Change in an uncertain world:
A vision for Work and Organizational Psychology

Interview with Hazel McLaughlin, London, UK

hazel.mclaughlin@morphsmart.com

About the interviewee

Dr Hazel McLaughlin is the President of the British Psychological Society (BPS) June 2020-2021. She is an international Industrial and Organizational Psychology consultant with corporate experience in both Executive and Non-Executive Director roles. She is the Managing Director and founder of *MorphSmart*, applying the science of psychology to enable change and business transformation. She combines evidence and practice in the areas of leadership, organizational effectiveness, diversity and inclusion, resilience, and corporate culture. She is a Chartered Psychologist who also works with the Alliance in Organizational Psychology (AOP) developing White Papers and knowledge sharing.

In her work role Hazel coaches and advises business leaders and teams in many industry sectors including health, finance and retail; she is a trusted advisor to organizational boards of directors. She has worked in Europe, USA and Asia-Pacific with global clients such as Linklaters, Barclays, Capgemini, L'Oreal, Oracle and Adecco. She was the BPS *Excellence in Occupational Psychology Practice Award* winner in 2019.

Her first degree is in Psychology from Glasgow University, and she has a Masters in Ergonomics from University College, London. Her doctoral research (from Kingston University, London) centred on *Relational power*; exploring uses and implications for leaders and organizations. She was the lead author on the international research paper *Women in Power* (McLaughlin et al., 2018) that reviewed the psychological evidence on women and diversity. Mid-career, she was twice nominated for *Women of the Year*, a national UK event. Hazel is a frequent conference speaker giving keynotes at international events. Since 2012, she has been a regular guest lecturer at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience at Kings College, London.

Keywords: Work and Organizational Psychology, motivation, leadership, agile, technology, future vision

Introduction

Early in May 2020 Angela had the pleasure of interviewing Hazel, a passionate and highly experienced Occupational Psychologist, living and working in the London area of the UK. As you will see from her biography she has just become the President of the member association representing over 56,000 psychologists in the UK (the BPS). Hazel's work combines science and practice and we took this opportunity to ask her to articulate her vision for the future of Work and Organizational Psychology (WOP). We agreed a series

of questions in advance of the interview that lasted for around 60 minutes. This article is a summary of that discussion.

Angela: *Can you describe what is happening to work and the economy in the UK at the moment?*

Hazel: We are living in uncertain times, with changes in economies, the workforce and society. The world is even more uncertain with the advent of the coronavirus (and the strain COVID-19); and there is no certainty as to what will happen in the UK, Europe or across the world. People are responding to the pandemic and reprioritising their lives. Exact figures of the impact of the virus on the British economy are not available yet, but the Bank of England predicts a drop of 14% in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) if the restitutions imposed by the virus cease in June, 2020. So what happens will depend very much on how long the lockdown continues and what measures become available to stimulate demand and encourage spending.

However, it is clear to psychologists that the world has changed and that this will have an impact on peoples' lives. The pandemic has given us all a moment to pause and to reflect on what really matters to us. Compassion and kindness matter more and relationships have greater significance. There is increased concern about the work family interface, with work and home lives no longer having such a clear distinction. With so many people working at home in close proximity to their family or in isolation from others; it is not the differences between the work and home life that are important; it is about integration. Many people are now reflecting on what is important and meaningful in their work within their lives. A White Paper (Rajadhyaksha et al., 2020) recently produced by the AOP is so relevant at the moment.

When I refer to family I mean this in its broadest sense; not just people with children but singles, couples, blended families, partnership and friendship groups. Being concerned with others' health as a result of viral infection has made everyone clearly aware that work is part of life. It helps us to question our purpose, our priorities and our focus. During isolation nearly everyone has been using technology to communicate, to work, or play, and to move things forward; and people have discovered that they really like it. The use of technology has been positive, adding value to the way we live; assisting in communication with others. Looking ahead, it is likely that technology will continue to have a big impact on our lives. But this will change the way we relate to one and another in a business context. We may have less water cooler conversations, but we will find different ways to communicate and support each other. This means we will need to find new ways to interact, to build trust and relationships.

