

<b>Institution:</b> City, University of London (City)		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> A4 (Psychology, Psychiatry & Neuroscience)		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Improving employees' psychological health: National and international delivery of an evidence-based workplace training intervention		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2002 to 2018		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Dr Paul Flaxman	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Reader in Organisational Psychology	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> 2006 to present date
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> January 2014 to December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> Yes		

### 1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Dr Flaxman's research has resulted in the development and widespread delivery of a workplace training intervention grounded in *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy* (ACT), which has been reliably shown to improve employees' psychological health. Since 2014, his training has been adopted across the UK by healthcare organisations, including 25 NHS trusts; local and central government; schools; universities; police forces; dance companies; and mental health charities. Internationally, Dr Flaxman's training has been used by practitioners in the US, Uganda, Australia, and Canada. Demonstrable impact has occurred at three levels: (1) enhancements to staff support and occupational health provision in over 50 organisations; (2) delivery of a train-the-trainer programme to over 200 workplace practitioners; and (3) statistically significant and clinically meaningful improvements in psychological health reported by employees attending the training.

### 2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

With growing global concern about the prevalence and costs of common mental health problems among working age adults, there is increasing interest in adapting modern psychotherapeutic approaches for workplace delivery. One such approach is *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy* (ACT), which has been shown to be effective when translated into psychological skills training programmes. During his time at City, University of London, Dr Paul Flaxman has played a leading role in the evaluation, development, and dissemination of workplace interventions based on the ACT approach. Flaxman's ACT-based training protocol evolved out of workplace intervention studies. The originating research was described in Flaxman's [REF2014 Impact Case Study](#) and included controlled trials of an earlier version of his ACT-based training delivered to staff at two local government organisations (2002-04) [3.1, 3.2]. Having gained ESRC funding, Flaxman adapted ACT for staff at a central government department and three NHS trusts (2008-10). In another study, he evaluated the effectiveness of his training among staff at the South London and Maudsley Mental Health NHS Trust (2011-13), with funding from Guy's and St Thomas' Charity. The training protocol that developed out of these studies was published as a book for staff support practitioners [3.3]. Flaxman's research also included a collaboration with the staff support team at Cardiff and Vale NHS Trust, who evaluated the effectiveness of his ACT-based training among nurses who were experiencing poor psychological health (2016-17) [3.4]. An evaluation of his approach for improving school teachers' psychological health, supported by funding from the British Academy/Leverhulme Trust, resulted in a new 4-session version of the training (2015-17).

This body of intervention research generated three key insights that have directly informed practice. First, that abbreviated ACT-based training, delivered in the workplace to small groups of employees, elicits statistically significant and reliable improvements in general psychological

health [3.1, 3.2]. Second, that the training results in clinically meaningful improvements in mental health among a majority of employees who enter the training with an elevated level of psychological distress [3.2, 3.4]. Third, the research identified two interrelated processes of change activated by the training: an increased willingness to experience difficult thoughts and feelings, and an increased capacity to use personal values as a guide to behaviour [3.1, 3.4, 3.5]. Publication of the first two research insights generated strong interest from staff support teams in NHS trusts, who were looking for accessible workplace interventions, with demonstrated efficacy for improving staff mental health that could be delivered by in-house practitioners. The third insight has informed the content of the resultant ACT-based training programme, particularly an increased focus on helping employees to “disentangle” themselves from stress-related thoughts, and clarify and use personal values in daily life.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

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- 3.1 **Flaxman** P.E. & Bond F.W. (2010a). A randomised worksite comparison of acceptance and commitment therapy and stress inoculation training. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, Vol. 48, Issue 8, pp.816-820. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2010.05.004>
- 3.2 **Flaxman** P.E. & Bond F.W. (2010b). Worksite stress management training: Moderated effects and clinical significance. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, Vol. 15, Issue 4, pp.347-358. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0020522>
- 3.3 **Flaxman** P. E., Bond F. W. & Livheim F. (2013). *The mindful and effective employee: An acceptance and commitment therapy training manual for improving well-being and performance*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger. <http://www.newharbinger.com/mindful-and-effective-employee>
- 3.4 Waters, C.S., Frude, N., **Flaxman**, P.E., & Boyd, J. (2018). Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) for clinically distressed healthcare workers: Waitlist controlled evaluation of an ACT workshop in a routine practice setting. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 57, Issue 1, pp.82-98. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjc.12155>
- 3.5 Gillanders, D.T., Bolderston, H., Bond, F.W., Dempster, M., **Flaxman** P.E. *et al* (2014). The development and initial validation of the cognitive fusion questionnaire. *Behavior Therapy*, Vol. 45, Issue 1, pp.83-101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2013.09.001>

