

CAFÉ CONFERENCING:

So Much More Than Just Free Cake

KATRINA WOLINSKI

Creating a positive future begins in human conversation. The simplest and most powerful investment any member of a community or an organisation may make...is to begin talking with other people as though the answers mattered.

Adapted from Greider (1993)

BACKGROUND

The 2002 NCETA Workforce Development Symposium offered a number of interactive sessions that provided delegates with the opportunity to discuss ideas and to network. These interactive sessions were introduced in response to feedback from the 2001 NCETA Workforce Development Symposium. This paper provides an overview of the interactive session called Café Conferencing, outlines the methodology involved in this technique and synthesises some of the workforce development issues discussed during the session. The paper presents a summary of the questions, concerns and ideas raised by those who attended the Café Conferencing session. It explores participants' views of the concept of workforce development and how it can be implemented, outlines perceptions of the actual and potential alcohol and drugs (AOD) workforce, and discusses contextual differences between organisations. The final section of this paper outlines some workforce development strategies suggested by participants, identifying the need for organisations to be strategic and pro-active in their approach to workforce development.

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WHAT IS CAFÉ CONFERENCING?

Café Conferencing is an interactive conferencing technique that recognises that learning frequently occurs through informal conversation and social

Box 1: Symposium Themes

1. Establishing a Common Understanding of Workforce Development
2. Diversity Within The Workforce
3. Diversity in Strategies
4. Diversity in Contexts
5. Diversity in Knowledge
6. Diversity in Learning

Katrina Wolinski
Research Officer
National Centre for
Education and Training on
Addiction (NCETA)
Flinders University

contact. Café Conferencing aims to capture and facilitate this process of learning by creating a café atmosphere (Whole Systems Associates, 2002).

At the Symposium, the Café Conferencing session provided a forum for open and informal discussion of workforce development issues in the AOD field. Cake and coffee were available throughout the session and acting as a social lubricant, enhanced the café atmosphere. The session went for 90 minutes and was attended by approximately 45 delegates. The session was held in a room set up with six tables, each seating 10 people. Each table was dedicated to one of the six Symposium themes outlined in Box 1. A key theme focused on reaching a common understanding within the AOD field regarding the meaning of workforce development. Other themes examined issues such as diversity within the workforce, the different contexts in which workers and services operate, various workforce development strategies, and diversity in knowledge types and learning within the AOD sector. Further explanation of each theme is provided at the beginning of the proceedings.

Each table had a host whose role was to clarify the process, facilitate discussion, establish and maintain group norms and sustain a continuous thread of conversation throughout the session. The hosts were provided with questions to stimulate and guide discussion.

The session organiser welcomed participants and introduced the format and aims of the session. Participants were invited to sit at the table allocated to a theme they were interested in discussing. Participants were encouraged to write ideas, theories and opinions generated by the discussion on large paper placemats provided. They were also encouraged to move between the various tables at any time throughout the session and join in the discussion of a number of different workforce development themes. The objective of this process was to facilitate cross pollination of ideas from group to group and to generate a shared knowledge base. The placemats served as a written record of the ideas generated, capturing the collective insights of the session.

OUTCOMES

Participants approached Café Conferencing with energy and enthusiasm. The technique was clearly an effective way to share personal experiences and translate them into collective insights that could inform workforce development policies and strategies. Individuals varied in the benefit they gained from attending the session. For some the benefit was the process, for others the context. Some discovered a new interactive conferencing strategy to take home with them and trial, while others had gained a greater understanding of workforce development and the complex nature of the AOD field. Overall, the session highlighted the impact of context, knowledge and experience on participants' perspective of the AOD field.

Transcribing the collective insights of the participants from the placemats allowed for identification of the cross pollination effect that resulted from participants moving between discussion groups. As a result of these mobile discussions, individual Symposium themes often merged. This paper is a culmination of participants' insight into the six Symposium themes. The transcript from the session underwent further thematic analysis and is presented here according to the central themes of what is workforce development, how is it implemented, who is the AOD workforce, in what contexts do they operate, and actual and potential workforce development strategies. The content of this paper reflects the written contributions of some participants, not the opinion of the author or the research literature. Verbatim comments are given in quotation marks.

