

Disclosure of Psychiatric Disability in the Workplace

Deciding, when or if, to disclose a psychiatric disability in the workplace is a dilemma for many people. Of course there are benefits to disclosure and it is an individual's right to be accepted as they are, however the realities of prejudice and discrimination cannot be denied. Stigma and a lack of understanding of mental illness remains a major barrier to workplace acceptance. While negative attitudes and beliefs are the reason for much discrimination, many employers may not understand how disability can be accommodated.

Stigma & discrimination

Stigma and discrimination impacts on all disability groups but is particularly problematic for people with a mental illness. Stigma in the workplace usually shows up as discrimination and frequently includes a belief that persons with mental illness either cannot work, or cannot be accommodated in the workplace. While there is always the fear that disclosure will trigger varying forms of stigma, non-disclosure can rule out access to reasonable workplace accommodations or adjustments.

Unfortunately there is no blue print for successful disclosure as each situation is different, requiring individual consideration and ongoing attention. At the very least people need to be well informed and prepared for some of the unfortunate responses that may result. This article aims to provide a broad view of some of the challenges faced by people with a mental illness seeking employment, some considerations leading to disclosure and where to seek out further advice and support.

Case study of Mark

Mark is a young man receiving treatment for a mental illness. With the help of his support worker, Mark applied for and gained a position of employment at a Packing Plant. He saw the offer of employment as a real step forward in his recovery. On his first day on the job he was given a 'Health Assessment Form' by the Company and told to bring it back later that week. One of the questions was, '*Have you ever suffered from a mental illness?*' The form also warned him that he could lose his position of employment if it was found that he had not truthfully answered all the above questions. After much discussion the young man decided to disclose. He had worked successfully and happily for a week but upon handing in the completed Health Form, his position was immediately terminated without explanation.

Best advice for Mark

In this instance Mark's decision to disclose up front was reasonable, in fact the issue is more about the actions taken by the employer who had not made his intentions clear as to why he asked the question. Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Council (HREOC) clearly state in their guidelines that the reason for a question on whether a person has suffered from a mental illness should be considered in relation to the inherent requirements of the position. If it is not related to the inherent requirements, there is no legal reason for employers to ask the question.

Also to be considered and perhaps asked up-front is: '*For what purpose does the employer ask the question?*' If it is to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made, this would be considered positive, however if in asking the question it is to terminate an employee, the act may not be lawful, dependant upon all the facts of the situation.

Such cases, if not easily managed by a support worker or advocate, can be taken to HREOC who will help follow through the issue with the employer. This process can also be positive and liberating for the person who has been discriminated against.

On the other hand

In hindsight, Mark may have decided not to disclose for various reasons, including fear of discrimination or fear of being denied certain entitlements. With such a decision to keep his disability private he would need to have the belief that his disability would have no effect or impact on his ability to do the job and that he would not require any work related adjustments.

Privacy is a recognised human right yet secrecy can damage relationships by impeding other's rights to information. It is essential to consider whether supervisor knowledge of a person's health conditions would improve safety or productivity in the workplace. However there is an employer obligation to use information only for the purpose for which it was given or it may be unlawful, as in Mark's case.

The negative effects of discrimination

The effects of stigma on individuals can result in future expectations of rejection. For Mark it caused feelings of demoralization, discouragement, hurt and anger. Psychological distress then leads to reduced social participation, increased difficulties in gaining employment and lower income. Individuals may worry excessively about being treated unfairly which develops into a long-lasting sensitivity to negative experiences.

Strategies for disclosure

In a presentation, *Disclosure of Psychiatric Disability in Vocational Rehabilitation*, Geoff Waghorn, Queensland Centre for Schizophrenia Research, explored how stigma countering strategies and disclosure strategies could be developed in vocational rehabilitation. Waghorn has observed disclosure patterns as often being reactive rather than well thought out and believes that more positive 'educating' and 'normalising' strategies are needed to equip people with ways to manage disclosure.

Strategic disclosure

Relevant findings have shown that vocational rehabilitation can be linked to four progressive stages which suggest how stigma countering strategies and disclosure strategies could be developed in vocational rehabilitation.

1. the Career Planning phase

Disclosure of disability should not be the focal point at this stage. Start by promoting an effective working relationship by focusing on the strengths of the employee and help them to self-assess their skills, qualities and interests. Matching career goals to the

reasonable capacity of the person will also help to avoid further discrimination. Be sure to take into account prior discrimination experiences of the individual and identify their automatic disclosure patterns so they can become more conscious and planned.

2. *in the Job Preparation phase*

Utilise low stigma environments when possible and provide training in work related social skills to avoid unplanned disclosure. Be sure to discuss ethical and legal issues. Select disclosure terms to help normalise the situation (e.g. 'social anxiety' can be described as low confidence around people).

3. *in the Job Acquisition phase*

Discuss client, job and employer circumstances, and possible outcomes of disclosure. Develop a trial disclosure statement and consider the best timing for main disclosure as well as preparing a response to discrimination.

4. *in the Job Retention phase*

Develop and document disclosure strategies for casual social situations and review these strategies along with performance. Think about new ways to utilise client strengths and discuss them with the employer as well as revising any supportive changes that have already been made.

Stigma countering in the Job Retention phase

Try to normalise the client's needs and strengths to the employer but encourage normal performance expectations. Get a feel for the employer's knowledge about mental illness, their concerns and support needs as well as assessing workplace stigma and the client's response to that stigma. If appropriate provide employer and staff education and check for an increase in unfavourable judgements in the workplace.

Conclusions

Considering the different aspects of disclosure and stigma countering strategies may be helpful if introduced in the various phases of vocational rehabilitation. Developing an agreed disclosure strategy may serve as a starting place which can be revised regularly as workplace feedback is obtained.

Waghorn also referred to statistical information in which disclosure was surveyed among 350 Professionals and Managers with psychiatric conditions and found that 87% had disclosed and 50% (151) had no regrets about disclosing. Interestingly, those compelled to disclose had more regrets than those disclosing by choice.

A useful resource for gaining advice and direction can be found on the website: '*Choosing Your Path. Disclosure: It's A Personal Decision*', which provides some excellent information about options and pathways that can be used when disclosing a disability in post secondary education as well as employment environments. It also provides guidance through disclosure issues when developing a career plan, preparing job applications and resumes and even handling job interviews. The website also articulates the role and responsibilities of employers and educators in relation to disclosure.

Ultimately, the decision to disclose, how much to disclose and when to disclose is a personal one and best navigated with advice and support. Take the time to investigate legislative rights, responsibilities, the experiences of various employees and employers with disabilities and disability services and support networks which may assist in preparing a plan to provide effective disclosure strategies.

References:

Geoff Waghorn, Queensland Centre for Schizophrenia Research (QCSR), The Park, Centre for Mental Health, Education and Research; and Steve Lewis, Ethics Officer, West Moreton Health Services District. *Full article in press with the Australian Journal of Rehabilitation Counseling.*

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Council (HREOC)

http://www.hreoc.gov.au/disability_rights/index.html

Anna Mungovan & Fran Quigley, Regional Disability Liaison Officers, Greater Western Sydney Region & Western Victoria Region, 'Choosing Your Path: Disclosure It's a Personal Decision'. <http://sites.uws.edu.au/rdlo/disclosure/>