

CONSUMERS SPEAK ABOUT GETTING A JOB

By Lynda Davidson

INTRODUCTION: Listening To People Who've Been There

The job market is extremely competitive for anyone, but being a survivor of mental illness creates even more barriers to obtaining employment in the competitive job market. This article addresses the problem with **resume time gaps and other issues**, and is written for consumers who are trying to obtain competitive employment. The information comes from the author's informal research with consumers who have succeeded in obtaining employment in the competitive job market, as well as from insights the author has gained managing the CMHA's Routes To Work project over the past nine months. Thanks to the support of Canadian Mental Health Association - National Office, and funding from the Human Resources Development Canada Opportunities Fund, this article was made possible.

The comments in italics below are from consumers and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the CMHA National Office. Thank you to all the consumers who took the time to answer my research questions. I feel that your suggestions will help other consumers on the road to employment.

BACKGROUND:

"People with mental illness do want to work and are very capable of employment that requires intelligence and creativity. People with mental illness who work have reduced frequency, duration, and intensity of their symptoms."¹ They also tend to be very dedicated employees.

An Ontario study that looked at performance at work, not just sick days, found that workers with mental health problems, whether alone or in combination with physical illness, were more likely to go to work even if they were not feeling well, and had more days when they had to exert greater effort to function at work.²

In our national research initiatives, we have learned that people who experience serious mental illness can hold responsible jobs and make a significant contribution to their work. However, it is often not the best approach for persons with serious mental illness, a history of chronic unemployment and instability to plunge directly into competitive employment. Individuals who are most successful at finding satisfying work are often those who were supported in viewing their entry or re-entry into the mainstream workforce as a longer-term goal, and not as a one-step process.³

After your battle with mental illness is stabilized, the residue of the illness sometimes tends to linger on in different ways. People can lose confidence and have a lower self-esteem after a mental illness. It may take a while to get your concentration back; feelings

of restlessness; short attention span; being easily distracted and having a hard time remembering verbal directions, can get in the way at first. It takes time to recover sometimes, and every individual is different.

Sometimes the lack of prompt diagnosis delays treatment for mental illness. Time often elapses between the onset and diagnosis of the disease and stabilization of the individual. During this time the consumer may have difficulties, including working at a lower employment level than previously attained, or not being able to hold down employment during this time.

STARTING GRADUALLY:

It is the general opinion of many consumers that taking a part time or short duration job is the best way to get back into the workplace. I received some of the following comments in response to my consumer research.

“I think the small jobs are really good ways to test yourself out in the workforce, before you make a choice to go back out full time.” HD

“I got a low stress job when I first went back to work after my depression. It gave me time to gain back the skills that I had temporarily lost from the illness. When I was stronger I looked for a more challenging position.” DB

“I don’t see what is wrong with taking a job that you are over qualified for to get your foot in the door, and get reestablished in the work environment. It worked for me.” WM

“I volunteered a couple of hours a week, and then a couple of days, and then I volunteered four days. I learned a lot about myself, and this time gave me the direction I should go when looking for a full time job. It also gave me current job experience to list on my resume.” ER

You have fought the battle with mental illness, and now you feel well enough to go back into the work force. It is normal to feel fear and anxiety about returning to work, even if it is only for a few hours a week. Most people cannot do it without support from friends, family, doctor, counseling, or support groups. On your own, it can be stressful, frustrating, and sometimes very discouraging.

TO DISCLOSE OR NOT.....THAT IS THE QUESTION:

Now that you are stabilized, you are beginning to seek a position at or near your previous level of employment, or perhaps a less stressful position. This creates what I call the “resume effect” of mental illness. You are left with one of two choices: (1) admit you have a mental illness for which you have been or are being treated, and deal with the challenges associated with that approach; or (2) try to develop a convincing way to

explain gaps in your employment, lower work performance, or employment at a lower level than is suggested by your qualifications.

