

Understanding interventions and outcomes in Support Employment beyond severe mental illness: a qualitative evidence synthesis

SUMMARY

This briefing examines the critical success factors in Supported Employment interventions for individuals with health conditions other than severe mental illness. Supported Employment is a distinctive 'place-then-train' voluntary employment model to support economically inactive or unemployed individuals with health conditions or disabilities into well matched, sustained employment. Supported Employment services in our study adhere to either the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) fidelity model or the five-phase Supported Employment model now formalised since 2016 in the Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF) fidelity model, fidelity model that is tailored to support people with learning disabilities and/or autism.

Although 'train-then-place' employability models have traditionally been used to support disabled people towards employment, place-then-train Supported Employment models have increasingly been used in recent decades as an evidence-based model for supporting disabled people rapidly into well-matched jobs alongside provision of wider support to tackle barriers before, during and after job entry. Although the quantitative impact evidence base for Supported Employment is strong (Bond et al., 2020; Whitworth et al., 2024) there are calls for greater understanding of the mechanisms underpinning these interventions.

This briefing draws on a systematic review of qualitative evidence in Supported Employment interventions located in economically developed countries and published since 2000. Our systematic review identifies 13 qualitative research studies published from 2005 to 2022 and with most published in the last decade. Population groups included in studies include vulnerable youth, autism, Asperger's, chronic pain, disabilities, veterans with spinal cord injury and youth with developmental and psychiatric disability. As noted above, this research focuses only on population groups other than severe mental illness (the traditional population group for IPS services).

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMISSIONERS AND PRACTITIONERS

The tables below can be used by commissioners and practitioners when they are monitoring or evaluating existing services, designing new services, expanding services to new cohorts to inform service design, sense checking their approach, and understanding service impacts.

KEY FINDINGS 1. KEY PROGRAMME ELEMENTS

The review unearthed common programme elements across Supported Employment services around the nature of support offered to service users, the qualities and skills of employment specialists and practitioners, and the nature of the employment. These are explored in Table 1. Commissioners could use this table to guide the development of service specifications and as a basis for contract review to ensure implementation quality. Practitioners could use this to shape their operations and strategy as they design or expand a service to new cohorts or to sense-check the quality and robustness of their service delivery across the different domains to drive forward learning and adaptation. This list would also be a valuable tool to inform a training and development programme for staff.

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TABLE 1 – KEY PROGRAMME ELEMENTS

Domain	Domain elements	Summary of qualitative insights from review
<i>The nature of support</i>	Practical	Support with both practical and personal issues is required, and one-to-one contact is important. For practical support this can include building a CV, interview skills, transport and clothing. Personal support can include building confidence and understanding career goals.
	Integrated	Co-ordinated input from different services is often required, noting that for IPS services integration of these services is part of the fidelity model.
	Individualised and person-centred	Support needs to be individualised to service users' specific needs and preferences and there should be recognition that needs may vary from day to day. Further, ensuring the physical location where support is delivered is in line with service user preferences (e.g. at the place of employment or outside of it, face-to-face or online) can have a positive impact. There should be an expectation that bespoke work and/or workplace modifications will be in place to enable continued employment. These modifications could be to the scheduling, location and customer engagement levels for the service user when in work or to the workplace environment itself.
	Intensity, Pace and Duration	In Supported Employment job entry should be as rapid as is appropriate for the individual. For some clients rapid job entry is realistic whilst for others longer-term support will be required. On-going in-work support may also be required and the planned and gradual fading out of in-work support is key. Clients with learning disabilities supported by the SEQF fidelity model tailored for that group typically require more intensive support (e.g. lower caseloads, longer and/or more frequent support) than other population groups.
<i>Qualities and skills of the practitioner</i>	Expertise	Skilled practitioners display an ability to perceive possible work destinations and to facilitate desired outcomes for service users.
	Understanding	Practitioners' knowledge and understanding of service users' needs sets the service apart from others. Utilising a detailed and live whole-person vocational profile is key.
	Trust	The development of a positive, trusting relationship between practitioner and service user is cited as the most important element of the intervention in several studies.
	Employer view	Employers are key partners and it is important to establish good rapport with employers. In some studies, the Supported Employment practitioner was viewed as a broker, a guide, and a troubleshooter. Employers particularly valued practitioners' ability to match employee to employer needs, found practitioner guidance in the initial stages of employment valuable, and valued the availability of on-going employer support.
<i>The employment</i>	Goal of permanent competitive employment	Permanent or long-term competitive employment well matched to the individual's strengths, passions and needs, sustainable and mutually beneficial for clients and employers is the goal. Volunteering, sheltered employment or work trials are not the goal.
	Service users' views	It was considered essential that service users' contribution to work is perceived as valuable by co-workers, that employment instils feelings of competence, and that work is stimulating. Services aimed to ensure employment offered service users personal responsibility.

KEY FINDINGS: 2. INFLUENCING FACTORS

The review also highlighted some of the factors commonly reported to be influencing employment outcomes and service user experiences of Supported Employment services. These factors are shown in Table 2 and relate to service user, employer, programme, and system factors.

Commissioners could use this table to support contract performance and learning workshops as well as to consider the role of other services or providers in the local ecosystem who might influence outcomes.

Practitioners could use this to sense-check the quality and robustness of their service delivery across the different domains to drive forward learning and adaptation and to identify where there are structural barriers they may need to work with partners, referrers and employers to address. It could also be used as part of an analysis of the root cause of issues when the Supported Employment practitioner is struggling to support a client into paid work.

