

## Carers' Reflections about a Fulfilling Work Environment in a British Residential Home

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**Abstract:** When do people feel happy? One of the answers is that it is then when they feel fulfilled: happy at home, with a good job, and enjoying their everyday activities. When talking about their working day, if a person says that it was good, that colleagues were positive, and the staff working as a team, that answers to all the questions that arose were found and that problems were resolved, this probably means that this person is working in a positive or, in other words, a fulfilling environment. Is such a scenario possible in care settings, specifically, in a British residential home, where the work environment is unpredictable every day? Some answers can be found by analysing the reflections of the staff-carers who spend their long working days trying to make their clients who are diagnosed with dementia happy and fulfilled. So, the aim of this study is to reveal the carers' opinions of what constitutes a fulfilling work environment in a British residential home. For this reason, the answers given by ten carers working in a British residential home provides a better understanding of these carers' opinion of the work environment. The results of the qualitative research are presented, highlighting the research participants' reflections on their choice to work in a residential home, the meaning of a fulfilling work environment in a care context and ways to make the environment more fulfilling in a residential home. The survey reveals that significant motivating factors and the reasons that carers choose to work in a residential home are connected to the people that carers are working with. The process of learning and trying to improve oneself in the work environment and seeking to help clients is important as well. One of the interesting findings in this survey is that the respondents, while explaining their compassion for clients, mention their own family members, who inspire them to care about their clients. It can be said that this fulfilling work environment in some ways reminds them of a safe home environment. For this reason, one of the ways to make the environment more fulfilling in a residential home is to make the residents feel that they *live in an environment that is more home-like and less institutional*, to create a safe environment for the clients that would remind them of a real home. In this case more staff is required to do a better job. It is also important to mention that carers themselves could create a more positive and fulfilled work environment if they are not too tired and if they receive support and encouragement.

**Keywords:** adult education, fulfilled environment, work environment, residential home.

### Introduction

There are currently eight hundred thousand people with dementia in the UK; there will be over a million people with dementia by 2021 (Coope, Richards, 2014). These statistics are not encouraging, as they show that the number of elderly people diagnosed with dementia are going up. This also means that more people are receiving residential care. Families who have a member that receives care want the best environment possible for their loved ones.

Statistical data show that "eighty percent of people living in care homes have a form of dementia or severe memory problems" (Coope, Richards, 2014, p. 2). For this reason, it is important to encourage the creation of a fulfilling work environment in care which will promote the best possible care outcome for both the clients and staff/carers.

In this way, the question arises of how to make the work environment in a residential home fulfilling, for both clients/residents and carers. Specialists often discuss what a fulfilling, positive work environment really is. The main characteristics of a positive work environment are the following: transparent and open communication; a work-life balance; training and a focus on development; recognition for hard work; and strong team spirit. When considering how to create fulfilling work environments, three main ways are mentioned. According to K.E. Phillips (2015), it is important "to develop a positive culture; provide employees the resources they need to succeed; promote growth and development". Phillips goes on to declare: "Though fulfilling work environments incorporate various components and can mean many things to many people, they always create the opportunity for employees to be successful. They generate positive energy, foster inspiration, and provide a quality setting in which employees can deliver superior value" (Phillips, 2015).

A variety of different challenges appear when trying to create fulfilling environments for those working as carers in residential homes. One of these is to be ready to work in a stressful environment; trying to make it a more relaxing place is a major task for the staff, including the carers, who are working there. This is why it is important to find out the carers' opinions about their work environment and how they cope with the challenges in their everyday life as they work with different people.

Research object – the carer's reflections about a fulfilling work environment. The aim of this research is to reveal the carers' opinions of what constitutes a fulfilling work environment in a British Residential Home. Research tasks:

1. To identify the reasons why carers choose to work in a residential home.
2. To explain the meaning of a fulfilling work environment in a care context.
3. To highlight ways to make the environment more fulfilling in a residential home.

## Methodology

The empirical research is based on ideas about people who are diagnosed with dementia and findings about how to live and work with people with dementia, creating a relaxing environment (Andrews, 2015; Andrews, House, 2009; Atkins, 2013, 2015; Bailey, 2015; Eckersley, 2011).

Ten carers from a British residential home participated in the research (8 women and 2 men), which took place in a residential home in the UK November 1 – 20, 2017. The participants were 24-70 years of age. A research restriction was that the majority of the participants were female (8 females and 2 males). All the participants were fulltime carers and participated in the learning process in their work environment.

The participants in the research were given 5 open-ended questions; all of them received their interview questions in written form. These 10 carers had to answer questions about their motivation to do this job and their care of clients. In addition, the participants were asked to give some practical suggestions to improve the environment for the clients. They were also asked about their decision to take courses in the working place. Finally, the carers were asked to name strong and weak features of the course they were taking.

The collected data was analysed using content analysis. The research results were presented in the context of a concrete practice (Bitinas, Rupsiene, Zydziunaite, 2008). The research results were presented as a text highlighting the research participants' ideas about their choice to work in a residential home, the meaning of a fulfilling work environment in a care context, and ways to make the environment more fulfilling in a residential home.

