (Nixon & Carroll, 1994). They may worry about the confidentiality and negative consequences. This uncomfortable feeling may not appear in the external source model. Outsourcing counseling service may be a solution. Staff may feel more secure when talking with external counselors. The drawback apparently is that external counselors are not easy to capture the organizational characteristics, especially for the latent agenda. It may consume more time and effort to

explore presenting problems. The combined model may become a compromise. The internal counselor seeks potential service users and refers them to external counselors. This model makes comfort to the staff and acquires internal support of the organizations. The challenges will be a higher cost incurred with less direct organizational experience of the working counselors. Claringbull (2006), therefore, brings up a 'counselor-centered model' (p.20), which flexibly provides tailor-made design to individual organizations to establish counseling services catering for specific organizational features and needs. It is reminded that every model pays attention to the interactive participants—employer, employee and counselor.

Tackling with a demanding complex of jobs, workplace counselors are multi-identity containing counselor, affective educator, trainer, consultant, informants, advice-givers (Carroll, 1995; Claringbull, 2006, Clarkson; 1990). They sometimes deal with personal issues and 'organizationally-induced upheaval or distressing disruption' (Clarkson, 1990, p.6) to improve the 'sociotechnical design quality of the work system' (Hill, 2000, p.18). Their professionalism and expertise have to prove their competences. Hence, Sanders (1990) has assertively advised to hire only those with formal and proper training.

Even though workplace counselors are respected because of their capabilities, successful implementation of workplace counseling will critically depend on sincere cooperation of internal organizational resources from various infrastructures such as the top management, human resources practitioners, and employee representatives. Discussed a macro-level, counseling at work has been one of highly recommended provisions in family-work life balance (Public Opinion Programme, 2006). It furnishes staff with opportunities to work in a more satisfying and resourceful way (Franklin, 2003), and then lessens frictions between work and family interests. Thus, workplace counselors, as a catalyst, have played a leading role in developing caring culture. In a broad sense, workplace counseling deals with personal problems. It also works for 'issues directly negatively influence work' (Carroll, 1996, p.48) in a narrow sense. In a nutshell, it facilitates plausible personal disturbances by work and work-related tasks (Carroll, 1996).

Workplace Counseling in Hong Kong

Workplace counseling has become a specialty in counseling arena induced by a complicated environment. Although continual studies enrich knowledge about workplace counseling, there appears gaps and room for modification in terms of conceptual and practical spheres. First, its direction migrating from counseling in organizations to organizational counseling has shown the focus on the organizational needs. This move seems to still keep the unsolved fear of using internal counselor. Whether this barricade will happen in Hong Kong organizations is misty. Exploring it is beneficial to promote counseling at work for local interests.

Second, provision of workplace counseling is not common in Hong Kong, especially for in-house counselors (Ho, Tsui, Chu, & Chan, 2003). The in-house counseling service named Oasis – Centre for Personal Growth and Crisis Intervention and operated by the Hospital Authority of Hong Kong is one of the impressive exceptions. With limited experience and previous research of workplace

counseling in Hong Kong, this paper will also explore possible views about the development of workplace counseling in this millennium in a domestic context.

Third, the crossroads of developing workplace counseling may be assumed that this profession is keeping a distance from the nucleus of the management, and looks floating around the power center of corporation but not in. It is observed that workplace counseling works close with the management but is still working at operational level. It will be in the insufficiency of charismatic persuasion to work with staff and organization if it does not enter the strategic camp of organization. The query is how a workplace counselor becomes a business partner and to grow hand-in-hand with the company and the staff. The present project is finding ways to respond these concerns.

Final, workplace counselors, even though multi-functional, may have barriers to demonstrate differentiation from non-workplace counselors unless they show their distinctive attributes. The questions about what their particular attributes are and how they serve differently in organizations will be the interests of this research.

Research Methodology

Method

The present study employed the qualitative approach for the following three reasons. Firstly, the literature review has shown that little known about workplace counseling in Hong Kong. Qualitative inquiry fits for the phenomenon that is not sufficiently understood (Patton, 2002). Secondly, learning directly from the participants what they thought about workplace counseling and quality of workplace counselors was one of the primary concerns of this project; and collecting qualitative data by 'going into the field' and 'direct and with personal contact' (Patton, 2002, p.48) would give a better and fuller picture of the issue. Thirdly, since the existing literature on local workplace counseling was extremely limited, it is adequate to adopt qualitative methods as an exploratory study, especially for a pilot study, to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon through direct interviews.