What Is Workforce Development?

The promotional material for the Symposium stated that defining workforce development can be like trying to “catch clouds”, with a concise definition being elusive. The aim of workforce development is to enhance the capacity and commitment of agencies and individuals to respond to problematic AOD use. Participants of the Café Conferencing session agreed that workforce development is not a case of “one size fits all”. Workforce development was seen to encompass a range of concepts and strategies which operate in diverse settings and contexts. It was agreed that workforce development is more than just education and training. It ranges from macro to micro strategies, from organisational change, policy change and structural change, to individual learning and skill development. Forging a common understanding of workforce development is the first step towards developing a national AOD workforce development strategy.

How Is It Implemented?

Group discussions revealed a common understanding of workforce development as a multifaceted approach, functioning on an individual, organisational and system level. While the concept of workforce development is not difficult, the challenge is to fit its various threads into a cohesive conceptual framework which can be operationalised.

It was suggested during the Café Conferencing session that workforce development strategies can be implemented in three ways, through sideways movements, as well as top down and bottom up processes. Participants agreed that both the direction and nature of change impact on how well new strategies are received by workers. Multifaceted approaches that utilise all three directions were believed to be the ideal foundation of a workforce development strategy.

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Participants identified that, on a micro level, the people working at the coalface are the “signposts”. They indicate the workforce development needs of the agency. Top down policy is unlikely to be successful without knowledge of workers’ needs. It is important that workers be involved in implementing change, through research, policy or action. This approach recognises the contribution of AOD workers to the agency and the sector and gives workers a sense of ownership. Empowering workers in this way was proposed as a strategy to facilitate retention of AOD workers in the field.

Who Is The AOD Workforce?

Participants’ identified a diverse range of human service workers who have the potential to respond to AOD issues. The extensive list of potential respondees produced by participants has been divided into seven categories, as shown in Table 1. The diversity in the workforce reflects the diverse nature of clients with AOD issues. As a result of the diverse clientele, many generalist service providers are regularly responding to AOD issues. It is important that these generalist service providers can effectively manage AOD issues in their workplace.

Table 1: The Alcohol and Other Drugs Workforce

Category	Description
AOD Specialist Services	Psychiatrists, doctors, specialist nurses, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) / Narcotics Anonymous (NA) workers, Needle Syringe Program (NSP) workers, AOD workers
Primary Care	General practitioners, nurses
Wider Health and Allied Health	Psychologists, social workers, mental health workers, counsellors, pharmacists, Indigenous workers, sobering up unit staff, youth workers, community workers, community health workers
Education System	Teachers, principals, trainers, tertiary student health services
Criminal Justice System	Police officers, watch house staff, judges, magistrates, probation officers, customs
Licensed Trade and Regulatory Bodies	Licensees, bar and security staff, environmental health officers, fire service, licensing and gaming authorities
Others	Clergy, council workers, hairdressers, politicians, law makers, researchers, policy makers, welfare, support services, volunteers, family, carers and clients

Café Conferencing participants identified a multitude of potential benefits arising from the diverse AOD workforce. Workforce development encourages networking between various services, resulting in cross disciplinary consultation, shared information and transfer of skills between disciplines. By acknowledging the generalist AOD workforce it increases the potential trained workforce who can engage with individuals with AOD problems. The potential workforce can also be utilised to increase the dissemination of education and health promotion material. Ultimately prevention and early intervention may reduce the demand for tertiary stage treatment. These are just some of the benefits discussed by participants that could result from identifying the range of professions who engage with people who experience AOD problems, and recognising their potential value to the field.

Participants also acknowledged that there are difficulties associated with such a diverse AOD workforce. Firstly, it has implications for how the AOD field is conceptualised. What is the role of the AOD specialist services? It was noted that all agencies have different goals, as well as different understanding and attitudes towards alcohol and other drugs and the people who use them. This does not only occur within individual disciplines but also within each workforce. A key question posed by the Symposium was how do we consolidate the experience and knowledge of such a diverse workforce to provide the best possible care?

In What Contexts Do AOD Workers Operate?

