

Podcast transcript

Career conversations: Jo Revell

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.

I'm here today with a member of our very much valued support workforce.

Jo Revell:

So my name is Jo Revell and I'm a band four therapy assistant practitioner. I work alongside a group of OTs and physios and other support workers and we work for the Early Supported Discharge team, which is a group that works sort of like a middleman between the hospital and the community teams. And the aim is for us to support people being discharged from hospital back into their home environment, to enable them back to some sort of independence, whether it's back to their normal baseline or whether it's giving them some therapy to get back to that baseline. We also bridge the gap for care if there is a situation where somebody is medically fit to go home, but there isn't the capacity for care in the community. So we will bridge that care gap. But we are basically a short term service, literally just to get people home from hospital and back to independence.

Hannah:

I know from speaking to you, you're full of passion for your role. What brought you to your role?

Jo:

I'm very passionate about my role purely because prior to joining the NHS, I was a branch trainer for a care agency and I looked after new recruits to the agency and I taught the care certificate to them as an induction program. But we were in a classroom for five days, face to face. And you get to know these people, you get to build a rapport with them. And it's almost like you have this group of people that you are nurturing through their journey to start their career in the care industry. And it's just giving them the help and support that they need and giving them tips and sharing your own experiences and just helping them along the way. And then when I saw that there was a role that came up in the NHS, I thought, I can use my experiences and skills that I've already got to hopefully provide really good patient-centred care to the patients, but also give that skills knowledge to other people to help them as well. So that's really why I sort of joined the NHS, to be fair.

Hannah:

Have you been in your role a long time?

Jo:

I've been in my role in the NHS for four years now.

Hannah:

How would you describe your professional identity?

Jo:

Well, it's difficult because I think being an unregistered member of staff, we do sometimes become, in a way, unrecognised for actually the skills and experience that we do have. I'm really lucky. I'm in a really good team, and we all look after each other and we all support each other and we all encourage each other. But sometimes when you go out into the community, you're deemed to be a carer. And when you say to somebody, actually, I'm not a carer, I'm actually a therapy assistant, and this is what my role is, they don't always understand that. But I think that's through lack of education and lack of sort of the promotion of our role, in a way.

Hannah:

What are the challenges that you experience in your role?

Jo:

I think it's a challenge. I've had some very recent challenges, to be fair, whereby we've had patients in the community who have needed further medical intervention. Being an unregistered member of staff, I sometimes feel that we're not always listened to. And it's very difficult then when you have somebody who is poorly or not 100% feeling themselves that you're ringing other AHP professionals and explaining who you are, what you do and the situation, and then you get that very sort of almost a different perspective of the person that you're talking to because you're not registered. They almost deem that you are not using your common sense or have no idea of what's going on, and that could be really frustrating and really challenging at times.

Hannah:

And what are the joys of your role?

Jo:

I've had some wonderful joys in my role. Just seeing somebody going back from home, from hospital to their home environment and seeing their eyes light up when they just walk through their front door is amazing. Absolutely amazing. I've had dealt with some patients who've had dementia and obviously are not recognising where they are or who they're with. And then I've used some, like, little techniques, something very simple, like just singing some Christmas carols to them, and then you can just see the joy in their face and you end up a bit long winded where you end up doing lots of things to get to what you want to do with them. But yeah, and it's just nice for them to say when you say to them, well, I've got to go now because I've got to go to my next patient, and they go, Please don't go. Please just sit here and talk to me. So, yeah, there is the nicer side of the job. And I just try to treat everybody as if it was my own relatives, really, because they are human beings, they

do belong to people and they deserve to be treated in that way utterly.

Hannah:

And what I'm hearing from you is utterly seeing the person and what makes that person who they are, beyond the diagnosis, beyond the experience that they're currently having, but the things that makes them human

Jo:

Yeah

Hannah:

and that to me sings of the values of occupational therapy as well. So you say you're a therapy support worker? Yeah. So is that across allied health professions or...?

Jo:

So the role that I am in at the moment is what we call a blended role. So we work with occupational therapists as well as physios, so a lot of our patients do need both sides of the coin, so they need a bit of OT to get them home and get them settled and looking at the bigger picture, shopping, washing, dressing, that sort of thing. But some of them also need the physio side of it, where they need an exercise programme, a bit of progression of mobility. So we're lucky to have an OT and physio. So whichever way, whatever help we need, we will speak to the relevant side and then we'll speak to them and get their point of view from what we think is needed. And then invariably, if they need an exercise program, I'll take the exercise sheets out to them and I'll sit and do the exercises with them.

