

# From Crisis to Continuum: Bridging the Gap between Reactive EAPs and Proactive Counselling in Hybrid Work Environments

<sup>1</sup>Fuhad Amed Mohamed Bangura., <sup>2</sup>Musa Jalloh

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Public Administration and Management, University of Sierra Leone, Freetown, Sierra Leone

<sup>2</sup>University of International Business and Economic, Beijing, China

Author 1: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2821-3115>

Author 2: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1078-2995>

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## ABSTRACT

Workplace counseling services, particularly Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), are widely used to support employee mental health, yet persistently low utilization rates indicate that service availability alone does not ensure engagement. These limitations are intensified in hybrid work environments, where reduced physical co-presence weakens the detection of informal signals and increases reliance on employees' self-recognition of psychological strain. Existing counseling systems, therefore, remain predominantly reactive and crisis-triggered.

This article develops the Continuum of Proactive Counseling Engagement (COPCE) framework to reconceptualize workplace counseling as a staged engagement architecture embedded in organizational climate. Using an integrative conceptual synthesis of literature on workplace counseling utilization, psychosocial safety climate, organizational help-seeking behavior, and hybrid work design, the study identifies three structural engagement gaps: temporal, modality, and climate gaps that constrain counseling access.

The COPCE framework integrates early signal detection mechanisms, multi-channel access pathways, staged intervention structures, and psychosocial safety climate feedback processes into a unified engagement continuum. The framework provides a theoretically grounded basis for redesigning workplace counseling systems. It offers testable propositions for future research on engagement timing, modality alignment, and the effects of organizational climate on counseling utilization.

**Keywords:** workplace counseling; Employee Assistance Programs; psychosocial safety climate; hybrid work; help-seeking behavior; organizational mental health systems

## INTRODUCTION

As work-related mental health issues such as burnout, anxiety, and work-related stress (Demerouti et al., 2001; Harvey et al., 2017; LaMontagne et al., 2014) become more pervasive across sectors, employee mental health has emerged as a critical factor governing the sustainability, productivity, and retention of the workforce. Consequently, numerous organizations have adopted Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) as the principal workplace counseling mechanism and a key element of work-related mental health strategy (Attridge, 2019). Although readily available, service use tends to be only about 3% and 8% per year (Sharar & Hertenstein, 2024; Attridge, 2019), suggesting that gaps between service provision and employee engagement with supports remain. This paradox of utilization indicates that the effectiveness of counseling cannot be interpreted purely

based on supply but rather from the perspective of both aspects, including the nature and timing of accessibility and the organization of normal circumstances for help-seeking behavior (Csiernik, 2003; Rickwood et al., 2007).

Recent global evidence further highlights the scale and urgency of workplace mental-health challenges. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) and International Labor Organization (ILO), approximately 15% of working-age adults experience a mental disorder. At the same time, depression and anxiety contribute to the loss of an estimated 12 billion working days annually and cost the global economy nearly US\$1 trillion in reduced productivity (WHO & ILO, 2022). The WHO and ILO also identify psychosocial risks such as excessive workloads, low job control, workplace isolation, and weak organizational support systems as increasingly important concerns in post-pandemic and hybrid work environments (WHO & ILO, 2022). Despite increased organizational investment in workplace counseling systems and Employee Assistance Programs, utilization rates remain persistently low, underscoring the structural gap between the availability of counseling and employee engagement with support systems.

With the growth of hybrid work arrangements, these challenges have been magnified. Due to reduced physical co-presence in distributed work environments, opportunities for informal classroom spotting of distress signals are limited, and spontaneous peer support and managerial interaction are diminished (Wang et al., 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021). Simultaneously, hybrid work has been associated with escalating demand for flexible and digitally mediated support routes (Bloom et al., 2024), exposing a growing mismatch between traditional EAP delivery mechanisms and employee preferences as workplace changes continue to unfold. Such developments argue for understanding workplace counseling not only as an intervention service but as a system of engagement within dynamic work environments.

Workplace counseling interventions and psychotherapeutic consultation models have been effective in reducing psychological distress and work functioning among service users (Rothermund et al., 2025; Attridge, 2019). Nevertheless, counseling services are often available only after symptoms have become severe enough, and they can only work preventively to a limited extent. Stigma concerns, lack of confidence in confidentiality, limited availability, and diminished cognitive capacity to process information during times of psychological distress significantly delay help-seeking behavior (Corrigan, 2004; Rickwood et al., 2007; Gulliver et al., 2010). This Avoidance Of The Workplace (AOTW) may reasonably heighten these barriers in hybrid work environments, where the informal prompting mechanisms are weakened by increased agentic behavior and visibility of distress is reduced.

