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Critical literature review for employees with psychosocial disabilities

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

02

This report presents the findings of a systematized review of the academic literature on supporting the employment of people with psychosocial disabilities. This guide is designed to educate and support employees with psychosocial disabilities to reach their employment goals. Recognising that there are many unique obstacles faced by people with psychosocial disabilities in the workforce, this guide will provide practical advice on steps you can take to improve your employment situation and hopefully retain your employment. Understanding that the employment situations of people with psychosocial disabilities are diverse in nature, this guide will provide general advice with the hope that it can be applied across a variety of contexts.

The key findings from the review are:

#1

Barriers to employment

- The symptoms associated with psychosocial disabilities can have detrimental impacts on employment functioning.
- There are systemic inequalities associated with psychosocial disabilities that negatively impact their ability to maintain work.
- Discrimination in the workplace negatively impacts people with psychosocial disabilities' ability to maintain work.
- People with psychosocial disabilities are often unable to access employment services and those services are often inadequate.

#2

Assistance from employers

- Work accommodations encompass any changes to the job or workplace that enable a person to effectively undertake their role.
- Research shows that employees with psychosocial disabilities with properly implemented work adjustments that are tailored to the needs of the individual perform equally well as employee without a disability and remain in their jobs for longer.

#3

Assistance from employment services

- Employment services can assist people with psychosocial disabilities to attain employment at all stages of the employment journey.
- Effective support from employment services often involves training in various skills including cognitive, social, interview, and general work skills.
- Employment services should help the individual attain long term employment by ensuring the job is within the interests and goals, considering the education, employment, and medical history of the employee.

INTRODUCTION

What is a psychosocial disability?

The NDIS defines psychosocial disabilities as a “disability that comes from a mental health condition” [1]. However, not everyone with a mental health issue will have a disability. Instead, psychosocial disability refers to a condition where mental health impacts on the functioning of an individual that leads to barriers with participation in their social environment. Examples of some psychosocial disabilities include Schizophrenia and Schizoaffective disorder, anxiety disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, Agoraphobia and Social phobia or Mood disorders, such as Depression and Bipolar.

What is the rate of employment for people with psychosocial disabilities?

Until recently, people with psychosocial disabilities were largely excluded from social participation. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, mental asylums were the primary form of care for people with psychosocial disabilities. These institutions segregated people from the rest of society, posing massive restrictions on personal freedom and causing a high social stigma on mental illness. With the civil rights movement and increasing awareness of proper treatment for mental illness in the 1950s came a movement towards deinstitutionalisation and the inclusion of people within the community. However, there remains a substantial gap in the social participation and inclusion of people with psychosocial disabilities.

The massive underemployment of people with psychosocial disabilities is a prime example of an area where there remains a lack of social inclusion of people with psychosocial disabilities. The Australian Bureau of Statistics found that in 2018, 4.6%, equating to 1.1 million, Australians had a psychosocial disability. Psychosocial disabilities comprised over a quarter of people who reported having a disability. However, in 2018 only 26% of people with a psychosocial disability were employed compared with 84% of people with no disability. Of all types of disabilities, people with psychosocial disabilities were least likely to be employed. Since 1998, people without disabilities have been twice as likely to be employed compared with people without disabilities [2]. This stagnation suggests that recent attempts to increase the integration of this group of people into employment have yet to be successful.

Why is employment important for people with psychosocial disabilities?

Being in employment has a range of positive impacts on quality of life for people with psychosocial disabilities:



Enhances income. Earning a wage through employment gives independence to people with psychosocial disabilities who would otherwise have to rely on the government or family for financial support. It also increases their quality of life by increasing disposable income.



Develops social skills. The routine and constant interaction with others inside the workplace improves social skills that people with psychosocial disabilities may not otherwise get the opportunity to develop.



Improves self-esteem. For most people, their work is a crucial element of their self-identity, and as such, having a job is associated with improvements in self-identity. Additionally, being employed is often considered an important indicator of social status. So being in employment improves self-esteem by improving social status.



Improves symptoms. Participating in employment nurtures positive personal changes outside the work environment, which reduces the severity of the symptoms of psychosocial disability.



Increases social inclusion. Participating in work is one of the critical factors to participating in the general community. Social inclusion increases feelings of belonging and connectedness and gives people a greater sense of meaning in life. Social inclusion also has broader social benefits in decreasing social stigma as people become more exposed to and tolerant of people with psychosocial disabilities.



