

Integrating Employment and Mental Health Supports (IEMHS)

Employers feedback report

Executive Summary

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Introduction

About the IEMHS project:

Integrating Employment and Mental Health Services (IEMHS) was a pilot project developed by Mental Health Reform with Genio and Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) funding, and in partnership with the Health Service Executive (HSE) Mental Health Division, the DEASP, EmployAbility companies and Mental Health Reform. The IEMHS project piloted the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model of supported employment. The project involved integrating local Employment Specialists into each of four Multidisciplinary Mental Health Teams (MDTs) in order to deliver an IPS service in four sites across Ireland. The overall aim of the IEMHS project was to demonstrate how existing mental health and supported employment services can fulfil the best practice IPS model of supported employment through improved integration with mental health services. Further information about the IEMHS project is available in the project report.¹

As part of the evaluation of IEMHS, Mental Health Reform commissioned this research study to examine employers' experiences and views of the IPS-based IEMHS project. In consultation with Mental Health Reform, the following were identified as key questions:

1. From an employer's perspective, what were the benefits of and barriers to the IEMHS project?
2. What were employers' experiences of working with a person/persons experiencing mental health difficulties?
3. How did employers perceive the support they received as part of their engagement with the IEMHS project?

Background:

Problems obtaining and maintaining employment experienced by people with mental health difficulties can have a detrimental effect on quality of life, reduce social networks and social inclusion, reduce recovery options, maintain poverty, and reduce emotional, social, and behavioural well-being (Tsang et al., 2007). Employment is therefore

¹ Mental Health Reform (2018) *Steps into Work: Integrating Employment and Mental Health Supports Project Final Report*, Dublin: Mental Health Reform, available from www.Mentalhealthreform.ie

considered central to improving quality of life and facilitating recovery for those with mental health difficulties, regardless of severity (Strong, 1998; Tsang, 2003). Despite this, rates of competitive employment among people with mental health difficulties are consistently below 20% in developed countries (Marwaha & Johnson, 2005).

In Ireland, an individual experiencing a mental health difficulty is nine times more likely to be out of the labour force than those of working age without a disability, the highest rate of any disability group in Ireland (Watson, Kingston, & McGinnity, 2012). This represents a substantial cost to the State. In fact, a 2016 DEASP survey of Disability Allowance Recipients found that 50% of participants reported mental health difficulties as the primary reason for being on Disability Allowance (Judge, Rossi, Hardiman, & Oman, 2016).

IPS is the most empirically validated model of vocational rehabilitation for those experiencing severe and enduring mental health difficulties and has been successfully implemented in a wide variety of cultural and clinical populations (Mueser & McGurk, 2014). One of the key principles of the IPS model is to build relationships with employers. However, despite the important role of employers in the IPS model, very little research has been carried out examining employers' experiences and perceptions of IPS-based supported employment (Lexén et al., 2016). The aim of this report is to address this lack of research by examining employers' experiences and views of the IPS-based IEMHS pilot project.

Methodology

This research took a mixed-methods approach, using surveys and interviews of employers. As this was a pilot of the IEMHS project, the available sample of employers was relatively small. For the survey, 40 potential participants were identified and contacted, 29 expressed an interest in taking part, and of those, 15 employers completed the survey. For the interviews, employers could only be approached if they met the following criteria. Firstly, only employers who provided job placements consistent with the IPS model (i.e. paid competitive employment) could be approached for interview. Secondly, to protect the privacy of clients, only employers with whom clients had chosen to disclose their mental health difficulties were eligible. Thirdly, before an employer could be approached, informed consent from the relevant client/employee had to be obtained. 15 employers met these

criteria, each of these employers was approached and nine employers were interviewed. For more information on the methodology and samples used in this report, see section two of the main report.

