

# Supported education: A means for enhancing employability for adults with mental illness

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## 1. Introduction

Education is an essential stepping stone to employment in western society. Because many severe mental illnesses have their onset in adolescence and early adulthood [3] many adults with mental illness have failed to obtain post-secondary education. For those who have experienced the onset of mental illness later in adult life, re-training may be necessary to prepare them for alternate career directions.

Individuals experiencing mental illness have unique challenges in accessing education [4]. These include individual mental health symptoms that impact performance, physical health problems, difficulties completing school work, interpersonal problems, lack of financial and other resources, and competition from other life demands. Other reported challenges to success include stigma, self doubt and lack of supports [1,4]. It is noteworthy that most of the reported barriers are social/environmental concerns, rather than individual level factors that might be addressed through clinical intervention or medication. The persistence of many symptoms, the recurring nature of many mental illnesses and the lack of flexible community options for training and employment make it difficult for many individ-

uals to experience employment success and to find a secure place in the community. Attainment of prosperity and autonomy becomes an almost insurmountable challenge.

## 2. Finding a solution

A unique opportunity emerged in Frontenac County, a partially rural area in south eastern Ontario, Canada, as a result of a community employment network. Discussion between the vocational counsellor from Frontenac Community Mental Health Services (FCMHS), a community-based mental health organization, and a representative of St. Lawrence College (SLC), the local community college raised the possibility of creating meaningful post-secondary education options for people with serious mental illness. The community college has a mandate to serve the community, offering accessible and valued learning opportunities to everyone in the local community. Staff at FCMHS had in-depth knowledge of the population and their vocational needs, as well as direct contact with many individuals who would be candidates for vocational training. The picture that began to form was a bridge between FCMHS Vocational Centre and the halls of SLC.

The first step was to identify local labor market needs. Research revealed that in Frontenac County, hiring in retail was abundant. Retail work was considered a viable field in this context since it provides sufficient flexibility for individuals with mental illness to

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sustain employment. For instance, retail work is often part-time, allowing an individual time between shifts for ongoing medical appointments and to rest. Retail work is also characterized by seasons that are very busy followed by lulls in the market, which again provide short breaks. In addition, a number of individuals being served by FCMHS expressed interest in this field, and had previous relevant experience .

### **3. Program design**

A specialized retail sales training program targeting the needs of individuals with mental health concerns was developed. An existing retail workforce curriculum that had been created by Literacy Link of Eastern Ontario served as the basis for the program, and was adapted to meet the needs of the target population. The curriculum was also modified to comply with the standards set by the College Academic and Career Entrance Certificate (ACE) Self Management/Self Direction course, such that this certification could be awarded to successful trainees. An instructor with 20 years' retail experience who had previously provided vocational skills training to clients from FCMHS was hired as the primary course instructor.

The program design involved 12 weeks of daily classroom instruction, as well as a 3 week community work placement. The instructional portion of the program was provided at the FCMHS vocational center, but students were registered as SLC students and received a student card and library privileges during the time they were in the course. Mental health support was provided by vocational staff of FCMHS, much in the way that employment supports are provided for many individuals with mental health disabilities. Transportation, printing and snacks were provided by FCMHS to reduce any potential barrier for individuals participating in the program.

An unpaid work placement in community retail establishments allowed learners to gain authentic experience in the retail trade, and to receive feedback on their performance. This supervised work experience offered a number of benefits: first, participants were able to practice skills, and increase their confidence in searching for a job upon completion. Second, learners received feedback that was both solicited and facilitated by vocational staff from FCMHS. In many cases, employers fail to provide honest feedback to people with disabilities [2], and may be unaware of accommodation needs due to the failure of the worker to disclose the

illness [5]. Thus, honest and constructive feedback is often not forthcoming, and poor performance may lead to job loss. Finally, learners received current reference letters from their placement supervisors, providing an important boost to job search efforts.

### **4. Implementation**

Participants were recruited through advertisements at FCMHS and in the local community. An information session was held for interested candidates to outline training expectations, schedule, and work placement information before they submitted an application. Eleven individuals enrolled in the inaugural program. All expressed great enthusiasm for the program, based on the novelty of being in school, connecting to the world of work, and feeling more a part of the community at large. The group formed friendships and acquired new learning. All completed the rigorous classroom training, which may be attributable to the commitment and flexibility of the instructor, the suitability of the training materials, and the mental health supports provided by FCMHS staff.

The success of the pilot was not without its challenges, however. One of the biggest issues that became apparent when the students were on work placement was lack of stamina. When learners were in the workplace and on their feet for several hours at a time, they tired easily. A solution came from further collaboration with another post-secondary program at SLC – Fitness and Health Promotion. An applied research grant from the college supported adding a physical training component to the second iteration of the program. Learners were paired with senior SLC students from the Fitness and Health Promotion program who worked one-on-one with them to improve their overall fitness levels and increase physical stamina. The benefit of this training was particularly apparent during work placements, where learners were able to complete their scheduled work shifts and duties much more effectively. In addition, collaboration with the SLC students enhanced trainees' comfort level with people outside the mental health community and helped to reduce the stigma that so often leads to low self esteem and social isolation. Participants were building a "normal" kind of life and becoming more than the illness with which they so strongly identified.

## 5. Results

Skills for Retail has been offered three times, and over time a number of implementation issues have been addressed. Presently, 20 out of 29 participants who completed the program are still employed (length of employment ranging from 6 to 24 months). These are positive results considering the significant barriers to employment encountered by this population. The successful partnership between FCMHS and SLC continues to thrive. *Skills for Retail* will run again in Fall 2010, and currently has a waiting list of eager participants. As the local economy continues to improve and the retail trade broadens, the timing for new graduates will be perfect. These successes serve to build hope for individuals in the community who are struggling with mental illness, and increase the commitment of service providers to link arms with employers to increase and diversify the workforce in our community. They also

demonstrate the value of local partnerships in building opportunities and enhancing inclusion for people with disabilities.

## References

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