

Employment and mental illness

A lack of suitable, flexible part-time work is the major barrier to employment, say people affected by mental illness, and an understanding, supportive employer is the most important factor in keeping a job . . .

For people affected by mental illness, employment brings not only an income, but also the dignity of having a recognised, valued place in society. Support is often essential for people to find and retain a job, especially under the new Welfare-to-Work rules.

This SANE Research Bulletin investigates the barriers to employment for people with a mental illness, and what they find helpful in gaining and keeping a job.

The survey was conducted during March and April 2006, using a convenience sample of 284 people with a mental illness who completed a questionnaire face-to-face, by telephone or via the SANE website. The majority of respondents were female (70%), with the most common diagnoses being depression (45%), bipolar disorder (18%), schizophrenia (14%) and anxiety disorder (7%). Three-quarters of respondents lived in urban areas, and 38% were smokers. Being a smoker has implications for employment, with the introduction of stricter legislation covering smoking in or near a workplace.

How many people work or want to work?

	%
<i>In paid employment</i>	57
<i>In volunteer positions</i>	7
<i>Unemployed – want to work</i>	17
<i>Unemployed – unable to work</i>	19

Over half of those surveyed were currently working, and 81% of the total were either in employment of some form, or wanted to work. This finding confirms how highly people affected by mental illness value employment, and are motivated to return to work – affirming the need for adequate support programs.

What are the main barriers to finding work?

	%
<i>Lack of suitable work</i>	53
<i>Lack of training</i>	14
<i>Lack of support: finding work</i>	14
<i>Lack of support: on-the-job</i>	13
<i>Other</i>	11

**more than one category could be selected*

Having a mental illness can make it difficult to work full-time, and part-time work is often more suitable. Over half the respondents, however, reported difficulty in finding suitably flexible jobs.

Lack of training and support to find and retain work were also significant factors cited. This suggests insufficient access to specialist disability employment agencies which can provide support, and also the need for recovery-focused rehabilitation programs to provide more practical work-skills training.

What support helps people stay in work?

	%
<i>Support from employer</i>	49
<i>Flexible work arrangements</i>	42
<i>On-the-job support from agency</i>	3
<i>Job club meetings</i>	3
<i>Other</i>	3

A significant finding of this survey is that the most important factor in successful employment was a supportive employer – respectful, understanding and flexible about work arrangements. This rated far higher than technical interventions such as on-the-job support from an employment agency. Having a supportive employer also makes disclosure of having a mental illness easier.

This finding emphasises the need for education of the general population and especially employers and managers, so that workplaces are more welcoming and understanding of people with a mental illness.

Is it helpful to disclose a mental illness?

	%
Disclosed to employer	57
Did not disclose	43

The majority of those who had ever worked, (57%) reported that they had disclosed their mental illness to an employer. Of these, 67% said that disclosing had been helpful because it provided a more understanding work environment, made getting support easier, and meant they were less worried at work.

The main reasons given for not disclosing were embarrassment and fear of discrimination by employers or others at work – not wanting to risk losing their job or to be treated differently simply because they had told someone they had a mental illness.

In summary

- Employment is highly valued by people with a mental illness, the great majority of whom want to work and contribute to society.
- Lack of suitable part-time and flexible work was reported as the primary barrier to getting back to work. Insufficient or inadequate support from employment agencies in finding and keeping a job was also cited.
- The most important factor in successful employment was a supportive employer, especially regarding flexible work arrangements.
- Most respondents had disclosed their illness to their employers, and had found this helpful in producing a more supportive work environment, and in reducing stress.

Recommendations

1 REMOVE BARRIERS

Employers need encouragement and incentives to provide flexible work arrangements, so that it's easier to employ people affected by mental illness. This may involve financial incentives as well as training for managers.

2 ONGOING SUPPORT TO FIND AND KEEP A JOB

Improved understanding of, and attitudes towards, mental illness by employers is a major factor in helping those affected to successfully get and keep a job. This support needs to be fostered and encouraged by education about mental illness and how to manage issues related to it – for employers, managers and work colleagues.

3 IMPROVE ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES AND REHABILITATION SERVICES

Specialist disability employment services need to be better supported to place people with a mental illness in sustainable jobs, and to provide them with ongoing support. Improved access to rehabilitation programs that focus on the employee's recovery is also important to provide people with a mental illness practical work-skills.

4 MAKE IT EASIER TO DISCLOSE

Employer attitudes to mental illness are likely to reflect those in the general workforce and community. Action to reduce stigma in the wider population, as well as amongst employers, managers and work colleagues can therefore play a significant role in promoting employment for people with a mental illness. Workplace Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policies and staff training in these policies are an important starting point.

SANE Australia

A national charity working for a better life for people affected by mental illness – through campaigning, education and research.

With thanks to the R. E. Ross Trust for supporting this initiative.

*SANE Research Bulletin 3:
Employment and mental illness
(June 2006) ISSN 1832-8385
PDF version available at www.sane.org*