### Evidence of Research Quality

- *Behaviour Research and Therapy* (Impact Factor, IF = 4.5), ranked 13 out of 295 clinical psychology journals in Scimago journal rankings (SJR).
- *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* (IF = 7.365), ranked 4 out of 84 applied psychology journals; classified Grade 4 (top-ranked) in the Chartered Association of Business Schools' Academic Journal Guide.
- *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* (IF = 2.541), ranked 54 out of 295 clinical psychology journals. Article [3.4] received 'Top 20' recognition from BJCP for downloads in the 12 months following on-line publication.
- *Behavior Therapy* (IF = 3.243), ranked 21 out of 295 clinical psychology journals.

### Grants

- ESRC (2009-10). 'Poor Psychological Detachment from Work During Leisure Time: Antecedents, Implications for Employee Well-Being, and Intervention Effects'. £82,411. Supplemented by an ESRC Follow-On Grant (2012-13). £23,080.
- Research Grant from Guy's & St. Thomas' Charity (2011-13). 'Mindfulness-Based Training to Promote the Well-Being and Resilience of NHS Staff'. £100,000. (£20,000 allocated to City).
- British Academy/Leverhulme Trust (2015-16). 'School Teachers' Psychological Health: Expanding the Focus to Recovery between Work Periods'. £9,065.

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

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Over the past seven years, the impact from Flaxman's intervention research has been achieved and evidenced through three main activities: (1) knowledge and skills transfer to external organisational partners through a 'train-the-trainer' programme; (2) delivery of training by these

practitioners to staff within their own organisations, and (3) robust evaluation work, where partner organisations evaluate the effectiveness of the training for improving staff mental health using well-established mental health and burnout questionnaires.

Transfer of knowledge and skills to external organisational partners has been achieved via a dedicated (2-day) train-the-trainer programme that (a) communicates the key findings and implications of Flaxman's ACT research to staff support practitioners (typically psychologists and other mental health professionals), and (b) provides those workplace practitioners with the ability to deliver the training to their own staff and client groups.

In 2012, Flaxman offered the train-the-trainer programme to 10 in-house staff support practitioners at three pilot NHS trusts (funded by an ESRC follow-on grant). The development and initial roll out of this train-the-trainer programme was described in Flaxman's REF2014 submission. Initial collaborations attracted a high level of word-of-mouth interest from other NHS organisations; particularly Flaxman's partnership with Northumbria Healthcare Trust, which has been documented in professional counselling at work and nursing publications [5.1, 5.2].

Since REF2014, Flaxman's training has been successfully utilised across the UK by 25 additional NHS trusts, and was endorsed by NHS Employers, e.g. through a Podcast [5.3]. In 2014, Flaxman began working with an organisational consultant (Ross McIntosh) to adapt the training for a wider range of organisations, to meet growing practitioner demand for the train-the-trainer programme. Since that time, Flaxman and McIntosh have delivered this programme to more than 200 practitioners working in schools; mental health charities (e.g. Mind); universities; NHS and private healthcare settings; the prison service; local and central government; three police forces; and dance (ballet) companies. Its reach has extended internationally to education, health, and cultural organisations in Uganda, Canada, USA and Australia. In the following sections, we describe how Flaxman's train-the-trainer approach has resulted in documented benefits for organisations' staff support provision, and for individual employees who attended the cascaded training delivered by practitioners at the partner organisations.

### **Impact on external organisations' staff support provision**

Impact has been achieved by enhancing partner organisations' staff support and occupational health provision. At Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, Flaxman trained the staff in-house support team (five clinical psychologists, psychotherapists, and counsellors). Since 2014, the Northumbria team has delivered a personal resilience course to approximately 2,500 members of staff using Flaxman's training protocol, which has become a central component of the staff support offering. The head of the staff support team reported on the training's popularity among staff: *"ACT-based resilience training has transformed our trust's provision of staff support. There is a huge amount of interest in this type of training among our healthcare staff."* [5.2]. Staff feedback has been very positive: *"Many felt it helped them develop coping strategies for managing challenging situations ... Since rolling out the training we have noticed positive organisational changes; for example, improvements in staff engagement scores on the staff survey and the perception that the Trust cares about staff health and wellbeing"* [5.1, p.23].