Other things are changing, too. Business travel will happen differently; people will e-meet more often. People will find different patterns to their working life. Already organizations are questioning the use of offices and how much space they need in central locations. People will seek out flexible arrangements. Some areas of the economy will flourish and others will contract. New businesses will emerge, and others will be distressed or disappear. Because of recent experiences different things will become of value, particularly activities that have been denied in lockdown; such as seeing groups of friends. With fewer social gatherings taking place we have got used to electronically mediated conversations. Social distancing is now the way we live our lives; so this means our interactions with others are very different. For example, hygiene factors have changed and greetings in the form of handshakes, hugs or kisses are no longer acceptable. So how do you say hello, in a socially distanced way? We all need to adapt, to listen more to others and to be aware of the new social cues. Our empathy and emotional intelligence will be more important than ever before.

Angela: *Why it is important for WOP to adapt and be agile?*

Hazel: Agility is very much in my thoughts at the moment. It is critical for WOP to adapt to our changing circumstances; fully understanding what is happening. To do this we need to listen extensively; to individuals, groups, teams, organizations, and other voices in society. Relationships are changing at a one-to-one local basis and across the world; but these changes are subtle. As most of our communications outside the household are now virtual; we have more limited information. Can you tell if people are agreeing, or not, with different viewpoints being made - when the non-verbal cues are less easy to see. Further, are people willing to be open and honest with all the people on a remote call? Evidence suggests that teams, who are used to working together, are open in their remote communications; but do others who are less closely connected feel the same way?

Consider the current complexity of working arrangements, particularly with the variability in easing the lockdown regulations. Some people will be working at home, alone; or remotely in teams. While others will be working in the office. This offers a mix of old and new ways of working happening at the same time. No longer are people communicating with the small group of people they work closely with (often criticised as working in a "silo"). This means that relationships are much more complex; involving more informal networks and a wider range of people. Initially this means communication will take more effort on our part; we just cannot operate automatically. Health and well-being is now more in the forefront of peoples' minds; along with consideration of others'

health. Work will need to be flexible to support mental health; particularly when people are not in the same environment (e.g., at home, and isolated). In these situations, how will people open up, and talk about their feelings when the only contact they have with the workplace is remote? There will be individual preferences as we learn to adapt in a way that suits each of us.

Angela: *What do you think are the core challenges to WOP at this time; and some possible solutions?*

Hazel: As psychologists, we learn to work by the scientific method and to operate by a set of rules. For example, to apply a particular model or theory to solve a problem. However, the situations we find ourselves in at the moment are new and require an approach beyond our known research; so it is important to be agile in our thinking processes to chart a way forward that works for us and for our clients, teams and organizations.

In order to gain a full understanding of what is happening in different parts of society it is important WOPs understand how big data can help us and where we need to think beyond it. We need to extend our critical analytical skills beyond understanding of research evidence to appreciate how population data is represented, and what this means for interpretation. For instance, in the UK the Office of National Statistics (ONS, 2020) presents many forms of analysis. for example, which geographic areas of the UK are most affected by the virus, how the economy is responding and what workplaces are operating. This is often presented in the form of eye-catching league tables; that may exaggerate some points and minimise others. Understanding the nuances of these data and how their reporting affects people and workplaces is critical to our understanding of the support we can offer. For example, if a certain town is reported as being "virus free" this may encourage reckless behaviour in that area and may increase fearfulness in other towns too. This is just one example, but it highlights the underlying premise of careful interpretation. Therefore, we must look beyond our traditional information sources and publications to really appreciate the bigger picture of what is happening in society and apply our critical analytical skills to understand what this means for people, work, organizations and the economy.

Angela: *What do you think are the key areas WOP need to explore to get a grip of what is happening in the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 environment?*

Hazel: I think there are five areas we need to better understand and facilitate in our professional working.

1. Multi-generational working

Most organizations will have workers from three of four different generations; and it is really important we understand the different motivations and energies existing in these multi-generational groups. We must not make assumptions, but data also provides us with a view on different perspectives. For example, peoples' attitudes may vary; with younger people seeking a sense of purpose and the opportunity to make a difference; but finding limited job opportunities. The mid-age group may be strongly career minded but may be challenged to adapt and respond to changing circumstances. Some people may question their work/life balance and seek out a different way of living. You can't assume these groups at different life stages will have the same expectations and aspirations; but many organizational policies do just that. Again, it is important to really listen and to understand peoples' drivers, values and future aspirations.

