A brief glimpse into the life of a work and organizational psychologist

Interview with Hildur Jóna Bergþórsdóttir
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About the interviewee

Hildur is a psychologist and a certified strengths coach currently working within Human Resources (HR) at Icelandair as a people manager. In addition to working within HR, Hildur has worked for many years as a consultant at Gallup in Iceland. In May 2023 Hildur has been elected as a member of the EAWOP Executive Committee (EC) where she is responsible for communication and practitioner oriented initiatives.

Keywords: transitions, career journey, work and organizational psychology, human resources, research and practice

Abstract

This career path interview describes an educational journey moving from Iceland to Denmark and discovering a passion to help managers and employees feel good about their work and to be successful in what they do. On returning to Iceland Hildur describes various work roles developing her knowledge and skills enabling her to be the practitioner she is today. Interesting cultural and work differences are explored in the practice of work and organizational psychology, human resources, research and practice.

The interview

How did you get into a career in HR? What drove you to be involved in work and organizational psychology (WOP) and can you tell us something about your path?

My path towards WOP was rather long winded. To be perfectly honest I had no idea what I wanted to do in the future when I started studying psychology at the University of Iceland. During my studies I got interested in both social and behavioural psychology. It was not (and still is not) possible to study WOP at the University of Iceland. Shortly after I handed in my Bachelor thesis about parental training (Bergþórsdóttir, 2004) I decided to move to Denmark to study clinical psychology. I enrolled in Aarhus University in the autumn of 2004 and in one of my first classes, we had a guest professor, Eva Gemzøe Mikkelsen who talked about bullying at work (cf. Persson et al., 2021; Pouwelse et al., 2021). I was so inspired by her research and practice that I decided to focus on WOP instead of clinical psychology. During my studies I was fortunate to also get practical

training within WOP. My mentor was Michael, a psychologist working as a consultant for BST Jylland, an occupational health service. I really enjoyed my training even though it was a bit difficult for me as it was conducted in Danish, but I loved every moment of it. It was then that I knew I wanted a career within WOP, to help managers and employees feel good at work and be successful at what they do.

For my Master's thesis, I decided to study the relationship between the psychosocial work environment and work absenteeism. I was fortunate that a large workplace in Iceland agreed to participate in my study. Now, this feels like a million years ago, as I had to use printed questionnaires and self-reported absenteeism rates! One thing I learned from this project is that measuring absenteeism via self-report measures is not likely to provide accurate data, as people tend to forget how often and for how long they have been absent from work during a certain timeframe. I therefore recommend using objective absenteeism data.

I learned a lot during this time and these experiences helped me get my first job as a work and organizational psychologist. Shortly after I graduated, I started working for Gallup in Iceland, where I had the opportunity to do workplace audits and then help managers make necessary changes within their work environment based on the findings from the audit. The audits usually consisted of an employee survey measuring well-being, communication, engagement, inclusion, team productivity, and much more. For instance, to measure engagement we used Gallup's Q^{12} employee engagement survey (Gallup, 2022).

At Gallup, we also used managerial assessments to coach managers to become better at their jobs by identifying potential strengths and weaknesses. Clearly, the questions differed from client to client as we tried to customise our assessments to fit their needs. Employees usually rated their managers on a number of items such as, *"My manager motivates me at work", "My manager gives me praise and recognition"* or *"I trust my manager".* Sometimes we also included self-assessments, where we asked managers to rate themselves on the same items. These assessments served as valuable input for the coaching sessions, as managers were sometimes not aware of their strengths and weaknesses.

Since we repeatedly used the same measures across longer periods of time, companies were able to see whether things were moving in the right direction, standing still, or

moving in the wrong direction. For instance, questions that asked about the amount of feedback employees received from their manager, tended to be rated higher if formal feedback procedures had recently been introduced.

Many workplaces also wanted to measure bullying and sexual harassment at work. To measure this, we typically asked questions such as *"Have you been subjected to bullying at work in the past six months?"* and *"Have you been sexually harassed by someone at work in the past six months?"*. Often, we included the definition of both bullying and harassment in the questionnaire. Some customers even took it one step further and also explicitly asked whether employees had witnessed it, whether they had reported it and whether they were satisfied with how it had been handled. In some cases, we implemented interventions following the outcomes of the audit. In this respect, my current workplace also asks employees to identify these types of undesirable behaviour to better understand what is happening in the workplace and to be able to take appropriate action.