Improves wellbeing. As a result, employment dramatically enhances the wellbeing of people with psychosocial disabilities.

Method

The report presented here is based on a scoping review of the academic literature on employment for people with psychosocial disabilities. Due to the substantial academic literature on this subject, the present scoping review was limited to meta-analyses and systematic reviews (the gold-standard for academic literature).

The scoping review followed the six-step method outlined by Arksey & O'Malley [3], which involved:

1. Identification of the research question(s);
2. Identification of studies relevant to the research question(s);
3. Selecting studies for inclusion;
4. Charting information and data within the included studies;
5. Collating, summarising, and reporting results of the review; and
6. Consultation with stakeholders and experts.

The search process resulted in the identification of 56 publications. A thematic analysis of the findings was performed, and the results of this analysis are summarised in this report.

Why is job tenure important to increasing employment rates?

One of the causes for the low level of participation in the workforce for people with psychosocial disabilities is that they tend to spend less time in a job than average. There are a range of factors associated with psychosocial disabilities that can make it more difficult for them to retain employment. As a result of psychosocial disability, people are at increased risk of early job termination [4]. Moreover, these early job terminations are frequently negative experiences. Often, the employee may have experienced high stress levels associated with performing tasks of the role or due to workplace discrimination. The employer might have ended their employment suddenly because of a change in funding or government-provided wage support. Changes to treatment or living situations can also lead to sudden changes in the ability of individuals within their employment situation, leading to abrupt job terminations [5].

The negative experiences associated with unwanted and potentially unexpected job termination can massively harm confidence, mental health and motivation. As a result, people with psychosocial disabilities who experience such hostile job terminations may remain unemployed for extended periods. The result is a higher unemployment rate for people with psychosocial disabilities. Therefore, increasing the job tenure will not only increase employment of people with psychosocial disabilities but will also stop the negative cycle of unemployment.



BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

Barriers to the long-term maintenance of employment for people with psychosocial disabilities can be broadly categorised as resulting from:

1. Psychosocial disability symptoms
2. Low access to employment services
3. Discrimination from employers
4. Societal and policy barriers

Each of these factors are described and listed here separately but it is important to note that these factors will have different weightings and interactions with one another in terms of impact on overall employment experiences for different people.

Barriers resulting from the psychosocial disability



The symptoms associated with psychosocial disabilities pose barriers to employment that are not experienced by those without psychosocial disabilities or with different types of disabilities. For instance, people with psychosocial disabilities may experience social or cognitive impairments which lower occupational functioning.

People with psychosocial disabilities commonly experience significant fluctuations in mental health. Affective episodes such as mania or depression are also common symptoms of psychosocial disability. As a result, employees may take more frequent and longer sick leave or experience extended periods of unemployment.

Such barriers to employment also impact access to education and training, reducing access to employment. People with psychosocial disabilities are more likely to have disruptions to secondary and post-secondary education than those without psychosocial disabilities. This lowers their ability to obtain the skills necessary for employment and decreases the likelihood of being hired, as they do not have the requisite qualifications.

Finally, people with psychosocial disabilities are more likely to experience significant traumas and stressful life events that can delay recovery and increase the likelihood of work impairment. They may be more likely to experience inadequate or unstable housing or homelessness and other forms of financial insecurity, spend time in prison, experience extended hospitalisations, or have substance use disorders.

As a result of all these factors, people with psychosocial disabilities are more likely to be unemployed or employed in lower-level and lower-paid positions with little to no opportunities for promotion [6, 7].

Low access to employment services

Structural inequalities in society often mean that people with psychosocial disabilities come from a lower socioeconomic background and may not live in areas with access to quality employment services or have knowledge of the availability of services in the first place. Even for those with access to employment services, the added strain of performing activities of daily living with a psychosocial disability can mean that people do not have the emotional or cognitive capacity required to seek out support services. Health professionals may also often have negative or stigmatising views about the ability of people with psychosocial disability and so not refer them to employment services or may disincentivise patients considering employment from seeking employment. Thus, employment services are often not reaching the people who need their support [6].

Negative experiences with employment services are widespread, often putting people off seeking those services again. Furthermore, others may hear about those negative experiences with employment services and chose not to use them in the first place. This problem largely arises due to a lack of adherence to guidelines for best practices.