Flaxman's training has been used to enhance school teachers' and school leaders' psychological health. Since 2014, educational psychologists working in schools in Bristol, the Midlands, and Dorset have attended the train-the-trainer programme. Since 2015, Flaxman and McIntosh forged a particularly strong (and ongoing) collaboration with the educational psychology team at Bristol City Council, which delivered ACT-based interventions to teachers in 11 schools in the Bristol area. According to the Senior Educational Psychologist, the adoption of Flaxman's ACT programme resulted in a major change in the council's psychological provision to schools: *"This initial training led to an explosion of new ways of working within our EP Service. Six years on, we now use ACT and related models for group-based workplace well-being, individual coaching for school leaders, and as targeted and specialist interventions for students experiencing significant mental health issues"* [5.4]. He estimates that 295 people have directly benefited from this collaboration to date: 180 members of staff working at 18 different schools; 12 foster carers; 36 educational psychologists in different parts of the UK; 40 staff at a young care leavers' charity; and 27 school leaders [5.4]. He has documented the learning in professional journals, benefitting the wider Educational Psychology community, and raising his team's profile nationally [5.5], [5.6].

Due to high demand for the train-the-trainer programme, Flaxman and McIntosh hosted two large-scale events for staff support and occupational health practitioners. The first event, in June 2017, was attended by over 300 practitioners representing public, private, and charitable sectors. In March 2019, Flaxman and McIntosh partnered with an external training consultancy ([Contextual Consulting](#)) to offer the 2-day programme to 100 independent and in-house practitioners. The programme's reputation meant the course sold out, so a video link ensured international delegates were able to attend. These events generated further impact by transferring delivery expertise to significantly more external practitioners than previously possible. Moreover, a number of these practitioners cascaded Flaxman's ACT-based training to staff in additional NHS trusts and other organisations.

### **Impact on employees' mental health**

By cascading Flaxman's ACT-based training to their own staff and client groups, the ultimate beneficiaries are the partner organisations' staff members. The Principal Clinical Psychologist from Lancashire Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust describes how participants benefit directly: "... *the course and the supporting materials are of excellent quality and really make a difference to the lives of our staff. I can see the change in many people as they progress through the course. A frequent outcome is that they start to value themselves and take care of themselves more. This is really important for NHS staff; who may often give a lot to others, to a point where they are at risk of burnout and going off sick, or this has already occurred*". [5.7].

Some partner organisations conducted quantitative and/or qualitative evaluations of the cascaded training. To assess training effectiveness, a subgroup of partners administered the same well-established mental health and burnout questionnaires to staff before the training (pre-training), soon after the training (post-training), and in some cases a few months later (follow-up). Between 2016 and 2017, this training evaluation data was gathered from 204 employees who attended ACT-based training within their own organisations. The resulting merged dataset includes school teachers, government and healthcare employees. Analysis of this dataset revealed that delivery of Flaxman's training led to statistically significant improvements in employees' general mental health (assessed by the general health questionnaire; GHQ-12) and reductions in work-related burnout (assessed by the Shirom-Melamed Burnout Measure). Based on GHQ-12 "caseness" scoring profiles, 49.5% of this sample of 204 employees were experiencing a clinically relevant level of psychological distress prior to attending the training (indicating they were likely experiencing a common mental health problem during the period before the intervention). After completing the ACT-based training, only 10.8% of these same employees were still reporting a clinically relevant level of distress [5.8].

Similar evidence has emerged from more formal (as yet unpublished) research conducted at the University of Leeds, which independently evaluated cascaded applications of Flaxman's training approach for NHS staff. A PhD researcher at Leeds conducted a randomised controlled trial of Flaxman's training protocol delivered by three external practitioners. The study found statistically significant improvements in mental health among a mixed sample of 32 NHS staff who received the training (including GPs, administrative staff, nurses, and mental health professionals) [5.9].

The results of these evaluations are important because (1) they demonstrate that the train-the-trainer strategy has been effective, in that employees who attended cascaded applications of Flaxman's ACT intervention reported significant improvements in psychological health; (2) the results reveal that the training is proving effective across a range of organisational settings and occupational groups (i.e. office-based staff, school teachers, and healthcare workers); and (3) the pre-training levels of psychological distress indicate that the training is attractive and helpful to employees who are experiencing a common mental health problem.

