

Youth on the frontline: how to support junior staff to provide frontline support

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Main findings

- Young professionals bring distinct strengths to frontline roles, including an ability to connect with younger service users and strong digital skills that can support more innovative, accessible and efficient service delivery.
- Young frontline professionals can be particularly vulnerable to challenges such as burnout, role ambiguity and boundary-setting, highlighting the importance of appropriate organisational support.
- Effective management and opportunities for continuous professional development are important for staff satisfaction and retention. Managers with direct experience of frontline roles may also be better positioned to understand staff challenges, provide appropriate support and make informed decisions.
- Investment in mentoring, training, peer support and wellbeing is critical to enabling young professionals to thrive in frontline roles, supporting both their longer-term professional development and their ability to deliver effective support to service users.

Introduction

Frontline working with service users is a necessary starting point for one's career. These roles demand a unique combination of empathy, resilience and adaptability, making it crucial to assess whether young professionals are adequately prepared, and adequately supported, for the challenges they may face. The enthusiasm and fresh perspectives that young workers bring to frontline support roles can be valuable, particularly in fostering rapport with service users who may relate more easily to younger professionals.

However, concerns persist regarding their potential lack of experience handling difficult conversations, and their subsequent resilience and self-care. Without adequate training, support structures, and professional boundaries, young frontline workers may struggle with burnout, role ambiguity and emotional detachment.

This literature review critically examines the challenges and strengths associated with young professionals working in frontline roles.

Drawing on existing research and insights from Catch22's organisational strategies, the review explores key themes such as emotional resilience, professional development, workplace support mechanisms and the impact of organisational culture.

Through evaluating these factors, the discussion aims to determine whether young staff can manage the trials and tribulations of working in emotionally demanding environments, maintaining their own wellbeing and delivering a high-quality service delivery.

Resilience and burnout

Resilience – one’s ability to use pre-existing strengths to overcome difficult situations - is dynamic, and develops over time (Stainton et al., 2019). A concern when placing inexperienced staff in frontline roles is that they may lack resilience due to having less opportunity to develop this skill. Whilst this concern is valid, we are presented with a Catch22: individuals may lack the resilience required to cope with certain challenging situations, yet it is by facing these very situations that resilience is developed. What we can conclude here is that junior staff can be hired into these roles as a learning opportunity, provided they received adequate support from managers, adequate training, and clearly established boundaries, so the learning does not escalate into burnout.

Many junior staff enter the field with passion and dedication, which can lead to increased engagement with the role and job satisfaction (Ahmed & Balzer, 2024). However, this enthusiasm can also result in overcommitment and overworking, increasing an individual’s susceptibility to burnout. Research suggests that younger employees experience higher levels of occupational stress and burnout, particularly in emotionally demanding roles such as social work, counselling or policing (Rožman, Grinkevich, and Tominc, 2019).

This aligns with Maslach’s Burnout Theory (1998), which identifies three key dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment. In emotionally demanding jobs, the risk of chronic stress and mental health decline is heightened. Emotional exhaustion results from prolonged exposure to service users’ distress, whilst depersonalisation can cause professionals to become detached from their work, affecting their overall ability to deliver interventions effectively.

This can evoke compassion fatigue, a condition in which prolonged exposure to others’ suffering diminishes a worker’s ability to empathise and engage effectively (Figley, 1995). A questionnaire was sent out to practitioners within Catch22, in which a worker described how the high-stakes nature of their role creates significant pressure, particularly when navigating complex cases involving legal and financial issues. They noted that “overthinking situations as the stakes are so high” can be overwhelming, especially when managing multiple agencies and ever-changing circumstances.

This illustrates how even with training; the emotional demands of the job can lead to stress and eventual burnout.

Professional boundaries and professional considerations

To combat burnout, it is crucial that staff set clear professional boundaries. Young staff are often perceived to have weaker professional boundaries due to their inexperience within the workforce, creating further challenges during frontline work.

A strong desire to help service users, coupled with less experience in self-advocacy, may lead to blurred boundaries.

Research conducted by Miller et al. (2019) supports this, finding that young workers in emotionally demanding roles are more likely to overextend themselves, often struggling to set limits on their availability and emotional involvement.

Younger employees in frontline roles reported significantly lower self-care and self-compassion scores compared to their senior counterparts.