People frequently report that staff at employment services “intimidate those interested in permanent employment with the risk of increased stress after entering the job and possible negative effects on their health”. They often guide people towards sheltered work, away from education, and into roles unsuitable for the client. As such, employers do not understand or consider the impacts of psychosocial disability or the goals and aspirations of their clients. Finally, support from employment services often ends not long after they attain employment, long before they cease requiring that support resulting in them abandoning their jobs [6, 8].



Discrimination from employers

The widespread discrimination in the workplace presents a significant barrier to employment for people with psychosocial disabilities. People often have negative beliefs and attitudes about the work capacity of a person with psychosocial disabilities, which workplace accommodations can reinforce. Other factors associated with psychosocial disability, such as receiving welfare benefits or hospitalisations, can also lead to high levels of stigma. Such stigma can lead to employees being socially excluded from the rest of the workforce, thus, having detrimental effects on mental health and wellbeing.

Employers might also believe that the discrimination and stigma from co-workers might put an employee with psychosocial disabilities at risk or that they may be unable to fit in. Employers may respond by relegating them to menial-level jobs or tasks, not considering them for promotions or development, or avoiding employing them altogether [10]. Thus, exacerbating the impact of social exclusion caused by stigma and creating extra stress by stagnating the employees' careers.

Finally, employees with psychosocial disabilities are unlikely to receive suitable reasonable work accommodations. This is partly because employees may want to avoid stigma by 'passing for normal', and so are disincentivised from disclosing their disability. As a result, employees do not receive the necessary accommodations. Even for employees who do disclose their disability, organisations often have inadequate HR policies and procedures to ensure that the correct support is provided. As a result, the onus falls on the employee to adjust for their disability which can add substantial stress to their role.

Employers are often ill-equipped to manage such challenges in the workplace, meaning that these issues do not get solved. This is largely because of a low awareness of supporting and effectively managing people with psychosocial disabilities in the workplace. For instance, employers may have a low understanding of the processes involved in fairly administering disciplinary, dispute resolution, and termination processes [10]. The invisible nature of psychosocial disabilities adds to the misunderstanding. The impacts or existence of psychosocial disabilities are not obvious meaning that co-workers and employers are often unaware of the disability or how to respond to the employee's needs [11].

Societal and policy barriers

Due to a range of societal structures, people with psychosocial disabilities are less likely to receive adequate social support, further exacerbating the impacts of their disability. People with psychosocial disabilities often do not receive adequate support for tasks of daily living, often depending on family or welfare. However, many are unaware of the disability pensions and support for caregivers, creating extra financial and emotional strain [12].

Government regulations also pose barriers to employment. The lack of coordination between state and federal government and health and employment departments has exacerbated problems and created barriers to solutions by making it difficult to simultaneously address vocational and non-vocational factors involved in the low employment rate for people with psychosocial disabilities. Instead, many government policies disincentivise work by predicated healthcare benefits on employment and earnings, meaning that people may have to leave employment because they rely on welfare support to maintain their health [7].

Finally, people with psychosocial disabilities often experience stigma from the general population, which can lead them to avoid social interaction and lead to self-isolation. This discrimination in the general community has also meant limited availability of suitable paid employment, which impacts job tenure, retention and satisfaction for people with psychosocial disabilities.



HOW CAN EMPLOYERS ASSIST PEOPLE WITH PSYCHOSOCIAL DISABILITIES TO RETAIN EMPLOYMENT?

There are two things an employer can do to ensure that their employees with psychosocial disabilities have the best chance for success. Firstly, they can provide adequate supports and accommodations to ensure their employees are equipped to undertake the requirements of their roles. These will subsequently be described.

The second thing an employer can do is create a supportive workplace culture that celebrates diversity. Because discrimination is such a prevalent issue for people with psychosocial disabilities, inclusive workplace cultures have a massive impact on helping people with psychosocial disabilities retain employment. Workplaces that promote diversity tend to be more supportive and inclusive. As diversity becomes more 'normal' in the workplace culture, others will feel increasingly empowered to be open about disclosing their own experiences, including their experience of mental health, further reducing the stigma involved [13].

On top of feeling supported by others in the workplace, feeling able to communicate one's own needs is also vital to a successful employment situation. Employees who communicate their needs in a supportive environment will likely receive support for those needs. Knowing the types of supports an employer can provide also helps communicate the needs of people with psychosocial disabilities. As such, fostering a supportive environment that values open and honest communication is crucial to the success of any implementation of work accommodations.

