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Self-managed supervision

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Abstract

The growth of professional supervision in social work over time has been accompanied by complex attempts to theorise key elements of supervisory practice, serving mainly to highlight the need to further examine what constitutes supervisory support in current regulatory environments. In particular, changed forms of governance at the heart of *New Public Management* generate a need to theorise broader patterns of support available to human service workers. This paper draws on a study of advice and support-seeking behaviours of human service professionals in three South Australian organisations. The findings of this study indicate the fluidity of current professional supervision practice, with workers seeking professional wisdom, identifying practice direction and debriefing with a range of colleagues within and outside their organisation. Accordingly, the paper confirms that supervisors should no longer be thought of as the sole provider of professional advice and support for human service workers and conceptualises the workers as active agents shaping their own learning.

Key Words: supervision, workplace learning, discretion

Introduction

Professional supervision has long been at the heart of mechanisms to ensure that social workers and other human service workers receive the support and guidance they need to operate effectively in today's complex environment. It is clearly important to both individual workers and their organisations (Jones, 2004; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002) and a supportive supervisor is commonly identified as being associated with a positive work environment (Mor Barak, Travis, Pyun, & Xie, 2009). The growth of supervision over time has been accompanied with increasingly complex attempts to conceptualise the essence of its diverse practice forms (Davys and Beddoe 2010), generating 'a malleable concept in search of a precise definition' (Grauel 2002, p.4). Indeed new work practices continue to challenge the more established supervision conventions, highlighting the need for further examination of what constitutes supervisory support (Milne *et al* 2008).

There are diverse views about the extent to which organisational behaviour has been shaped by a *new public management* (NPM) emphasis on contractual service provision (Greuning 2001, Hood and Peters 2004). but it has been accepted widely that traditional support elements of supervision, as previously understood, are seen to be subsumed under a regulatory emphasis (Kaboolian, 1998, Bradley, Engelbrecht, & Hojer, 2010; Collins, 2008; Scott & Farrow, 1993) as a consequence of the emphasis on administrative tasks at the cost of educational and supportive tasks. These new forms of governance and organisational control are seen to emphasise both the role of human service workers as regulatory agents, but also as subjects of managerial control (White 2009). Some authors go so far as to suggest this changes ‘raises the spectre of surveillance’ (Beddoe 2010). Rather than focus on arguably problematic nature of recent iterations of supervision, however, this paper argues that an enhanced conceptualisation of supervision would include a range of activities through which workers look for support and professional guidance from a broad range of sources, a conceptualisation that offers hope that professional development in current organisational and administrative configurations can be dynamic and empowering and need not be sinister.

Despite their importance for ensuring sustainable, quality human services, few studies have been devoted to the ways in which workers identify, utilise and value a broader range of supports available to them in a human services workplace. This paper draws on a study of advice and support seeking behaviours by human service professionals in three South Australian organisations. The vast majority of these workers reported that they received supervision but their responses indicated that their manager or supervisor was certainly not their only source of support and guidance—indeed, many identified that they went outside the organisation for supports traditionally provided within supervision. Workers sought professional wisdom, identified practice direction and debriefed with a range of colleagues within and outside their organisation.

In analysing these data this article argues that, while the old model of supervision may have been superseded, human service professionals are increasingly forging a new model in which they manage their own professional networks to meet their needs for advice and guidance. Post new public management an enhanced conceptualisation of supervision would focus not on ‘the provision of supervision’ but on the management of supervision by individual human service practitioners.

Problematising supervisory practice

The importance of support and ongoing professional development for social work and human service professionals has long been identified in studies of the human services workforce. As a labour intensive service industry, the technology at the heart of the human services is essentially intellectual capital (Carson et al, 2004) and workforce issues such as high turnover deplete organisations and the clients they aim to serve. Although worker characteristics have traditionally been the focus of workforce retention strategies (Collins, 2008, p. 1185), the importance of social support has been recognised in studies identifying the importance of both organisational and supervisory support (Bogo & Dill, 2008, p. 90; Collins, 2008, p. 1182; Jacquet, Clark, Morazes, & Withers, 2007). Kadushin's categorisation of the key functions of supervision as administrative, educational and supportive has provided a useful and pervasive structure for discussions of supervision (Dill & Bogo, 2009; Jones, 2004; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). While administrative supervision describes the role of the supervisor in overseeing the management of agency business, the educational and supportive roles of the supervisor contribute to the development of expertise and resilience of the worker.

