

Although challenging, **Link Roles** are valued for their potential to create expertise and improve care

Managers and Link Practitioners' views and experiences of link roles and link programmes

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INTRO

Link practitioners are care team members who take on an additional role as liaison between their care team and a specialist team (link role). Previous research of individual link programme effectiveness suggests that link roles can successfully improve care and staff understanding, however, there are known to be barriers to their success (Perry-Woodford & Whayman 2005, Everitt 2008 and Sopirala et al. 2014).

Supportive team managers and engaged link practitioners are important to success of link programmes, yet there is limited research into their views and experiences (Dawson 2003, Heals 2008). This study uniquely focuses on exploring the views of those undertaking and supporting a range of link roles across an organisation, to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers and facilitators to the role.

METHODS

- Purposive sample of 4 managers and 10 link practitioners (Tables 1 & 2)
- Semi-structured interviews – questions derived from themes identified from literature as to possible facilitators and barriers to success of link programmes (Table 3)
- Data collected December 2017 – March 2018 in a south England NHS community trust
- Data analysed using inductive thematic analysis

RESULTS

- Motivation to undertake a role driven by:
 - Interest in specialist area
 - Desire for professional development
 - Promoting shared learning
- Information sharing performed in a variety of ways including meetings, emails and information boards
- Combination approach seen as good practice for information dissemination - captures people's preferences and increases likelihood of information being received
- Challenges to programmes include lack of time and the number of link programmes requiring support
- Programmes without a clear link to clinical practice harder to support as staff struggle to see how the role improves patient care
- Link roles considered valuable by all participants:
 - Improves patient care
 - Creates an 'expert' in the team
 - Influences practice & helps standardise care across the Trust

DISCUSSION

Careful consideration is required by specialist teams to identify if link programmes are appropriate for their service. If setting up or delivering a link programme, recognising that interest in the specialty is not the only motivating factor to engagement in the role, may improve programme effectiveness. Clearly identifying link to practice and improved patient care is important for programme.

References

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TABLE 1- INC/EXC. CRITERIA

Inclusion Criteria

- Aged ≥ 18 years old
- Care team member with a current or previously held link role OR Care team manager responsible for staff with a link role
- Ability to give informed consent

Exclusion Criteria

- Aged < 18 years old
- Never had a link role OR not responsible for staff with a link role
- Does not give consent to participate

TABLE 2- PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC

PT. ID	Manager/Link	Mental Health (MH)/ Physical Health (PH)	Work Base	Job Role
001	Manager	MH	Community	Senior Manager
002	Link	PH	Community	Specialist Nurse
003	Manager	PH	Community & inpatient	Matron
004	Manager	PH	Inpatient	Ward Manager
005	Link	PH	Community	Staff Nurse
006	Link	PH	Community	Staff Nurse
007	Link	PH	Community	Specialist Nurse
008	Link	PH	Community	Charge Nurse
009	Link	PH	Community	Specialist Nurse
010	Link	MH	Inpatient	Charge Nurse
011	Link	MH	Inpatient	Charge Nurse
012	Manager	MH	Inpatient	Ward Manager
013	Link	PH	Inpatient	Staff Nurse
014	Link	PH	Outpatients	Staff Nurse

TABLE 3- INTERVIEW GUIDE

- How are the link roles distributed within the team?
- *What factors influenced you to become a link practitioner (links only)?*
- Tell me about your experience of being a link practitioner/ managing link practitioners.
- How easy is it to attend link meetings and undertake the necessary responsibilities of the role?
- How is the information from the link meetings disseminated to the rest of the team?
- Do you feel supported in the role/managing the role?
- *Do you find some link programmes easier to support in your team (managers only)?*
- Do you feel the link practitioner role is a valuable one?
- What do you think makes a successful link programme?
- Do you have ideas as to how link programmes could be improved?

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