This study used thematic analysis for data analysis. Its purpose was not for theory-generating but perception-seeking followed by fact-describing on multi-relation (Forest & Meunier, 2005). Nevertheless, it tactically was based on the working process of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In light of discreet steps and procedure without prior assumptions or presuppositions, the study planned to understand the research subject and conduct an applied research in this particular context.

Research Design and Procedures

Sampling. This research was conducted in Hong Kong. Although Hong Kong is an international city where workforce comes from various countries and regions, the study recruited purposeful sampling and participants came from local employees as they are the major portion of domestic workforce. The participants were selected based on the following criteria: first, they had to be local

permanent residents employed with an organization to ensure that they were familiar with the Hong Kong society but not only workplace environment; second, they had to have at least ten years of work experience who possibly tried different levels of career ladder; third, they were over thirty years old who might experience more work and personal difficulties; fourth, they have knowledge about counseling. The researcher received six referrals for initial screening. Two of them were successfully invited.

Data Collection. The current research was conducted by qualitative interviews. All preparation and procedures aligned with ethical requirements. Informed consents were presented and details were explained before interviewing. The individual face-to-face interviews were in Cantonese, took about eighty minutes each, and were conducted by one investigator. The inquiry was in a semi-structured fashion for purposive and qualitative data collection. The sequence of questionnaire constituted three parts: the first was closed questions for basic demographic data; the second was also closed questions about organization information; and the third was the core area comprising opened questions about working counseling. Guiding questions used during interviews were flexible-oriented. Deeper exploration depended on the responses of the informants. Since workplace counseling in Hong Kong was insufficiently known, the questionnaire was designed with clear and simple language.

Data Analysis. The rich but fluid data (Richards, 2009) were analyzed in a within-case level and categorized thematic description (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003) which learned from the data (Richards, 2009). The unit of analysis was an individual. Each interview was recorded in Cantonese. Verbatim was transcribed in formal written Chinese. Several rounds of proofreading were needed to ensure the accuracy of translation from Cantonese, a dialect, into written Chinese. Coding then started to identify the key data with names or labels. The coding process with repeated reading discovered relevant themes as many as possible for grouping to form concepts. Categories would be built to put the concepts under meaningful groups so that the data would be interpreted structurally. During the interviews, the interviewer frequently re-confirmed correct understanding with the interviewees for member checking through questioning techniques. In order to minimize prejudice and enhance the reliability, coding was also cross-checked by a third party. The triangulation (Guion, 2002), to enhance the validity, strengthened the vigor.

Findings

Participant A was a female, middle-aged manageress serving in an American company. She was married without children and living with her husband. She was studying counseling in a university. Participant B was a female, middle-aged professional serving in a local government-funded organization. She was single and living with her parents. She was currently studying counseling.

The findings showed three categories in current stress, use of workplace counseling, and perception and expectation from workplace counseling and workplace counselor (refer to table 1).

Table 1

SUMMARY OF CATEGORIES AND THEMES

CATEGORY	THEME
Current stress	• Personal life • Work stress
Use of workplace counseling	• Current ways to coping with stress for personal life • Current ways to coping with stress for work • Availability of workplace counseling • Experience in using counseling • Knowledge of workplace counseling • Attitude towards workplace counseling
Perception and expectation from workplace counseling and workplace counselor	• Concerns on workplace counseling • Roles and functions of workplace counselors • Qualifications of workplace counselors • Sources of workplace counseling provided

Current Stress

Personal Life. Participant A, in general, felt satisfied with her private life. However, taking care of the seniors including her parents and parents-in-law would be stressful when they had health problems. She would be upset when she had less time to visit them because of busy work schedules. Participant B usually felt peaceful but sometimes she had conflicts with her siblings.

Work Stress. Participant A frankly admitted, "My work life is unhappy." She had problems with her boss, and was stressed with heavy workload. She worked overtime more than one hour every day without compensations. Sometimes, she worked on weekends. Participant B had work stress for long working hours. Her overtime work was over one hour everyday with no extra pay. She also frequently worked on Saturdays at home.

Use of Workplace Counseling.

Current Ways to Coping with Stress for Personal Life. Participant A responded, "I would ask help from friends," when she had problems. This was an important way for her catharsis. Talking with friends was also a coping method of Participant B while "My [religious] faith helps," she added. She found that self-support with different channels was effective.