The study of organizational psychology has highlighted psychosocial safety climate (PSC) as an understudied contextual factor influencing counseling use. PSC is employees' aggregated perceptions about the extent to which management implements a medical approach to production and productivity demands relative to psychological health (Dollard & Bakker, 2010). High PSC environments promote earlier help-seeking behavior, more effective disclosure norms, and increase the success of workplace mental-health interventions, while low PSC environments inhibit service use even when services are explicitly accessible (Rothermund et al., 2025; Hall et al., 2010). These results provide evidence that the decision to access workplace counseling cannot be understood entirely from an individual-level perspective; rather, understanding the organizational climate in which support-seeking behavior is seen as legitimate and safe may further explain these decisions.

Although several workplace mental-health intervention models, including stepped-care systems and psychotherapeutic consultation approaches, have improved access to counseling support, many workplace counseling systems continue to rely heavily on employee self-identification and reactive access processes (Weber & Schmidt, 2024). This remains inconsistent with behavioral evidence showing that psychological distress itself can reduce an individual's capacity to recognize problems and initiate help-seeking behavior (Rickwood et al., 2007). Consequently, employees often engage with counseling systems only after psychological strain has intensified, limiting the preventive potential of workplace mental-health interventions.

Workplace counseling is gaining recognition as a key intervention for organizational effectiveness. Nevertheless, research on the timing and access pathways to counseling engagement remains limited, with

much of the existing literature focusing primarily on the efficacy of particular forms of counseling. We highlight specific areas that have received limited theoretical attention, such as how hybrid work contexts shape opportunities for early signal detection, with signaling modality alignment expectations and psychosocial safety climate influences on counseling use behavior. To bridge this gap, we will need a framework that incorporates behavioral, structural, and organizing climate explanations of counseling engagement in distributed workplaces.

To address these limitations, a conceptual model is introduced in this article: the Continuum of Proactive Counseling Engagement (COPCE) framework, which transforms workplace counseling from an intervention system activated by preceding crises to a climate-embedded engagement continuum. From solid literature informing on counseling uptake, psychosocial safety climate, hybrid arrangements, and organizational help-seeking behavior, the framework outlines three interlocking engagement gaps: temporal, modality, and climate gaps that constitute barriers to traditional EAP effectiveness. COPCE systems provide a theoretically grounded architecture for redesigning counseling engagement systems in hybrid workplaces by integrating early signal detection mechanisms, multi-channel access pathways, staged intervention structures, and organizational climate feedback loops.

## METHODOLOGY

This article adopts an integrative conceptual synthesis approach to examine workplace counseling engagement in hybrid work environments and to develop the Continuum of Proactive Counseling Engagement (COPCE) framework. Integrative conceptual synthesis is commonly employed in organizational psychology to integrate theoretical perspectives and empirical findings from distinct research traditions into cross-fertilizing explanatory frameworks regarding complex organizational phenomena (Torraco, 2005; Snyder, 2019). This strategy is especially well-suited when the goal is theory development rather than hypothesis testing, and when knowledge has been spread across multiple, slightly interconnected areas of inquiry.

It develops the synthesis based on four interrelated bodies of literature: workplace counseling and Employee Assistance Program (EAP) uptake; psychosocial safety climate (PSC); help-seeking behavior in organizational contexts; and psychological effects of hybrid work. These domains were selected because, combined, they capture the behavioral, structural, and contextual mechanisms that shape engagement with workplace mental-health support systems (Dollard & Bakker, 2010; Rickwood et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2021). With this framing, a common set of explanatory mechanisms for delays in counseling use among distributed workers across all three study protocols could be identified.

A formal literature search was conducted to identify relevant articles and other sources from 2020 to 2026, as the evolution of work organization across hybrid and digital implementation modes has changed dramatically following the COVID-19 pandemic (Kniffin et al., 2021; Bloom et al., 2024). Major academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar), as well as policy guidance from international workplace mental-health organizations where implementation-level evidence has not been comprehensively captured in the peer-review literature yet (WHO, 2022). Search keywords comprised combinations of the following terms: workplace counseling, employee assistance programs, psychosocial safety climate, help-seeking behavior, hybrid work, remote work mental health, and organizational psychological safety.