Not being aware of these subtle differences can lead to misunderstandings. For example, I have heard experienced workers describing younger colleagues as being *"entitled"* expecting to do work their way and progress quickly within the organizational structure. When you ask what the young worker thinks of this they reply *"they expect me to be confident about what I am doing; so this makes me sound like I know what I am doing"*. There can be a difference between perception and the person's reality. Trust and mutual understanding is key. We now recognise that the global pandemic will have a major impact on 'The Class of 2020' who will struggle to find their identity and meaningful place in the workforce. This time of change will be even more uncertain and stressful for them (Alter, 2020).

It is important to make a bridge across these various viewpoints so that members of differing generations appreciate each other; and get to know each other's points of view. Mentoring schemes can be really valuable to encourage inter-generational understanding. When we talk about diversity and inclusion, this is not simply about numbers of people from different backgrounds, genders, and so on. It is about different people with different ways of looking at the world of work who, working together, can add value. I think of this as mutual thriving. It is generational, inter-group and across society. It is about valuing the other. This becomes more important as our focus is local and family first during the coronavirus pandemic.

2. Invest in different ways

People of varying nationalities and cultures are also motivated by different things and we should be looking to add value in the social environment. For example, not all young

people want to travel, or become vegan. Many do care about change and reflect on what is going on around them. But, what is certain is that most young adults are in a different situation now-a-days; as for many it is very difficult to be financially independent and live in their own household. We need to appreciate these differences in circumstances, drivers and potentially in values.

We need to focus on governance in particular and explore what needs to be done in organizations in an authentic way. For example, we need to listen to hard working staff to find out what is making their work difficult and then remove these barriers. While this may sound like a big task; small things can make a real difference; such as simply saying *"thank you for your work"*. This is about being more explicit and balanced in the psychological contract.

Faced with change, as we are now, in times of economic uncertainty; it is easy to put barriers up. For example, being focused on local issues only and not focusing on a European/global perspective, or recognising the advantage of using technology.

3. Encouraging entrepreneurial approaches

Brilliant and energised people come out of education with dreams, hopes and aspirations; and many people want to set up their own business. But we need to consider the training of WOPs. How well do we train them to develop entrepreneurial behaviours? Further, how far does our work with organizations encourage and integrate innovation. These have not been traditional areas for WOP; as encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation requires different management styles and attitudes to risk. The challenge for us is how to embed these behaviours in education and work; and how to monitor these changes. But, looking at the positive side, having set the correct indicators for change it is not hard to measure these with current technology. We want leaders to see the advantage of entrepreneurial aspirations and to actively encourage innovation and different mindsets in organizations.

One sector embracing change ambitiously is retail; where there is major focus on customer experience. On-line shopping is very different to buying in-store. Customers are interested in a face pace, easily accessible product information, one-click payment and flexibility of delivery. Organizations that have embraced these changes to the way they sell their products have benefitted hugely during lockdown; while others have suffered. One of the main facilitators of changes such as these is having different leaders.

4. Changing face of leadership – In the UK, Europe and around the world

Leaders need to operate differently in a post-COVID-19 world; and while previous

models of leadership are useful in different situations, it is important to appreciate the complexity of the current and future contexts. New behaviours will need to be developed that enable leaders to embrace innovation, new ways of working, and deal with uncertainty. This will require leaders to be agile and *think outside the box*. Leaders will be managing people working both, in the home, and in the workplace; or moving between home and work. At the same time leaders will be remodelling their organization to cope with economic demands and restrictions. Work roles are changing, some being lost, while others are being created requiring new, and different skills. The pressure to *continue business as usual* and, at the same time, dealing with strategic change will increase pressure on mid-level leadership who are both managing the workforce and driving through change. These changes will not be easy on workers; and leaders will need to listen carefully to their workforce to enable them to embrace and develop in the new working arrangements. Leader empathy will be important in the way we gain knowledge, learn and get to know what people can do and what they need.

Critically leaders will need to articulate what is happening in the change process and reinforce the values that are important to the organizational culture. Respect and empathy will be important behaviours in facilitating workplace change; along with the ability to use sources of informal power. Leaders will be more hands-off, enabling others rather than directing them. However, such situations do create many opportunities for WOPs who will be able to coach and mentor leaders, developing empathy and listening skills and helping them moving forward with change.