## Results and Discussion

### Carers' thoughts about their choice to work in a residential home

In explaining about the choice to work in a care home, one respondent emphasized:

*I like working in a care home because I like helping people who have dementia, to have a slightly better life during their autumn years. You tend to meet nicer people in general. Also, it is nice feeling to help the vulnerable people during their autumn years and, to be honest, some of clients make me smile and laugh [C6].*

Another of the respondents answered in a similar way:

*I like to make a difference in their lives. The elderly are vulnerable people. If I can make their lives happy and fulfilled, easier, then I have done a good job [C3].*

One respondent added that it is important to see the residents fulfilling their lives as best they can [C7]. Still others emphasized similar points.

*As I am a people person, I enjoy getting to know clients and the families. I get a lot of job satisfaction and enjoy interacting with the clients [C8].*

*I like to offer assistance to others that need me. I like working in a care home because I enjoy the feeling I get when I know I have been able to make someone happy. My motivation mostly is the "thank you", "smile" reward I receive for what I do [C9].*

*I like to help a lot and share my life with people; that is why I like working in a care home. I always felt that it is important both for me and the clients to deliver a good job and this drive me always do my best [C10].*

For some respondents, an additional motivation is the salary they receive.

*My motivation is money. I mean I have bills to pay after all [C6]. It is important: to earn money and support family [C2].*

But most of the respondents agree that

*working in a care home gives me more time for myself and I am really enjoying; makes me to feel that I'm helpful for elderly people and I also enjoy what I am doing. Always try to improve my skills and services, trying to learn from my other co-workers who are/is the best [C1].*

In this way, the survey reveals that important motivating factors are the people that (colleagues/co-workers/staff) carers are working with. The process of learning and trying to improve never stops. As one participant stated, it is important *to keep up my/our knowledge of care [C4].*

### **Meaning of a fulfilling work environment in a care context**

One of the interesting findings from this survey is that the respondents, while explaining their compassion for clients, also mentioned their own family members, who inspire them to care about their clients.

*...I miss my grandparents and family and I wish to look after them, but because I can't, I am happy to look after them like they are a part of my family... [C1]. They are like an extension of my family, I care for them as if they were a relative [C7]. I see them as I would see my own family members in similar situations and also makes me think about my own future [C9].*

Mutual trust becomes a very important element, because the staff care about the clients, because they *get to know each resident individually as people and have a big part in their lives [C5].*

The participants in the survey mentioned that they want to create a safe environment for their clients that could remind them of a real home, *because they are vulnerable, they want to feel safe, to feel they are cared in safe environment. If we can make them feel like that, then they will be happy and contented and I have done my job [C3].*

Carers stress that this is not only the part of their job, but as well their own feelings, because they *get to know each resident individually as people and have a big part in their lives [C5].* This is considered the right approach, arising from a personal desire to care about people. As one of the participants said: *the people I look after... someone has got to care. It is right thing to do, it is justice and they cannot help the way that they are [C6]* so that it is important to care about residents, *making them smile and laugh and making their life easy for them... [C2].*

One participant stated that we will all grow old and it is lovely when clients acknowledge you are doing your best to make their lives more enjoyable [C8].

Another respondent acknowledged that this is the stage where they need love ones around them, but, due to various reasons it is impossible. This is where I want to be a friend and be there for them [C10].

### **Improvements in the environment of residential care**

Different ways to improve the environment for the clients while fulfilling their lives were highlighted. One of these is the significance of the number of staff members.

Often carers mentioned the need to have more staff members working in the suites. One of the respondents emphasized that it is important to have *more staff as if we are short staffed it leads to a stressful work environment [C5].*

Other respondents agreed that it is necessary *to have enough staff to give personal time to the residents. Quite often staff are so busy that we can't spend a little time to chat with the residents [C7].*

*If carers had a little more time they could give clients more one on one interaction [C8].*

*I would suggest more carers to have enough time to sit and chat with the residents. Caring it is not only ... personal care giving but also keeping them company [C9].*

One more way of improving the environment is to arrange things better in the home environment.

The respondents expressed the need *to make the place they (residents) live homelier and less of institutional environment [C3]*. For example, one suggestion was *on the bigger units' light outside in the garden, for them to see things, when they want to go outside at night [C2]*.

*I would try to make the environment homelier, sometimes things can become more "clinical", this is good for a hospital environment, not for a place that is supposed to be home, more flowers, proper sofas and chairs, more homely cosiness... smell of bread [C6]*.

As well, according to the respondents, providing different activities is important for the clients. The respondents highlighted the need for

*a variety of activities for them to keep their brains active and feel them happy in their environment [C5]*.

One participant in the research suggested monthly outings [C4].

*More trips to their favourite places like salons, restaurants, parks, and cinema. [C10]*.