The gaps in employment on your resume present questions in the mind of the prospective employer. By law they are not allowed to question you about your health or your personal life.⁴ I have learned from consumers contacted in my research that some employers respect this, but others have asked, “What were you doing during that time?” So the dilemma begins – what to do?

There are no right or wrong answers about disclosing your mental illness; the decision is totally up to you. I have some comments that I received from my research with consumers that may be of help to you. The question asked was “What did you find effective in dealing with your resume time gaps which were caused by periods of mental illness?”

“I did not disclose my mental illness in any of my employment interviews. I personally think people with bipolar or schizophrenia or any mental health diagnosis are clearly misunderstood by the public, and disclosure in the workplace, in most cases, can only mean trouble. If I wanted to become and remain UNEMPLOYED, that would be a strategy I would use: tell prospective employers my mental health history.” LG

“I disclose my mental illness on a need-to-know basis. Otherwise, I am setting myself up for unnecessary prejudice or incorrect impression of my true abilities.” DB

“The job I finally got was where I was the most honest without telling them about my mental illness”. PR

“My employer knows all about my mental illness, and employed me initially through an assistance scheme for the disabled sponsored by government.” KP

“My current employer has gone out their way to learn about my medical condition, and are supportive now that they understand. I disclosed my mental illness after I was hired and my probation period was over, because of the possibility of a recurrence of my mental illness sometime in the future.” YT

“I only tell of my mental illness after I have been a few months on the job and proven my worth.” PA

The decision to disclose your mental illness is a personal decision, and only you can decide what the best way to handle this. Employment Rehabilitation agencies can help you obtain employment and will only disclose the fact that you had mental illness but are fully able to work efficiently. You can search for employment yourself if you have an invisible disability, but it is important to know what you really want and are capable of handling.³

The following guidelines for disclosure are suggested:

- 1) Disclosure of a disability should only be done if it supports your objective of getting a job or performing well at your job.
- 2) Before disclosing assess the potential reaction of an employer to your disclosure.

While looking for work, your goal is to get the interview and then the job offer. Don't lose sight of these goals in your consideration of "if, when and how" to disclose. Whatever your decision, you will be the one to choose the route which is most comfortable to you.⁵

"I sometimes disclose my mental illness. It depends on where I am applying, disclosing this information could be an asset and lead to me getting the job over other candidates. I research the agency to find out how recovery oriented they are, and what their track record is in terms of hiring consumers." BA

HANDLING GAPS IN RESUME:

Below are some suggestions from successfully employed consumers in response to my question of how they handled their resume time gaps.

"I took time off to care for a family member (it's nobody's business that the member was me). MO

"You could say "I took some time off" or "I was recuperating from an illness, but I am better now." TE

"Some government agencies, non profits, charitable or social service organizations are more willing to hire if you are mentally ill than a private company would be. When I applied for my current position, I stated that I was a consumer in my cover letter." RE

"I explained that I had some financial or personal things to take care of at that time, and that I did that and I am ready to return to work. They are not legally allowed to ask for details.⁴ Be brief and confident when explaining that you had to take care of something." BS

"I said that I had been volunteering and finding time to weigh my values. It worked for me." AL

"I told them I was struggling with a number of personal problems. Then I made it clear that the issues have been addressed." BE

“I got around the problem of time gaps by doing a skills/functional based resume – basically your skills, a “Summary of Qualifications” go up top, right under your objective, then your education, and then your work experience. Be sure to include anything that could be counted as volunteer work, etc. that might fill in some time gaps.” LS

“I just said health reasons – it is illegal for an employer to ask for details.” LH

“I stated that I wanted to spend some quality time with my family. I wouldn’t say lie to the prospective employer, just that you don’t have to tell them exactly what you have been doing and why. It’s YOUR business!” MU

“I had so much time off with my illness I had to tell the employer that I took time off due to personal illness, and left it at that. No one asked me for details.” EL

“I was as general as possible about my time gaps, but I didn’t outright lie. It would ruin my integrity!” DM