Current Ways to Coping with Stress for Work. Apart from talking with her husband and friends to release uncomfortable emotion, Participant A also chose: "I'll go to gym and do exercise. Sometimes, I'll go shopping." She had different ways to release negative emotion from work. Participant B limited to talk with friends. Her hesitation in looking for internal source was the gap reporting "Talking with HR (human resources) may be a way. But I never do it. I was told that it will produce negative consequences." Her distrustful relationship with internal source presented.

Availability of Workplace Counseling. There was no counseling service or employee assistance program offered in the companies of both Participant A and B.

Experience in Using Counseling. Participant A did not try counseling when she

had emotional disturbances. Participant B reported, "I have not tried but may consider it," but she expressed the possibility of seeking private counseling practice when necessary.

Knowledge of Workplace Counseling. Although both participants received counseling training, Participant A never heard about counseling at work before and Participant B had no ideas about it.

Attitude towards Workplace Counseling. Participant A hesitated, "I may try. If it helps, I may continue [to use it]," if "She or he may listen to me, understand me. I may feel comfortable," or "It may be a way to release my emotion." Moreover, she expected, "If they know well about the company, they may give me advice. It may give me insight to solve my [work] problems." A lot of uncertain responses appeared. Participant B might try it if provided. She did not show much interest in this hypothetic discussion.

Perception and Expectation from Workplace Counseling and Workplace Counselor

Concerns on Workplace Counseling. Participant A preferred, "I will do only business [but not private issues] in the company." In addition, she had reservations on professionalism, capability, privacy, and confidentiality, such as "I will worry about her or his role… the privacy. I am not sure if she or he will report to my boss." Participant B particularly emphasized on confidentiality, professionalism, and professional ethics. She had more doubtfulness than Participant A, "I do not know if she or he is professional, independent and trustworthy… How can she or he handle confidentiality? What is her or his role? Is she or he totally independent?"

Roles and Functions of Workplace Counselor. Participant A expected neutrality, fairness, and openness of workplace counselors. She anticipated the counselor could be a bridge that "She or he may develop invisible chemistry and mediate conflicts with my boss." She guessed, "Talking with a third party without conflict of interests, I will open up. She or he may give advice easier." Participant B conceived the stance of workplace counselors to be professional, independent, neutral, and fair. Her expectations included "I hope she or he can help me analyze problems, handle interpersonal relationship, and better respond [to clients]. Furthermore, she or he can help my career development."

Qualifications of Workplace Counselor. In addition to professional qualities, technical know-how, knowledge of business management, organizational structure, and culture of the specific enterprise, Participant A expected, "She or he should be experience and senior to provide good suggestions… have good management experience. She or he should know the internal structure and culture of the company." Providing instant solution was critical while "She or he should be good at counseling skills. When I have conflicts with my boss, she or he can settle our arguments." Participant B was demanding and required "I deal with clients. She or he should know the details and specific crises, and know the interaction of the team." She preferred to have a supervisor.

Source of Workplace Counseling Provided. Participant A preferred to an 'individual agent.' She added later, "Whether she or he is an employee of the company is not very important," but should be familiar with business management,

organizational structure and culture. Participant B chose 'an outsider.' However, she understood the ambivalence that an outsider would not be familiar with business operations, organizational interaction, and group dynamics of the specific entity.

Reflections about Workplace Counseling

Trust Problems

Workplace counseling deals with problems induced by work or personal life of staff in organizational settings. Evidence has proved effectiveness of workplace counseling to not only release staff tensions (Coles, 2003; Hill, 2000) but also nurture the health of organizations (Cummins & Hoggett, 1995). However, this study reflected that the participants have little knowledge on workplace counseling and little experience in using it. It also found that distrust towards workplace counseling is the mortal wound. This distrust is caused by poor or incomplete knowledge about counseling services, doubts, misunderstanding of its professionalism, stance, roles, and functions (Berridge & Cooper, 2004; Kinder, 2005). These obstacles will place a bar to develop counselling at work. It also reflects the distrust towards internal source such as human resources representatives. Thus, the trust problem is not only the issue of workplace counselors but also of human service practitioners.

Talent Retention

The challenges of the current 'career-resilient workforce' (Waterman, Waterman, & Collard, 1994, p.95) are different. Nowadays, employees in the emerging technological environment (Turnage, 1990), particularly the managerial grades and above, will likely choose caring companies (Budd & Mumford, 2001). Traditional human resources practices such as reward management may not satisfy their actual needs. Services about stress reduction (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994), personal growth, and better private life may be useful in this regard. Counseling at workplace is one of the options which will ultimately be beneficial to organizational development (Cummins & Hoggett, 1995). From the view of work-life effectiveness (Koppes, 2008), human resources veterans should understand the staff, and formulate creative human resources policies in order to enhance staff morale and staff retention that will eventually improve organizational effectiveness.