The Café Conference participants agreed that workers who encounter AOD issues operate in a variety of contexts, each of which presents its own unique workforce development challenges. There are differences in philosophy, treatment approach, and education and training. There are differences between non-government, government, private, and community based organisations.

The context of urban agencies differs from those in rural and remote areas. Differences also exist in relation to cultural specificity, political affiliation and religious background as well as the type of knowledge that is valued. The AOD sector reflects the mixture of clients, culture and needs within the community. Participants indicated their interest in the work of the Building Trades Group of Unions who have shaped workforce development to suit their culture. The work of this group was presented during one of the Symposium keynote presentations by Dean Hall and Trevor Sharp (see paper contained in this volume). Participants felt that the work of this group has been both progressive and successful.

Differences in Philosophy and Treatment Approach

The Café Conference participants identified the origins of the AOD sector as religion and medicine. Consequently there is a historical context to the diversity in the field regarding approaches and philosophies around service provision. This is captured in polarised positions such as abstinence versus harm minimisation, inpatient versus outpatient treatment, medicated treatment versus cognitive behavioural therapy, holistic care versus a narrow treatment approach. Different philosophical and treatment approaches can be a barrier to agencies working together. However, participants agreed that all organisations share a common goal - “to empower people to overcome AOD problems”. They believe that the ideal workforce development approach supersedes philosophical differences, providing strategies for increasing the ability of frontline workers from all agencies to effectively engage with clients with AOD issues.

Differences in Education and Training

The participants vigorously debated the advantages and disadvantages of formal education over workplace learning. The question remains - is workplace learning effective and is it adequate? The Café Conferencing discussions suggested that as a result of funding constraints many AOD workers in non-government organisations (NGOs) have little formal education and training but a wealth of experience. Staff are often recruited through work placements with ongoing supervision. As with frontline workers, managers also have varying levels of education and training in both management and AOD skills. Explanations for the diverse level of education, training and competence throughout the sector range from the capacity of organisations to offer and fund comprehensive education and training, to the lack of standardised training courses and accreditation. Workforce development issues relating to education and training include resource allocation, minimum training standards, recognition of experience, tertiary AOD education, accreditation, professionalisation, career paths and ultimately staff recruitment and retention.

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Differences Between Organisations

The Café Conference participants highlighted the significant differences between non-government, government, private and community organisations, operating in either a rural or urban setting. For example, aspects of capacity building in organisational settings may differ from those applied in community settings. Similarly, the politics that influence workforce development may differ between government and non-government organisations (NGOs). Distance learning may play a more vital role for rural and remote workers than it will for those in urban areas. Each organisation will vary according to factors such as size, resources, communication, networking and type of service provision. As a result each agency will experience unique workforce development challenges that will impact on their approach. Diversity between organisations highlights the need for workforce development strategies to be both “situation specific and globally relevant”.

Participants in this session agreed that the greatest diversity in context in the AOD field is between AOD specialist services in the government and non-government sectors. There were many comments about the benefits and challenges of working in the NGO context. It was noted that NGOs are at the grass roots, they are more accessible and offer a broad range of services. NGOs were also described as having the ability to recreate themselves. Despite the benefits, the NGO sector faces many challenges, particularly limited resources. However, this challenge has stimulated considerable collaborative activity between NGOs, including sharing resources and rental sites. Participants revealed limited strategic

planning infrastructure as another challenge for the NGO sector. NGOs, and to a degree government organisations, also have difficulties with data recording systems. However, NGOs do not have the infrastructure or resources to resolve this issue. This has implications for recording data, applying for funding grants and ultimately the ability of NGOs to contribute to the field's evidence-base and to engage in evidence-based practice. Participants perceived that improving the capacity of NGOs could be achieved by increasing collaboration between NGOs and introducing system wide workforce development strategies.

Cultural Differences

Cultural, political and religious issues were raised as important considerations during development and implementation of workforce development initiatives. Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse communities present unique challenges to the AOD field. Participants concluded that a workforce that is culturally sensitive and open minded in their approach is best placed to provide AOD services to these individuals.