Sources were included where they contributed to at least one of three analytical objectives:

1. clarifying the scope and limitations of workplace counseling interventions,
2. identifying behavioral and organizational barriers influencing counseling utilization, and
3. Examining how hybrid work environments reshape distress signal visibility and access to support systems.

The selection included both empirical and conceptual studies to reflect the multilevel nature of workplace counseling engagement processes and to support the development of a framework guided by an integrative theory-building methodology (Torraco, 2005).

This synthesis occurred via three stages of thematic integration. We identified common barriers to engagement reported in studies of EAP utilization or work-relevant help-seeking behavior (e.g., delayed recognition of psychological strain, stigma concerns, and access pathway constraints). Second, the psychosocial safety climate literature was synthesized to develop models of organizational-level conditions that influence disclosure-to-access transitions and access-to-recovery pathways within counseling engagement processes (Dollard & Bakker, 2010; Hall et al., 2010). Third, previous research on hybrid work arrangements was reviewed to understand how the displacement of interaction patterns and decreased visibility of distress signals in workplaces with increased expectations for flexible modalities influence opportunities to engage (Wang et al., 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021).

Using a thematic comparison across these domains, we illuminate three engagement gaps (temporal, modality, and climate) that recur yet are rarely integrated in the workplace counseling literature. Through synthesizing these themes, a framework of the Continuum of Proactive Counseling Engagement (COPCE) was developed to structure engagement architecture in terms of mechanisms for early signal detection, moving through multi-channel access pathways and climate-embedded support systems that were structured according to stepped-care intervention logic and organizational climate theory (Bower & Gilbody, 2005; Dollard & Bakker, 2010).

Accordingly, the methodology focuses on achieving theoretical integration and explanatory coherence rather than quantitative aggregation; this approach aligns well with conceptual framework development designs in management (Snyder, 2019). The purpose of this study is thus to provide a structured explanation that can be tested in future empirical research on the impact of timing, modality fit, and safety climate moderation on counseling use in hybrid work contexts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This review adopts a structured integrative approach to synthesizing the literature across four interrelated domains: workplace counseling utilization, psychosocial safety climate, organizational help-seeking behavior, and hybrid work design. These domains were selected because they collectively capture the behavioral, structural, and contextual mechanisms that influence engagement with workplace mental-health support systems. By integrating findings across these areas, the review identifies recurring patterns in delayed utilization of counseling. It highlights theoretical gaps that inform the development of the Continuum of Proactive Counseling Engagement (COPCE) framework.

### Using workplace counseling and the utilization paradox

Workplace counseling has become a cornerstone of organizational mental health strategy, not least because of the proliferation of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). It has consistently been found by many researchers that short-form counseling (SFC) through EAP modalities has resulted in lower levels of psychological distress, better work functioning, and higher employment retention (Attridge, 2019). Despite this, and although hundreds of thousands of staff use these systems every year (with usage figures rising), the fact that many who potentially need them do not engage means that achieving engagement with EAP systems is a bigger problem than their treatment effectiveness per se (Sharar & Hertenstein, 2024). The gap between the provision of support and its uptake has been identified as a structural access paradox in occupational mental-health provision.

By definition, traditional EAP models are fundamentally reactive; they require employees to identify that they are not coping well, reach out for help without an invitation from the workplace, and figure out how to access support entirely on their own. Studies show that help-seeking by people under psychological stress is delayed when they are uncertain about confidentiality concerning their problem, perceive the stigma of mental illness, and/or cognitive capacity is reduced due to stress (Corrigan, 2004; Rickwood et al., 2007). As a result, few

employees will seek support until after symptoms have developed, and many preventive workplace counseling systems are lost in the process.

### **Hybrid work and shifting paths for engagement**

The shift to hybrid work has affected how workers deploy and absorb intellectual stress. While physical distance reduces early-deficit recognition (by managers and peers), autonomy may extend personal coping periods prior to leading- signaling for support ( Kniffin et al.; Wang et al., 2021). With many more businesses moving towards hybrid working, expectations around how counseling will be delivered have shifted. Employees want access to flexible support in addition to traditional face-to-face services.

Hybrid work arrangements not only alter where work is performed but fundamentally reshape how psychological strain is identified, interpreted, and responded to within organizations. Reduced physical proximity weakens opportunities for informal monitoring of employee well-being, while digitally mediated communication environments reduce spontaneous peer and managerial interactions that traditionally supported early signal detection. At the same time, increased autonomy and flexibility may prolong individual coping attempts before support-seeking occurs. These structural changes create a growing mismatch between conventional reactive counseling systems and the expectations of distributed workforces, reinforcing the need for proactive, multi-channel engagement architectures.

