



key facts

There for carers: the workforce development needs of Carer Support Workers

Introduction

Skills for Care conducted research with Carer Support Workers (CSWs) and their managers/employers to:

- build a picture of the day-to-day role of a CSW
- discover what knowledge and qualifications that they have, or think they need to have
- explore their thoughts on their career path

Methodology

An electronic survey was sent to 109 CSWs and those employing or managing them in July 2013. 100 responses were received (61 from CSWs and 39 from managers/employers). This was supplemented by 18 telephone interviews which explored some of the emerging themes in more detail.

Given that there is no, single generic title or descriptor that describes the work of all CSWs, Skills for Care adopted the following definition for the purposes of this research:

“People whose primary function is to support, assist or advocate for adult carers, either directly or through group work, but excluding those providing direct/personal care and support in people’s own homes.”

Key findings

About the survey respondents

The CSWs were predominantly female and aged 45+. Most were employed by charities and voluntary organisations. Generally CSWs have generic roles and do not specialise in carers with one primary issue (e.g. Mental Health). CSWs appear to be a stable workforce, with most having been in their job for over a year.

The age profile of CSWs and the lack of an established career pathway is a potential issue for the sector which needs to consider how to attract people into jobs that they may not realise exist.

Employment via the charity/voluntary sector is a positive factor. It provides a degree of separation from Social Services and other statutory agencies which can help with carer engagement. However, as budgets are continually squeezed the ability to demonstrate 'quality' and 'value for money' is paramount.

What CSWs do

The main elements of the CSW role relate to providing emotional support, both in person and on the phone, closely followed by enabling carers to support themselves (by helping them to organise support). Three in five CSWs are undertaking Carers Assessments and two in five are giving benefits advice. As this demonstrates, the range of tasks is wide and demands a high skill level across many areas.

The generic nature of the role has pros and cons; it makes it difficult to explain the role to others in a clear and succinct way but also attracts a wide pool of people to the role and thus the sector. Employers need to be mindful of the challenges CSWs face in keeping abreast of relevant information and ensure that they are well supported through good quality supervision.

What CSWs think about their role

CSWs appreciate the flexibility and variety of the work, but can feel frustrated at the lack of status accorded to their role by other professionals, which was attributed to a lack of a clearly defined role and/or the lack of a directly relevant qualification to support the role.

The fact that CSWs are often the only person focusing solely on the needs of the carer is seen as vital – if they don't provide this support, who will? This ability to listen and support is crucial in terms of the prevention of carer breakdown, as well as enabling the carer to come up with solutions that effectively keep them from needing further formal interventions. This will only become more important in the future as the number of unpaid carers increases.

Becoming a CSW

Half of CSWs had experience of caring themselves, and many felt that they couldn't do their job without this personal experience (a view not necessarily shared by managers/employers who valued personal characteristics over caring experience).

The employment background of CSWs is wide and varied. This was seen as a positive by managers who welcomed the skills mix that this brought. Specific skills mentioned included empathy, communication skills, understanding, listening (not judging), organisation and time management. However, the lack of a formal qualification pathway may be hindering the perceived status of the CSW role.

Transferable skills

CSWs had brought many transferable skills to their role, some of which are not currently being utilised (e.g. 51% had skills in delivering training, yet are not using this skill as a CSW). This may be because approximately half are working at an equal or lower level to that which they had previously.

Managers talked of the diversity of backgrounds and the way in which the role seemed to attract a wide variety of people, for a variety of reasons, including the flexibility the CSW role offers compared with other professions. However, more emphasis could be placed on recognising, acknowledging and utilising existing skills.

Perceptions of skills and knowledge

We asked respondents about the importance of a range of skills involved in undertaking Carers Assessments (CAs) and then to rate their own skills and knowledge against the same criteria. CSWs rated themselves as highly skilled against the top two features deemed 'essential' for undertaking CAs ('being able to understand the caring role' and 'being a good communicator').

Only just over half of CSWs rated their knowledge of local support systems as 'very good', despite this being rated the third most important skills for CSWs undertaking CAs to have. Similarly, approximately six in ten CSWs rated themselves as 'very good' at talking sensitively to carers about whether they wish to cease caring.

Four in ten CSWs rated their basic counselling skills as 'fairly good', 'neutral' or 'poor' yet almost three-quarters saw this as a vital skill. This is a clear skills gap that needs to be addressed by employers. Some of these skills are addressed in the qualifications suggested below.

Qualifications

CSWs are relatively highly qualified, with two-thirds having a Level 4 (or higher) qualification, despite this, very few employers set minimum qualification levels for their CSWs, perhaps reflecting the emphasis placed on personal and life skills. Of those who felt a minimum threshold could be useful; two-thirds would set this at Level 3.

There was disagreement about the role that qualifications might play in raising the status of the CSW role, with some feeling that the broad background of those in the role would make it difficult to suggest a qualification or a level of qualification that might suit, whilst others felt this would be a useful contribution.

It was clear that many employers are relying heavily on in-house training to improve or maintain the skills of their CSWs. Whilst the need for CSWs to achieve formal qualifications may be low, the ambition to undertake learning via qualifications was high, with many seeing this as improving their career chances. The issue was that few were clear about appropriate options. Skills for Care suggests the following might suit the roles, needs and aspirations of CSWs:

- Level 3 Diploma in Health and Social Care.
- Level 5 Diploma in Leadership in Health and Social Care.
- Continuing professional development qualifications.

Increasing the take up of formal qualifications would support the role of CSWs, improve the status of the role and assist career progression. Skills for Care is considering ways of promoting relevant qualifications to CSWs, perhaps through the use of case studies

The skills and qualifications needed to manage CSWs

Some felt that managers needed qualifications because their role is wider than that of a CSW and has different demands, but others felt that to be successful you need to have 'come through the ranks' in order to fully understand the people you are managing. Those who felt it important that CSWs have a qualification were also more likely to be in favour of managers having a (higher) qualification.

The future

In five years' time, half of CSWs see themselves as having moved on from the role:

- Almost three in ten see themselves moving into a management role
- A quarter expect to have retired
- A quarter expect to stay in the role, reflecting the relatively high levels of job satisfaction reported

Further details

The research was conducted by Skills for Care.

To access the Main report go to:

<http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Document-library/Skills/Carers/Carer-Support-Workers-survey-report.pdf>