Work accommodations and supports

There are a variety of work accommodations and supports that are regularly employed to support the employment of people with psychosocial disabilities [8, 11, 13, 14]:



Work schedule adjustments are modifications to the work hours. These can include changes to the number of hours worked or simply shifting when an employee works. Flexible work schedules with frequent breaks can help people with psychosocial disabilities reduce their level of stress and work during hours they feel most comfortable. Employees may also need to move to part-time work.



Physical adjustments are changes to the workspace to increase accessibility and reduce work-related stress. For example, space enclosures and high levels of natural light can be helpful for employees. Employees with psychosocial disabilities may prefer to work in a quiet environment or with white noise in the background. Providing opportunities to work at home where possible can also benefit many employees.



Work task adjustments include any changes to the job description or requirements. Employees might work best on familiar tasks with structured responsibilities. Assisting an employee to organise assignments into smaller tasks can reduce the complexity associated with those jobs. Other employees might opt into a job-sharing arrangement.



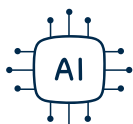
Supervision adjustments describe changes to the employee's training, coaching, mentoring or management to better support their progression and needs. For example, weekly meetings where feedback is provided to the employee can help them stay on track, provide time management guidance, or extra guidance in undertaking tasks.



Training adjustments are changes to normal training provided to staff members. These can include extra courses that an employee might require to function in the workplace or changes to existing training that provide extra time for the employee to learn as required.



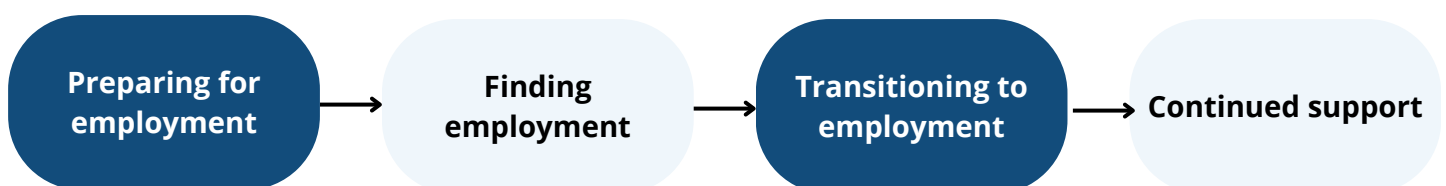
Social supports are workplace culture adjustments that support the wellbeing of the employee. Supportive co-workers can increase the likelihood that an employee with psychosocial disabilities can retain employment. Employers might also consider allowing employees to have support animals or running peer support groups. Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) or referring employees to clinical/employment counselling services can also provide the social support required for the employee.



Digital supports can provide instruction for work tasks (sequencing, transactional and performance skills), processes, techniques, social skills and schedules. Digital supports include interventions such as video modelling, audio coaching and prompting, augmented reality devices, and smartphones. Digital supports have been shown to increase the work capacity and teach social and vocational skills to people with psychosocial disabilities.

RETAINING EMPLOYMENT: ROLE OF EMPLOYMENT SERVICE PROVIDERS

Employment services provide a wide range of services to assist throughout the employment journey. The employment journey starts once an individual begins to prepare for and search for employment and continues indefinitely throughout the period of employment. People will value support in each area differently and require different types of support across each point in time. Summarised here are some of the types of support that may be provided.



Preparing for employment

When a person with a psychosocial disability approaches an employment service provider, they will usually be allocated to an employment specialist whom they will work with throughout the duration of support. This employment specialist has a wide range of skills, enabling them to provide many services across the employment journey. The caseload of an employment specialist varies substantially depending on the employment service and can be anywhere between 8 and 30 clients. Given this variation in caseloads, there is also substantial variation in the level of support provided between employment services. Employment specialists will also direct or refer clients to courses or other support services as required.

Often the most important first step when a client engages with an employment service is to help them increase their work confidence and discover their interests. Personal assessments based on work history, education history, medical history, current mental health, personal goals, interests, and strengths can help to guide the types of jobs an individual might want to apply for. Employment services might also direct clients towards supported industry internships where people can experience different career pathways [8,15]. Crucially, the employment consultant will help clients explore their barriers to employment and give them the tools to improve their self-esteem and confidence to join the workforce.

Before entering the workforce, people with psychosocial disabilities often benefit from increasing their work-related skills. As mentioned, some of the main barriers faced by people with psychosocial disabilities is a lower skill level due to a lack of education, training, and periods of unemployment. As such, employment services can provide work skills training to improve problem-solving, social skills and knowledge of how to perform practical tasks to improve work performance within particular disciplines [16]. Employment services can also refer suitable clients to programs and organisations that support individuals with psychosocial disabilities to achieve higher education.