This suggests that counsels designed to curb office-based visibility, in which employees only want to reach out in a crisis, may no longer align with the current engagement landscape. What is needed instead are counseling models supported by early-warning detection systems and multimodal access structures aligned with the distributed rubric of the hybrid workplace.

### **Psychosocial safety climate as a predictor of help-seeking behavior**

The psychosocial safety climate (PSC) is a useful framework for explaining organizational differences in counseling use. PSC reflects employees' shared views on the extent to which management incorporates psychological health and safety into organizational decision-making (Dollard & Bakker, 2010). Introduction High PSC workplaces are associated with reduced psychological strain, increased reporting of when and how to disclose and take up workplace mental–health interventions (Rothermund et al., 2023).

Importantly, PSC is not only a predictor of mental-health outcomes but also a contextual moderator of whether employees perceive such access as appropriate and safe. When services are institutionalized, the presence or absence of psychological safety leads employees to be reluctant to engage with effective workplace counseling systems.

### **Problems with reactive-access counseling approaches**

Although stepped-care mental-health systems and psychotherapeutic consultation at work models have improved employee access to interventions, most workplace counseling systems are structured on a self-identification basis, ultimately leading to a reactive access process (Weber & Schmidt, 2024). However, this assumption is at odds with even behavioral evidence, which shows that it is indeed distress itself that reduces the reachability of support (Rickwood et al., 2007), but this has yet to be addressed in help-seeking research.

In hybrid work contexts, these limitations are even clearer, as the laughable signal due to reduced visibility of distress signals does two things: it decreases informal prompting structures and slows intervention timing. Overall, these findings make a strong case for the engagement/social support models (built on how to identify contextualized signals early and provide flexible, embedded support and access pathways) across places and climates.

The literature synthesis identified three recurring structural engagement gaps: temporal, modality, and climate gaps that constrain counseling utilization across hybrid work environments. These gaps and their corresponding responses within the COPCE framework are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 . Structural engagement gaps and COPCE framework response

Gap	Nature of the problem	COPCE response
Temporal gap	Employees seek help only after distress has intensified.	Use early signal detection, push-based resources, and low-friction entry points.
Modality gap	Single-channel or business-hour support does not match current preferences.	Offer video, chat, phone, in-person, and self-guided options.
Climate gap	Low psychosocial safety climate discourages help-seeking and limits recovery.	Integrate climate audits, manager training, and organizational feedback loops.

Together, these engagement gaps provide the structural foundation for developing the COPCE framework, which reconceptualizes workplace counseling as a staged engagement continuum rather than a crisis-triggered intervention system.

### Theoretical Underpinnings Of The Copce Framework

An explanatory framework that contextualizes the model of individual help-seeking behavior within organizational climate conditions and the structural characteristics of intervention systems is needed to understand engagement with workplace counseling. The Continuum of Proactive Counseling Engagement (COPCE) framework thus integrates four complementary theoretical perspectives: the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model; psychosocial safety climate (PSC) theory; organizational help-seeking behavior theory; and stepped-care intervention logic. Collectively, these perspectives help explain why traditional reactive counseling models often fall short in hybrid work environments and clarify the need for more proactive engagement pathways that optimize the timing and utilization of counseling.

#### Job Demands–Resources theory and the timing of counseling engagement

Based on the widely accepted Job Demands–Resources [JD-R] model of occupational health (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), we offer an established understanding of how psychological strain is formed in more modern work settings and why it is important to intervene early before such forms of negative adaptation escalate to more serious burnout and withdrawal consequences. The JD-R (Job demands-resources) framework posits that job demands, such as workload pressure, role ambiguity, and emotional strain, create the possibility for psychological risk; however, if sufficient job resources (supervisory support, autonomy, and opportunities for recovery) are available to employees, they reduce this increased risk of burnout.

The hybrid working environment changes demands and resources at the same time. Although flexibility could be an important resource for fallback, there is reduced visibility of distress signals, and the presence of informal support interactions is weakened (Wang et al., 2021), potentially delaying recognition of strain by both employees and managers. Consequently, psychological burden may build up as time goes on, relying more on distinct paths of accessing crisis-stage counseling.

The COPCE framework builds on JD-R logic by conceptualizing workplace counseling as a pathway to accessing resources earlier in the job stress process, rather than merely as an outcome response. The framework, by outlining a path in which low-friction entry points and early signal detection mechanisms are integrated into the workplace environment, enables earlier restoration of equilibrium between job demands and job resources, eschewing reliance on employees noticing pandemic-level distress.

