

Speaking of Research

Series 2 - Barbara Sherriff

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SPEAKERS

Catherine McDonald, Barbara Sherriff

Catherine McDonald 00:05

Hello and Welcome to Speaking of Research, a podcast from the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. I'm Catherine McDonald, and in the second series of our podcast, we're focusing on research that addresses global challenges. We'll be in conversation with doctoral researchers about their research, which global challenges they hope to inform, and how they hope their work will make a difference. In this episode, I'm joined by Barbara Sherriff from the University of Brighton. Barbara, your research looks at how employment can make a positive difference to wellbeing. Sounds really interesting, tell us a bit more about that.

Barbara Sherriff 00:45

Hopefully it is. It's very much about looking at the rise in mental ill health globally. And levels went up prior to Covid, and then they shot up during lockdowns, but they never came back down to pre-covid levels. And so I'm looking at the role of work within that, and what work can do to support people to have better wellbeing.

Catherine McDonald 01:08

So you've already mentioned a global challenge there. What is the specific global challenge you're addressing with this research?

Barbara Sherriff 01:14

I think the specific challenge is mental health rising and the impact that that has in so many areas, but what I'm looking for more is about how to help mitigate that through the workplace.

Catherine McDonald 01:28

And how did you arrive at that? Is this through personal experience, that you have felt that this is a need for this research, that there is a need for this research.

Barbara Sherriff 01:37

Yeah, very much so. My previous organisation, the majority of the employees were Gen-Z employees and knew a lot about the changes in the workforce pre and post covid specifically. But also my background in HR and management showed that this wasn't just us, there was a lot of negative reporting about employers struggling with their differences in employee staff, and we could see a lot of positives, but also a lot of challenges. And that's where I came in, trying to get information that would support everyone to better support young people in the workplace.

Catherine McDonald 02:16

And what have you found out so far?

Barbara Sherriff 02:19

One of the things that I found out is about there's a very big difference in expectations, that seems to be something that comes across loud and clear. So, we've got heightened awareness of mental health through Covid and a lot of work on de-stigmatising mental health by amazing charities such as Mind. But we have also got as part of that young people starting in the workforce, either when everyone was working from home or were hybrid workers, and when you don't have role models or informal mentors present, people are filling in the young gaps as to what's normal, and so there are going to be differences and expectations based on that

Catherine McDonald 02:59

Absolutely. So do you think this research wouldn't be happening if we hadn't all experienced Covid and the subsequent lockdowns?

Barbara Sherriff 03:06

It's hard to say, because, as I say, mental ill health was rising anyway. There are a lot of other things, not just Covid, that have been pointed to about this, social media is probably one that has received the most headlines. But actually, kind of the impact of that is way more nuanced. But there are other things, such as difference in the educational system and the impact of repeated testing in particular.

Catherine McDonald 03:31

And so if you could fast forward to the end of your PhD and have all your research behind you, what would you hope its legacy would be in terms of, what do you specifically hope it will inform or change?

Barbara Sherriff 03:45

I would hope that young people have their needs met at work. We know that at the moment, there's a lot of dissatisfaction. There are high worklessness, there's high sick leave. Essentially, the employers are coming out with stereotypes, and a lot of people are really, really trying hard to support their young people, but they don't really know how. They don't know what the best thing to do is. So, I would hope my research really helps that.

Catherine McDonald 04:13

And can I ask a bit about your methodology. So how you're going to conduct this research? Are you well, I'm assuming you'll be speaking to employers and employees.

Barbara Sherriff 04:21

Yeah, I started off by employer interviews, so with supportive employers. So a lot of the things about expectations came from line managers with between 50 and 100 Gen-Z staff between them. Then I also did a survey were finding out actually, sort of for numbers, what the impacts are of various things, and then my final stage is focus groups, where I'm currently talking to young people about their experiences.

Catherine McDonald 04:49

And what are the sort of headlines that you're finding out from both groups at the moment?

Barbara Sherriff 04:55

I think the headlines are that communication is key. And that shouldn't be a surprise to anyone. But it's it's about understanding the expectations, it's about meeting the expectations, but also potentially about managing those expectations, making sure they are reasonable. And this comes back down to where employers, for example, sell their organisations as being massively supportive of employee mental health. But then maybe aren't clear what this means. So as an employer, you can talk about, for example, we use wellness action plans for all employees, another great invention from Mind. Or they can mean that they have first aid training, mental health first aid training for all managers, or potentially an employee assistance provider to signpost people to emergency numbers or counselling. But actually, what the employee is seeing is, you're really supportive of employee mental health, but without any of that clarity and so sort of thinking, okay, we've got long waiting lists for ADHD diagnosis through the NHS. So, can my employer pay for these? And so, it's about being really explicit about the boundaries of the support, and where does the NHS stop, and an employer's provision start?

Catherine McDonald 06:16

Absolutely. And I would imagine that this sort of framework will vary depending on what business the employer and the employee are in will it?

Barbara Sherriff 06:26

Potentially. I mean, obviously different organisations have different levels of money. If you're a charity, particularly one in the higher education sector, you're going to be squeezed, and so maybe you've got less funds to throw at something. But actually, what I'm looking at isn't about the additional extras. So, for example, if you are giving people discounted gym membership, that might be wonderful for some people, but some people might not be mentally well enough to actually take advantage of that. So, there are financial restrictions. But actually, what we found out is that it's the people are way more important than the optional extras. And this sort of builds on a lot of things from previous things such as the role of a manager, the role of the organisational culture.

Catherine McDonald 07:15

It's so interesting because as somebody who learned so much from my early years working in an office, I simply can't imagine being at that stage of my career and working either remotely or even in a hybrid way, really. And so, I think for managers of sort of my generation, I'm 50, it's a lot to get your head round, isn't it?

Barbara Sherriff 07:36

It's massively different. When I was working in my previous organisation, it was generally our young people who wanted to come back to the workplace. They were the ones who wanted to come back in person, missing their social aspects, missing their being in the office, finding out what it's like to be in the workplace. Yeah, they had a completely different start to anything I would have experienced.

Catherine McDonald 08:00

Yes, I just I can't imagine it, so it's very easy to see how important the research that you're embarking on is going to be. Thank you so much Barbara for joining us today. So thanks to Barbara Sherriff and to you for listening to this episode of Speaking of Research from the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. To find out more, please visit southcoastdtp.ac.uk. Don't forget to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to access earlier and forthcoming episodes. This was a Research Podcast production.