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How to support employees with psychosocial disabilities.

A critical literature review for employers

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

01	Table of Contents
02	Executive Summary
03	Introduction
06	Why should organisations employ people with psychosocial disabilities?
09	What are the barriers to employment for people with psychosocial disabilities?
12	How to support employees with psychosocial disabilities?
15	References

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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 inform employers, HR professionals, and managers on strategies that they can implement to improve the experience for people with psychosocial disabilities in the workplace with the goal of increasing job tenure. The aim is to provide practical guidance for people managers to implement into a range of organizational and industrial contexts.

The key findings from the review are:

#1

Barriers to employment

- People with psychosocial disabilities tend to have a shorter length of job tenure and lower levels of job satisfaction than the general population.
- The symptoms associated with psychosocial disabilities can have detrimental impacts on employment functioning.
- Discrimination in the workplace negatively impacts the ability of people with psychosocial disability to maintain work.

#2

Talking about psychosocial disabilities

- Psychosocial disabilities represent a diverse group of individuals so high levels of communication with those employees is crucial for understanding how to best support them in employment.
- In order to facilitate high levels of communication, organisations need to encourage disclosure of psychosocial disabilities. Fostering a diverse workforce and having clear policies in place that are well communicated empower employees to communicate their needs.

#3

Work accommodations

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

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.

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 [2], 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 it important to improve employment 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.

Despite the importance of employment to the wellbeing of people with psychosocial disabilities, their employment rate remains far below the average. 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 [3]. This stagnation suggests that recent attempts to increase the integration of this group of people into employment have yet to be successful.

Why is it important for organisations to take action to improve employment outcomes for people with psychosocial disabilities?

People with psychosocial disabilities tend to have less access to suitable employment than the general population. Employment options tend to be limited to lower-level and lower-paying positions with few opportunities for professional development or progression. As a result of the low availability of suitable employment options and widespread discrimination in the workplace, people with psychosocial disabilities experience much lower levels of job satisfaction than the general population [5]. Employers have a significant role in addressing low employment outcomes by creating suitable job opportunities for people with psychosocial disabilities.

However, many employers are ill-prepared to fill this gap in the job market. 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 [6]. 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 [7].



WHY SHOULD ORGANISATIONS EMPLOY PEOPLE WITH PSYCHOSOCIAL DISABILITIES?

With diversity and inclusion being increasingly pushed in organisational contexts and society more broadly, employers are increasingly pressured to hire people with psychosocial disabilities. Such external pressure might make employers feel forced into employing people with psychosocial disabilities to meet quotas or other expectations. However, without knowing and believing the importance of making those 'diversity hires', employers may consciously or subconsciously discriminate against the employee. As such, the following section will dispel some of the myths about the negatives of employing people with psychosocial disabilities and explain some motivations and advantages of their employment.

07

Employees with psychosocial disabilities do not cost additional resources

Firstly, it is essential to address the elephant in the room; the assumption that people with psychosocial disabilities will perform worse than people without a disability or that employing people with psychosocial disabilities will cost the firm extra resources [5]. While such preconceptions are very common, research tends to suggest the opposite. With the correct work accommodations or adjustments and supportive workplace cultures, people with psychosocial disabilities perform at the same level, if not higher, than people without psychosocial disabilities [8].

Employers might still argue that implementing those adjustments is costly, both directly financially and in the time it takes to implement them. However, research has also found that this claim is unfounded. In fact, work accommodations and supports for people with psychosocial disabilities tend to have little to no cost and are relatively easy to implement. Even though accommodations for other disabilities are often more costly, people with psychosocial disabilities are less likely to receive work accommodations than other types of disabilities [8].



What are the legal responsibilities of employers?

Research shows that one of the barriers to employment for people with psychosocial disabilities is low awareness of their rights under the law and low awareness amongst employers of their responsibilities [4]. According to the Disability Discrimination Act 1992, employers must provide reasonable adjustments to enable a person with a disability to perform the inherent job requirements unless this would cause “unjustifiable harm”. This requirement aims to minimise the impact of disability, enabling employees to take part in employment fully. Furthermore, the requirement recognises that people with disabilities can usually perform work-related tasks. Through their Job Access program, the Australian government provides financial and practical support to employers to implement and maintain workplace adjustments.

Why is diversity important?

Legal requirements should not however be the primary reason for employing people with psychosocial disabilities. Having people with psychosocial disabilities in the workforce has a range of positive effects on organisational performance. In a world that is becoming increasingly diverse, replicating that diversity in the workforce is important because it improves organisational skills in the following dimensions:



Increased creativity and innovation. A diverse workforce brings together individuals with different perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds. This can lead to new and innovative ideas, as well as creative problem-solving.



Improved decision-making. A diverse team is more likely to consider a variety of viewpoints, leading to more thorough and thoughtful decision-making.



Better customer service. A diverse workforce can help an organization better understand and serve a diverse customer base, leading to increased customer satisfaction and loyalty.



Enhanced employee engagement and retention. When employees feel valued and respected for their differences, they are more likely to be engaged and committed to the organization. This can lead to improved retention rates and reduced turnover costs.



Improved reputation. A commitment to diversity and inclusion can improve an organization's reputation and brand image, leading to increased customer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth.



Improved financial performance. Studies have shown that companies with diverse workforces tend to perform better financially. This is likely due to the fact that diverse teams are better able to understand and serve a diverse customer base, make better decisions, and innovate more effectively.

There are 1.1 million people with psychosocial disabilities in Australia. This is a substantial portion of the population that organisations are better able to market to by employing people with psychosocial disabilities. With a diverse workforce, the organisation can better develop products, services, and marketing strategies that recognise the individual experiences of that group of people.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR PEOPLE WITH PSYCHOSOCIAL DISABILITIES?

The symptoms of psychosocial disability create a range of work-related impairments that pose significant barriers to employment when not correctly addressed. Unfortunately, workplaces commonly do not adequately address those barriers to employment. Instead, people with psychosocial disabilities often experience significant discrimination and social exclusion in the workplace, creating significant stress and reductions in wellbeing. This section will outline the primary common barriers to employment experienced by people with psychosocial disabilities.

What are the effects of psychosocial disabilities on work functioning?

The term psychosocial disability encompasses a broad range of disabilities with an even broader spectrum of symptoms. Given such breadth of possible experience of psychosocial disability, it is important not to over generalize the impacts that psychosocial disabilities may have on employment. Adding to the complexity is the episodic nature of psychosocial disabilities. This means that the effects of the disability on work productivity and functioning are constantly and often dramatically changing over time [9]. Despite this variation, there are some similarities that can be drawn to provide a general understanding of some of the ways that psychosocial disability differentially impacts on work performance and functioning when compared with the general population:



Fluctuations in productivity. Individuals with psychosocial disabilities may experience reduced productivity due to difficulties with concentration, memory, decision-making, problem-solving and motivation. Due to the episodic nature of psychosocial disabilities, they may often experience periods of high productivity when their mental health is good, followed by periods of lowered productivity due to decreased mental wellbeing.



Higher frequency of sick leave. 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.



Impaired social interactions. Psychosocial disabilities can affect an individual's ability to interact with others, leading to difficulties in building relationships with coworkers and managers. People with psychosocial disabilities are also at increased risk of having turbulent and unstable relationships meaning they may have less social support outside of work.



Financial strain. Difficulties in finding and maintaining employment can lead to financial strain, which can exacerbate mental health symptoms and further impact employment functioning. Furthermore, people with psychosocial disabilities can be reliant on welfare benefits and publicly funded healthcare which are often dependent on a person's employment status. Such financial instability can lead to periods of homelessness at the extreme.



Interruptions to education and training. Many people with psychosocial disabilities will have missed substantial portions of secondary education or may have been placed in special needs classrooms, limiting their access to higher education and training. 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.

What conditions in the workplace present barriers to employment?

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.



HOW TO SUPPORT EMPLOYEES WITH PSYCHOSOCIAL DISABILITIES?

There are a range of steps employers can take to address workplace barriers to employment and provide suitable and supportive job opportunities for people with psychosocial disabilities. Firstly, employers must foster a supportive organisational culture that values diversity and inclusion. Such environments provide perfect grounds to encourage disclosure of psychosocial disabilities and provide the subsequent adjustments and accommodations. Each of these steps will be outlined in detail in this section.



Creating a positive and supportive culture

An organisational culture that supports diversity is a vital step towards encouraging disclosure. Fostering a diverse workforce is an effective way to promote supportive organisational cultures. Over time, as diversity becomes more 'normal' in the workplace culture, others will feel increasingly empowered to be open about disclosing their own mental health experiences. Increasing mental health literacy in staff and supervisors through training is another way to start the cycle of disclosure to encourage diversity [12]. Providing information on clear workplace policies and expectations around the treatment of others and procedures around disclosure can also improve organisational atmospheres and increase openness [5].

Identifying employees with psychosocial disabilities

Another strategy employers can use to promote disclosure is to look out for symptoms and warning signs of mental ill-health. Early identification and diagnosis of a psychosocial disability is the best way to ensure that the individual receives high-quality care that minimises the negative impacts of the disability. This requires that employers actively provide extensive opportunities to discuss potential disabilities during recruitment and while employed. Employers can also regularly psychologically screen their workforce to evaluate the effectiveness of attempts to improve wellbeing or identify areas for improvement [7, 11].

It is essential that when employers are having conversations with employees about psychosocial disability, they do not make assumptions about the nature of their disability. After a conversation with an employee about their psychosocial disability, employers should understand the employee's personal experience of their disability and how it impacts their functioning at work. Employers should also understand what they and others in the workforce might be able to do to support the employee in their work [8].

Providing work accommodations

Finally, in response to conversations with employees, employers should ensure that correct accommodations and adjustments are implemented to support the employee. When implementing work adjustments, there are a few important considerations to address. Firstly, work accommodations should not make employees feel insufficiently challenged by their job or overprotected. Accommodations with this effect can negatively impact the individual's confidence, work commitment, and productivity.

Secondly, employers should not alienate themselves or the employee from the rest of the workforce by making it appear that they are in some way privileged. Staff education, training, and clear organisational policies are crucial to avoid this. Staff should be aware that accommodations are available to all who require them and are to ensure people can undertake the requirements of their role. Finally, it is important to be aware that, given the episodic nature of psychosocial disabilities, employees' work accommodation needs may shift over time. Constant communication and supervision are required to ensure the employee is supported.

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 [6, 8, 11, 13]:



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.



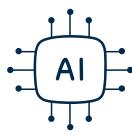
Supervision adjustments describe changes to the employee's training, coaching, mentoring or management to better support their progression and needs. For example, weekly meetings where feedback is provided to the employee can help them stay on track, provide time management guidance, or extra guidance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

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