#### Psychosocial safety climate as a contextual determinant of counseling engagement

Psychosocial safety climate (PSC) theory is a social-contextual model that outlines how PSC influences beliefs about employee care for psychological health in workplace decision-making processes (Dollard & Bakker, 2010). PSC acts as a higher-order organizational determinant that modulates exposure to and response to psychosocial risk and influences help-seeking behavior.

There is evidence suggesting that environments with high-PSC build stronger norms around help-seeking, encourage greater uptake of counseling, and increase the success of workplace mental-health interventions

(Hall et al., 2010; Rothermund et al., 2025). Conversely, if employees perceive productivity demands as outweighing psychological well-being needs, take-up of counseling services will remain low despite access pathways.

Thus, the structure of the COPCE framework is based on PSC as a contextual moderator of the timing of counseling engagement, rather than treating organizational climate as a baseline context. Counseling use is seen not only as a decision made at the individual level but also as an outcome resulting from collective beliefs about the appropriateness and safety of help-seeking practices within organizations. Embedding counseling engagement within psychosocial safety climate processes can explain variation in their utilization across organizational contexts with comparable service availability but differing climate conditions.

### **Organizational help-seeking behavior and obstacles to accessing Counselling**

Initial Research on help-seeking behavior at the level of organizations, insight into why, even with available counseling support, employees frequently hesitate to access these services. Perceived stigma, confidentiality concerns, uncertainty regarding service eligibility, and reduced cognitive capacity during periods of psychological strain adversely impact help-seeking (Corrigan, 2004; Rickwood et al., 2007; Gulliver et al., 2010). In contexts where they may be interpreted as signals of weakness (e.g., workplace, career), these hurdles are even more pronounced for individuals who disclose.

The hybrid work environment creates additional challenges for seeking help, as informal prompting mechanisms that channeled people towards earlier help-seeking behavior with available support services weaken. Distress is hard to see, limiting colleagues' and supervisors' ability to summon assistance and ensuring even greater reliance on self-recognition of need.

Specifically, the COPCE framework provides multiple staged entry points across the counseling engagement continuum, whereby employees can access support through low-threshold mechanisms that do not require crisis-level problem recognition. This framework helps more closely align the pathways one would use to access counseling with the evidence on help-seeking decision processes, reducing both psychological and administrative effort in initiating contact.

### **Logic of stepped care interventions and staged counseling pathways**

Models of stepped-care intervention provide a further, important underpinning for the COPCE framework, as they demonstrate how the intensity of support may be aligned with need across an increasing range of severity of psychological distress (Bower & Gilbody, 2005). These models focused on efficient, targeted support by delivering lower-intensity interventions initially and progressing to higher-intensity services as needed.

While stepped-care approaches have been well studied in clinical and community mental-health systems, similar implementations within workplace counseling engagement pathways are less common. More conventional EAP structures often use binary access routes that cannot reflect variation in employees' support needs.

The COPCE framework takes stepped-care logic into organizations by framing counseling engagement as a continuum of tiered intervention pathways (self-guided resources, coaching and peer-supported problem-solving, brief professional counseling, and referrals to external clinical services as needed). It also allows aligning intervention intensity with employee needs while maintaining the capacity for specialist counseling for higher-level needs.

### **Integrating theoretical perspectives into a continuum model of counseling engagement**

In combination, (i) JD-R theory accounts for the accumulation of psychological strain prompting help-seeking intervention; (ii) psychosocial safety climate theory describes the organizational-level contextual conditions in which help-seeking is legitimized or discouraged; (iii) research into barriers to counselling initiation identifies obstacles to seeking professional help if services are available but go unutilised and finally, (iv) stepped-care intervention logic explicates how levels of intervention intensity may be structured through progressively

tiered stages of support. The COPCE framework unifies these varying perspectives into a single, coherent engagement architecture that reframes workplace counseling, ultimately shifting it from an intervention-emergency system to one that continuously defines the dynamics of home, community, and work.

The framework integrates early signal detection mechanisms, climate-embedded support pathways, and staged intervention structures to theoretically explain how counseling systems can be reconfigured to improve the timeliness of utilization and access within hybrid working environments.

### Structure of the COPCE Framework

The framework of the Continuum of Proactive Counseling Engagement (COPCE) situates workplace counseling engagement as a staged process embedded within psychosocial safety climate conditions rather than as an access event triggered only by crises. The framework consists of four sequential engagement layers, shown in Figure 1: organizational climate conditions; early signal detection mechanisms; low-friction entry pathways to increase the number of relevant users offering feedback on a specific topic; and organized (“staged”) intervention intensity structures that are adaptable to receive frequent feedback into the action planning cycle of organizations. Collectively, they comprise a proactive engagement architecture designed to improve the timing of counseling extracts in hybrid work settings.

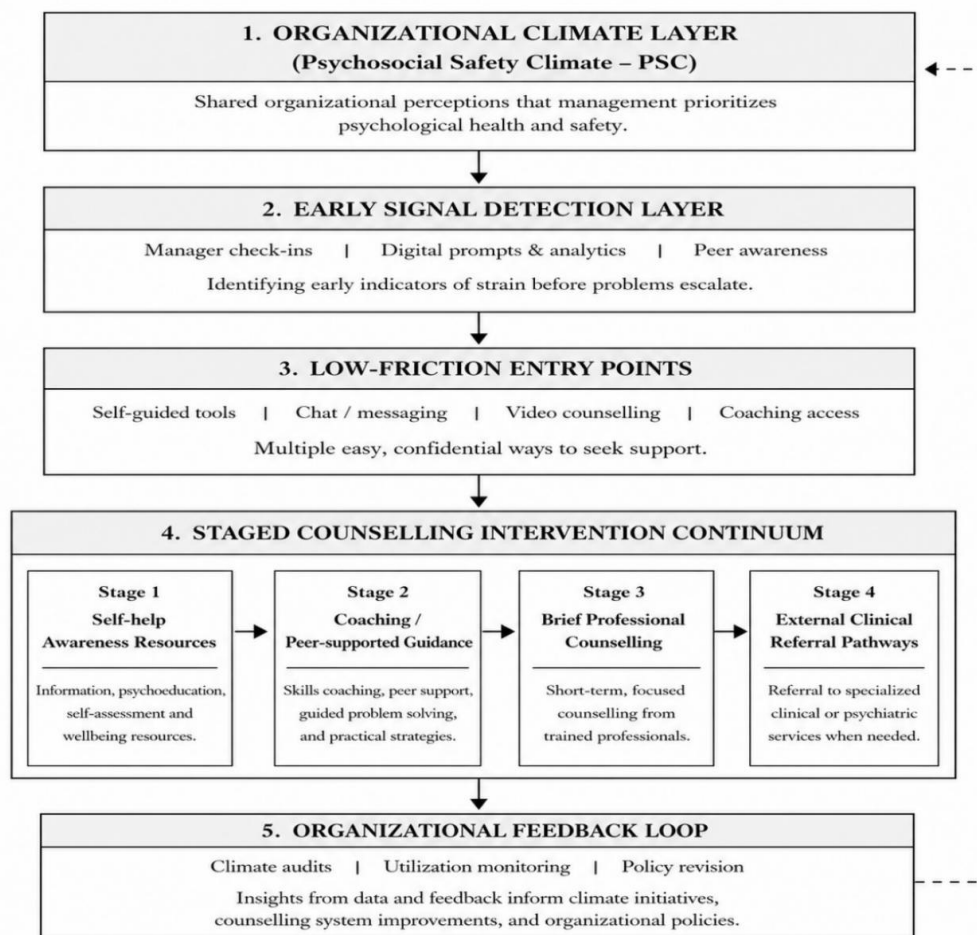


Figure 1. The Continuum of Proactive Counselling Engagement (COPCE) Framework.

### Propositions of the COPCE Framework

#### Temporal engagement propositions

Typically, reactive counseling systems rely on employees to identify distress and seek access on their own. However, psychological strain can itself compromise cognitive functioning needed for explicitly recognizing problems and making decisions, which in turn may elongate the time period between experiencing distress and seeking help (Rickwood et al., 2007).

**Proposition(P1):**

Delayed use of workplace counseling is negatively associated with the effectiveness of early signal detection mechanisms.

Likewise, reduced visibility of distress signals in hybrid work settings undermines the informal prompting mechanisms that facilitate timely intervention.

**Proposition 2 (P2):**

Proactive engagement mechanisms moderate the relationship between hybrid work arrangements and delayed utilization of counseling.

**Modality alignment propositions**

Standard workplace counseling mechanisms remain largely based on single-channel access pathways, often restricted to telephone services available only during office hours. In the highly distributed workforce, there is an increasing expectation of flexible access through multiple delivery formats (Kniffin et al., 2021).

