



Consumer to Consumer:
Employment and Recovery

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Purpose Statement

The authors of this booklet are four mental health consumers and survivors who were staff members of the Vocational Insights Project, a consumer-driven project designed to reduce unemployment among adult consumers of mental health services in Ohio. We have written this booklet with the following purposes:

- To encourage empowerment among consumers;
- To present employment as a part of recovery;
- To assist consumers in seeking and maintaining employment

The Authors:

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Director's Message

Over the past several years, the Ohio Department of Mental Health has worked collaboratively with and funded a number of vocational rehabilitation efforts and projects. The Vocational Insights Project has been our most rewarding effort. The publication of this booklet as a practical approach to employment, written by consumers for consumers, is reaffirming for all of us.

You have proved that the assumptions of the program grant “that primary consumers of mental health services desire employment and can locate, obtain, and maintain employment if they are given support and guidance from peers and family members,” were true.

This booklet is not only an extremely valuable document for consumers seeking employment, it is also a testimony to recovery and the role that work plays in the recovery process for people with mental illness. We hope it will serve as a model for employment projects statewide.

The Ohio Department of Mental Health is committed to consumers helping consumers at all stages of recovery and commends the work of the Vocational Insights Project.

Michael F. Hogan, Ph.D.
Director, Ohio Department of Mental Health



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Introduction

The Vocational Insights Project began in 1992 as a three-year demonstration project funded by the Community Support Division of the National Institute of Mental Health for the Vocational rehabilitation of severely mentally disabled adults in Ohio. The underlying assumption of the project was that primary consumers of mental health services desire employment and can locate, obtain and maintain employment if they are given support and guidance from peers and family members. The primary goals of the project were that:

1. Mental health consumers would learn job skills in classes taught by other mental health consumers;
2. Mental health consumers would obtain employment through peer and family supported mechanisms; and
3. Mental health consumers would maintain employment through peer and family supported mechanisms.

This publication represents the success of this project. The efforts of the writers and all other project participants, staff, consultants, family and friends have reinforced the initial premise that consumers want to and can work if they are supported in their efforts. The Vocational Insights Project has provided significant information and data regarding the knowledge pool for those of us how are striving to teach and learn. It should also impact employment services delivery for consumers throughout Ohio.

Wilma Townsend, Chief
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About the Authors

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Why Work?

Employment Experiences and Recovery

If recovery means having less of your symptoms and more self-esteem, then paid or unpaid employment can be the answer for you. If recovery means having more social life, more responsibility, and more income, employment can surely fit the bill. All these issues and more can result in your recovery through employment.

My experiences as a consumer employed as a Job Search Specialist (a person who instructs and assists other in job seeking skills, such as resume writing, interviewing, finding job leads, understanding employer, etc.) gave me all of these – reduction in symptoms, increased self-esteem, a wider social circle, new experiences, increased income, and lots of responsibility. Graduates of the job search skills training classes that I teach often return after graduation to report about the self-confidence they have gained as a result of employment or volunteer work. For example, one fellow applied as a clerk in a local chain store and is now a manager there. He talks with a low of enthusiasm for his work and now reflects his enthusiasm back to me.

In one of my classes, there was a young woman who was very timid and shy. She had a college degree and *really* wanted to work. She thought she was too sick to work, but during the hours she spent in the job search skills training classes, her confidence grew mightily. You could actually see in her face that her belief in herself was returning. It was truly amazing. About a month after her graduation, she started working part-time and then became an important member of our office staff. For her, work works.

Working as a consumer assisting consumers made my experience even more powerful. I had previously worked in non-consumer jobs for long periods and was not as satisfied, fulfilled, or empowered as when I worked as a consumer for consumers. For example, when one of my clients, a consumer, lands a position in a certain company or agency, I take great pride. I was able to help that consumer by passing on the tools that led to success in obtaining a job. I also experience a great sense of accomplishment when I graduate a job search skills training class composed of consumers who were also substance abusers.

I have also watched my fellow Job Search Skills Specialists grow because of their employment. One of them really appreciated this opportunity to better her life. This is what she said:

The opportunity of a lifetime began when I first started working as a Job Search Specialist. I had the chance to become more than I had ever been before. I loved what I did because I truly believe that working has been the most important element in my recovery. I moved from being a Job Search Specialist to being a VISTA volunteer. This has helped me grow even more. For me, mental health treatment really worked, but, more importantly, work worked for my recovery!

