A Psychologist “On the Move”

Practitioner Profile: Eileen M. Connolly, PhD

Eileen M. Connolly, PhD, works predominately as a solo practicing psychologist in suburban Philadelphia. But she’s hardly isolated within the four walls of an office.

Since earning her PhD in counseling psychology from Temple University, Connolly has built a diversified practice with both individual and corporate clients. Her professional grounding in vocational testing and counseling, along with more traditional counseling, led her to her first job at the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in Princeton.

Connolly says that her management position at ETS helped her understand top managerial roles – from CEO and chief financial officer to the director of human resources – and how organizational systems function. “The work was a good match with my psychology background and training,” says Connolly, adding that it paved the way for later professional pursuits.

Connolly left her position at ETS to begin a solo practice with a range of activities. To help her begin to build the coaching component, she sought supervision from psychologists who were actively involved with doing executive coaching. These days, Connolly spends roughly 40 percent of her professional time helping organizational clients improve their effectiveness and achieve their corporate goals.

In recent years, Connolly has seen companies pay greater attention to developing particular competencies needed for specific leadership roles. For example, if a leader needs to be more assertive and that person doesn’t necessarily see herself that way, the coach helps the individual cultivate the necessary competency. “The approach used to be reactive and focused on getting faltering leaders back on track. Now it’s much more proactive and focused on developmental activities,” says Connolly.

When asked what has helped her grow her consulting business, Connolly zeroes in on one particular factor: “I’ve developed strategic alliances.” One of her strategic partners is a company that provides a host of career-related services such as career transition resources. “It’s been an excellent source of professional enrichment as well as referrals,” says Connolly. She travels regularly to the firm’s offices in Manhattan to interact with other coaches, and she’s taking the lead in helping the group develop tools to hone their consulting skills.

“You need to create opportunities for collegial relationships with your peers,” says Connolly. “They don’t just occur naturally.”

Another of her strategic allies is a group in Texas that provides assessment tools she uses in her coaching work. Further, Connolly credits her membership in the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Division 13 (Society of Consulting Psychology) as a good source of information and networking opportunities.

Immersing herself in the community – exploring demand for psychological services and forging connections – has helped Connolly diversify her practice. “Once I began receiving referrals to conduct psychological evaluations on candidates for bariatric surgery, I wondered if this development was a pattern, part of a larger trend,” says Connolly. She reached out to a surgical clinic to find out what procedures their patients were seeking and how her professional services might fit in.

To help build her competence in this area, she sought out
connections with colleagues doing pre-surgical consultations. She also began tapping into other community-based resources for people struggling with weight control. As local demand for bariatric surgery has grown, patient consults have become an increasing part of Connolly’s practice, which now includes post-surgical services such as treatment adherence.

A substantial percentage of Connolly’s practice taps into psychology’s roots in mental health services delivery. Connolly works with adults who have a variety of psychological problems including anxiety, mood and adjustment disorders, stress and relationship issues.

Having a blend of professional activities helps her diversify revenue sources. The mental health services portion of her practice involves health insurance as well as self-pay clients. Coaching work has been a major factor in reducing her reliance on the insurance and managed care reimbursement system.

While she credits diversified revenue streams as one factor in having a successful practice, Connolly adds that her investment in professional networking has paid dividends in increased referrals. For example, some of the psychologists in Connolly’s network who are involved in coaching do a lot of organizational development work, while Connolly does none. She may find herself in a situation to share a lead involving that type of work with a colleague. “The reverse is also true,” adds Connolly. “Some of these psychologists who specialize in organizational development work might have an occasion to refer one-on-one coaching opportunities to me.”

For Connolly, another major factor in building a thriving practice is flexibility. In the current economic environment, Connolly says, “Companies are cutting executive coaching budgets. But they’re not necessarily cutting outplacement and career transition benefits for employees who are laid off.” Connolly now focuses more of her professional coaching work on helping unemployed executives find their next professional opportunity and perhaps strategize to switch careers. “You have to go with the larger trends, both economic and within health care,” she says.

Another evolution in Connolly’s practice relates to technology. Over the years, her standard approach to coaching has involved meeting with executives on their own turf. But Connolly sees technological tools such as webcams and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP, a general term related to delivering voice communications over networks such as the Internet) as creating new opportunities to work remotely with organizational clients. Meanwhile, she says, technology aids practice building. “It opens up the field of potential candidates and referrals for coaching.”

When asked what she’s doing to ensure a thriving practice despite the economic downturn, Connolly says she’s trying to keep all her channels, as well as her eyes, wide open and be aware of trends and opportunities as they emerge. For example, more people are coming to her for psychotherapy as they experience greater stress, although they aren’t coming as frequently as in the past. “The [psychotherapy] channel is stable, but it looks different these days.”

The upshot, she says, is a balancing act. “I’m maintaining my core [practice activities] but looking to be flexible and adaptable.” To help accommodate changing client demand for psychotherapy services, Connolly became a participating provider in one insurance network.

“I see colleagues who remain in the office with their patients day in and day out,” says Connolly. “I hope they’re taking the time to network, to consider new options and additional ways to utilize their broad skills.” For Connolly, taking advantage of networking opportunities through professional associations and continuing education, for example, helps her interact with peers and benefit from their experiences.

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Her peers, in turn, admire her interactive and proactive style. “She’s a psychologist on the move,” says Helen Coons, PhD, a practicing psychologist in Bala Cynwyd, PA, and member of the APA Committee for the Advancement for Professional Practice.

In anticipating marketplace opportunities, Connolly says she always expects to find bends in the road. “It’s important to be aware that things are changing. Hold steady but remain flexible,” says Connolly. “I position myself to be ready for the next bend.”