Findings

Survey Findings

- In the majority of cases, IPS clients were perceived by their employers as productive employees, who, on average, compared favourably with other employees, got on well with their co-workers, and responded well to criticism of their work.
- The most common issues experienced by employers as a result of hiring an IPS client were communication issues, absenteeism, and reduced work capacity. However, the majority of surveyed employers indicated that they had experienced no negative issues, suggesting that the belief that hiring people with mental health difficulties may negatively impact upon employers may be unfounded. In fact, on average, IPS clients were perceived by employers to have had a positive impact on the work environment, whilst common employer concerns, such as increased costs and stress, were only experienced by a small minority.
- Employment was perceived by employers to have been beneficial for IPS clients in a number of ways, including increasing their self-confidence and independence, and improving their skills.
- The support received by both employers and clients was viewed by the majority of employers as sufficient or better, suggesting broad satisfaction.
- The supports deemed most important were an easily contactable and responsive Employment Specialist/liaison and a support team liaison/Employment Specialist that understands the requirements of a company; both related to the Employment Specialists, highlighting the importance of Employment Specialists to this project and the IPS approach in general.
- Employer attitudes towards people with mental health difficulties in the workplace were predominantly positive and broadly in line with previous research (NESF, 2007). However, given that some of the employers would have been aware of the mental health status of the employee, it is possible that these more positive responses could

be due to either informed employers providing socially desirable responses or attitude change based on their experiences of working with/employing someone they know is experiencing mental health difficulties.

- Finally, the majority of surveyed employers indicated that their experience of hiring through the IEMHS project had been positive and that they would not only hire employees through a similar project in the future but also would recommend it to other employers.

Although the findings outlined in this section are encouraging, it is important to note that they are based on a limited sample. Therefore, these conclusions must be read with caution and the findings should be considered in conjunction with the more detailed qualitative findings outlined in the next section.

Interview Findings

Benefits

- Benefits, as reported by employers, fell into two categories: Altruistic/ideological and practical.
- Altruistic/ideological benefits were not tangible in nature. Instead, employers perceived as a benefit the opportunity to help individuals in need. Benefits of this kind were described by employers as performing a social good, aiding the integration for people with mental health difficulties into the labour force and mainstream society, and providing the IPS Client with experience. This in turn gave many employers a 'feel-good factor'.
- Practical benefits, benefits that had a positive practical impact on employers and their businesses, included the opportunity to hire a potentially productive employee at a reduced cost (owing to the wage subsidy), the dedicated support of a local employment specialist, and ease of access to potentially productive labour.
- The majority of employers emphasised that the benefits for IPS clients were greater than the benefits for employers themselves. Perceived benefits for the IPS client, as reported by employers, included the following: increased self-confidence, improved skills and abilities, increased work experience, increased personal and financial independence, a greater motivation to work, and the benefits of an established

structured routine. Many employers also emphasised the social benefits of working as part of a team, noting improvements in social skills and greater social inclusion over time.

- Overall, employers praised the IEMHS pilot project for facilitating greater integration of people with mental health difficulties into the labour force and mainstream society. Some even contrasted the benefits of the project with historical approaches to employment for people with mental health difficulties, noting the detrimental impact of ‘work houses’ and ‘institutionalisation’.

Barriers

Barriers to employers’ participation in the IEMHS project and to the expansion of this project nationally, as reported by employers, included the following:

- A lack of knowledge and awareness among employers about mental health generally, about mental health issues in the workplace, and about specific mental health difficulties and what employers could/should expect when hiring individuals with specific mental health difficulties;
- The negative attitudes of employers towards hiring people with mental health difficulties, e.g. that they are less reliable than other employees or that mental health episodes could result in unpredictable and even violent behaviour; and
- The need for additional resources, specifically time, owing to the perceived need for greater supervision of, and more time spent training/working with, IPS clients to ensure satisfactory work performance. Note that employers did not attribute this need for greater supervision to individuals’ mental health difficulties, but to a lack of skills and work experience due to their long-term unemployment.

Employer Experiences:

Although survey findings relating to employers’ experiences of their participation in the IEMHS project were predominantly positive, employers also reported experiencing several challenges.