There is strong evidence that a supportive supervisor makes a very positive impact on the life of the professional human service worker. Mor Barak et al (2009) conclude from their meta-analysis of 27 research articles examining the effect of supervision on child welfare workers, social workers or mental health workers (p. 12) and outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job stress and burnout, that "most of the studies that examine the importance of social and emotional supervisory support find statistically significant relationships between such support and beneficial outcomes, particularly job satisfaction" (p. 10). This support includes a significant guidance and advisory role; "task assistance" (Mor Barak et al., 2009, pp. 21) and the teaching of how to do the work is an important element of supportive supervision.

Yet an organisational environment where managerial concerns are predominant generates a changed context within which social work and human service professionals now operate, and influences the way in which professional supervision is performed (Collins, 2008; Jones, 2004). In the wake of new public management, human service organisations have been encouraged to be more businesslike than traditionally bureaucratic. Associated with this is an increase in the regulation of, and accountability for, service delivery which

changes the roles of human service line managers, reducing their centrality as professional supervisors and increasing their responsibility for managing contracts between commissioning departments and contracted agencies (Kaboolian 1998). Central to this change has been the difference between support and guidance designed to achieve organisational purposes and support and guidance for professional or client centred purposes.

The consequential changes to professional supervision have been argued to be the availability of supervision to social work and other human service professionals (Collins, 2008) with regularity of supervision being a key concern and a failure to address issues such as the emotional demands of the work (Collins, 2008 citing Gibbs 2001; Regehr et al 2004). NPM peaked in the 1990s and arguably is now in decline, with the focus shifting to organizations operating as complex adaptive systems with characteristics which are qualitatively different from market-based forms and business principles as endorsed by NPM (Rhodes 2008, Hood & Peters 2004, Langan, 2000). There has, as yet, been little exploration of what impact this has had on workers in organisations. Supervisors are focussed on ensuring that the organisation's goals are achieved through the efforts of the worker (Dill & Bogo, 2009) but both research and practice have tended to identify the worker/supervisor relationship separately from other relationships in the workers' professional context, with an emphasis on the dyadic and hierarchical elements of the supervisory relationship. It is important to note, though, that some studies have suggested that the impact of collegial support is different to that of a supportive supervisor (Jacquet et al., 2007). Collaborative work arrangements and collegial team-work have been identified as providing worker support and having an important impact on worker job satisfaction and reductions in emotional exhaustion (Pirie, 2003; Zunz, 1998; Thompson et al., 2005; Collins, 2008).

Colleagues and professional networks provide both emotional support and a range of task guidance that contributes to worker professional learning. In addition to occurring in the supervisory relationship, professional learning also occurs through informal networks facilitated through individual workers' efforts to socialise with colleagues (Baker-Doyle, 2011). Research on workplace learning has shown that informal interactions with colleagues can foster workplace knowledge (Boud & Middleton, 2003) and that this type of learning does not necessarily need to involve those in supervisory or mentor positions (Boud & Middleton, 2003). Indeed, informal learning can take precedence over formal learning as it occurs more frequently (Berg & Chyung, 2008) due to its sporadic, but continual, nature (Livingstone, 1999). In comparison, formal learning is often limited due to time and

organisational constraints (Boud & Middleton, 2003). Cross (2007) notes that, “80 per cent of workplace learning occurs through informal means, only 20 per cent of what organisations invest in learning is dedicated to enhancing informal learning” (p. 230).

In a range of industries there is evidence that workplace learning takes place through a variety of networks both within and beyond organisational boundaries (Berg & Cheung, 2008). Such informal learning is “predominantly unstructured, experiential, and non-institutional” (Marsick & Volpe 1999, p. 4) although it may also be intentional, and include self-directed learning (Marsick & Watkins 2001), mentoring (Conlon 2004), and networking (Eraut 2004). Equally, unintentional informal learning frequently takes place while undertaking daily tasks (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003), and it can take a reactive form, where the learning is incidental and unplanned but still recognised by the learner retrospectively. Both intentional and unintentional informal learning take place through daily social interactions such as working alongside others, tackling challenging tasks, dealing with clients, as well as interaction in non-work settings (Eraut, 2004).