5. Impact of technology

Recently I have been asked to consider what psychology will look like in 2040; and I am sure people will still want the human touch. But we must embrace and use technology wisely. Work will still be important – we won't all be on beaches enjoying long holidays. But, we will be working differently. Therefore, as technology changes it is important psychology is included and integrated within these developments. We don't know exactly what these changes will be (e.g., will we have smart phones inserted under our skin; or how artificial intelligence will change our lives); but technology will definitely change the way we work. One of these changes will be the use of data analytics, as I mentioned earlier; and it is really important that WOPs are engaged in these developments.

Technology will disrupt things in different ways; and psychology has the opportunity to influence these changes impacting on our daily lives. Large and small organizations will see many changes, but particularly large businesses will be required to change. Work and

Organizational Psychologists can help in all these circumstances. I can imagine groups of psychologists and technical experts working closely together; influencing each other as they work towards agile solutions that will challenge and test our current psychological knowledge and develop new learning. This will change team behaviour and remote and agile working will require different approaches The distinction between the leader and the team will be less clear with more focus on joint working, on collaboration and solutions rather than formalised processes.

Angela: *Thank you for outlining those important areas of change, Hazel. If I could turn your attention to careers in psychology; what advice would you give to your younger self?*

Hazel: To start with I think it is important to be passionate and energised by what you do. Of course, you need to study and work hard but hard work is not enough; it is also key to do things you are genuinely interested in; to maintain motivation. Further, while it is important to focus on learning and developing psychological knowledge; I think it is critical to listen to what people are saying and question if our theories and models are responding to these needs. Understanding what is important to our clients and understanding the culture they live and work in is vital to building a good working relationship. Being able to appreciate others' perspectives is a particular skill that WOPs need to develop more; but only too often, even with the best intentions, inexperienced psychologists fail to fully understand what their clients' need. We must understand what they are really saying and what creative solutions will make a difference. The approach needs to be tailored and agile.

My advice to the younger me would be to go easier on yourself; realising you don't need to be an expert straight away. Believe in yourself while at the same time recognise and learn from your mistakes. Successful people are open to learning and seek out new opportunities. Learn and move on, we all need to be resilient. Many young people now, faced with the fiction created by social media, feel everyone is better than themselves. My advice is to do as well as you can; and to just be yourself. No one person can be good at everything; we all have different strengths. Build on the talents of others too. Many great people are really modest, and don't go shouting about what they do in the world. Value yourself and have self-compassion.

Next, I think it is important to show empathy with people. While you are learning get to know your peers well; and practice being empathetic.

Having good role models and mentors throughout your career is another essential strand to development; enabling you to see when you are succeeding and how to build on those behaviours.

So, in summary I feel we must challenge what is relevant training and support for the next generations of psychologists; looking to work more closely with other aspects of industry; and in particular with technology. But, by re-examining career development and reviewing mentoring arrangements we will better equip our young psychologists for meaningful careers.

Angela: *Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to the readers of InPractice and share your insights into the future of Work and Organizational Psychology. We are delighted you are our first thought leader interviewed for InPractice. We wish you every success in your up and coming presidency.*

Hazel: It has been my pleasure.

References

Alter, C. (2020, June 1-8). The Class of 2020, the world-wary generation the pandemic will define for life. *Time*. Retrieved from https://time.com/5839765/college-graduation-2020/

Rajadhyaksha, U., Korabik, K. Lero, D.S., Zugec, L., Hammer, L.B., & Beham, B. (2020). The work family interface around the world: Implications and recommendations for policy and practice. Alliance for Organizational Psychology White Paper. Retrieved from https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/0567b461-ac8d-411b-b8fe-abb7b43bd87d/downloads/AOP%20W-F%20Final%20White%20Paper.pdf?ver=1588127884615

McLaughlin, H., Silvester, J, Bilimoria, S.J., Jané, S., Sealy, R., Peters, K., Möltner, H., Huse, M., & Goke, J. (2018). Women in power: Contributing factors that impact on women in organizations and politics; Psychological research and best practice. *Organizational Dynamics*, 47(3), 189-199. doi 10.1016/j.orgdyn.2017.09.001

Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2020). Coronavirus (COVID-19): Latest data and analysis on coronavirus (COVID-19) in the UK and its effect on the economy and society. Retrieved from https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases