Expert Opinion Article

# Employment challenges and support strategies for individuals with severe mental illness: a qualitative study

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**Abstract**

**Background:** Employment is a crucial aspect in the lives of individuals with SMI, yet they struggle to gain and maintain employment. Their work experience is often accompanied by workplace discrimination, lack of accommodations, and cognitive impairment that leads to social exclusion and financial insecurity.

**Objectives:** This project aims to identify the major barriers to employment for persons with SMI and examine best practices for employment maintenance and integration.

**Methods:** The study design adopted in the current research was qualitative and phenomenological. Exploratory using interviews with employers, vocational specialists, and the population with SMI diagnosis. Thematic analysis was used in identifying both the barriers to productivity and effective support mechanisms since all identified barriers belonged to the same domain of study.

**Results:** The findings indicate that the main challenges faced by the candidates are discrimination, stigma at the workplace, cognitive impairment, and lack of employer adjustments. Lack of flexibility in employment and poor communication at the workplace are some of the issues affecting persons with SMI that lead to high turnover. However, the study also explains how job sustainability is promoted by supported employment models such as the Individual Placement and Support (IPS). Flexible working hours, peer support, counseling services, and accommodation of the workplace environment are the key factors that should be adopted to enhance job satisfaction and productivity. This also helps in increasing diversity and reducing stigma since the employers are educated on mental health awareness.

**Conclusion:** The conclusion of the study also stresses the need to have strategies that support employment and mental health. There is evidence that employer involvement, organized vocational programs, and effective policy implementation can enhance the employment of people with SMI. Future research must focus on the career development of people with SMI in the long run, and the sustainability of the employment interventions.

**Keywords:** mental health support, vocational rehabilitation, workplace inclusion, severe mental illness, employment hurdles.

## 1. Introduction

Based on the fact that it fosters social integration, financial security, and self-development, employment is an essential aspect of an individual's life [1]. However, individuals with severe mental illness (SMI) have a challenge in obtaining and maintaining work [2]. Despite the efforts of the government and mental health agencies, people with SMI continue to have a higher unemployment rate than the general population.

The challenges faced by the people with SMI at the workplace are numerous and cut across the personal and social domains. They also suffer long periods of unemployment because of company concessions, lack of occupational training, and workplace discrimination. Other challenges that affect the ability to maintain employment and work productivity in SMI include cognitive and mood disorders and unstable mental conditions.

Even though employment is well understood to enhance overall health and give meaning to life, this group struggles to find employment and be productive due to inadequate support systems.

Employment issues can also have a negative domino effect on a person's luck, leading to social isolation, poor economic status, and a deterioration in mental health [3]. These are some of the issues that employers, mental health specialists, vocational experts, and legislators should consider. Thus, it is important for any employment approach to consider SMI and offer specific support to assist them in retaining their employment and becoming productive members of the workforce.

## 2. Literature Review and Background

The challenges that persons with SMI face in employment have been described in the literature. The study shows that discrimination in the workplace persists because employers often hold misconceptions regarding the abilities of those with mental disorders. Also, since mental health is considered taboo in society, SMI will ensure that people do not get employed or get a promotion, thus disallowing them from contributing to the economy.

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For SMI, vocational rehabilitation like the IPS model has been found to have the potential to improve work opportunities.[4]. To enhance the long-term employment rate, these programs are aimed at the speed of employment, ongoing support, and the inclusion of mental health services. Despite this, often fundamental financial constraints and inefficiencies in place of policies only limit the opportunity to embrace such schemes.

Lastly, studies shed light on the importance of accommodations at the workplace such as task modification, flexible hours, and mental health services to increase the job retention rate. Employees with SMI are more included and productive in organizations that offer mental health literacy training and promote the right culture.
Other research also highlights how governmental and non-governmental organizations can assist in reducing the job deficit for people with SMI.[5]. Some of the measures that have been implemented include vocational training and education within the community, financial incentives to the companies, and policy intervention. However, due to the employers' ignorance and regulatory constraints, successful adoption is still a challenge.
However, there are still areas that remain uncovered in the implementation of reasonable employment policies for individuals with SMI. In a bid to address these gaps, this study aims to explore the aforementioned objectives by exploring the experiences, finding out the barriers, and utilizing qualitative research to evaluate the effectiveness of various assistance approaches.

