

Podcast transcript

Career conversations: Chrisi Ward

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.

Chrisi Ward:

So I'm Chrisi, I'm an OT apprentice in mental health and I've worked there for ten years.

Hannah:

The purpose of our conversation today is around career journeys and thinking about your career, your experiences, in getting to this point. I've found it helpful to kind of guide my reflection using the analogy of the career journey of the river and in a sense, kind of use the kawa model, unsurprisingly, in my thinking.

So what drew you to occupational therapy or allied health in general? Can you pinpoint the source? How did it all start?

Chrisi:

So I think initially, I think, which is one of the reasons that I'm so for pushing forward OT with young people, is initially all I knew was about the role of mental health nursing. So I knew that I wanted to do something in mental health, and that was initially the avenue I explored and it just didn't align with me. So when I was out working and working in mental health environments, I suddenly met these people and they were me. It felt like me. So that's where it started for me. It's like, you do how I envisage this is what I want to do.

Hannah:

Thank you. If I ask the question of what's contributed to the flow?

Chrisi:

Just seeing the difference that it makes and knowing that it always felt like it was more than and

I know nursing is more than the medication, but it always felt like so much more than that for me. It was always like, what do they want? Why are they here? All of those big questions that I think OT answers and I think that contributes to the flow for me. And it just feels right. And sometimes I think that's it a job feels right, so that's why you do it.

Hannah:

So in terms of pinpointing the source, you started working in mental health, occupational therapy wasn't really a possibility, you didn't really know what occupational therapy was. However, through getting to know occupational therapists and seeing the work of the role, that's kind of what inspired you.

Chrisi:

Yeah. And I think when you come in as a support worker role, often people need a second person. If you're going out with someone, they need two people. You end up being this person that watches someone's journey from the outside because you're helping to manage the risk, and then that's where you fall in love with what you want and that's how I got here.

Hannah:

You came into the mental health as a support worker, first off, yeah? Can you share a bit more about that kind of journey?

Chrisi:

So I think working as a support worker in CAMHS, I think that's probably the closest to get to being an OTA in CAMHS anyway, it's very similar because it's a lot about engaging children and what they enjoy. Whether you're a support worker, I think it's one of the reasons there weren't many OTAs in CAMHS at that time, because the role was fulfilled by the support worker. And I loved all of those things. It wasn't until about eight years down the line when I came into Adult Mental Health where I really realised what I actually enjoyed was the OT stuff. I enjoyed watching it, I enjoyed watching the OTs do their thing in CAMHS, but I felt like I was getting to do bits of that anyway. I came into Adult Services and all the bits of the role that I really loved weren't my job anymore, they were someone else's. And that's what pushed me. That's where I ended up in my first OTA role.

Hannah:

So support worker in CAMHS, which is for those who are not familiar with the acronym Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. And then did you move from a support worker in CAMHS into being an occupational therapy assistant in adult services?

Chrisi:

I moved into a support worker role initially and then very quickly took an activity coordinator role on an acute mental health ward. And then when the OTA retired, I took the OTA role.

Hannah:

So what skills, experiences, opportunities have contributed to your flow along the way?

Chrisi:

I think this, for me, and I know for lots of people, it's about their life experiences. I think for me it's always been very much I think OT found me because that's how I am. I am that is who I am as a person. I think as I've become older and I've watched the journeys of other people, friends, colleagues, family members, I think that contributes to the flow. You see, I suppose sometimes you see people's negative experiences and you think, this should be better, we can do this differently, we need to think about this differently. And you think the only way that you can have that is to go and do something different, go out there and see, how can we make things better, how can we make things look different?

Hannah:

What do you love about your role in the present day and over the course of your career journey?
What have been the joys?

Chrisi:

It's really like obscure things, probably to other people. It's helping someone that has struggled to do something, to do something they've wanted to do for so long and seeing the difference. It's that moment when they stand there and they say to you, I really just want to give you a hug. I just feel it just feels amazing. And it's this tiniest little thing that's taken you such a short amount of time. But it's huge to them. I mean, there's nothing more satisfying than being able to do those little things that make such big differences to people.