In the process of policy formulation, there should be mutual support and collaboration between human resources professionals and other functional departments. Since they serve internal customers, good understanding of staff needs is critical. Counselors play a role here by providing first hand information about staff. Working with workplace counselors without loss of the golden rule of privacy and confidentiality will plausibly gain optimal outcomes.

Organizational Dynamics

For human service professionals, both human resources practitioners and work-

place counselors, it is necessary to be sensitive to the 'shadow-side realities' (Egan, 1993, p.32). The sensitivity of the hidden dynamics among the counselor, the client, the system of the organization, and the management (Walton, 2010) contribute to different outcomes. On one side, they are alert to staff needs to provide adequate services. On another side, they bear in mind the balance and interaction of idiosyncrasies between the organization and individuals in those particular circumstances. Loss of the balance will cause thing skew to the shadow side, and undesired consequences may follow.

Gatekeeping

Counseling is a trained profession. Improper counseling will be catastrophic to the service users. Head of human resources management has the responsibility to control the quality of counseling supplied such as from supervisory colleagues (Sanders, 1990). Human resources professionals are gatekeepers to prevent 'a shift from professionalism to superficiality' (Buon, 2004, p.10).

Moreover, services provided by both human resources practitioners and workplace counselors are internal-customer-driven. Overlapping tasks are unavoidable but repetitions of jobs are unnecessary. Collaborative accountability will be advantageous to both parties as well as the organization. The human resources in-charge may assist in making professional counseling independently of workplace counselor.

Re-think the Position of Workplace Counseling in an Organization

Apart from generating more idea on effective working counseling, this research also gives insights on the professional development of workplace counseling, notably the strategic position in organization management. In the contemporary working environment, it is suggested to elevate counseling at work to a strategic position from operational facet. The feasible leadership of workplace counselors would be 'not only for client-generated self review, but also counselor-generated feedback' (Walton, in Carroll & Walton, 1997) about the existing and ideal scenario of organizations, and the reversal is true.

'Strategic' here represents business-relevance and organization-orientation. Strategic concerns at workplace counseling refer to its mission of achieving corporate objectives through counseling services and deliverables. Being a management tool (Claringbull, 2006), its design will be an integral part of the overall organization strategies that pulls counseling close to the organizational decision-making hub. Its importance will work the same as other instrumental services such as marketing, logistics. Its strategic amalgamation may be effectively sustained by the exclusive first-hand in-depth information directly from the staff. Coles (2003) has discussed that good workplace counselors help staff work on impacts of work upon life, and vice versa. In fact, they probably do more than these and can add more values in staff (Claringbull, 2006). Through counseling, they may skillfully gain profound insights about the hidden agenda of dysfunctional influences in workplace (Walton, 1997). They then will be capable and informative in assisting management improvements in organizations in a

strategic tenure viewing from macro and aerial angles (Walton, in Carroll & Walton, 1997). They possibly provide crucial collective information to the management and cooperate with human resources representatives to formulate workable policies and practices for optimizing the effectiveness of human assets.

However, concerns about confidentiality and insecurity feelings are incurred by distrust when the counselors are in-house staff. Professional ethics of counseling strictly requires the maintenance of privacy and confidentiality (Athanasiades, Winthrop, & Gough, 2008; Davis & Gibson, 1994; Kinder, 2005). Especially in workplace, confidentiality is the greatest concern for employees while deciding to use the service. Adequate handling of information and records including hard and digital copies, storage, retention, and retrieval (Eberlein, 1990) are of the highest priority. Record management should be discreetly handled so that staff can feel safe to consume counseling service. Guarantee and support of confidentiality from the management are likely essential for organizational reporting system. When the employees trust the confidentiality system, they may not care whether the workplace counselors are outsiders or insiders.

Interestingly, the participants frankly expressed a great hesitation whether a workplace counselor was for the staff or for the company. A way to show counseling for the interests and sake of employees will be essential to settle their quandary. The research also discovered a feedback that although the interviewees preferred outsiders to furnish with counseling service, they also required workplace counselors to understand business operations, organization management, company structure, and organizational culture of the particular workplace settings. Selecting in-house or external model (Davis & Gibson, 1994) is also an education opportunity for staff involvement that enables counseling service more friendly approached.