Another thing that is very important in helping one understand the results when performing in-company audits is the existence of a comparison group. We used many different comparison groups in our work at Gallup. For example, we had our own database where we collected all measures of the past years and reported them as benchmarks. In addition, we also benchmarked against previous audits within the same company. Depending on the client, we also used industry-specific benchmarks or international benchmarks (rather than only comparing the results to data from Iceland). During my time at Gallup, I spent a lot of time reading research trying to understand the risk factors for undesirable behaviour in the workplace as well as trying to identify whether there are differences among groups based on, for example, the type of job or gender. To improve the validity of our collected data, we also tried to understand what the best way would be of presenting the questions (i.e., should we include the definition of bullying or not in the questionnaire) and what the ideal frequency of asking the questions would be (i.e., every twelve or six months).

This research was not only important for the data collection and interpretation, but also for the interventions. For instance, I found the edited book by Einarsen and colleagues (2020) on bullying and harassment in the workplace especially helpful in understanding the theory behind bullying and harassment and also used it as input for designing interventions. I also took some courses at the Nordic Institute for Advanced Training in Occupational Health (NIVA) with brilliant psychologists such as Ståle Einarson, Maarit

Vartia, Helge Hoel and Eva Gemsöe Mikkelsen to learn more about the subject. The NIVA is an active player in the field of occupational health and safety education and its mission is to transform research findings into advanced courses within the field of occupational health for both researchers and practitioners.

I worked at Gallup for nearly nine years as a consultant. In my career I have had several opportunities to support managers dealing with difficult issues. Unfortunately, some managers think that difficult matters will disappear if they ignore them. But the thing is, they do not, they grow and eventually explode. I wish all managers would ask for advice or get some coaching, before they address difficult issues. Managers that address matters as soon as they arise and seek guidance from HR professionals before addressing the issue are the best managers in my opinion.

My years at Gallup taught me how important it is for managers to have data to support them when they are making decisions and are wanting to change things. Before you decide to change something at work (e.g., like change the food in the cafeteria), make sure you measure and gather as much data as you can before making the change; and preferably link this with engagement. You could for example ask employees whether they eat at the cafeteria or not, how often they eat there, how they would rate the food (e.g., for quality, price, freshness) and whether they would recommend it to others. Then you could also measure engagement and use a regression analysis to see whether these items are related or not.

In change processes this is important because, if you do not measure up front, you won´t know whether the situation is better or worse after the changes have been made. Critically, you won´t know whether and how the changes affect engagement and you will only base your decisions on the loudest employees that are willing to share their opinion and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the group. During and after the change process it is important to measure again, set goals, make small changes and measure again. The measures help managers see whether they are going in the right direction or not. This principle can be applied to many situations, but is too often forgotten, and I think it is our job to support managers with this knowledge and help them become better at what they do. With that being said, workplace audits are great, but it is also important for managers to know their employees, to be able to see whether employees are behaving differently, for example, if they suddenly become moody or distracted. A simple question like, how are you feeling today, can work wonders. Workplace audits tell us whether

there are some departments that need support, help us identify issues that need to be discussed on a company level or a departmental/team level and help us see in which direction things are going if changes are occurring. Further, if there are any changes in measurements across time these also need to be looked at more closely; perhaps by interviewing a few employees to make sense of these changes.

In 2015 I decided I wanted to get experience from the other side of the table and work more closely with managers. I thought it would be great to be able to follow matters all the way through and to coach managers to become better at their jobs and help them address difficult issues and implement changes successfully. Hence, I decided to apply for a job as an HR specialist at Landsvirkjun, the national power company of Iceland. Landsvirkjun produces renewable energy and has about 300 employees located around the country. I started working as an HR specialist in October 2015 and in 2018 I became an HR manager, standing in for my manager when they were not available.

Just before I left Gallup, I learned how to use the Clifton Strengths Finder (Rath, 2007) and when I started working at Landsvirkjun, I used it to help me get to know employees, create trust and to help managers see the potential in each employee and the team. In this respect, a meta-analysis performed by researchers from Gallup (Asplund et al., 2015) found that people who can use their Clifton Strengths (versus those that don't) are six times more likely to be engaged in their jobs and to strongly agree with the statement that they *'have the chance to do what they do best every day'.* My experience within HR has taught me that you need to know your employees and what they bring to the job role, appreciate them and their experience, know their role within the team and help them be the best version of themselves. I believe that if all employees know their role within the team and know what is expected of them, things will be so much better at work and we will have much less conflict between co-workers.

What is it like working as WOP in Iceland and how did you get into your current role?