- Employers reported experiencing initial work performance related challenges in their IPS employees. These included the need for additional supervision, difficulties

following instruction, slow task performance, low self-confidence resulting in a lack of initiative, poor job-fit, and, to a lesser extent, absenteeism.

- Employers also reported experiencing initial challenges relating to the social interaction between IPS clients, their co-workers, and in some cases, customers of their businesses. In many cases, these challenges manifested as self-imposed social isolation, e.g. not interacting socially with co-workers during work, eating lunch alone, etc.
- It is important to note that these challenges were attributed by the employers to the mental health of the IPS client. The former (work performance related challenges), were attributed to a lack of skills and work experience, while the latter (challenges relating to social interaction) were attributed to a lack of self-confidence owing to a lack of experience interacting with new people, possibly due to living an 'institutionalised' or 'sheltered life'.
- In terms of work performance challenges, employers reported making special workplace accommodations. These included the following:
 - adjusting the role and the responsibilities inherent in a role, to better suit the skills and abilities of IPS clients, therefore resulting in a good 'job-fit' (the extent to which the skills, abilities, and interests of IPS clients were matched with the requirements of the employer and of the position for which they were hired);
 - providing additional supervision; and
 - increasing the amount of support from co-workers.
- They also reported relying on the support of the Employment Specialists to address any work performance issues that arose.
- In terms of challenges relating to social interaction, a minority of employers encouraged staff to eat lunch together regularly as a group, while a majority chose to inform their staff that a person with mental health difficulties would be starting work with them. Although this was a violation of privacy, employers argued that it served to a) 'prepare' staff for the arrival of the IPS client so that they were better able to provide them with support when needed and b) ensure that existing

employees were aware that negative attitudes or behaviour towards the IPS client would not be tolerated.

Support

- In general, employers' perceptions of the support they received as part of the IEMHS project was predominantly positive and satisfaction levels were high. Employment Specialists were perceived as a particularly important source of support for both the employers and the IPS clients. They were described as essential by many employers, with a majority stating that they would not participate in such a project without the dedicated support of a local Employment Specialist.
- There were also aspects of support which were perceived as unsatisfactory by some employers. For example, many interviewed employers indicated that they had received little support in relation to policy, procedures and best practice. A minority described the level of interaction with Employment Specialists as insufficient.
- Employers identified four important aspects of the Employment Specialists' role relating to support:
 - to act as a mediator or communication link between employers and IPS clients;
 - to provide important information to employers, including information on policy, procedures, best-practice guidelines, and legal advice relating to employment law and insurance implications, as well as information specific to the IPS client being hired;
 - to ensure a good 'job-fit'; that is, to ensure that the skills, abilities, and interests of IPS clients were matched with the requirements of the employer and of the position for which they were hired; and
 - to be reliable and easily accessible so that they could provide reassurance to employers should it be needed.

Attitudes

- Employer attitudes were predominantly positive in relation to the following: the concept of supported employment for people with mental health difficulties and

other disabilities; people with mental health difficulties in the workplace; and people with mental health difficulties, generally.

- However, there was also evidence indicating latent negative attitudes towards people with mental health difficulties, which contrasted with the explicit or overtly stated positive attitudes. Some described IPS clients using patronising terms such as ‘child-like’, while others even indicated latent negative attitudes consistent with negative stereotype of people experiencing a mental health difficulty, e.g. that they could be unpredictable and even violent.
- Latent negative attitudes were not evident in every interview and varied in extremity. It was also unclear whether these attitudes were subconscious or whether they were not overtly expressed due to a social desirability bias.

Conclusion

There is an established consensus, both nationally and internationally, stressing the need for an evidence-based approach to improving the employment opportunities and outcomes for, and facilitating the recovery of, people with mental health difficulties. IPS-based supported employment programmes like the IEMHS project provide such an approach, which has been shown to be more effective and cost-effective than alternative vocational rehabilitation approaches. However, despite the important role of employers in the IPS approach, very little research examining employers’ experiences and views of the IPS model has been carried out. This report aimed to address this by examining employers’ views and experiences of the IPS-based IEMHS pilot project.