Differences in Knowledge

A relatively recent change in the health field is the shift towards evidence-based practice, which has arisen largely in response to the rapid expansion in the field's knowledge base (Roche, 2001). However, as indicated by feedback from participants of the 2001 Workforce Development Symposium, other types of knowledge are equally important, particularly knowledge gained from qualitative research and practical experience.

The controversy over evidence-based practice (EBP) was highlighted within the session. Some argued that EBP privileges certain approaches and is therefore biased. It was argued that the more relational approaches are disadvantaged because they are not as easy to measure and as a result are less attractive to funding bodies. It was suggested that there should be a shift from the medical emphasis of evidence-based research to a greater emphasis on outcomes and quality based research. One group substituted the word evidence with action, conceptualising it as action based research, moving away from the medical model and attempting to build something unique to the AOD field.

EBP has its place in the AOD sector, lending validity and reliability to treatment methods and confidence to workers. However, as one participant wrote "it is important that it does not drive the research agenda". Participants expressed concern that motivation could adversely influence how types of knowledge are valued or produced. Participants acknowledged that research proposals are often written to obtain funding rather than for the sole purpose of increasing understanding. The reality is that knowledge is valued differently according to how it is produced.

Workforce Development Strategies

Feedback provided from the 2001 Symposium, NCETA website and other meetings has indicated that workforce development is frequently equated with education and training, or the term staff development is replaced with workforce development without any real difference in application. A diverse range of workforce development strategies were discussed during the Café Conference, ranging from those at a macro level, such as policy and structural changes, to those at a micro level, including strategies focusing on the development of workplaces and individuals. Some of these strategies are outlined below.

Aim For Professionalisation

The professionalisation of AOD workers was seen by some participants as a positive way to bridge the gap between non-government and government organisations. There was concern and anxiety over workers labelled as clinicians or counsellors who are not trained or accredited. It was suggested that the introduction of standardised competency based training nationwide and the development of detailed role descriptions may lead to a greater understanding of what services can be provided and how they can be improved.

The Role of The Media

Session participants recognised the important role of media in promoting workforce development but that the AOD sector markets itself poorly. It was agreed that part of a workforce development strategy includes the need to be “media savvy” and develop guidelines for long term collaboration with the media around recruitment, education, prevention and dissemination of research findings. The risk of misinterpretation was highlighted as a result of the various agenda of the media, but nonetheless, it was recognised as a powerful vehicle for dissemination.

Identify Workers’ Needs

Members of the AOD workforce vary in their level of qualifications and experience. As a result education and training needs to be offered at a number of different levels. The question was often asked “how do we know what they need to know?” Participants identified a number of ways to do this, from asking and observing workers, to conducting peer appraisals, performance appraisals or needs analysis. These are just some suggestions for identifying the additional professional development needs of staff.

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Encourage Workforce Interaction

Networking, collaborating and liaising are buzz words for any industry, and are of particular importance to implementing workforce development within the AOD sector.

Networking

Networking was highlighted as a useful workforce development strategy. It is important to recognise the need for support networks within the AOD field as addiction can be a chronic relapsing condition and the field is perceived as offering few rewards or successes for AOD workers. Sharing support, knowledge and skills were highlighted as essential components of workforce development. As such, it is important to establish systems that allow organisations to respond to the needs of workers, utilising networking and collegiate and peer interaction as a way to promote learning, support and flexibility.

Collaborate

Participants suggested that adopting a collaborative approach at local, state and/or federal levels is often a strategic decision based on levels of funding and resources. One participant noted that people in Australia are generally perceived as working in parallel without much interaction, however this is slowly changing. NGO’s were described as having adapted well to their environment. With scarce resources, the need to collaborate has become more apparent. As a result, relationship building strategies to support collaborative planning have met with success. Workforce development in itself is not a fragmented

structure, it is a collaborative effort. Effective and wide dissemination is a key to sharing information about what works and what doesn't, to facilitate success and avoid repetition of mistakes.

Arrange Mentoring and Supervision

Mentoring and supervision were identified as integral to workforce development. Having credible people, who are accessible and can be utilised as a resource is a key feature and an essential component of working in a supportive environment. Participants suggested that the concept of mentoring in the AOD field is not widely understood and thus not applied.