Work can give people who have mental illnesses direction, confidence, a way to find their talents, an outlet for the need to produce and feel successful, and a million other things according to each person's wants, needs, and choices. We know this because we have seen it happen.

Make it happen for you!



You have a choice:

Employment or Unemployment

As a consumer, you can be a teacher, lawyer, accountant, executive, factory worker, or taxi driver. You do have a *choice*.

Being diagnosed with a mental illness does not mean that you lose your intelligence. It means that you have entered the mystical road to recovery. A long or short journey will be before you. Your life experiences might change to include medications, psychotherapy, and psychiatry. To make it through, you'll need support in all areas. *But you will have choices*. The goal of one day being free (or as free as you can be) from this recovery schedule can be accomplished. But you will have lots of choices to make.

Educate yourself about yourself. Know what your needs are. Gather all available information. Ask questions, make phone calls listen to other consumers. Go shopping for resources in your community. Get the help you deserve. Use your intelligence. Lean on your life experiences. You can be your own best advocate. *You do have choices*.

Be who you were created to be. People have molded consumers into a stereotype of incapability. Step-by-step recovery can reinforce your capabilities. *You do have a choice*.

Investigate the employment resources in your community. Try to locate a Job Search Skills Training Program. There you can learn tips on networking and accessing a support system for yourself. You will also receive suggestions on ways to search for employment and advice on how consumers can keep jobs once they get them. *You do have a choice*.



How to find employment

1. Learn about community resources.

Go to the public library. Read the city and community newspapers. Call the local United Way office for lists of services. Call the Ohio Bureau of Employment Services. Call you county mental health board.

2. Take a Job Search Skills Training class.

There you will learn to:

- find job openings
- complete job applications
- prepare your resume
- get ready for job interviews.

3. Get job leads.

Network with anyone and everyone.

4. Join a Job Club.

It's important to be around people. A Job Club or any support group or self-help group will give you exposure and support.

5. Look for a mentor.

Try to develop a one-to-one relationship with someone who will pat you on the back, someone who just won't let you wait, someone who will help you stay on your road to recovery.

6. Schedule your job search.

It takes time to find a job. Decide how many hours you can devote to the effort and then put in those hours.

7. Work your way to employment.

Set goals for yourself. Take small steps if you need to. Celebrate small successes. But don't settle for less than you want. *You do have a choice.*

Finding a job you are qualified for is a super goal and very important step in your recovery. Whether you choose to work two hours a week or twenty hours, to be a volunteer or a paid staff member, to work at a major corporation or a consumer drop-in center, to go back to school or go back to work, you will have new responsibilities and new experiences. You will meet new people and probably make new friends. You will see your self-esteem soar as you take control of your life.

Whatever decisions you make about your steps to recovery, those decisions are yours. You are somebody special. *The choice is yours.*



Consumers Helping Consumers

A Practical Program Approach

Many consumers enter or re-enter the work force through consumer-operated businesses or services, and many of these businesses and services are part of the mental health system. Drop-in centers, warm lines, family groups, and peer support services, among others, offer paid or volunteer employment for many consumers. We encourage this as a first step. It really makes sense for consumers to think about working in the mental health field because of their first hand experiences and insights.

You and some other consumers might even decide to operate your own business or service. What a great idea! All the authors of this booklet were staff members in a consumer-operated project. So now we want to share with you some of the lessons we learned as consumers helping consumers.

Having a support system.

A career in providing consumer services is best begun by already having an extensive support system in place in your life. You will probably need someone to talk with frequently. Really use the people in your life who have made a commitment to you and your project. People who believe in you will, often times, believe in your efforts simply because you do. But be sure to have this network created and then use it whenever you need it.

Providing consumer-run or consumer-operated services can be a tough road to travel. You might run into opposition from many areas, including family members, doctors, ADAMHS Boards, case managers, your own case manager, therapists, your own therapist, friends, and even other consumers. But don't get frustrated – a vital tool for you is to have a firm belief in what you are doing. Believe in the advantages you will get as well as the help others will get from your efforts.

Don't feel bad if it is hard getting support from co-workers. A common problem with consumer providers is that there is a lot of attrition, meaning that there is a big turnover in staff in some consumer programs. Remember that this has to do with the job and not you.

How far do I go to help? Setting boundaries.