And it's invaluable being part of some of these teams of just wonderful people that turn up day in, day out, however difficult it is, especially riding off the back of COVID the personal cost for so many people to see them still coming in and making these changes and differences for people and putting first their wants and wishes. Not the needs of the service, not our own personal needs, but what they want. Examples being things like people wanting to go swimming when there's other things that traditionally people would have thought was more important, but swimming is where they want to go, or to buy a cake or whatever it is that matters to them. I mean, honestly, it doesn't matter. And the ability to step back and do it alongside someone, whether it's the gardening or the shopping, you're doing it together and that makes huge differences to people, that it's just lovely.

Hannah:

So I hear from you, the joy is in the meaning to that individual person and in the meaning of the doing.

Chrisi:

Absolutely.

Hannah:

Which is wholly occupational therapy, isn't it?

Chrisi:

Yeah.

Hannah:

What's about boulders along the way in the present day and over the course of your journey, what's been the biggest challenges?

Chrisi:

I think the most recent. I think there's two sort of really recent biggest challenges. I remember at one point, midcovid, while you're trying to home school three kids and still bring all of my OT joy, just sitting on the floor in the garden going, what am I doing? Is this even worth it? What is the point of all of this? I think that was a massive boulder and it was exhausting and none of us, I don't think any of us had any energy left. I think the battles to get to here, to get to a point where I can be on my OT degree and doing all the things that I fought really hard to get to, it shouldn't be as hard as it's been. I think that boulder was huge. We talk about finance and backfill and all of those things that actually we're investing in our future workforce and we're saying, we need more, but we need to do more.

Hannah:

Do you think that as a member of the support workforce, was your professional development kind of acknowledged and valued?

Chrisi:

I think people would often say things like, we value you, we really want this opportunity for you. But. There was always a but. We haven't got the money this year, or what will we do when you're on placement? How will we manage with this? And I get it, service pressure is huge. It needs to be thought at a bigger level, those sorts of things. I hear the value. I know that you value the work that I do, but actually this is really important to me and this is what I need.

Hannah:

Absolutely. Did it seem like you had possibilities for progression?

Chrisi:

No.

Hannah:

I guess you've had to fight for those possibilities.

Chrisi:

It's definitely felt like a fight and not a battle. It's a we'd love to, but. As I say, that's become the mantra for me. It was very much we'd love to... but. And it's been lots of conversations and even going through and doing talk with Steve to try and get the profile raised as how valuable the support workforce is, how valuable their progression is. It's better to give them the opportunity to progress than to lose them, especially when other professions were more accessible. It would have been so easy for me to be a nurse.

Hannah:

I think it's really good to hear that and hear those different narratives as well, because I think within the support workforce there are people that are happy not being a registered member of staff, but still craving that development and that progression within that non-registered role. Equally, there are

people that really crave the opportunity to go ahead and train and to join the registered workforce and to overcome those barriers to that in itself.

Chrisi:

Yeah, absolutely.

Hannah:

So it's really good to hear your narrative with that.

Chrisi:

And I think in terms of like, if you think about training in other things, I think that as an OT workforce, we're really good at investing in their development at team level. So things like behavioural family work or training around models, those things have been really accessible for me. I just wanted more.

Hannah:

So what's helped with those challenges, or what would have helped?

Chrisi:

The teams have been amazing. They're so supportive. Within 20 minutes of the email going out to say that we were offering apprenticeships, I had had that same email forwarded to me about twelve times. They were wonderfully supportive and even still and that vast OT community, they're not just the OTs that you see and you work with. Those vast number of Twitter OTs that when you sit there and you say, I don't know if I can do this. I really want to do this, they tell you all of the times that they felt the same. And just knowing that you are alongside other people that wrote they obviously got there, helps you to feel like you can do it. Yeah. The people you work with are pretty invaluable. I think they do become that family that you have at work because you're with them as much as your own family and friends that aren't in work.

Hannah:

Sometimes more

Chrisi:

Sometimes more. And you have those moments where you all sit there and the day has been tough, and there is no one else on the planet that will understand that day like them.