Provide Access to AOD Resources

Another simple yet very effective strategy suggested by participants is to provide workers with access to information relevant to their role. Availability of good information to guide decision making is invaluable. Information dissemination was believed to be inadequate. The question was posed, is dissemination the role of researchers, and if not, then whose role is it? Ensuring that latest research findings are available and giving workers access to these through the internet or a reference library is fundamental. Participants stated that this is the responsibility of both the manager and the individual. Researchers also play an instrumental role in information dissemination. In this electronic age, the posting of research findings on the internet is a fast and cheap method of dissemination. The use of AOD list servers like Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia (ADCA) Update or Drugtalk can help increase awareness of current research and promote the dissemination of findings.

Barriers

Participants agreed that there are many structural barriers to implementing workforce development strategies, ranging from organisational to managerial. They may be resource barriers for workers trying to increase their level of AOD professional development, or relational barriers between managers and employees.

In NGOs mentoring and supervision can prove difficult due to a lack of professional personnel, there are also barriers to clinical supervision as it must be funded, whether by the agency, the professional organisation, or the individual. Without standard policies and procedures, opportunities for individuals to upskill can be missed. The AOD sector tends to bury its mistakes rather than learn from them. Many lessons can be learnt about workforce development by sharing personal and organisational experiences.

SUMMARY

The issues that emerged through the Café Conferencing process highlighted the significant progress in the AOD field regarding understanding of workforce development since the last Symposium. It is now widely understood that workforce development is more than just education and training, it is a multifaceted approach which addresses the range of factors impacting on the ability of the AOD workforce to function with maximum effectiveness.

It has been increasingly recognised that context plays a significant role in the type of workforce development strategies that can be implemented. The ideal model is workforce development at an individual, organisational and system level. System and structural approaches such as recruitment strategies, policy change and accreditation are important components of workforce development, as are strategies aimed at the individual such as mentoring, peer driven initiatives, collegiate networking,

information exchange and mutual support. These strategies can help organisations and individuals engage in workforce development, thereby improving the ability of the agency and individual to effectively engage with clients experiencing problems with alcohol and other drugs.

Feedback from the Symposium indicated that Café Conferencing was extremely well received with 90% of participants indicating that this format should be used again. The fundamental premise of Café Conferencing was reinforced in the feedback sheets, where 89% of respondents thought the lunch and tea breaks provided a good opportunity for interaction, networking and exchange of ideas. By providing a relaxed café atmosphere we were able to facilitate interaction and the exchange of ideas around key workforce development in issues in the AOD field. While the session was more structured than a lunch or tea break, the result was the same, all participants who completed a feedback sheet reported the session to be a very useful/useful opportunity for interaction, networking and exchange of ideas.

Café Conferencing provided the opportunity for a synergy of ideas and experience. The participants represented the diversity within the AOD field and learnt from each other by sharing experiences. This was validating for many and an opportunity to learn for others. Café Conferencing was a successful conferencing technique, providing participants with the opportunity to interact and discuss important questions around workforce development in the AOD field.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future Café Conferencing sessions may benefit from three additional procedural strategies. The first is to ask the table hosts to take notes throughout the session. This will provide an overview of the discussion, capturing the input of all participants and will help keep participants comments in context.

The second strategy, used concurrently or alternatively, is to record the outcomes of the session by asking each table to summarise the collective discussion and ideas. Each table could then present the summary to the whole group. This process gives all participants, in particular those who have moved to other tables, the opportunity to ensure their views are fairly and accurately represented.

A third strategy is to use the summarised content of the discussion as the basis for a workshop. This may be a useful adjunct for people who participated in the session as well as for those who were unable to attend due to concurrent sessions. The workshop would facilitate further discussion of the emerging workforce development issues and the development of potential workforce development strategies.

Further information about the concept and principles of Café Conferencing is available from <www.theworldcafe.com>. Further information is also available from NCETA.

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Author Contact Details

Katrina Wolinski
Research Officer
National Centre for Education and
Training on Addiction (NCETA)
Flinders University

GPO Box 2100
Adelaide SA 5001
Ph: 08 8201 7576
katrina.wolinski@flinders.edu.au