Despite this identification of the importance of informal learning and social support, forms of support between co-workers have received limited scholarly attention (for a few early but relevant studies see Collins, 2008) in the human services as a consequence of a preoccupation with the worker-supervisor axis or worker-organisation dichotomy (Bell, Kulkarni, & Dalton, 2003, p. 467; Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006, p. 552). An exception to this is the study by Bradley (2008) of processes that support the induction of new social workers identifying that new social workers look to colleagues for guidance and support as a supplement to the support they receive through the formally endorsed supervision process.

‘Most of the social workers in the study said that they preferred to learn about their new role by observing and talking to experienced staff whose work they valued and with whom they felt at ease and supported. Working alongside colleagues who conveyed values of positive regard, respect, warmth, acceptance and understanding, was found to be helpful and empowering to social workers in their induction phase of employment.’
(Bradley, 2008:359)

Boud has classified areas of informal workplace learning as 1) *Mastery of organisational processes*, 2) *Negotiating relationships in the workplace* (including strategic positioning for career purposes) and 3) *Dealing with atypical situations*, where there are no set procedures or

processes (Boud & Middleton 2003). While all three components can be related to the support and guidance needs of human service professionals, the latter is particularly critical, where the worker needs to exercise discretion to determine appropriate responses to situations that are often complex, pressured and constrained by limited resources. Guidance and information sharing between colleagues is one way in which the exercise of discretion is shaped. According to Albrecht and Adelman (1987), communication between individuals, “reduces uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one’s life experience” (p. 19). But the nature of professional discretion in government departments and contracted service delivery agencies has altered in the wake of new public management (Kaboolian, 1998).

The exercise of discretion in such situations was the focus of Lipsky’s (2010) account of street level bureaucracy with its exploration of the motivations and commitments of a range of human service workers including social workers, policy and teachers and their managers; and the recognition of the limited ability of managers to control street-level practice. Lipsky argued that the goals of public organisations can be contradictory and require workers to decide between different priorities to make a policy work but the problem is compounded by the fact that they tend to have insufficient resources to do what they are required to do. For Lipsky, discretion is necessary to make policy operational but appropriate discretion is based on professional values rather than front line workers simply cutting corners to reduce pressure on their workloads (Lipsky 2010). While Lipsky identified the limitations of managers, with their accountability to the organisation, to shape the exercise of this discretion, colleagues were seen to be highly influential (Carson, Chung & Evans 2014).

In the Australian human services context very little is known about how social workers and other human service seek support and guidance, and from whom. This study sought to first, explore how a range of human service practitioners managed their need for information and advice and, second, reconceptualise supervision as a process managed by workers to enhance their professional performance.

Method

To explore this aspect of the workplace learning and development of human service workers, participants from three diverse human service organisations in South Australia were invited to participate in an online survey. This research explored from whom human service workers

had sought support, both within their institution and outside their institution. In particular, the research sought to address the questions:

- 1) From whom do workers get information and advice, within and outside their organisation?
- 2) With whom do workers discuss information, inside and outside their organisation
- 3) What determines the value that they place on the information that they receive from others?

The project included workers from one large government agency, one faith-based, and one secular not-for-profit agency. The organisations provided services related to aged care, youth work, child protection, social work and counselling, either providing direct service, management, or employed in support roles.

A total of 193 human service practitioners with experience ranging from six months to over 30 years (see Table 1) working in a range of professional and administrative roles in the human services completed the survey (see Table 2). The majority of respondents (88 per cent) (n=171) were government employees, while 12 per cent (n=22) worked in the two not-for-profit organisations. A total of 76 respondents specifically identified themselves as social workers but our scrutiny of the data identified no significant differences between these respondents and the broader group.

Table 1: Respondent characteristics

Table 2: Respondent characteristics

Participants were invited to complete an online survey estimated to take 20 – 30 minutes to complete. The survey utilised multiple choice questions, closed questions allowing more than one response, and open-ended questions where participants could provide extended text responses.

From whom do workers learn?