Hannah:

So how has your environment enabled or restricted your career journey? It sounds like the support team around you has massively been an enabler.

Chrisi:

In honesty, without my family and friends, it wouldn't be possible. Who would pick up the children from school? Who would take them? When I have to be on placement at seven in the morning when I don't usually start till half nine? I wouldn't be able to do that because that balance between it's all

well and good saying well you're earning, you can afford it, but you've still got those child care and suddenly you've gone... I mean, we were looking last night for an example, I need two days childcare in the summer for three children for two days is £111. So without family support in those other days, it just wouldn't be feasible. So those sorts of things and the people that sit there when you go, can't do this, can't do this, it goes, yes, you can regroup. Let's start again. It's really valuable practice educators and mentors and all of those things that hold you in those moments where you suddenly sit there having done this job for 19 years, and you suddenly sat in a physical health team surrounded by equipment that you've never used, that you don't for all you know, it could be upside down. It's highly unlikely, but it could be or back to front, and they just patiently show you and explain to you how this works. It's difficult going back from feeling like, you know, lots of things to knowing nothing to have that is crucial to being able to keep doing it. Those moments of patience and support are really helpful.

Hannah:

You've been a member of the support workforce for 19 years?

Chrisi:

Yes.

Hannah:

One, you don't look old enough.

Chrisi:

I'll take that, I guess.

Hannah:

What's enabled your career journey during that 19 year period, almost looking before you got to the point of applying apprenticeship?

Chrisi:

I think I've probably spent eight of the last 19 years trying to get here. Okay. And I'd say before that, it's always just being how much let's be honest about how much I get from the job. It's not just about how much you give, but it's the satisfaction of doing something that feels purposeful. It's purposeful for me. It's meaningful to me. Helping other people to find meaning in things, that's meaningful in itself for me, so that definitely keeps me going. I don't think there's another job in the world where you build the relationships with your colleagues that you build in this kind of environment. I've just always loved it. I can't imagine if somebody said to me, what else would you do? I can't imagine what that would look like. What would that be? Yeah, I love OT. I can't think of doing anything different. And I think that was the thing that kept me going. Even the times where I thought, if I don't get this degree, I just don't want to do this anymore. Deep down, I don't know what I would have done differently.

Hannah:

And what about particularly as a member of the support workforce about your experiences of supervision?

Chrisi:

Supervision, it's got to be around the relationship you have with that person, I think is the first and foremost, but also I'm really good at making supervision about other people because that's what I do all day. So I will find it a lot easier to talk about other people than how I am and how that looks for me. When you come in sometimes and you're there with someone that's maybe a new OT and you've done this for a really long time, I very quickly fall into that role of being the one that makes them feel better, because that's comfortable for me, I guess.

Hannah:

With your knowledge, your skills, your experiences of a long time working within the support workforce, you almost become that supervisor yourself without even realising that you're doing it seamlessly, without even realising.

Chrisi:

There's nothing I love more than having I mean, I think I've got a student working with me at the moment. I love working with students. They make me think about why I'm doing what I'm doing and not just doing it. We very quickly fall into habits. What am I doing and why am I doing it? Well, now I've got to tell you, I'm going to have to really think about exactly how I do it and why I do it. I just enjoy it. That's why I think what it always boils back down to is I enjoy doing what I do.

Hannah:

Do you feel that you've been able to be or to bring your authentic and best self to your role?

Chrisi:

I don't think anybody always brings their authentic and best self to their role because that's not realistic. We're all human. I think the longer that you're within a team, the easier it is to bring you to the table. Different teams come with different levels of safety and different levels of... I know within the team at the moment, we talked very recently about how it's quite a psychologically safe team where you can say, 'this doesn't feel okay' and people hear you, and that makes a massive difference. I would definitely say I've worked in teams before where that hasn't been the case and it hasn't felt safe. I think anybody that knows me would very quickly notice. You've probably gathered, I'm not very quiet. If I go quiet, it's probably because I don't feel safe there. As you get older and more established, you're less willing to tolerate those times where you can't bring yourself to a team and look for what those alternatives might look like for you.

Hannah:

So we talk about psychological safety. I guess that's workplace culture. Is there anything kind of specific within that that helps you bring you to work?

