

The Behavioural Sciences Research Division: A brief history of one of Occupational Psychology's most influential units in the 1970s

Way back in the late 1960s, a review of the Civil Service (CS) concluded that it was run on outdated lines and needed a thorough overhaul, not least in the way it was managed. As a result of this, a new department, called the Civil Service Department (CSD) was set up to implement the changes identified as necessary and to take over the task of managing government departments from the Treasury, who had previously had this role. Many of the key tasks of the CSD related to developing and implementing a wide range of HR policies and practices. To assist in this, the CSD set up a Research Division, staffed mainly by occupational psychologists, whose job it was to provide research-based advice to help guide these changes. It absorbed a smaller Behavioural Science unit and became the Behavioural Sciences Research Division (BSRD).

Over time, BSRD's range of activities extended greatly and included such things as –

- introducing and evaluating the first appraisal and career planning system the CS had ever operated
- conducting job satisfaction and job enrichment studies (Herzberg's theories on the latter were very prominent at the time!)
- designing a massive training programme for what was then a major new approach to taxation (specifically, the introduction of VAT)
- devising various cognitive tests, including a foreign language aptitude test
- carrying out OD interventions eg to tackle conflicts between different work groups
- evaluating the impact of flexible working hours
- carrying out a longitudinal study of the effectiveness of performance management

and... much more besides. Much of this work was ground breaking in nature and scope, and some of it found its way into articles in academic and practitioner journals. At its height, BSRD employed up to 20 OPs, several statisticians and computer experts and 6-7 supporting administrative staff. It was headed up, throughout its whole existence, by Dr Edgar Anstey, then the most senior of the 200+ psychologists employed by the CS (for more on Anstey, see DOP History pages). It was a period when it was quite common to find groups of OPs being employed within organisations (eg the Post Office OP group was quite sizeable) and also individuals as the 'in house' OP. The balance between using internal or external consultants was thus very much tilted in the direction of the former – the shift to greater reliance on external consultants came much later (partly driven by organisations wanting to keep headcount numbers down and not commit to the costs of employing permanent staff).

Given that the CS at that time (as now...) employed hundreds of thousands of staff across a wide spectrum of roles and activities, it offered the opportunity to carry out larger-scale interventions or research studies than would normally be the case. One of the early problems was suspicion and hostility from at least one of the main trade unions representing civil service staff (this is a story in itself...) fortunately this opposition was overcome and the problem resolved. Indeed, the situation changed to the extent that the trade unions themselves began to commission BSRD to do work for them!

To some extent, this was BSRD's undoing, as some parts of CSD management felt that these OPs were a bit too like the trade union in their thinking and sympathies! Eventually, a new Cabinet Secretary – who at that time was head of the home CS – did what he had done at the Treasury, namely cut the jobs of specialists such as statisticians, economists and psychologists. So BSRD was wound down, effectively ending in 1977. Some OPs were retained in different departments, others moved on to industry, academia and consultancy. Of those who left, three later became Professors (Clive Fletcher, Vic Dulewicz and Rowan Bayne). Several others went on to set up very successful consultancy companies. It is probably fair to say that virtually all of the 30 psychologists who worked in BSRD over the years subsequently made valuable individual contributions to OP practice. For all of them, working as part of this pioneering group of fellow professionals was a positive and formative experience.

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