One of the respondents was *pleased with what we have at work place, perhaps a small chapel where they (residents) can attend religious services would be nice [C1]*.

### **Learning in the working place**

When answering the question about the carers' decision to study in their working place, the participants in this survey emphasized the importance of job training in the context of lifelong learning. The importance of looking "at things from all angles" [C6] was referred to.

For example, one of the participants started a NVQ (National vocational qualification) course because it helps develop better care for residents mainly and more accurately, ... to get a better perspective, to look at things from all angles [C6].

The participants in the research agreed that "you can never stop learning" [C3...]

*Courses are good and as you can never stop learning. The more knowledge you gain the better you are able to do your job in the workplace and in general life [C3]*.

The components of this process are knowledge, skills, and values [C3, C4, C5].

These components can be found in the literature as well and are described as follows: knowledge is the foundation of the whole course; skills "develop and enhance during the course"; while values are related to the course content. Such values include "independence of thought, depth and breadth of understanding, love of learning" (Learn more, do more. Knowledge, Skills and Values). It is important to use knowledge in practice, to develop planning and organising skills, to use personal features, to develop and improve communication and cooperation, independent learning and solving learning related problems (Staniuleviciene, 2014).

Getting involved in the studying process helps carers to improve their knowledge in theory and in practice, as well as encouraging them to seek better support for their clients. Theoretical and practical knowledge and values foster positive thinking and attitudes that provide support. Then carers can be more creative and help their clients overcome difficulties in everyday tasks. The carers are ready to accept new knowledge and, in this way, participate in lifelong learning.

According to this research, developing a fulfilling work environment is complex; the carers' reflections about it shown in Figure 1.

**Work – life balance:** carers need to balance between their job and their personal life. In effect, carers cannot be overloaded with tasks and there must be enough staff to do high quality work. Support with resources: in order to carry out their job efficiently and effectively, carers must have appropriate resources (physical and human).

**Personal development and learning:** carers can develop personally through their studies with on the job training and e-learning. Cooperation with clients: encouraging and cooperative relations with clients always create a positive work environment.

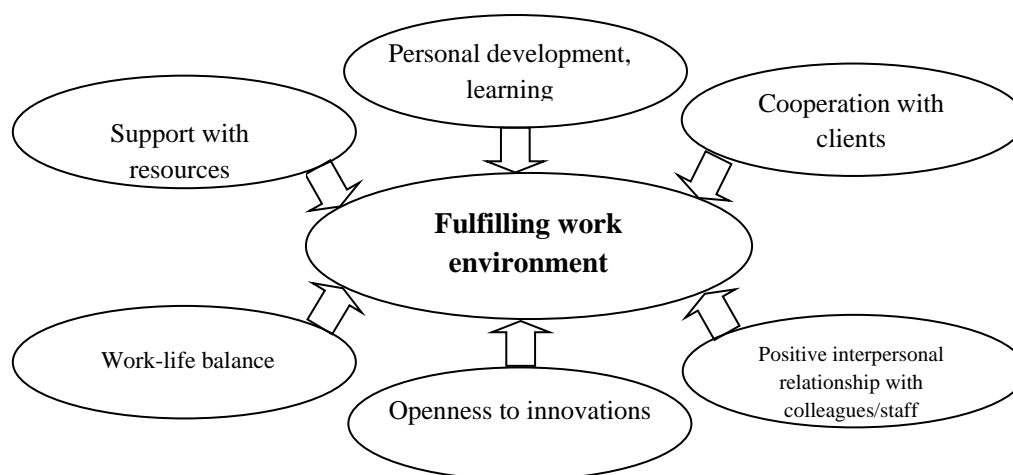


Figure 1. Fulfilling work environment in a care context (by the author).

Positive interpersonal relationship with colleagues/ staff: a positive relationship with colleagues and other staff makes it easier to carry out tasks and helps the staff to work as a team. Openness to innovations: this helps carers to renew their knowledge related to the job and encourages daily progress.

## Conclusions

The survey reveals that, among motivating factors and reasons that carers choose to work in a residential home, the people that carers are working with are particularly important. The process of learning, trying to improve in the work environment, and seeking to help clients are important as well.

One interesting finding in this survey is that the respondents, while explaining their compassion for clients, mentioned their own family members, who inspire them to care about their clients. Carers bring a positive culture from their home environment to the work environment. In some ways a fulfilling work environment is reminiscent of a safe home environment. This is why one of the ways to make the environment more fulfilling in a residential home is to make residents feel that they live in an environment that is more like a home and less like an institution, to create a safe environment for the clients that could remind them of a real home. A fulfilling work environment for carers in a care context means an environment which is in the best interests of the residents.

Therefore, a fulfilling work environment in a care context is a complex of various components: the work – life balance; support with resources; personal development and learning; cooperation with clients; a positive interpersonal relationship with colleagues/ staff; and an openness to innovations. This research has also revealed that more staff need to do a better job in residential homes. It is important to mention that carers themselves could create a more positive and fulfilled work environment if they have support and encouragement.

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