Even though in-house counselors are directly hired by the organizations, they need to firmly maintain a neutral, transparent, open, and independent footing. In a deeper stage, workplace counseling may intrude into the strategic level which may be conflicting in the counseling field. Without a clear role or stance, a workplace counselor would have difficulties in gaining trust from the staff, and could not work properly in organizational context (Nixon & Carroll, 1994). The way to lead proper understanding and trust from employees will be a challenge. Apart from this, neutrality, independency, and fairness are apparent stances and ethical attitude (Berridge & Cooper, 2004) of workplace counselors.

With an extraordinary position in workplace, workplace counselors are proposed to pursue strategic involvement as a learning agent as well as a change catalyst for both individuals and organizations (Walker & Jacobs, 2003). They will potentially contribute to enhance organizational development. For instance, they may act as executive coaches to help business growth. On another side, they may be diplomats at all organization levels to proactively influence the management and the staff (Carroll, 1995). Thus, they may work with human resources staff to foster caring organizational culture and devise well-being programs. Creation of soft power for rearing staff loyalty and sense of belonging will plausibly be one of their missions. Their contributions will be perceived similar to other functional departments.

From views of workplace counseling at strategic level, tasks of workplace

counselors cover an extensive range consisting of: first, developmental functions such as career counseling; second, mediation, for example, equal opportunities, harassment, and workplace conflicts; third, decision making including redundancy, layoff, and early retirement; fourth, problem-focused activities, for instance, bereavement, stress, grievances, complaints, and psychological debriefing (Devilly & Cotton, 2003); fifth, psycho-education on mental health; sixth, crisis management handling trauma, and robbery (Nelson-Jones, 2000); seventh, internal auditing such as work-life audit (Chalofsky, 2008) and stress audit (Coles, 2003). For more than it is, supportive services offer employees with opportunities to review their personal issues, scopes for personal changes and personal development, and chances to assimilate their work experience for meeting their career path and needs of improvement (Walton, 1997).

Taking Foxconn as an example, the corporation, after reviewing the tragedies, has been gradually changing business strategies and tactics in the China market (Zhang, 2010). It will extend from manufacturing to retailing, and may also have its own product design and brand. Thus, there is connectivity with potential partners of employees even though they have left the Company. Moving further, it will examine the feasibilities to provide loans to any employees who plan to set up their own business when they return to their homeland. This innovative idea will help the Company quickly expand retail channels. With the advent of a series of changes, workplace counselors may play a strategic role to adapt and contribute to the organizational development. They may formulate counseling strategies in exploring, for instance: first, how to better use the creativity of the young workforce; second, how to align with the Company's business strategy; third, how to help the young workers develop their careers which match to business transformation; and fourth, how to assist the Company in coping with crisis management. All these counseling strategies helping business growth will be people-orientated.

Additionally, the idea of taking the strategic function in an organization, independence is a main concern of workplace counseling. The in-house workplace counselors are recommended to directly reporting to the in-charge of the management. An official agreement may be concluded after their discussion and negotiation with the management. It is suggested to constitute: first, a neutral and independent position of the workplace counselor; second, professional and ethical requirements; third, being a key member of the management team; fourth, participation in formulating company policies; fifth, guarantee of confidentiality management of counseling records and data; sixth, report of contents in collective information; seventh, physical set-up of the service; eighth, mutual respect; and ninth, human and financial resources and support. Its authority and empowerment will bring on staff confidence in consulting counselors at work.

The workplace counselor will then take an initiative to form a working committee. It includes representatives from different levels and departments. It aims are to communicate with the counselor and staff by reflecting staff opinions, collecting suggestions and monitoring confidentiality management. Meanwhile, the counselor provides counseling education, and arranges in-house training on mental health (Kinder, 2005), counseling-related managerial skills and mediation techniques for supervisors.

Unveiled by the disclosure, stress is imposed from work and personal life. Work stress largely comes from heavy workload and long working hours. These mutually affected spheres directly give negative impacts on well-being and mental health (Barling, 1995; Siu & Philips, 2006, FWC, 2010). The unhealthy workforce eventually ascribes to unhealthy organizations; and vice versa. Working closely with human resources professionals and the management, workplace counselors are advised to devise creative practices in order to cater for work-life equilibrium. The diverse and divergent demands from the contemporary workforce are challenging. The creativity includes family-friendly programs and extension of counseling skills to a diversified knack such as 'writing therapy' (Wright, 2005), creative but person-oriented career counseling (Dorn, 1992; Weinrach, 2003). Their contributions of soothing tensions for work and family will be recognized.