Formal professional supervision was widespread, with the majority (87 per cent) of participants indicating that they received formal professional supervision. The length of time someone had worked in the human services did influence whether they were receiving professional supervision, with 96 per cent early-career respondents but only 90 per cent of mid-career respondents and 81 per cent experienced respondents affirming that they received supervision. For most respondents this supervision was provided within their organisation although 7 per cent of respondents indicated that they received formal professional supervision both inside and outside their organisation.

It is evident, however, that formal supervision is conceptualised by some respondents as distinct from other professional development and guidance activities. Despite the high number of respondents who indicated in response to a question late in the survey that they received professional supervision, only a small number actually used the term supervision earlier in the survey when describing the nature of the discussions they had within or outside the organisation. On the other hand, without using this supervision label, over half of the respondents indicated that they sought advice within their organisation about specific cases – the management of the case, problems they were experiencing and the range of options available. Traditionally such discussions occur in formal professional supervision but evidence presented below demonstrates that workers did not exclusively turn to such supervision for this guidance.

Advice and guidance within the organisation

Supervision is only one of the ways that respondents reported meeting their needs for guidance, education and support. Seeking advice and discussing issues with managers featured prominently, although it is interesting to note how many workers *did not* identify managers as a useful source of advice. As might be expected, early-career workers were the most likely to seek advice (79 per cent) and discuss issues (77 per cent) with managers although it is notable that over 20 per cent of these relatively inexperienced respondents apparently did not take guidance from their managers. Their more senior colleagues, although almost as likely to discuss issues with their managers, were even less likely to seek advice (72 per cent) from them.

Other sources of advice and guidance within the organisation were used extensively. In addition to their managers (or indeed sometimes apparently instead of their managers) workers turned to their colleagues for advice and guidance. As indicated below (see Table 3), senior but non-managerial staff performed an important role for workers of all levels of seniority.

Table 3: Advice and guidance seeking within organisation

When asked about how they assessed the advice and guidance that they collected, respondents reported that it was the insights that they saw embedded in the advice and guidance, its practical application and the use they had been able to make of past information from an individual that determined the value they placed on the input of that individual (see Table 4).

Table 4: Explanations of value placed on advice and guidance within the organisation (by % respondents in that seniority group)

A highlight of this finding is the professional confidence reported by the early-career practitioners, who demonstrated a willingness to make their own active judgements of the advice and guidance they were accessing. While the status of the individual with whom they were speaking was more important for early-career than mid-career or experienced workers, it is notable that these early-career workers placed a high value on their own assessment of the worth of previous insights or the applicability of the previous information from a particular source. This paints a picture of self-confident, active professionals making assessments, cognisant of but not necessarily reliant on an organisational mandate. Our data suggest that while increasing numbers of years in practice gave workers increased independence from the status of their advisor, from the very earliest years workers were actively choosing the sources of their advice, and assessing its merits, based on professional criteria.

Following Kadushin (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002), we can see that workers described a range of professional advice-seeking discussions including *educational* emphases, such as

seeking theoretical insights into their work, solution seeking through comparison with other cases, seeking or sharing knowledge of services, using colleagues as a sounding board to review their decisions and discussions of ethical dilemmas and their own personal attitudes and involvements. In the words of our respondents, wisdom sharing inside organisations was, *“often around sharing knowledge regarding particular services available and criteria for accessing and meeting needs of young people”* or learning about *“colleagues’ perspectives, their practice knowledge, and information”*.

In addition a large majority of respondents sought *administrative* direction from individuals within their organisation about processes or procedures, risk assessments, case directions and planning, legal issues, organisational procedures and crisis management. This is illustrated by respondents who reported that *“Discussions often relate to a particular process or procedure”* and *“Advice on customers, referrals and situations customers are in”* and *“Direction of case direction safety issues, staffing issues, procedures and any issues or improvement resource issues.”* Others sought advice on types of resources available, as typified by the comment; *“I want to know how they have dealt with a similar situation, resources and services that may assist and policies and procedural requirements.”*