**Proposition 3 (P3):**

Timely access pathways to workplace support services are positively associated with the uptake of multi-channel counseling.

Facilitated pathways may also reduce psychological barriers to accessing services.

**Proposition 4 (P4):**

Low-friction counseling entry points lower barriers to support-seeking and bolster the likelihood of uptake.

**Climate integration propositions**

In this context, an important determinant is the psychosocial safety climate, which indicates whether employees believe that accessing counseling is both legitimate and safe (Dollard & Bakker, 2010).

**Proposition 5 (P5):**

Psychosocial safety climate moderates the relationship between counseling availability and counseling utilization and could strengthen engagement outcomes.

The effect of counseling interventions on the reasons has also been found to depend on organizational climate conditions that occur after access [18].

**Proposition 6 (P6):**

Stage of counseling engagement pathways enhances the resilience of psychosocial safety climate within hybrid work contexts

**Continuum structure proposition**

Bower & Gilbody (2005) point out that stepped-care models, where the level of intervention matches support needs, are more accessible and effective.

**Proposition 7 (P7):**

Compared with reactive counseling models, continuum-based counseling engagement systems are associated with earlier utilization timing and better alignment between intervention intensity and employee support needs.

## Theoretical Contributions

The contribution: This article advances the organizational psychology and workplace mental health literature by proposing a continuum-based framework for conceptualizing counseling engagement in hybrid work settings. Existing models primarily conceptualize workplace counseling as a set of interventions triggered during crises, rather than as an engagement process mediated by behavioral and organizational contexts, even though Employee Assistance Programs remain the predominant mechanism through which counseling occurs across sectors.

Firstly, we reconceptualize access to workplace counseling as a temporal rather than one-off decision. Data on EAP take-up have mostly focused on whether employees come forward to use counseling services. However, research on utilization, particularly regarding the timing of access within the strain-development trajectory, is more limited. The COPCE framework shifts analytical attention to the timing of interventions as a structural determinant of counseling effectiveness, introducing the concept of the temporal engagement gap.

Second, psychosocial safety climate theory is expanded to counseling paths (detours). Although PSC has been researched extensively for its ability to predict psychological health outcomes and psychosocial risk exposure (Dollard & Bakker, 2010), there has been much less research investigating the role PSC might play in determining when someone seeks counseling. It understands the factors and circumstances that shape a PS, so that it acts as a contextual moderator of how an available counseling system is perceived in terms of legitimacy, access, and safety.

Finally, the model advances workplace intervention theory by incorporating stepped-care mental-health logic into organizational engagement systems for counseling. Stepped-care approaches are well established in clinical and community mental-health settings (Bower & Gilbody, 2005) but have rarely been applied to pathways to access workplace counseling. COPCE goes a step further in applying stepped-care logic by organizing the process to engage counseling as a continuum of care phases that align with employees expressed needs for support.

Fourth, the article advances the hybrid work literature by exposing a gap in engagement modalities between conventional counseling delivery modes and the expectations of a distributed workforce (Wang et al., 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021). This brings the hybrid-work literature into the field of designing organizational mental-health interventions.

Finally, the COPCE framework combines a unified synthesis of the Job Demands–Resources model, psychosocial safety climate theory, help-seeking behavior research, and stepped-care intervention logic into a single explanation that accounts for counseling engagement in hybrid workplaces. The article thus provides a theoretically informed basis for formulating future empirical studies exploring how different proactive counseling architectures affect the timing of utilization, recovery trajectories, and organizational well-being outcomes.

The COPCE framework also aligns with recent WHO and ILO policy directions advocating integrated approaches that combine psychosocial risk management, organizational interventions, manager training, and early support systems within workplace mental-health strategies (WHO & ILO, 2022).

## Practical Implications

The COPCE framework has multiple implications for the design and implementation of workplace counseling systems in hybrid organizational environments. First, the framework indicates that merely exposing counseling services is not enough to encourage engagement with support systems. If counseling provision is expanded, organizations should assess whether psychosocial safety climate conditions are sufficiently strong to support early help-seeking behavior. Mission statements: Change happens only if something is perceived to be an important organizational priority. If employees feel that psychological health has a real place on the agenda, then counseling access pathways are more likely to be established as preventive rather than crisis laws (Dollard & Bakker, 2010).

