

Case study



Occupational therapists in social care

Q&A: An experienced OT's perspective at practice level

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About Anita

Having qualified as a mature student in 2004, Anita is an OT who has worked for her local authority for 18 years. She has been in post as a Deputy Head of Service for the adult disability teams for six years. Anita manages five operational team managers, with teams of social workers and unregulated social care workers, OTs and learning disability nurses.

What are your experiences of career progression as an OT in social care?

I knew I wanted to work in social care as it provided an opportunity to work in a community setting and undertake holistic assessments within people's home environments. I spent 18 months as a newly qualified OT and quickly progressed to a senior level. I then became a practice educator and had two students in quick succession, building on this by supervising unregulated social care workers. Before long I applied for a senior practitioner role to develop self-directed support, which perfectly aligned with OT principles.

My progression has been rapid, but my OT skills enabled my progression into management. I am methodical and analytical in my thinking, a completer finisher with an alternative way to approach things and think about risk. 'thinking about who I am and who I can be, I can be a manager, I am management material, I can do this, I am a leader.'

What are the enablers to your career progression in social care?

The team manager on my second-year student placement in social care said to me 'once you've finished your training, you come back. You come back and we'll find a job for you.' I found that helpful, a boost to my confidence and I did go back to work for that team.

I needed pushing at times, but have been encouraged by my own managers on more than one occasion. 'Did you know that role is coming up? You need to go for it.'

What are the barriers to your career progression in social care?

OTs are the minority in social care; there are one or two OTs in each of our teams and approximately seven social workers so perhaps less likely that the OT is the one that's going to grow, strive and get into management. I hope I'm perceived as a role model to other OTs wanting to get into management.

I've observed that men generally progress quicker than women do in social care. My own children were still quite young when I first started working as an OT, on part-time hours. This is a barrier to progression as managers are expected to work full time.

Before the death of George Floyd, there hadn't really been the appetite to talk about what it might

be like for those not from a white background and there just wasn't space to reflect on these aspects. It wouldn't even have crossed my mind to openly talk about these issues as there were no solutions on offer. It made me stop and think about who I am and what the barriers might have been for me; the more you get into senior management, the more you need to be able to push a bit and challenge a bit more.

As an OT, I experienced subtle racism from people in the community, people would talk across me to my white colleague, or talk slowly, with an assumption being that English may have been my second language or that she was the junior member of the visiting duo. Those have been real challenges and barriers, and that I'm sure continues to be an issue within the workforce although there is a real opportunity to try and change that for people.

Where do you see your career in five years' time?

I'm not intending to do anything different just yet and haven't seen anything that I might want to explore. I'm still recovering from the COVID pandemic which was all hands-on deck and just do what you need to do. Everyone forgot what their job roles were and did a bit of everything to help. The service has spent the last year in recovery building new teams to help tackle overdue operational work and get the service back on track. It's a great place to work and I couldn't imagine not working in social care.

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