Chrisi:

It's about knowing that you can express yourself or bring an opinion, and it be heard and validated. Even if people don't agree, they can validate that that's how you feel about it. And that's your experience of that person, that event, that experience. I think that's the key is knowing that within a team that you can be heard and listen to. I've worked in teams in the past where you're "just" a support worker. Actually, sometimes that's the person that sees the patient the most. Doesn't mean we're always right, because we're not. None of us are. But you need to be heard.

Hannah:

Absolutely. I think that's a really important point to make and a lot of narratives that support workforce feeling undervalued and not listened to, when actually you're often the person there doing the doing with the person...

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

Chrisi:

Yes. So when I came back to my current trust, they were in the process of establishing OTA roles within the community teams, but had naturally got that process completed. I had to make the choice to take a support worker role and feel like I felt like it was the direction that was going to lead me to become an OT and take that and step away from the OT role that I felt defined me or go somewhere else. Or continue as an OTA but know that that might not lead me to the journey that I wanted next. So it was a bit of a curveball, it was a bit of a risk, but I always felt like if it didn't work out, I could go and look for another OTA role. So there are some compromises and some trade offs along the way. Yeah. With my little for and against list like I always have.

Hannah:

What has been or is most important or helpful in your development and progression as a member of our support workforce?

Chrisi:

Again, I think it's the team. It's the team. If the team believes that OT carries value and the OTA carry value to the team, they will support and invest in you. So without them, you're just this random piece of jigsaw that doesn't fit anywhere. It needs to be everybody. And I'm really lucky that our team leader frequently posts about how wonderful OT are, really gets on board with OT week. And it makes all the difference to knowing that you're valued as OT support worker, that you're valued as a future part of the OT workforce and they invest in you.

Hannah:

It's really good to hear. I don't think I need to ask you the question about professional identity, but it sounds to me like regardless of your title, your professional identity is occupational therapy drenched.

Chrisi:

I realised very much as even when I was just working as a support worker, the OT thoughts, they were in my head. They didn't just disappear because my role had changed. The way I thought about how we work was still there. It didn't go away.

Hannah:

What do you wish you'd known prior to joining the support workforce, what would you say to your early career or younger self now?

Chrisi:

I think, don't give up. Even on those moments where it feels like it's never going to happen, don't give up because it's so easy to go, I don't think I can do this. You've just got to not give up and use those people. I mean, I say to like, any of the other apprentices, if they're wobbling get yourself on OT Twitter, the people there very quickly remind you of why you do what you do.

Hannah:

I think in so many of these in so many of these discussions, I've heard community and connection has been so, so valuable to progression and development.

Chrisi:

But we know that. We know that, don't we, as OTs? It's the doing, being, belonging. It's not just about us doing what we do as OTs or the fact that we are them. It's the fact that we belong to that community of OTs. And very often, as OTs, you'll have four or five nurses in your team and just the one OT or the one OT and the one OTA and that wider OT community, it's your belonging. Yes, you belong within your team, but you need that belonging within the OT community as well.

Hannah:

Did or do you feel that sense of belonging as a member of the support workforce?

Chrisi:

Yeah, definitely. I'd say that the OT community is very much of it's not us and them. It's we're one. And that's the nicest bit of it. And even, I'd say, even within the teams I work in now, I'm very much heard as an equal, not as you're just a support worker. I can't remember the last time I heard that said at me in a very, very long time.

Hannah:

That's really good to hear. Really good. What's next for you?

Chrisi:

To hopefully qualify in two years as an OT, whatever that might look like. At the time, I was always very set that mental health is my love and passion, and it very much is, but every time I go out and do something OT, it's like they open another door of a room full of all different OT that's just all the more exciting to learn more about. So keep opening doors and giving me options – I can't cope with all these choices.

Hannah:

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

Chrisi:

Nothing specifically, other than I'm so geeky I made a kawa with the questions.

Hannah:

I love that. I love that.

Chrisi:

I couldn't I couldn't help myself.

Hannah:

It's been good chatting to you today, Chrisi.

Chrisi:

And you.