Journeys to work: the perspective of client and employment specialist of “Individual Placement and Support” in action

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide the personal accounts of the journey back to work from the perspective of both the person entering employment and the Employment Specialist who assisted them.

Design/methodology/approach – Two people with mental health problems who received help into employment from an employment service in a London Mental Health Trust were asked to give write their accounts of their journey. The Employment Specialists who assisted them in this journey were also asked to write their accounts.

Findings – Reflective accounts – no findings presented.

Originality/value – Much has been written about the effectiveness of Individual Placement and Support evidence-based supported employment, but little has been published about the lived experience of this approach from the perspective of both the person endeavouring to return to work and the employment specialists who support them. This paper presents two such accounts.

Keywords Personal accounts, Recovery, Employment and mental health

Paper type Viewpoint

The context

Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust (CNWL) employs over 7,000 staff in a range of integrated healthcare services for a third of London’s population, Milton Keynes and beyond. This includes mental health services across six London boroughs and Milton Keynes, and addiction services comprising a network of adult community and inpatient substance misuse services.

CNWL made a commitment to increasing access to paid employment for people recovering from mental health and/or addictions in 2004. This has involved the organisation becoming an exemplary employer for people accessing mental health and addiction services, as well as the implementation of the Individual Placement and Support Employment approach (IPS).

IPS services have been implemented in a range of mental health teams since 2004, and in addictions teams since 2009. Many of the services have achieved an Exemplary Quality Assurance Fidelity Review, which reflects how closely the service follows the IPS principals.

The IPS approach is based on over 20 years of research. Randomised controlled trials have compared IPS with standard vocational rehabilitation services and found that IPS services were three times as effective at supporting people with mental health problems into paid work (Bond et al., 2008). The IPS model has an emphasis on the integration of employment support within clinical treatment, a personalised/strength-based approach, rapid job search, a focus on
competitive employment, and minimal pre-vocational input. The model has eight principals, each of which is supported by an evidence base (Bond et al., 2008, 2012).

The following two case studies provide the accounts of both the service user and the employment specialists who supported them around the journey to paid employment, and the positive impact it has on each individual’s recovery and wellbeing.

Both of the service users involved wish to remain anonymous.

D had not worked for 17 years when he was referred to the employment specialist and he could speak very little English.

**D’s account of his journey**

“I met my ES after I had heard about the Employment Services within CNWL. I was interested in working because I wanted to improve my health. I was sat at home suffering from my mental health and I felt very depressed, thinking what will happen with my life. I often thought about what my life would be like if I held down a job but there was one thing stopping me! I spoke no English at all four years ago! When I met my ES she discussed what my motivations were and whether I wanted to work. I felt at last there was someone to help. We struggled during the first session, my ES spoke very slowly and I answered back with one word answers. She even drew pictures to help me understand. I knew she wanted to help me move on and find work.

My ES helped me create a CV which was also challenging. I had worked previously 17 years ago in this country but it was for a Gujarati speaking company however, I struggled here too as I could not communicate with many people, I found it a struggle using the bus service, paying on the buses, I lost a lot of confidence which resulted in me leaving this role and I became very unwell.

Soon after meeting my ES we started to job search in the community. I was looking for either a cleaning role, factory work, or anything I can use my hands with. We visited many factories around London on several occasions and then I met my ES’s colleague who speaks the same language as I do. We straight away worked together as a three on practicing interviewing techniques, how to address my hygiene, how to meet and greet employers. It was such a relief and I understood the hard work that my ES was putting into my journey back to work. It was so helpful that she suggested I spoke to her colleague who is also an Employment Specialist.

My ES then organised for me to go to an interview with a large retailer. The interpreting ES spoke to me over the phone and prepped me for my day. Both of the Employment Specialists met and wrote a letter explaining my history and my capabilities. They even wrote that I am willing to do a work trial, and that if they were happy with this, to contact them to translate and arrange this!

The manager was impressed with the way we all communicated and offered me a work trial. My ES explained to the manager that she should demonstrate what I should do, and my interpreter relayed this to me so I copied everything I saw! I had no clue in what the lady was saying but I just imitated her. My ES also helped me explain my mental health to my manager as I felt she should know that sometimes I may need extra support and she can call my ES for support.

I am now in part time work as a cleaner. I cannot believe I have finally got a job it has changed my life. I feel happy within myself, the bad thoughts from my head have disappeared. I have made friends at work who speak Gujarati and they help me practice my English! I feel more confident travelling around in London and being around people that do not speak my language. My home life has improved as well. I cook for myself and socialise with people in my accommodation site where I live.

My ES and I meet regularly and she asks how my job is going and helps me with my benefits. We have also met to write this story and the interpreter is helping my ES. Finally, I want this story to help others in a similar situation. Anyone can work; if you receive the correct help and support no barrier will stop you from working.”
Suzanne Clinton-Davies – the employment specialist who supported D

A journey well travelled - supporting a client on his recovery journey back to employment

“In 2012 I was given the honour, and it has genuinely felt like this, to support a gentleman recapture a huge part of himself and begin the journey to accessing paid employment. Little did we both know how creative and challenging it would be […] but the rewards have been great.

As a new Employment Specialist in the Brent Community Rehabilitation Team I decided with my Team Leader to “spread the word” about the IPS model (individual placement and support) to as many supported accommodation sites as I could. This meant giving short focused talks at the houses and in-patient community wards to service users/residents and to the many staff who are the back bone of the service.

At one such talk approximately 6 residents attended along with a couple of staff. I knew that at least one if not two people were non English speakers, but nonetheless I tried to convey the essence of my speech with some improvisations and hand outs.

At the end a few people requested to hear more about how I could help, but one man stood out. This was D. He repeatedly stated in his broken English that he wanted to work and had a persistence and drive that I have rarely seen. So we agreed to meet and thus began our winding journey. Our first sessions would have been comical to film, between his faltering English and my limited acting abilities but slowly I grew to build a picture. This was a man who had travelled from a village in India, with little in the way of formal education or training, to a man who had acquired various trade skills and then on coming to the UK had become severely unwell. Fast forward 20 years he now stood before me, unemployed, hopeful, excited and declaring that he wanted to work with his hands, be it in cleaning, carpentry or repairing bikes.

However creative we were with the CV, D had not worked for many, many, years and getting a job interview through traditional routes was going to prove challenging. We needed links, a network of Gujarati speakers who could help, or so I thought. We found Gujarati speakers in Kilburn and Wembley and were pointed in the direction of the temples to assist us. We also found that there remains a stigma around mental health within various communities and it is a subject that remains taboo and something to be feared. We journey on; I developed links with a well known cycle shop and found a Gujarati manager who was prepared to train him up. I navigated through the HR department to have his CV selected only to find that the job we were going for had changed. All back staff – i.e. those working behind the scenes repairing, were now expected to have customer service skills and be able to communicate and repair bikes at the front of the shop. Without English, this was impossible. Au revoir to that job!

We made links with a Gujarati restaurant proprietor but the hours were impossible, we contacted a well known stationer who needed a cleaner and then Head Office reduced their budget. Finally we forged a connection with a company to which a high street retailer had contracted out their cleaning […]. Having established a warm, albeit rather superficial connection with the manager, I now needed to ensure that D could manage a very basic interview and work trial. For this I enlisted a wonderful Gujarati and English speaking colleague who supported D with what to say and how to say it. We wrote a script and always listened to D’s preferred views and thoughts. D was adamant that he wanted to inform any company he worked for, before signing a contract, that he had experienced mental health difficulties. It was most important to him as it was a part of his identity and he wanted people to be informed in case he hit challenging times again.

So, having arranged a work trial and brokered an interview we met with the local manager of the cleaning company to sign up. On the application form were general questions about physical and mental health and D insisted that we tell the interviewer about his mental health. It was perhaps one of the worst interviews/contract signings I have ever had to witness. As I explained in general terms about D’s mental health, the manager sat back in her chair and unflattering told him and myself that there was no possible way she could take him on. He was a danger to himself, to others, he might swallow poisonous chemicals, he could hurt someone, he would fail to turn up and the list went on. In very basic terms I tried to relay to D that the interview was not going so well. The truth was that I was horrified and incredulous that this kind of blatant discrimination was happening in 2014. It was at this point, that the manager of the retailer walked in, himself a Gujarati speaker and warmly greeting me he asked what was happening. I sadly told him that under his roof, a sub contractor was making highly discriminatory remarks, that the Equality Act was here to protect all people and he should be aware of the predicament I was in with my client. I requested that he discretely speak with the cleaning manager and remind her of the Equality Act and how until the moment we had mentioned mental health she had been pleased to sign D up. Perhaps she should re consider and at least allow him the chance to prove himself. If it went wrong she had my contact details and we could review. All credit to the Retail manager, he rose from the chair, walked back into the interview room and asked the cleaning manager for a word. Ten minutes later we were signing the contract […].

I would like to say that everything from that day to this has been easy, but it wouldn’t be true! What is true is that D has become a fantastic cleaner, the manager has increased his hours and D has made the transition into less supportive accommodation and is building a very different and positive life. He describes how he loves going to work and has made new friends. D is a role model to all who wish to hope and believe they can go back to work. We still meet regularly and my current supervisor a Gujarati speaker helps clarify questions and appointments where necessary. At the end of the day ‘where there is a will, there really is a way.’ We just need the clients to tell us that they do want to work; our role is to have the skills and knowledge to navigate the complexities of work and support them to find the best way in and then keep them in employment. It has been a wonderful learning and eye opening journey for both of us and with D’s support we have communicated this story to many service users and staff […]. To my fellow colleagues, peer support workers and service users I offer a quote that resonates deeply with me “[…] let us be agents of hope for without hope there is no future.” Lord Sacks, 2005.”
B was a graduate with a diagnosis of bi-polar disorder who had been unemployed for two years when he was referred to the employment specialist.