Being a work and organizational psychologist in Iceland opens a lot of opportunities. For example, I know one psychologist that is currently the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of an Information Technology company. They worked with me as a consultant, later became an HR manager, and now they are a CEO. Some work and organizational psychologists work for consultancies that support managers and employees, which is how I started my career. I decided to work within HR after being a consultant. In HR you get to work

with everything from recruitment to retirement, supporting managers and employees. At my job at Landsvirkjun I got the opportunity to work with almost everything within HR, namely, recruitment, job development and training, support for managers, management training, addressing difficult issues, workplace audits, employee conversations, layoffs, gender equality and much more. The only area I did not get the opportunity to gain experience in was the rewards and compensation area.

After six years working for Landsvirkjun, I became restless and needed more challenges at work. At first, I thought about becoming a consultant again, or perhaps my own boss. Then a former colleague recommended Icelandair to me. Icelandair is a leading airline (counting about 4500 employees worldwide) offering internal and international flights. Icelandair was looking for an employee within the HR team to become a people analytics specialist. A people analytics specialist is someone that is able to use data to make sense of existing employee data and use it for decision making. You can actually study specifically to become a people analytics specialist and don´t need to be a work and organizational psychologist to become one. However, Icelandair was also looking for someone with HR experience, specifically with workplace audit experience, as they wanted someone who was able to work with data, understanding and using it for improvement and management support. For me it was a perfect match. My experience from both Gallup and Landsvirkjun helped me get this job. I am so happy I decided to work at Icelandair instead of becoming a consultant as for me it is much more fun to be a part of a team than working all by myself. And what an amazing team it is. I have been here for two years now and feel like I have known these people forever. At Icelandair I get the opportunity to develop new skills and learn new things. I am also still working within HR, helping managers bring the best out of their employees, coaching managers in addressing difficult matters, using workplace audits to create better workplaces and using strengths–based training. I started as a people analytics specialist but today my job title is people manager. My role has changed a lot since I started working at Icelandair and this is probably one of the reasons I love my job so much, I am always learning something new and taking on more responsibility.

Could you describe a typical day at work? Perhaps you could also tell us a bit about what you really enjoy about your work and some challenges that you face in this role.

It´s difficult for me to describe a typical day at work because they are all very different. Some days I am in front of the computer, reading, and sending emails, looking at data,

while other days I am meeting managers and employees in one-on-one meetings, discussing perhaps difficult matters, coaching them or making decisions. I could start the day analysing data, having to address a difficult matter before lunch, plan a party for employees after lunch and finish my day with a meeting with managers planning a strengths-based training for their team.

I love my job. Being able to help managers and employees become better at their work, help them detect and prevent problems, address issues when they arise, and make changes in harmony with the work environment gives me energy. I also love being there for the employees if they need to talk to someone about their job or even their lives. Many things happen in our lives that affect our well-being at work; and they are not all job-related. Some of these things are good, others are not. Sometimes we need to laugh, cry or vent and it is a privilege to have a job that allows you to be a part of people's lives.

The constant learning, reading, discussing with other professionals is an important part of being a work and organizational psychologist. Some of the things I do at work only happen once in a lifetime, while others are recurrent. For instance, one of my co-workers lost their child very suddenly. So, I had to meet with their team to discuss what had happened, how they could provide support, and what would happen when their colleague returned to work. I hope that this type of situation will not happen again, but if it did, I would use what I have learned from this experience. For these types of situations, I find it important to be part of a team and to be connected to a larger network within your profession, as these provide the opportunity to ask questions and get support, both of which I value very much. While experience is valuable it´s also important to have good procedures to follow. Whether you are addressing difficult matters or recruiting a new employee, you need to have clear work procedures and always be willing to re-evaluate them, to get the best possible result.

There are so many things that work and organizational psychologists need to consider. That is probably what I love the most about the work, I never know what is going to happen today or tomorrow. I might have some clue, but things can easily change within minutes. I enjoy communicating with people, and this gives me vitality.

Being a work and organizational psychologist is also challenging. Sometimes I lie awake at night thinking about the day before or the next day, when, for example, I know I would be helping a manager deal with difficult issues such as bullying. I often find

myself wondering, whether we could have done something differently, whether we rushed things or whether we prepared enough. Some days I am just working with some data and that can be very interesting, but I prefer a mix, where I am able to work with people as well as data. I think that this is where I find the greatest balance in my current job. Over my career the biggest challenges that I have faced were related to a lack of communication, either between a manager and an employee or between management and HR. This often leads to misunderstandings and disengagement, often due to a lack of trust in discussing difficult matters which leads to an escalation of problems. Sometimes this even leads to people leaving the workplace. Of course, there are other challenges, but I find this one the most urgent.