The research also highlighted a correlation between poor boundary-setting and higher levels of emotional exhaustion, with participants describing difficulties in detaching from service users' distress outside of work hours.

This lack of firm boundaries can contribute to role confusion, compassion fatigue, and ethical dilemmas, as workers may feel compelled to take on responsibilities beyond their remit.

Without structured support, young professionals may struggle to separate work from their personal lives, leading to prolonged stress and reduced effectiveness within their roles.

This further underscores the need for targeted guidance and training on boundary-setting and work-life balance.

Stigma and age-related challenges

External influences can also affect the care provided by a junior member of staff, as young professionals often experience negative stereotypes and stigma.

Research indicates that young staff members are sometimes perceived as inexperienced or inadequate (Wong et al., 2021). This can be especially problematic when working with older service users, who may assume that a young practitioner lacks the necessary experience of life understanding to provide meaningful support. Such biases can hinder trust and rapport-building, which are essential for effective intervention.

Service users may be less likely to disclose personal information, issues or follow guidance from a practitioner they perceive as inexperienced, which has the potential to undermine the effectiveness of the support provided.

To combat this, Catch22 promotes an inclusive workplace culture through mentorship programs, reflective practice sessions, and intergenerational learning opportunities. Feedback from young workers highlights that open discussions with colleagues, managers and support networks serve as key protective factors.



These platforms provide the opportunity for advice, reflection, encouragement and shared experiences, all of which contribute to enhanced professional development.

Managers and supervisors play a crucial role in offering guidance on trust-building strategies with service users, thereby fostering credibility and confidence amongst young staff.

Strengths of young professionals in frontline work

Despite the challenges, young staff bring unique strengths to frontline roles with service users. One key advantage is their ability to connect with specific demographics.

With 13.3% of people in prison being under the age of 25 (Allen, 2020), there is a sizeable amount of service users that would benefit from receiving support from someone of a similar age to them.

Shared characteristics, such as age, can facilitate trust and understanding (Griffin, 2021).

Younger professionals may find it easier to build rapport with younger service users, overall improving engagement and intervention effectiveness.

Young professionals' digital proficiency can benefit older service users who may struggle with technology, evidencing that young staff are beneficial for more than their relatability.

They can assist with tasks such as navigating online services, filling out digital forms, or accessing remote support, ultimately reducing barriers to essential resources.

This ability to bridge the digital divide enhances service accessibility and ensures that vulnerable individuals receive the support they need in an increasingly digital world.

Their technological expertise can facilitate creative problem-solving and the implementation of web-based interventions for wellbeing promotion (Prydz et al., 2024).

By integrating digital tools into frontline work, young professionals contribute to more efficient, accessible, and innovative service delivery.

Additionally, young professionals bring fresh perspectives and adaptability, which are crucial for addressing complex service user challenges. Their technological literacy and comfort with digital engagement tools, such as social media, enable them to connect with service users through modern communication platforms.

This is particularly relevant given Catch22's partnership with TikTok since 2022, supporting young people transitioning into creative and digital industries. This initiative reflects Catch22's commitment to empowering young people by recognising their potential to succeed in diverse career paths, particularly in emerging digital fields.

By providing access to training, workshops and employment opportunities, Catch22 not only helps young service users develop practical skills but also reinforces the idea that they can thrive in innovative and evolving industries.

This approach highlights Catch22's attitude and dedication to breaking down barriers which may prevent young people from exploring opportunities in the creative digital sector.

Training and development opportunities

As mentioned, less experienced staff can be more than capable of delivering high-quality services, provided they receive thorough, comprehensive onboarding and training.

To equip younger staff with the necessary skills to manage the challenges of frontline work, Catch22 provides a structured and comprehensive range of in-house training programmes. These programmes focus on key areas such as developing professional boundaries, mental health awareness, and personal resilience.

Training sessions often incorporate scenario-based learning, workshops led by experienced practitioners, and reflective practice exercises, ensuring that young professionals can apply theoretical knowledge to real-world situations, and practice their intervention delivery before they are applying it in situations with service users.

Responses to a questionnaire sent to Catch22 employees indicated that confidence in their roles increases over time, highlighting the effectiveness of the organisation's approach to professional development.

By engaging with training opportunities in a supportive environment, young professionals gain the skills needed to handle service user

interactions effectively and navigate the complexities of their roles. Research supports this approach, with studies showing that access to continuous professional development enhances job satisfaction and improves retention rates (Hollar, Kuchinka and Feinberg, 2022).