B's account of his journey

“I suffer from Bi-Polar Effective Disorder and it has taken me a long time to come to terms with this. The first time I suffered an episode was in my late teens. Many people around me, both family and friends were shocked to see this happen to someone as positive and outward going as myself but the truth of the matter was that I suffered from serious burn out from my school and social life that had caused something in me to not be right.

It has taken me many years since then to reach a balance both in the way in which I think and perceive myself and with the way I deal with my day to day life. I have had a lot of help along the way. If it wasn’t for the support I have had from my mental health team, I wouldn’t be the same person I am today.

University was very hard for me. Not really because of the workload but mostly because I had suffered another manic depressive episode in my first year there. The manic episode which I went through, lasted 8 months which resulted in me having to voluntarily drop that year and start all over again, which meant that my depressive episode happened while I was re-taking my first year in university. This is the time when I met a care worker called Simon and he would meet up with me on a week by week basis to see how I was doing and see how he could help to make me feel different about myself and to see things from a different point of view. This made going through the last few years of University a lot easier as he helped me reach a good balance on which to conduct myself.

Having graduated university, I went out in the big open world with a 2:2 and a keen desire to reach my goals. Little did I know but this was the time of the beginning of the recession and what that meant for graduates like me was that finding a job, any job would prove harder than the previous generation of graduates. It was an uphill struggle to find a decent form of secure employment. Although having found work here and there, starting off on an internship and then later on a 6 month contract and finding temporary work, I was unable to find a permanent position. I had to learn that in order to get what you want, you seriously had to go out and get it. This again proved for me to be an incredibly hard time.

I then had a period of 2 years of unemployment, I didn’t suffer from any severe episodes of my mental health at this time but it still affected my job seeking, making it hard to stay motivated.

Even though things were again incredibly difficult I remember how much care I got again from the Westminster Mental Health Team as my consultant psychiatrist referred me to a Employment Specialist. Little did I know her help would be invaluable in giving me the support and confidence I would need to find not only a job, but the right job for me. Meeting her was very good for me, as I recall I had reached a very low point where I did not want to meet up with many friends as my situation wasn’t getting any better. She introduced me to people of all ages who were looking for work in weekly and fortnightly artist network meetings in central London. I met people who were going through similar struggles and were in a similar position as me. These meetings really gave me a boost to try harder and push for more opportunities out there. She was a great support and gave me regular support on finding work, looking at opportunities available online and through her contacts. I felt so happy to have this support to look for work at a time when I wasn’t feeling great about myself.

Since finding secure employment, I feel like a new person. I hate to sound overconfident or even patronizing to anyone reading this, but I feel like a new man. In ways such as the way I think, act and even the way I carry myself. I can’t stress enough how much better I feel having found work. Now I am not shy to talk about my career or even what I do. Whereas before it was very much hiding the fact that I was unemployed, now I look forward to the opportunity to open up about my life. I feel like I walk more confidently and am not shy to speak to strangers, however funny that may seem, I really feel like a happier, more outward going positive person.
I really am glad to have found work and cannot imagine going back to a world of boredom, loneliness and significant signs of the onset of depression. I feel like my life has changed in such a great way that I hope I can encourage other people to do the same and find work. Because it really is worth it, it is a life changing process because it gives you the motivation, the purpose in life to achieve things you couldn’t imagine achieving when you’re alone at home. And at the end of it, even a monthly reward of a pay check, so that you can treat yourself and others. I hope this story helps you, as you can see that it can happen to anyone, not just me. As long as you put in some effort, put in some hard work as well as get the help you need to push yourself and achieve [...] you really can be a better person.”

Tina Meegan – the employment specialist who supported B

“While working at the South Westminster Recovery team as an Employment Specialist, B was referred to me by his Consultant Psychiatrist to support him to return to employment. He had many strengths, a degree, strong administration skills, an interest in the arts, good communication skills and was motivated to gain employment. However, after two years of unemployment he had become isolated and had lost confidence.

He became a member of the Artist’s Employment Network at the South Westminster Recovery team, which supports service users with an interest in the arts to find employment. B has a particular interest in the film industry, he networked with other members of the group with a similar interest and then co-worked on a project. This is a very supportive network and he was an active member who gained confidence from the network, made friends, supported others and had the opportunity to hear about employment opportunities in the arts industries.

Initially he gained some work in a large book shop. He then moved onto a job as an Administrator in an HR Department at a London Hospital which he was keen to do. After speaking to his Consultant Psychiatrist regarding his situation he decided to leave the job at the hospital. He was finding it difficult to cope with a number of challenges that were not related to his mental health.

I supported B in negotiating with his employer, and also deciding whether he should leave the role. I encouraged him to be open with his employers and they were very supportive, but he ultimately decided to leave the post at that stage. Within a short space of time we started looking for another job matching his skills and interests.

B then gained an administration role within a film production company – his ideal industry which he has successfully sustained for over a year and a half now. His journey to work has been inspiring, and very much supported by myself and the clinical team working together.

He is now confident in owning his mental health and willing to share his journey and encourage others.”

References


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