Finally, *debriefing* was an important focus of conversations with colleagues, with one third of respondents identifying that they used their colleagues for this purpose. Respondents described expressions of frustration about organisational or leadership issues, discussions about issues with other staff, seeking support and a listening ear when issues were difficult to handle, overwhelming or distressing. Within the organisation, workers reported, *“I am really just seeking out a sounding board, I tend to present an overview of the case, briefly outline what I want to do and highlight my concern and then receive some feedback from the person I’m consulting with”* or *“With colleagues I tend to interact in an informal way - chats over a coffee, quick debriefs...more moral support than anything.”* Others also appreciated *“spontaneous discussions within the worksite.”*

Seeking beyond organisational boundaries

Not only were workers active in seeking advice and guidance within their organisation, however, but—consistent with the behaviour of workers in other industries—social workers and other human service workers reported seeking information and advice across the boundaries of their organisations. As professionals the extra-organisational advice and

support they seek is from workers in their own field (75 per cent of respondents) in related fields (62 per cent) and indeed from non-work contacts (30 per cent).

Outside their organisation, they found relevance for their work when checking on policy directions in another field or in Indigenous communities and taking a sounding of community views. Workers commented that they sought direction for “*Referrals for specific interventions (i.e. anger management, grief and loss, relationships, risk assessments*” and “*Discussion can also occur when planning logistics for rehabilitation programs and matching suitable residents for said programs*”. For a majority of respondents, “*generally it will be in relation to solving a specific problem.*”

Debriefing with individuals outside the organisations was often with family members but occurred in similar ways to the debriefing processes within the organisation. For example, one respondent shared with a relative in another human services profession “*to debrief as our workplaces do not do this very well*” while the majority of the other responses were typified by the following; “*I'm simply looking for someone I can discuss a case with freely and sharing experiences with people who may not relate but may provide other kinds of support.*” Debriefing with individuals outside the workplace was often conducted when issues were “*difficult to handle or overwhelming or distressful.*”

What determines the value of advice received from others?

Active decision-making about advice and guidance within the organisation is evident in the fact that early-career (31 per cent) and mid-career (21 per cent) workers took some account of the status of the worker outside their organisation. Again, however, it was the prior usefulness and applicability of the advice that was most heavily weighted in the decision-making. Participants' responses painted a picture of collaborative partnerships across both organisational and professional boundaries which revolved in many instances around the individual cases on which they were working. Illustrative of the discussions they reported were references to cross-professional or cross-jurisdictional sharing; “*Sharing experiences and understanding of work related issues across jurisdictions*” or “*I have a friend who works in mental health and her perspective primarily adult focused is interesting*” and “*I have a relative who is a Psychologist and we might share information as to how to best respond to certain situations or problems*”.

The high level of discretion exercised by respondents in where they sought advice raises the question of how multiple sources of advice and, in particular, advice from within or without the organisation, are weighted by individual workers (see Table 5). Once again respondents demonstrated their confidence and active engagement in discriminating among options. Many respondents indicated that those inside the organisation were more influential than outsiders but a very large cohort indicated that they discriminated depending upon the situation or the advice being sought and where they found the type of information or specialised knowledge and experience they were seeking.

Table 5: Valuing comments inside and outside organisation

The high degree of attention paid to the usefulness (either in insight or applicability) of the advice and guidance being sought is consistent with the picture of busy professionals with multiple demands on their time, seeking to make wise and practical professional decisions expeditiously. It may also reflect an organisational context where supervisors are preoccupied with the tasks of contract management (Kaboolian 1998).

Active Agents: Self-managed supervision

The high level of activity in seeking support and guidance evidenced in participants' reports of their behaviours within and outside their organisations confirms the importance of informal learning activities in the human services. However this research also confirms that the supervisor should no longer be thought of as the sole mediator of advice and support for a worker. While this research does not explore the political or organisational influences that lead professionals to seek guidance from diverse sources, it does suggest that the human services are adapting to new management models in ways that reflect changes in other organisational contexts.

Formal professional supervision was one element of workers' *advice and guidance portfolio*, participants also demonstrated that they actively utilised collaborative working arrangements as they turned to a range of colleagues for professional advice and guidance and for social support. The frequency with which participants identified their use of colleagues within and outside the organisations confirms that multiple informal interactions that characterise the networks described by Berg & Cheung (2008) are contributing to

informal learning in the human services. The intentionality with which workers chose with whom they consulted confirms Marsick & Watkins (2001) suggestion that informal professional learning can be both self-directed and intentional.