Second, a multi-channel access architecture is important in distributed work environments. Integrating synchronous and asynchronous support modalities, integrated digital check-ins, chat-based services, access routes to coach/guide support, or self-optimization pathways with structured referral mechanisms typically takes the organization beyond single-entry counseling pathways. Psychological and administrative barriers to seeking support are reduced by matching counseling delivery formats to employees' preferred modalities, thereby enhancing uptake timing (Kniffin et al., 2021).

COPCE highlights managerial capability as an early-warning system in contexts of proactive engagement. Training can help managers identify signals of psychological distress, support team members, protect confidentiality, and signpost them for further assistance without perpetuating stigma. The time-lagged association between organizational climate conditions and each intervention's effectiveness was entrenched by embedding supportive leadership practices within counseling engagement pathways.

This aligns with recent WHO and ILO recommendations that emphasize psychosocial risk prevention, organizational intervention strategies, and manager capability development as essential components of effective workplace mental health systems (WHO & ILO, 2022).

Finally, organizations are advised to monitor counseling systems using a combination of engagement-sensitive performance indicators (the timing and levels of use, the nature of the access pathways used, and the barriers recorded at entry) rather than focusing on symptom-reduction outcomes among service users. These indicators can be monitored to determine whether counseling systems serve as proactive engagement infrastructure or as responsive crisis-response services.

Lastly, COPCE serves as a methodology for researchers and policy developers to assess proactive counseling architectures in hybrid work environments! Key directions for empirical work include comparative studies exploring reactive and continuum-based counseling models, longitudinal analyses of the timing of utilization, and multi-level investigations of the effects of psychosocial safety climate on intervention engagement.

## Limitations

There are several limitations to draw from when interpreting the contributions of this study. First, this article does not collect new primary empirical data; instead, it uses an integrative conceptual synthesis approach. While the COPCE model draws on established organizational psychology theory and research in workplace counseling, it requires empirical validation as an engagement architecture across different organizational contexts (Torraco, 2005).

Although recent WHO and ILO policy developments support proactive and organizational approaches to workplace mental health, further empirical testing is required to determine how continuum-based counseling engagement systems operate across diverse organizational and cultural settings.

Secondly, a lot of the literature underpinning the framework comes from mental-health systems in European and North American workplaces. Factors such as differences in institutional structures, labor-market conditions, and regional access to counseling may well affect the transferability of the proposed continuum of engagement. This warrants future cross-cultural studies to explore the better generalisability of proactive counseling architectures across different labor systems.

Third, this framework is based specifically on structural changes due to hybrid and digitally mediated work arrangements. Although many of the engagement mechanisms outlined in the model can be cross-sector applicable, organizations that work purely in on-site or operationally constrained environments may need to adapt certain access pathways.

Lastly, at the level of organizational systems, this frames engagement in counseling within COPCE. This study suggests that other individual-level characteristics, such as stigma sensitivity, occupational identity, digital support preferences, and perceived confidentiality expectations, may mediate the effect of psychosocial safety climate on timely counseling use within future continuum-based engagement architectures.

## CONCLUSION

Workplace counseling remains one of the most popular organizational methods for addressing employees' psychological distress. However, consistently low utilization rates suggest that traditional Employee Assistance Program delivery models are constrained by reactively driven service access routes that rely on self-identification of the need for help (Attridge, 2019; Sharar & Hertenstein, 2024). There is a body of evidence examining those factors which influence the likelihood of an employee utilizing employer-provided workplace counselling (as outlined in our scoping review) and modelling the organizational conditions under which interventions are delivered and received which indicates that service availability alone does not pave the way to engagement with treatment but timing, alignment of mode of delivery with psychosocial safety climate conditions do so (Dollard & Bakker, 2010).

This article has introduced the Continuum of Proactive Counseling Engagement (COPCE) framework as a theoretically informed model for redesigning access to counseling systems relevant to contemporary hybrid workplaces. Through the integration of early signal detection mechanisms, flexible multi-channel entry pathways, staged intervention structures, and psychosocial safety climate feedback processes, the framework offers a novel relay that reconceptualizes workplace counseling engagement as an ongoing continuum rather than a crisis-access event.

The COPCE framework contributes to the organizational psychology literature by extending psychosocial safety climate theory to counseling utilization pathways and positioning intervention timing as a structural determinant of engagement effectiveness.

Future studies should assess proactive counseling architectures in longitudinal and comparative organizational studies, particularly about psychosocial safety climate variation, modality adherence preferences, and early-stage engagement accessibility. This means investing in strengthening the evidence base for continuum-based counseling systems to ensure that workplace mental health interventions align with the structural realities of modern hybrid work.

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