Hannah:

So it sounds like your professional identity is blended and that's a massive strength because you almost pull the best bits and the assets of both those professions in your own.

We've talked a little bit about the present for you, the challenges and the joys in the present day. What's brought you to this point?

Jo:

I think just having my training background has brought me quite a way through this, but also having opportunities within the team. I'm on secondment at the moment with the BSW faculty as a lead support worker, and we're looking at the framework to help develop non-registered members of staff and I'm really passionate about it because I don't feel that they have the right opportunities out there. Being towards the end of my career now, I see the younger generation coming through and I think all they need is a little bit of nurturing. And even if they don't want to be a registered member of staff, they are really valuable people in the NHS. They're sort of like the foundations of the building and if you take them away, the building will collapse. So it's really important that we do nurture these people in the right direction as to where their aspirations are, what they want to be in five, six, seven years time. And I think because I'm at the end of my career and there are things that perhaps I wish I had done, I now feel that maybe it's time to motivate the younger generation into these are careers, they are good careers. You get a lot of you get challenges out of it, but you also get the excitement and you just feel like you're making a difference.

Hannah:

Absolutely. What do you wish you'd known when you started out in your role as a member of the support workforce?

Jo:

I think I wish I had known the different pathways there were that I could have gone down four or five, maybe six years ago if I'd have known that I could have gone back to uni, to do an apprenticeship, to become an OT I probably would have gone down that route. But now I'm coming up to retirement and I sort of think now I'm not really going to get out of being a registered member of staff, what I would want to get out of it. So I'm now thinking, well, what other ways can I develop? So I managed to get onto the secondment and that has really opened my eyes and shown me that even if you don't want to be a registered member of staff, there's lots of other ways to develop. Today I've actually booked myself onto an Inspiring Leaders programme in the hope that maybe from the secondment there might be a different role that comes up that I can bring all this experience into.

Hannah:

I think we need to really challenge that notion of hierarchical progression that we have to progress to being a registered member of staff in order to be valued, because that's absolutely not the case, is it?

Jo:

Oh absolutely. We did a survey in our first part of this secondment and it was really surprising how many registered members of staff have so many skills and experience that could be utilised within organizations without them becoming a registered member of staff. And I think in today's society, a lot of people don't want to go to uni for whatever reason, whether it's childcare or the cost of going to uni. But they are really good people, really good, motivated people with lots of skills and we need to find ways of keeping them as well as motivating them and letting them still develop.

Hannah:

What three things, if you could narrow it down to three, do you think have been most important for you in your development and progression as a member of our support workforce?

Jo:

I think for me, I always want a challenge, even if it's slightly out of my comfort zone, I always like to have a challenge because it keeps you thinking, keeps you motivated and sort of keeps you on your toes a little bit. I think having those opportunities there are really important as well. Definitely. And I think sort of support from line managers as well, sort of recognition that you want to progress or you want these challenges and getting them to allow you to have those challenges and to go out your comfort zone but be there to support you when you need them.

Hannah:

Has that been kind of a difficult conversation for you in terms of I want to develop and I want to progress, but not necessarily in the sense of I want to register. How have those conversations gone for you?

Jo:

To start with it was sort of difficult because you thought that because I thought that the only way was to become a registered member of staff. But then from this... when I learned that there were different pathways, I spoke to my team lead who turned the conversation around and found and wanted me to say what I wanted to do, which then made that conversation much easier. So I think if you know what you want to do, if you've got those pathways or a list of courses or opportunities for you that you can browse over before you have those conversations, it makes life much easier because you can then sort of put your career pathway together in a way. So for me, yes, I had a list of career pathways, what I wanted to do or what I thought I wanted to do, and then having that conversation and the way it was held, it was almost more like a question and answer conversation rather than just a straightforward what you want to do. And it made me think about myself and what I wanted to get out of it.

Hannah:

People need to see possibilities in order to see themselves in those possibilities.

Jo:

Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely.

Hannah:

And it was good to hear there that the person that had that conversation with kind of turned the conversation around and was very you focused.

Jo:

Yes, I think as well, it's about trusting that person, because the person I had that conversation with I knew would be honest and open with me. I've always trusted their opinion on anything that I've done and they've always been very supportive and they know me as a person, which, again, makes life so much easier, rather than just talking to a manager saying, I want to do this, if they don't know anything about you, or that makes it really difficult. So I've been quite lucky in a way that I've had that person to be able to be honest and open with me, to make me then think about myself and what I want from things.

Hannah:

Are there any other aspects of the environment around you that you think have facilitated kind of your career journey or even restricted your career journey?