Cognitive and social skills training are also commonly used to assist people with psychosocial disabilities with employment. Cognitive skills training improves cognitive processes such as attention, memory, executive function, social cognition or meta-cognition by providing and practising strategies for completing cognitive exercises. Social skills training is similar in that it trains a person with psychosocial disabilities to improve social skills by breaking down complex social experiences into simpler steps and provides skills that can be practised through role play to improve responses to those social experiences. Such training programs ensure that the future employee has the skills and confidence to perform their roles and manage the stress associated with that employment.

Finding employment

Employment services can also assist in finding employment. Employment consultants can assist in the job search, providing a short list of suitable jobs based on the assessment of the individual. The employment consultant can also help by preparing a resume and writing cover letters. Finally, a common and essential form of assistance is interview skills training. This type of training can follow standard role-play instruction and skills development, where feedback is provided to correct mistakes. Alternatively, interview skill training can be performed online in a virtual reality environment [8].

Transitioning to employment

One of the most significant challenges for people with psychosocial disability during the transition to work is knowing how to manage disclosure of their disability to their employer, how their disability will impact them in their new employment, and how to manage and organise their work to mitigate the impacts of their disability on their work. Given these challenges, one of the primary roles of employment service providers during the transition to work is to navigate these decisions and support their clients to implement decisions regarding their work.

The employment consultant can provide information about the positives and negatives of disclosure and help the client make an informed decision. For instance, the employment consultant should understand how their client's disability will likely impact their work and what sorts of assistance they could receive should they disclose their disability. Some clients may not want to disclose their disability for various reasons, in which case the employment consultant must oblige that decision and support the employee in that decision. Should the client decide to disclose their disability, employment service providers can liaise with the employer and provide information to educate them about the work-related impacts of the disability. Employment service providers can also assist in negotiations with employers regarding reasonable workplace accommodations that should be implemented and help the employer to implement those accommodations [11, 17].

Continued support

Employment service providers should continue supporting their clients after they have attained employment. However, not all employment service providers give this type of support, so it may be necessary for the client to inquire about this beforehand and, if possible, request extra support or find a service provider to assist long-term. Long-term support has been shown to dramatically increase the likelihood that employees with a psychosocial disability will retain employment.

Continued support will come in various forms depending on the individual client's needs. Some clients will require extra training similar to the programs that may be provided before employment begins. Other clients may need assistance with maintaining or changing treatment plans or with personal things such as housing, finances, or, more generally, activities of daily living. Continued support in terms of maintaining communication with the employer about maintaining or changing workplace accommodations may also be provided. Employment service providers should also work with clients regarding goal setting and planning future employment journeys to accommodate those goals [18].

WHAT CAN A PERSON WITH PSYCHOSOCIAL DISABILITIES DO TO ENSURE THAT THEY ARE ABLE TO SUSTAIN THEIR EMPLOYMENT?

To ensure that an individual can get the most out of the support from employers and employment services, there are a few things that they should keep in mind.





Frequent and honest communication. It is important that people with psychosocial disabilities maintain constant and open communication with employers and employment services from whom they receive support about any changes to their mental health or living conditions. The only way that proper support can be provided is if those providing the assistance are aware of the needs of the individual. Psychosocial disabilities are often episodic in nature and are highly dependant on changes in the individual's environment. As such, the needs of the individual almost certainly change over time and so constant open and honest communication is vital to the employment success of that individual [14].



Reciprocate support provided. Another factor that is important to acknowledge for the individual with psychosocial disabilities is that those who are providing support are putting time and effort into doing so. It is essential not to take their support for granted, so some reciprocity has to occur for the relationship with others to be maintained. Reciprocity of this type can come in a variety of forms depending on the type of relationship, but recognising that the individual with psychosocial disabilities has to give something back is crucial to ensuring that the support remains productive and helps the individual to maintain their jobs [13].



Maintain treatment and good mental health practices. Finally, it is the responsibility of the person with psychosocial disabilities to maintain and follow their treatment plans. Although psychiatric treatment may not be directly related to work functioning, it is vital to reducing the symptoms and impact of psychosocial disability on daily life. As such, by maintaining psychiatric treatment, the individual limits the impact of their disability on their functioning at work [19].

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