### **Unanticipated Impact due to Covid-19**

Due to restrictions on face-to-face training during the Covid-19 pandemic, some partner organisations (including NHS trusts) moved to remote, on-line training to enable continued delivery of Flaxman's ACT-based approach. For example, the staff well-being psychology team at North Bristol NHS Trust delivered an adapted version of ACT training to more than 80 staff during 2020, and to around 250-300 staff overall including the period before the pandemic.



Ross McIntosh has continued delivering the training remotely as part of mental health and well-being initiatives during the pandemic, including new “bite-sized webinars”. Beneficiaries include 150 staff at a central government agency; 20 leaders at Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust, and 37 staff at Leeds Community Healthcare NHS Trust. Those from healthcare environments particularly valued: *“Regular time out to stop and reflect in what is sometimes an overwhelming stretched NHS environment. This gave space to think, take stock and plan. This in turn has helped achieve so much more with an awareness of the stresses and negative thoughts that can numb us and stop us from taking helpful action ... skills in these areas [are] of use to us, colleagues and patients/clients”* [5.10].

Further beneficiaries of McIntosh’s sessions include 50 mental health and staff support professionals from the UK, Ireland, Germany, USA and Australia (as part of a “Flexibility at Work” programme offered through Contextual Consulting); 37 staff at a Bristol charity supporting young people) and around 100 teachers working at Bristol schools [5.4]. Further training offered through Dancers’ Career Development – a registered charity which supports dancers to successfully transition into alternative careers after retiring from professional performance – has made a significant difference to 280 independent and company dancers, whose livelihoods have been heavily impacted during the pandemic. Participants have referred to it as “*a real lifeline*” and “*a chance to reflect, process and share all that this strange time has thrown at us*” [5.10]. As the Dancer Support and Programmes Officer confirms: “*At a time where the dance sector has been in turmoil and anxiety about the future has been at an all-time high – these workshops have been so relevant and important ... Being able to put the sessions on-line quickly meant we were able to continue supporting companies across the UK when it needed it the most*” [5.10].

Sustained interest during the pandemic in the train-the-trainer programme has also resulted in 50 professionals signing up for the Contextual Consulting module. An additional 20 professionals at Leeds Community Healthcare NHS Trust are completing the programme [5.10]. This continued interest demonstrates that the ACT programme will continue to be utilised to improve workforce mental health, across a wide range of industry sectors, as we emerge from this challenging period.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

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- 5.1 Jennings, T., Whipday, E., Egdell, K., Pestell, S., & Flaxman, P. (2016). Meaningful Work. <https://contextualconsulting.co.uk/insights/meaningful-work-act-in-the-workplace>
- 5.2 Jennings, T., Flaxman, P., Egdell, K., Pestell, S., Whipday, E., & Herbert, A. (2017). A resilience training programme to improve nurses' mental health. *Nursing Times* [on-line]. Vol. 113, Issue 10, pp.22-26 <https://www.nursingtimes.net/roles/nurse-educators/a-resilience-training-programme-to-improve-nurses-mental-health-18-09-2017/>
- 5.3 NHS Employers Podcast: Resilience with Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust <https://www.nhsemployers.org/case-studies-and-resources/2017/06/northumbria-healthcare-resilience-training-podcast>
- 5.4 Testimonial – Senior Educational Psychologist, Bristol City Council Inclusion Service. (16.03.21).
- 5.5 Gillard, D., Flaxman, P., & Hooper, N. (2018). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: Applications for Educational Psychologists within Schools. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, Vol. 34, Issue 3, pp. 272-81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2018.1446911>
- 5.6 Gillard, D., Wright, D., McNally, A., Flaxman, P., McIntosh, R. & Honey, K. (2020). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for School Leaders’ Well-being: An Initial Feasibility Study. *Educational Psychology in Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2020.1855120>
- 5.7 Testimonial – Principal Clinical Psychologist & Mindfulness Teacher from Lancashire Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust. (26.02.20).
- 5.8 SPSS output file showing analysis of ACT evaluation dataset: extent of improvement shown on GHQ-12 and Burnout measures. (02.03.21).
- 5.9 Poster Presentation from the Association for Contextual Behavioural Science (ACBS) World Conference, Dublin, Ireland (June 2019) – Arianna Prudenzi, University of Leeds.
- 5.10 Testimonial – Organisational Psychologist – People Soup, describing additional impact during Covid-19. (19.03.21).