“I stated that I wanted to spend some time at home (with depression that is always the truth)” HV

“In my current employment interview, I explained that it was a “health problem”- it wasn’t a lie. When they asked me asked the nature of the problem, I explained it was a “endocrine problem”, which would most likely be true.” JA

“Things I said to cover gaps in my employment history? I worked for the government and it is high confidential (technically true since Society Assistance paid me monthly, and I was seeing therapists and skinks for ‘confidential’ work).” CS

“I went into the family business and when asked specific questions, made something up about working in a restaurant. It was true because my family did own one years ago, but it went out of business.” SL

“I said that I was working on some personal goals/development. It’s really none of the employer’s business what the reasons are.” BE

Research done by CMHA National Office has shown that lack of previous work experience, due to mental illness, can also be a barrier to employment. Volunteering is one way of giving yourself some experience on your resume, along with doing some training to develop skills, or being placed in a work trial position by an employment service that helps consumers get back into the work place.³

The National Office of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) believes that access to meaningful fulfilling paid work is a basic human right for every citizen.³ People who have experienced the mental health system should be able to pursue this goal, assisted by whatever supports and accommodations are appropriate.

HELPFUL WEB SITES

http://www.rivier.edu/departments/cardev/an_effective_resume.htm

An Effective Resume – How to do guide.

<http://www.abilityforum.com/accomplishments.htm>

<http://www.abilityforum.com/createRes.htm>

<http://www.abilityforum.com/objectives.htm>

<http://www.abilityforum.com/coverLetter.htm>

<http://www.abilityforum.com/interviewPrep.htm>

<http://www.abilityforum.com/resumeSamples.htm>

<http://www.abilityforum.com/strengths.htm>

Tips for creating your Resume, Career Goals and Self-Assessment, Presenting Yourself and other good articles.

<http://www.mentalhealth.com/book/p43-work.html>

Mental Illness and Work, The Role of Work in Recovery

<http://www.bu.edu/cpr/jobschool/disclosing.htm>

Disclosing Your Disability To An Employer

<http://www.bu.edu/cpr/jobschool/func-temp.htm>

How Does Mental Illness Affect The Way I Function At Work?

<http://www.bu.edu/cpr/jobschool/jobfeedback.html>

Responding To Feedback On The Job

<http://resume.monster.ca/dilemmas/weakness/>

Tips on How to Handle Gaps in Employment

<http://www.aboundingcareers.com>

Tips on Resume, Interviews, Marketing Yourself

<http://monster.ca>

Good Information in the Resume Centre and Interview Centre sections.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ¹ **Danley, Karen S. (1996) Psychiatric Vocational Rehabilitation: Research and Findings on Mental Illness, the Ability to Work and Optimum Recover.**
- ² **Dewa, C.S., Lin E. Chronic Physical Illness, Mental Disorder and Disability in the Workplace (2000)**
- ³ **CMHA National Office ‘Routes To Work’ Project Learnings web article**
- ⁴ **Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms: Section 15**
- ⁵ **CMHA National Office ‘Steps To Employment’ Book**

RESOURCES

Mancuso, L.L. (1990) Reasonable accommodations for workers with psychiatric disabilities

Advocacy, Incorporated – Employment Advice For Persons With Psychiatric Disabilities (April 1997)

M. Kathleen Eilers and Bruce Kamradi -Mental Illness Is Not A Political Issue (July 10, 1999)

The Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, Boston University -Working In Professional And Managerial Jobs

Center for Mental Health Services -Recovering Your Mental Health, A Self-help Guide

Heather McKee, Canadian Mental Health Association National - Office Strategies For Success, A Consumer’s Guide To The Workplace

Alan Cantor (1996) - Worksite News, Western Canada’s Occupational Health & Safety News Magazine, Accommodating Employees With Disabilities

The Canadian Psychiatric Association (1995) – Mental Illness And Work

Ontario Human Rights Commission (November 23/00) - Policy And Guidelines On Disability And The Duty To Accommodate