Boundaries are absolutely necessary. Boundaries are absolutely necessary. It needs to be said twice because of the seriousness of the potential problems that will certainly arise if you do not set boundaries. The best advice is that you set stringent boundaries in the beginning and that these boundaries refer to relationships with bosses, students, participants, and co-workers. You can always ease back from strong boundaries, but it is very difficult to make boundaries stronger after a relationship is established. So beware of letting anyone take advantage of you or your position. This can happen. One of the symptoms of mental illness is manipulation. People might not take advantage of you on purpose, but that doesn't matter. What does matter is that you are overworked, tired, and can become symptomatic yourself under these circumstances.

To be, or not to be . . . Starting consumer-run projects

You can take steps to design, locate funding, and start a consumer-operated project, program, service, or business. It will be a risk, but you can take a step, you can go *for it!* Starting a project or program will be tough, but at the end, it could be very fruitful. Here are some considerations, things that we learned from our project.

1. Search for supportive, well-informed people for guidance and advice. Find People who know what it takes to start a business for and by those with emotional issues.
2. Get business leadership from people who are knowledgeable about the business you want to start.
3. Get support from your friends and family members, but don't count on others to do the work for you.
4. Get training, especially about contracts and important aspects of grant-funded projects.
5. Specify different expectations, including time frames, for each area of the business. Your team will have leaders and followers, but the roles will change. Leaders become followers, and followers become leaders.
6. Network with anyone and everyone.

7. For funding, get advice from people who are experienced with non-profit agencies and also from people who know about for-profit businesses.
8. Listen to your customers, to other consumers, and to your instincts.

But you said it was a good idea.

Program Support

Support for your program may come from numerous areas. But don't always rely on it. Sometimes staff from other agencies will say they support your program but then not refer consumers to you. Don't let this throw you. You have probably heard the saying, "They talk the talk, but they don't walk the walk." In our case, this refers to people who say they support consumer-run or consumer-operated programs but don't back up that talk with real support. When this happens, don't take it personally! It is not about you. It is about the politics of agencies and money. The best way to beat this problem is to solicit the support of consumers in your area. When relatively large numbers of people support one political party, one candidate, or one television show, those in charge take notice. The soft underbelly of politics is that things always have to look good. Where people are joined together in support of a common problem or type of program, those in power will hear. So make it your first priority to get consumers involved in your program and way you can. If they like your program, others will listen to that.

What do you mean I can get better?

Is there a cure for mental illness?

Recovery

Recovery is about being the very best you can possibly be. Recovery is a process in which one of the main ideas is that you have to convince yourself that you can get better; you don't have to stay the same all your life. Doctors, therapists, and case managers have, in the past, enabled us to remain sick. But a big part of it is in your brain. And I don't mean the mental illness, but the attitude that keeps you symptomatic. Live your life how you want to, not according to someone else's ideas.

Can I really do this?

Using your talents.

Many times, we as consumers limit our hopes and dreams as we are limited by our disabilities. We tend to limit our recognition of our own talents and skills

as we limit our lives and become disabled. Yes, of course, we have limits, but so does everyone else, whether they have a mental illness or not. Let your limits establish themselves. Don't let an "I'm disabled" attitude established them for you.

Everyone has skills and talents. Everyone! Sometimes the best way to find out what talents we have is to test ourselves and see. In our program, some of my co-workers who became good public speakers had never envisioned themselves as public speakers. The way they found out they could do it was to try. Some people who became good organizers never know that they had that ability until they started organizing something. Never limit yourself.

Work can be an important part of recovery.

Feeling and being useful and productive is essential to many, many people's good mental health. So would it surprise you that your own mental health would improve drastically if you went to work? Remember that recovery is not a place where there are no troubles and life is beautiful every minute! If it is life, then surely it has ups and downs. That's how life is – recovery is getting new ways to handle the challenges, ways that work for you. What works for one consumer might not work for another. And what works for you might not work for a friend or a student or someone you are trying to help. Be bold! Be creative! Be innovative! Create your own life. Find your own way. There is a lot that you could learn more about – symptom management, medication, reasonable accommodations through the Americans with Disabilities Act, therapy, treatments, part-time employment, self-help groups, and many other options you can think of or that someone can suggest to you. Remember that working with other consumers can help you be empowered.

Challenges, Choices and Changes

All these are made possible by consumers working with consumers.

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