Among the employers who participated in this study, there was universal support for the concept of supported employment for people with mental health difficulties and employers praised the IEMHS pilot project for facilitating greater integration of people with mental health difficulties into the labour force and mainstream society. Participation in the IEMHS project was seen as beneficial for both the employer and client alike. Although barriers to participation from the employers’ perspective were identified, including a lack of knowledge and awareness, the need for additional resources, and employer attitudes, these barriers were not insurmountable. Similarly, although employers experienced challenges as a result of their participation in the IEMHS pilot project, these challenges were attributed to

clients' lack of experience, rather than their mental health, suggesting that such challenges would likely be overcome with time and experience. Even so, many employers made special workplace accommodations to address these challenges, including providing additional supervision and support, adapting the role and responsibilities of clients, and relying on the support of the local Employment Specialist. Employers' perceptions of the support they received as part of the IEMHS pilot project were predominantly positive.

Taken together, the findings of this report show that employers' views and experiences of the IEMHS pilot project were predominantly positive in nature. These findings, in conjunction with previous research highlighting the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of the IPS model, support the case for trialling the IEMHS on a larger scale in the future. Based on the findings outlined above and in more detail in the main report, several recommendations are made, which, if enacted, may serve to further strengthen the IEMHS project going forward.

Recommendations

Based on the findings outlined above (for a more detailed discussion of the findings, see section 4 of the main report), this report makes the following recommendations:

- As the IEMHS approach is due to be rolled-out nationally on a pilot basis starting in 2018, it is recommended that a detailed evaluation of the national roll-out be carried out at a later date. This should include an examination of the experiences and perceptions of IPS clients and Employment Specialists, as well as employers. Such future research could also compare experiences and outcomes in small, medium and large businesses, and attitude change as a result of participation in the IEMHS approach. This would provide important additional insights and improve the IEMHS approach going forward.
- In keeping with the IPS fidelity scale, it is recommended that IPS clients receive detailed information about the advantages and disadvantages of disclosing their mental health difficulties to their employer, so that they can make a fully informed decision in this regard.

- As noted, some employers disclosed the mental health difficulties of IPS clients to their co-workers in an effort to prepare staff (see section 4.2.3). Although this was done with the best of intentions, it may have represented a violation of IPS clients' rights to privacy. Therefore, it is recommended that employers be made aware that such disclosures are not appropriate without the consent of the individual concerned.
- Poor initial work performance owing to lack of work experience was a challenge experienced by many employers. It is a recommendation that there is a need for more intensive on-the-job support and training by job coaches than may have been provided within the IEMHS project.
- While regularly scheduled meetings between Employment Specialists and employers, and between Employment Specialists and IPS clients, may have occurred for some placements, it is recommended that these are introduced for all placements. This would provide better structure and support for employers and IPS clients alike, it would allow issues to be addressed as they arise and would facilitate ongoing assessment to ensure that both employers and clients are satisfied.
- Reflecting the importance of a good job-fit, it is recommended that Employment Specialists focus more, not only considering the strengths and interests of their clients, but also the requirements of the employer and the role. This would ensure a better job-fit, which is associated with better outcomes and greater satisfaction for both employers and clients alike.
- When Employment Specialists are seeking employers to participate in the IEMHS project, it is recommended that they consider the characteristics and motivations that make employer participation more likely. These include open-mindedness, a strong social conscience, and previous personal experience (either direct or indirect) of mental health difficulties. This may allow Employment Specialists to better target their recruitment efforts.
- It is recommended that an independent feedback mechanism be created, during placements, for employers so that they can alert an oversight body or the

Employment Specialist's supervisor to any difficulties they are having with the support they are receiving.

- Finally, many employers felt under-informed about mental health in general and about mental health issues in the workplace. Given the challenges of disclosure, it is recommended that a universal approach geared towards increasing the knowledge and awareness of mental health issues and how to respond appropriately be provided for all employers.

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