We also face challenges in relation to the data we use. We need to decide what data to gather, how to present it, how to make sure managers understand how and when to use data, and whether and when we need different information. Not all managers can or are willing to use data to help them make decisions, with some still using their instincts. I think it is important to use data, but you also need other information as well. With other information I mean communication with employees face to face, one on one or in meetings. Take the employee survey for example. The results only give you part of the story. You can design and use all kinds of questions, but in the end, you will always need to communicate with the employees to fully understand what lies behind their answers. For example, if many employees indicate that they have taken or intend to take action to look for another job, you still do not know why they wish to leave the organization. The possible reasons can be endless, and if you don´t discuss this with employees you might reach the wrong conclusion regarding the underlying reason. However, by having an open discussion with employees, they might tell you what drives people away from an organization, which might be easy to fix.

In my job as a work and organizational psychologist, it´s very important to be flexible. The schedule can change very fast as managers and employees expect us to be available 24/7. I also find it important to be visible. Many managers seek advice only when you are literally standing in front of them. It might be because they find the issue to be too small or insignificant to send an email or book a meeting. Whatever the reason, we need to be proactive in our communication. It´s also important to be curious, to ask a lot of questions, almost like a detective. When working with difficult matters, you need to ask many questions to really understand the situation and be able to do that without making the person feel at unease. To be able to facilitate and communicate with different people

is also an important skill. You will meet all kinds of people, that´s the beauty of it. You will need to adjust your communication style to suit different situations and people.

How do you use research in practice?

I use research a lot in my practice. Both for my personal development and to help the workplace become better. For example, I read a lot of studies about engagement, burnout, stress, job demands – resources, strengths, leadership, bullying and harassment. I love following and reading studies from EAWOP members that I have met at different EAWOP congresses. In addition, I love studying different scales to measure engagement (for example), especially if they have a shorter version, as that helps to encourage people to use them. In this respect, I like to use the short version of the Work Engagement scale of Schaufeli and colleagues (2006).

I also use research to become better at identifying possible risk factors within the environment and to learn more about how to support managers and employees when they are in need. For example, it is important to understand what factors cause disengagement, burnout and bullying. A few years ago, one of my dear colleagues, who was a work and organizational psychologist dedicated to researching workplace bullying, died suddenly. When they died, their family and friends created a fund, to support research and training around bullying at work. During Covid-19, online training became popular, and we soon found out we did not have a lot of online training on bullying at work. So, I and a co-worker decided to apply for a grant from this fund to develop online training for employees and managers about bullying at work. To be able to do that we attended a lot of courses about bullying, read a lot of research and got advice from experts in this field. We wanted the training to be applicable to all workplaces in Iceland and to remain current over time. We started by creating a manuscript and an animated video and published it on YouTube in both English and Icelandic (Minningarsjóður Brynju Bragadóttur, 2020). It was a very successful project and many workplaces in Iceland have now imported it into their employee online training. This project was a great experience for all those involved as it was about co-operation between different professionals, researching and acquiring knowledge.

In general, what keeps you motivated in the field of WOP – where / what would you like to do next?

Progress is probably my main motivation – to see individuals, managers and groups develop, learn something new and apply it at work. Human Resources play an important

role in progress, and it is a great opportunity to be able to support employees, managers and teams on the road to success. I started working at Icelandair in November 2021, so I guess that is what I am going to do next; to learn and develop professionally as a work and organizational psychologist at Icelandair. There are many opportunities to do that, and I am so excited about the future. I love being a consultant and I love communication, so I guess I have my dream job right now.

What advice would you give someone considering going into WOP practice in Iceland?

Be willing to learn and say 'Yes' is the most important quality. Apply for a job as an intern, as experience is golden. My advice to students is to think ahead. Look for workplaces that need your expert help. Read their annual reports, see if they know things about their employees, compare annual reports and see if there is something missing. For example, many workplaces know how their employees feel and put that in their annual reports, some are struggling with it and skip mentioning it in their annual reports completely. In these cases, provide the organization with help in gathering or analysing data.

It´s also a great idea to ask the HR manager for an interview, ask about the challenges they are facing, offer to be an assistant or an intern. Remember to keep an open mind. Some of the work I have done is not that exciting or interesting, but it´s a job and you need to start somewhere.

I also think it is important to get as much experience as you can within the field before you decide on your specialty. If you decide too early you might miss opportunities to excel in other fields. In the end, the main thing is to find a workplace that appreciates you and your strengths, then you will be able to craft your job so that both the workplace and you benefit from it. Someone said, *'Love what you do or do something else'* and that rings true for me. If you put passion into what you do every day, people will appreciate you, you are likely to get more responsibility and develop in your role.

Another important point is not to overthink things. If you have a question, ask it. If you can help someone, help them. If you can put a smile on someone´s face, do it.

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