

Employment survey for employers

Summary of findings

'Employing people who may become unwell again does come with its challenges but with supportive employers and good relationships [it's] manageable and worthwhile'.

Background

Unemployment for people who use mental health services is higher than any other disability group in New Zealand. Ninety per cent of people with experience of mental distress want work and 80 per cent of people who use mental health services are unemployed. Employment exclusion is the biggest barrier to social inclusion (Gordon & Peterson, 2015).

The Employment Equality Project's goal is to enhance the opportunities of people with experience of mental distress to gain employment. We aim to achieve this by offering training to employers and colleagues to address barriers, highlight facilitators, and provide tools to support a healthy and inclusive workplace.

We developed two short, confidential online surveys (one for people with mental distress and one for employers) to improve our understanding of the barriers and opportunities to employment for people with experience of mental distress. We sent links to the surveys via work contacts, email, Facebook, Twitter and Linked In.

There were 66 responses from employers:

- 79% lived in New Zealand
- 93% had employed people with experience of mental distress
- 50% were mental health service employers and the other 50% came from a broad range of sectors.

'Only that in one instance I only became aware that my employee had experience of mental distress when some of the issues he was experiencing at work began to exacerbate his symptoms. I wish I'd known earlier and we would have found a different way to work together.'

Key Findings

The top four factors influencing employers to employ a job seeker with experience of mental distress were:

- Belief that people who have recovered are stable and resilient workers (87%)
- Belief in the value of employing a diverse workforce (82%)
- Feeling comfortable about responding to someone experiencing mental distress (80%)
- Confidence that the person would be accepted in the workplace (78%).

The top four factors influencing employers against employing a job seeker with experience of mental distress were:

- Concerns about the ability of the job seeker to handle work stress (49%)
- Concerns about absenteeism due to mental distress (36%)
- Worries about how to respond to an employee experiencing mental distress (31%)
- Concerns about the effects of treatments on job performance.

Respondents were asked to comment on their positive experiences of employing people with experience of mental distress. Their responses clustered around the following themes:

- The employees were very committed to the work
- The employees had high levels of compassion and empathy
- Honest discussion and open dialogue contributed to the positive experience.

Respondents were asked to comment on their negative experiences of employing people with experience of mental distress. Their responses clustered around the following themes:

- The employee's lack of awareness that their distress was interfering with their work
- The employee's struggle to cope with the demands of work after being out of the workforce
- Absenteeism without full communication from the employee.

Respondents were asked to comment on what they had learnt from employing people with experience of mental distress. Their responses clustered around the following themes:

- Employees need to have a reasonable level of wellbeing and self-awareness
- Flexible and supportive workplaces are essential for everyone
- Non-judgemental support and open communication is important.

'The challenges are no different than with someone who does not identify as having experienced mental distress. The issues have been regarding not doing the work well and with detail, a couple of people relapsed, but a diabetic could have a difficult time too. We try to support and make mental health care just the same as any other health challenge. It has been my observation that people who have mental distress do not miss more days or have more difficulties than those team members who do not have a diagnosis.'