A comprehensive service with extensive demands is anticipated if workplace counseling is offered. Vertically, workplace counseling is expected to solve problems in different levels within organizations from co-workers to upper hierarchy, and the external business corporations. Horizontally, the need of counseling services not only is for solving work problems or institutional disturbances, but also contributing to personal growth or career advancement. Serving a wide spectrum of tasks, workplace counselors might meet challenges in equipping with an innovative variety of competences. In brief, workplace counselors are required to expand their scopes from work and work-related guidance (Carroll, 1996) to emotional interference, career and personal development (Carroll, 1996; Clarkson, 1990; Coles, 2003; Hill, 2000). They are not only counselors but also catalysts and bridges to solve conflicts at work. Their expertise thus extends from generic counseling skills to business know-how simultaneously. This implies that workplace counselors are expected to be sophisticated and versatile to accommodate different staff needs.

Remedial intervention is part of work of effective workplace counselors. Prevention of work problems will be an important focus in the future (Orlans, 1989), an illustration in this regard would be stress assessment (Coles, 2003). Structured stress monitoring and mechanisms in reducing stress-related difficulties likely become new areas. Other proactive measures may comprise coaching (Stern, 2004), mediation, pre-employment career assessment, training plan, and career counseling to align personal development with organizational development. Richer inclusions of workplace counseling will be derived from diversity of responsibilities.

Comprehensive contribution provided by workplace counseling likely helps successful organizational growth and implementation of well-being including family-friendly working environment, work-life balance, and work flexibility such as family-support (Jacob, 2008). Hence, versatile workplace counselors are advised to equip with knowledge of organizational management and business operations. 'Learning the language of the organization' (Kinder, 2005, p.24) containing organization management, business awareness, and corporate culture (Claringbull, 2006; Cummins & Hoggett, 1995) will gain better trust from the service users. Their proactive exploration of opportunities in commercial field inspires future progression of counseling profession.

The present study addresses the potential contributions of workplace counselors at strategic level. The concept needs more debates to evolve fuller meaning and components. Noticeably, receipt of for-and-against responses about practicality of workplace counseling in strategic perspective will be expected. Demand for revolutionized conversion will be weak if there is no substantial support from conceptual and theoretical texture, especially from academia. The successful establishment of strategic human resources management, for example, demonstrates a reference. The evolution from personnel management to strategic human resources management from the 1980s led by the American academics (Armstrong, 1995) is not a 'Rome' over a night. It tells a truth that crystallization of concept takes time. All these may be virgin lands for workplace counseling practitioners and academic parties.

Limitations and Further Research

This paper is a preliminary exploration with very limited previous resources in Hong Kong context. Only female informants in this study may mirror limited facts and perception. Research on male or gender comparative for this issue is also an area calling for investigation. Other factors such as age and stage of life cycle may create different pictures on the same topic. However, this research intends to stimulate further in-depth studies about local counseling at work.

Conclusion

The research reveals that success in counseling at work, as a tool for work-life balance, is of effort from various stakeholders cooperating with workplace counselors. Employees need to have proper knowledge of counseling so that they can access better self-awareness on any needs of counseling at work. Humane organizations build up caring organizational culture and suitable infrastructure such as confidential management of counseling records.

Workplace counseling and workplace counselors are recommended not only in breaking through the traditional path but also playing in both strategic and operational roles in organizations. Apart from conventional jobs, workplace counselors may take proactive actions to work with the management and human resources professionals in prevention of and providing remedial services for staff mental or emotional interruption. Thus, skills beyond therapeutic techniques, systematic and practical thinking about implications of counseling work, counseling management, negotiation, coaching, mediation, knowledge of organizational and business ecology, and skillful multi-role capability (Coles, 2003; Claringbull, 2006; Heley, 2007) are plausible and required potentialities. Conclusively, healthy workplace is a combination and collaboration of work and family wellbeing (Beach & Martin, 1995; Casey & Grzywacz, 2008; Cooper & Cartwright, 1994; Offermann & Gowing, 1990). Proof of high correlation of work-life equilibrium and job satisfaction offered by employee-focused management maintains economic gains for corporations (Reed & Clark, 2004). Strategic workplace counselors will contribute to developing policies for both work and personal issues in organizational perspective and helping workforce growth. The novelty of

workplace counseling at strategic function is an inter-disciplinary study pertaining to counseling, organizational development, business management, human resources management and personal growth.

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