These findings make a significant contribution to our conceptualisation of professional supervision. Reflecting Kadushin's three pronged model of supervision—education, administration, and support—the activities of professional wisdom sharing, direction or work planning and debriefing are utilised by workers to sustain their professional practice.

Yet what this research has demonstrated is that workers are not relying on a single supervisor to meet these needs, but rather are active self-managed agents ensuring that their needs in these three important areas are being met. As workers they are looking widely within their organisation but also outside the organisation to workers in their own field and other fields as well as to friends and family. The self-managing of satisfying their advice and guidance needs is an exercise of professional discretion that recalls Lipsky's analysis, whereby front line workers exercised their discretion to ensure that they had the resources they needed to perform their role in complex situations with restricted resources.

It has been hypothesised in relation to other organisational settings that a 'politically savvy' worker minimises their supervisor's awareness of the worker's knowledge gaps (Ray & Miller, 1991, p. 508). In other words, workers would not seek support from individuals with a higher status because they wanted to "appear in control both informationally and emotionally" (Ray & Miller, 1991, p. 508). Our research, however, found no evidence of this notion of presentation of self influencing workers' decision-making about where to seek advice or guidance. Rather, workers reported that the choices they were making to seek advice and discuss issues were influenced by their expectations of gaining value derived from the insights embedded in the information as well as the usefulness and applicability of previous information. This very intentional decision-making highlights a degree of professional discretion in accessing the support and guidance that workers need. This is quite distinct from the more singular models that entail professional supervision by an authorised individual within the organisation. Through this process of seeking the information and guidance that they determine for themselves to be relevant, workers are indeed managing their own professional supervision.

The extension of the professional network outside the organisational boundary adds breadth to the advice and support being generated around a worker. As this advice and

support is drawn from beyond the narrow professional or organisational perspectives that traditional supervision would have brought, workers are creating a richer pool of advisers than they would otherwise have had. But this does create a further need to exercise discretion about the instances where internal guidance is sought and those where it is drawn from outside the organisation. In choosing to manage for themselves the sourcing of advice and guidance workers are creating a further series of demands on the integrity of their decision-making.

Self-managed supervision is entirely consistent with the principles and ethics of professional development that guide the development of professional standards in the human services. Recognising the responsibility that human service workers are taking for their own guidance and support in no way supports the argument that supervision is superfluous. Rather it creates a framework for reflection by human service workers about the sources and purposes of professional guidance and support in their professional life.

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Tables

Table 1: Respondent characteristics

Table 2: Respondent characteristics

Table 3: Advice and guidance seeking within organisation

Table 4: Explanations of value placed on advice and guidance within the organisation
(by % respondents in that seniority group)

Table 5: Valuing comments inside and outside organisation

Table 1: Respondent characteristics

Years in Human Service work	
Early career practitioners (5 years or less)	24.9% (n=48)
Mid-career practitioners (6-14 years)	31.6% (n=61)
Experienced practitioners (15+ years)	43.5% (n=84)
Total Participants: 193	Female: 79.3% (n=153) Male: 20.7% (n=40)

Table 2: Respondent characteristics

Job Role	
Direct service	53.9% (n=104)
Management	16.6% (n=32)
Support personnel	15.5% (n=30)
Other	14.0% (n=27)

Table 3: Advice and guidance seeking within organisation

	Senior colleagues		Other colleagues	
	Seeking advice	Discussing issues	Seeking advice	Discussing Issues
Early-Career	96%	96%	83%	88%
Mid-Career	92%	87%	67%	75%
Experienced	88%	82%	82%	79%

Table 4: Explanations of value placed on advice and guidance within the organisation
(by % respondents in that seniority group)

	Status of individual	Use of past information	Insights of information	Application of information	Other
Early career	42%	77%	92%	69%	6%
Mid-career	25%	70%	85%	53%	20%
Experienced	15%	83%	89%	52%	21%

Table 5: Valuing comments inside and outside organisation

Do you place more value on the comments of individuals inside or outside your organisation?			
	<i>Inside</i>	<i>Outside</i>	<i>Depends on what it is</i>
Early career	44%	13%	42%
Mid-career	49%	5%	44%
Established	37%	7%	54%