Jo:

I think one of the things that has restricted it a little bit was when I first joined the NHS, I wanted to do an apprenticeship, but I couldn't because there was another member of staff doing the apprenticeship. So it was a case of, because we were a small team at the time, they couldn't allow two people off with study time and everything. So I had to wait a year, which was fine, and I then reapplied again, which was fine. They took the application and then they realised that because of my age, my school qualifications were not recognised. So I had to then go back to college to do my functional skills, maths and English. The most stressful thing I've done in my life. Not the English so much, but the maths. I don't particularly like maths and there was no support at all in the trust. They just basically said, go away, get your maths, then come back and we'll go from there. So I had to

find a college to do it and then you end up going to college and you're in a room with people who are a lot younger than you and having to then almost go back to school, really having to relearn everything. And I did get quite stressed out about it and at one point I was really considering, you know what, this is too much like hard work, too old in the tooth for this, I'm not going to do this anymore. But I did, I persevered and I did, I did get my maths and English, which is good. And then when I went to apply again for the apprenticeship, by this time three other people then had decided that they wanted to do the OT apprenticeship and the physio apprenticeship. So it then made it more difficult then for me to do an apprenticeship because that would have meant four people out of the team. So that's a big barrier where when you look at nursing staff, it's easy to backfill nursing staff, but not quite so easy with therapy side of things. And then I had a situation where I wanted to do an apprenticeship and I wanted to do a secondment, so I had to choose which one I wanted to do, so I chose to do the secondment rather than the apprenticeship, which I am looking back at it now. I think I've enjoyed so much meeting loads of people, having my eyes opened, almost like open to another world, that there are lots of other things that are there other than just the clinical role. And I've done lots of courses, online courses during the secondment and I think I probably took the better option out of the two. I've met so many lovely people on the secondment from lots and lots of different organisations and across the whole country. And even if by just the secondment, even if one, two, three people hear what we're saying and then pass that by, word of mouth around that to me is more valuable than sitting in a meeting and just listening to people sort of thing. I think word of mouth is a huge thing that can gain a lot.

Hannah:

Absolutely. And I think particularly the kind of people that we are that work in healthcare settings, I'm always going to be biased towards occupational therapy, but generally people that work in healthcare settings, we're interested in people, we're interested in narratives, aren't we? The thing that grabs us is when we can hear something that really pulls us.

Jo:

I've been really lucky. I've had a very inspiring team lead who has now gone on to work for Health Education England. But we were redeployed in the pandemic and we carried out video calls with relatives of end of life patients. And when she asked me to do it, I thought, I don't know if I really want to do that. And then I sat and thought about it and I thought, if I was in that situation, what would I want from the NHS, how would I, you know? And so we did do it, and it was the most rewarding thing I've done in my life. Very emotional and quite hard at times. But it was something that I would never have had the opportunity to do if I hadn't been in this team, if I hadn't been in the NHS and if I hadn't had that leader who said, what do you think about it? Should we have a go with it? They did push me out of my comfort zone to start with, and I was thinking, oh, no, I can't do this. This is really challenging. But I guess we grow through pushing our comfort zone, don't we?

Hannah:

And that's kind of what career development progression is all about. It's not always necessarily going upwards, but just growing.

Jo:

Yeah. And it builds your confidence, but it makes you look at things in perspective, in a different light as well when you're doing things like that, rather than just taking everything for granted every day.

Hannah:

each experience we have, whether it's work related or not work related, contributes to the person we are in our working role, doesn't it? That helps you on the way as well.

Jo:

Absolutely. Yes, definitely. I just think people need to ever think you can't do anything because you can do things, but it's having that network around you to be able to do that. And it just frustrates me to think that there are so many unregistered members of staff that have got all these skills and experiences that could be utilised. And I just think that we need to start recognising that there are people... I appreciate people go to uni and they work really hard when they go to uni to get that qualification. But I think there are equally a lot of unregistered members of staff who are just as capable and should be given those opportunities and not just be forgotten about. The profile of the support workers should be raised as high as they can because at the end of the day, regardless of whether you've got a qualified person there, invariably it's the support workers that actually go to see the patients and support the patients. And I think sometimes they get forgotten a little bit, really.

Hannah:

About valuing the individual as a member of the support workforce and the unique set of skills, knowledge, experiences that they bring.

Jo:

They're almost like the eyes and ears for the NHS, really, aren't they?

Hannah:

Absolutely. NHS and beyond.

Jo:

Yes, absolutely.

Hannah:

Thank you for going through your journey with me.

Jo:

Absolute pleasure.