This investment in training not only benefits individual employees by fostering career growth and resilience but also strengthens Catch22's workforce by ensuring a well-prepared and skilled team capable of delivering high-quality services.

In addition to this, "climbing the ladder" is crucial to be equipped for a senior role. In 2015, Gallup studied 2.5 million manager-led teams across 195 countries. This study meticulously evaluated effective management techniques, and one conclusion was that employees are more likely to work better with managers who understand their job, especially if they have completed it themselves.

As a manager, they will be more empathetic and will be able to make better decisions if they know the semantics of the role from first-hand experience.

This evidences that young/junior staff need to start in the frontline roles to progress into more senior roles, so they can support their teams

Organisational support and wellbeing initiatives

Burnout and emotional exhaustion are significant challenges for frontline workers, often resulting from the demanding nature of their roles. To address this, research suggests that organisations should recognise the emotional and psychological demands of frontline work and implement targeted strategies to support staff wellbeing.

Catch22 has developed several initiatives aimed at mitigating burnout, promoting work-life balance and reinforcing professional boundaries.

One key approach is structured peer support, where employees participate in regular group discussions to share experiences, reflect on challenges and receive guidance from colleagues. Research by Poremski et al., (2022), found that structured peer support significantly reduces stress levels among frontline workers by fostering a sense of community and collective problem-solving.

Their study, which examined social care professionals across multiple organisations, highlighted that the practitioners who engaged in peer support programmes reported lower levels of emotional exhaustion and higher levels of job satisfaction.

Supervision is another critical component of Catch22's wellbeing strategy. Staff members receive regular one-on-one supervision with experienced managers, of whom the majority were frontline practitioners, providing a safe space to discuss concerns, seek advice, and develop effective coping mechanisms.

Supervision sessions also help reinforce ethical decision-making and boundary-setting, reducing the likelihood of role confusion and compassion fatigue.

Additionally, Catch22 has introduced flexible working arrangements, such as remote work options and job-sharing opportunities, to help employees better manage their personal and professional commitments.

The organisation also provides access to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), offering 24/7 mental health support, counselling services, and stress management resources. Engaging with these initiatives enables young professionals to build resilience, develop sustainable coping strategies, and maintain long-term wellbeing.

From an organisational perspective, these strategies contribute to a healthier and more engaged workforce, reducing staff turnover and improving service delivery.

For individuals, they offer crucial support in managing the pressures of frontline work, enhancing their overall job satisfaction and professional longevity.

While Catch22 has made significant strides in employee support, continued investment in mentoring programmes and additional mental health interventions could further strengthen workplace well-being and ensure long-term staff retention.

Conclusion

Young professionals are an invaluable asset to frontline support, bringing energy, innovation and a strong ability to connect with service users. While they may face challenges such as burnout, role ambiguity and difficulties in boundary-setting, they are fully capable of excelling in these roles when provided with the right support, training and professional development. Catch22 has demonstrated a proactive approach to addressing these challenges, via targeted interventions, including mentorship programs, structured peer support and wellbeing initiatives.

By fostering an inclusive and supportive environment, organisations can ensure that young professionals not only manage the demands of frontline work but also thrive, developing the skills and resilience needed for long-term success.

With continued investment in training and workplace support, young professionals can make a lasting, meaningful impact on the sector while maintaining their wellbeing and receiving support for their professional growth.

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Appendix A

Background and role

1. Could you briefly describe your role within Catch22?
2. What motivated you to pursue a career in social care, particularly at Catch22?

Trials and tribulations

3. What are the main challenges you've encountered working with service users?
4. Have you ever encountered situations that felt overwhelming or beyond your current skill set?

Emotional resilience and coping

5. How do you personally cope with the emotional demands of your job?
6. Do you feel your theoretical knowledge (from training or education) adequately prepared you for handling difficult situations?

Support and resources

7. What forms of support are available to you at Catch22 when you face challenging situations?
8. Do you feel the support provided by Catch22 is sufficient to help you manage the emotional and practical demands of your role?
9. In what ways have your peers or supervisors supported you in dealing with the challenges of your job?

Moving forward

10. How confident do you feel in your ability to continue managing the challenges you face in this role?
11. If you could suggest improvements to how young staff are supported, what would those be?