TABLE 2 – INFLUENCING FACTORS

Domain	Domain elements	Summary of qualitative insights from review
<i>Service user-related</i>	Motivation	Low motivation and lack of engagement by service user had an impact on quality of outcomes.
	Practical issues	Issues like a lack of transport or fear of losing benefits were significant.
	Condition-specific	Specific issues including where a service user is on their substance misuse or addiction journey, the impact of criminal convictions or a fear chronic pain may worsen with employment were important factors to address.
	Expectations	Supported Employment practitioners need to guide clients to understand different workplace contexts and job roles in order to support them to develop well matched and realistic job goals and job searches.
	Understanding	Lack of clarity regarding the voluntary nature of service is an obstacle to clients engaging effectively with support.
	Family influence	For young people, a lack of parental encouragement can lead to non-engagement.
<i>Employment and employer-related</i>	Expectations	Clear and concrete expectations from both employers and potential employees are required. Disabled people reported that employer expectations of them were often too low. Mismatched expectations about a client's skills, experience or interest in a role may reduce the sustainability of the employment for client and employer.
	Employer view	Some employers held negative assumptions about these types of population groups and were less likely to offer employment. Many employers also had a limited understanding of the Supported Employment service and what it could offer them and the client/employee in terms of support.
	Colleague support	Colleagues should be given relevant information about the individual condition or support needs of service users. Colleague support was noted as especially important for those with a disability to grow belonging and confidence in the workplace.

<i>Programme-related</i>	Delivery	Caseload size, and how geographically dispersed it is, are important factors in the delivery of high quality support. Staffing challenges such as turnover or low skills and knowledge were important, along with access to resources (e.g. laptops and meeting spaces).
	Timeliness	Successful employment outcomes depended on timeliness of service provision to client needs and circumstances.
	Practitioner needs	Flexibility and autonomy regarding ongoing training as well as regular caseload review and supervisions are key factors in supporting practitioners to deliver high quality support. This can reduce turnover and improve overall service delivery quality.
	Cherry-picking	Selecting or prioritising service users who meet the needs of less inclusive employers over service users with more specific requirements is a risk and contrary to the model.
<i>System-related</i>	Integration challenges	Lack of familiarity with the Supported Employment model in other services poses a challenge to embedding referral pathways and building a network of support around service users. This can require education regards Supported Employment in order to change assumptions and cultures in other services. Achieving good quality service integration can be time intensive and requires strong relationships of trust between services. Lack of collaboration between services, long waiting times for support services and limited understanding of the Supported Employment model all pose barriers to effective integration.
	Facilitators for integration or partnership working	Communication and collaboration between stakeholders, shared objectives, buy-in from other services, networking support from senior employees and on-going interdisciplinary meetings were all important success factors.

KEY FINDINGS: 3. EFFECTS OF SERVICE PROVISION

Finally, the review found a range of different effects that engagement in Supported Employment had on service users over the short and longer term. This table could be used by **commissioners** as a framework for understanding the impact of their Supported Employment services using a mix of qualitative and quantitative insights to demonstrate the breadth of impacts. This could inform the performance monitoring approach or outcomes framework for a Supported Employment service. **Practitioners** could likewise use this table to understand more about the impacts of their service and build an evidence base for their work against the different outcomes listed. Collecting information about these outcomes can help to build their impact case for more funding and expanded service provision. Wellbeing outcomes such as EQ-5D-5L or SWEMWBS, for example, are valuable as outcomes in their own right but improvements in them can also be converted into financial values within cost-benefit analyses.

TABLE 3 – SHORT AND LONGER-TERM EFFECTS OF SERVICE PROVISION

Timeline	Outcome	Summary of the effects of Supported Employment reported in review
Short-term effects	Employment	Gaining well matched work in the open labour market and sustaining that employment.
	Job readiness	Enhancing employability and increasing skill acquisition.
	Health and wellbeing	Improvements in health, enhanced wellbeing and growth in confidence (health improvement may be in relation to their underlying support needs or not).
	Attitude to work	Work was viewed positively, there was greater motivation to seek work, and increased confidence in ability to find work.
	Other	Acquiring relevant and desirable work had positive impacts on sense of contentment, feelings of competence, and sense of belonging in the workplace.
Long-term effects	Employment	In-work progression and enhanced career prospects.
	Wellbeing	Improved mental health, increased self-confidence and enhanced self-worth.
	Social belonging	Increased sense of contribution to society and social inclusion.
	Security	Increased financial security and independence.
	Positive futures	Increased hopefulness regarding the future, greater sense of achievement and feelings of accomplishment.

References

- Bond G, Drake R, Becker D. (2020) 'An update on Individual Placement and Support', *World Psychiatry*, 19:3
- Whitworth, A., Baxter, S., Cullingworth, J. and Clowes, M. (2024) 'Individual Placement and Support (IPS) beyond severe mental health: an overview review and meta-analysis of evidence around vocational outcomes', *Preventive Medicine Reports*, 43

Want further details?

This briefing is a high-level summary of a published journal article that contains full details. The published journal article is freely available at:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1936657424000013?via%3Dihub>

Feel free to contact the lead author, Prof Adam Whitworth, Strathclyde Business School, University of Strathclyde, to discuss further: adam.whitworth@strath.ac.uk

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