Keywords: employment, mental illness

Background
Research shows that being employed is linked to an individual’s health and well-being. However, the majority of people with severe mental illness are unemployed, even though they want to and are able to work (Krupa, Kirsh, Cockburn, & Gewurtz, 2009; Kirby & Keon, 2006).

There is evidence that workplace environments can contribute to the development or worsening of a mental illness. Currently, mental illness and addiction account for 60% to 65% of all disability insurance claims among Canadian employers. Therefore, there is a need to help those experiencing mental illness gain and retain employment. Employers can play a significant role in achieving these goals. Yet, there is little research on employers’ perspectives about hiring and supervising workers with mental illness.

Research shows that employers have a range of negative views about workers with mental illness. These include concerns like poor quality of work, frequent absences, low social skills, needing lots of supervision, and having difficulty following instructions. (De Waal, 2001; Diksa & Rogers, 1996; Stuart, 2006). Some employers discriminate against hiring workers with mental illness, assuming they will be dangerous and unpredictable. Others believe that mental illness is not a “real” illness, or that it is not a good idea for people with mental illness to work (Krupa et al, 2009).

Recently there have been a number of educational programs, training workshops, and online resources introduced to try to change employer attitudes about workers with mental illness. There are now also several employment placement programs designed to help people with serious mental illness find suitable work (for example, the Alberta Association for Supported Employment). Despite these developments, there seems to be little change in employers’ attitudes about hiring and accommodating workers with mental illness.

Objectives
The aims of this pilot research were to find out about the practical challenges employers face when hiring or supervising workers with mental illness as well as determine what kind of support employers need to assist workers who are returning to the workforce.

This project explored the following research questions:
1. What are employers’ views on workers with mental illness?
2. What are employers’ challenges and barriers to hiring and accommodating workers with mental illness?
3. What kinds of support do employers need to hire and accommodate workers with mental illness?

Method
A qualitative research design was used to investigate employers’ perspectives. In-depth interviews were conducted with 28 employers from 27 different industries located in and around Edmonton, Canada. The employers were frontline managers, disability consultants, and human resources managers who had direct experience hiring and supervising workers with mental illness.

The questions included a short scenario to examine employer views about mental illness. Other questions collected demographic information like the size and nature of the industry, the employer’s role, their experience with workers with mental illness, the challenges they faced, and the kinds of support they
needed to hire and accommodate these workers. All the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Transcripts were coded and analyzed for commonly occurring themes.

Results
The employers in this study were willing to hire and accommodate workers with mental illness, which was unexpected based on findings from other research. However, the employers did identify specific challenges to this task. For example, they were concerned about high-volume workplaces, prejudice about workers with mental health issues, lack of access to educational resources, and poor communication from return to work programs.

These key findings suggest that although employers are willing to hire and accommodate workers with mental illness, they are strongly influenced by available resources and the quality of support they have previously received. Employers who do not have easy access to information and support services, or have had poor experiences with support service providers may not want to hire or accommodate workers with a mental illness again.

Conclusions
These findings are important because they suggest there is room for improvement among support service providers involved in helping workers with mental illness. Policies and practices that can promote better coordination among support services are necessary, so that employers responsible for hiring and accommodating these workers feel adequately supported.

The findings of this study add to the small body of knowledge about employer perspectives on hiring and accommodating workers with mental illness. They help to explain why employers may be reluctant to hire workers with mental illness. Employers need efficient and effective support services to help them with this task.

This pilot research provides the foundation for a future province wide study using a larger sample size to examine employer challenges and support needs for workers with mental illness in more detail.

Lessons Learned
There are currently some services available for workers with mental illness who wish to return to work and stay employed. For example, there are employment services to help people with mental illnesses to gain and sustain employment, and return to work programs (such as employee assistance programs, health and wellness providers, disability service providers, and human resources departments).

Based on our findings, these service organizations must work closely with workers and their supervisors to ensure they feel supported when returning to work. This means it is necessary to understand the supervisors’ pressures, address their fears, co-operatively develop workplace accommodations for the worker, and follow up.

The full report can be found at www.mentalhealthresearch.ca.

References

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