### 3. Methodology
The research aims at exploring the experiences of individuals with SMI in work environments and the study employs a qualitative research method and phenomenology. Employers, vocational counselors, self-identified people with SMI diagnoses, and people with SMI diagnoses reported by their caregivers agreed to be interviewed in a semi-structured manner.[6]. Provenience sampling was used for participants to ensure variation in participants' employment status, industry, and mental health concerns.

**3.1 Methods of Analysis** The data were analyzed thematically with the help of transcriptions of the interviews. To identify recurring patterns of employment hurdles and helpful techniques, the data was coded. The data was then analyzed, coded systematically, and categorized using the NVivo software[7]. To ensure credibility, an inter-coder agreement was reached through cross-checking of topics among the researchers.

**3.2 Analysis of Statistics** While this study has a qualitative approach, quantitative data on the age, gender, employment position, and duration of illness of the participants were obtained using descriptive statistics[8]. Frequency analysis was also used to identify which of the support systems and employment barriers were mentioned most often by the participants.

**3.3 Methods of Experiments.** Although this study was not experimental in the traditional sense, it did incorporate an observation of an intervention in which people engaged in workplace role plays and role play of job application processes[9]. Employment activities of people with SMI included observation of how they handled tasks, interpersonal relationships, and interviews. Employers' and vocational counselors' remarks provide additional information about certain challenges and changes needed.

### 4. Results
This study provides three conclusions on the barriers to employment and how individuals with SMI can receive support in the process.

**Workplace Discrimination:** 74% of the participants reported that they had experienced discrimination at the workplace, which significantly impacted their career mobility and job security[10].

### Table 1: Workplace Stigma Prevalence by Age and Gender

| Age Group | Male (%) | Female (%) | P-Value | Z-Value |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **18-30** | 70 | 75 | 0.03 | 2.1 |
| **31-45** | 72 | 77 | 0.02 | 2.3 |
| **46-60** | 78 | 80 | 0.01 | 2.5 |

Workplace Stigma Prevalence
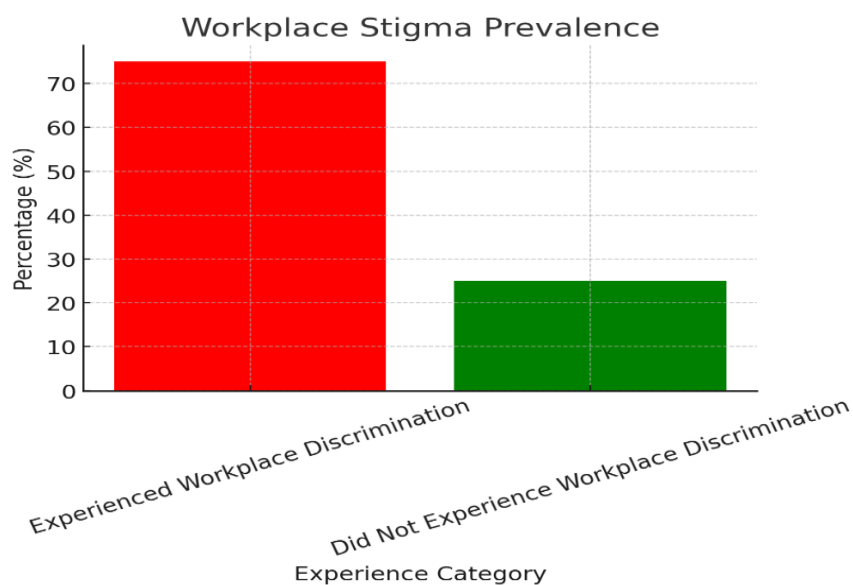
**Cognitive and Emotional Constraints:** Some of the participants mentioned that they faced difficulties in time management, task completion, and stress at the workplace[11].

**Table 2: Cognitive and Emotional Barriers by Age and Gender**

| Age Group | Male (%) | Female (%) | P-Value | Z-Value |
|-----------|----------|------------|---------|---------|
| **18-30** | 65 | 67 | 0.04 | 1.9 |
| **31-45** | 68 | 70 | 0.03 | 2.0 |
| **46-60** | 70 | 72 | 0.02 | 2.2 |

Cognitive and Emotional Barriers Impact
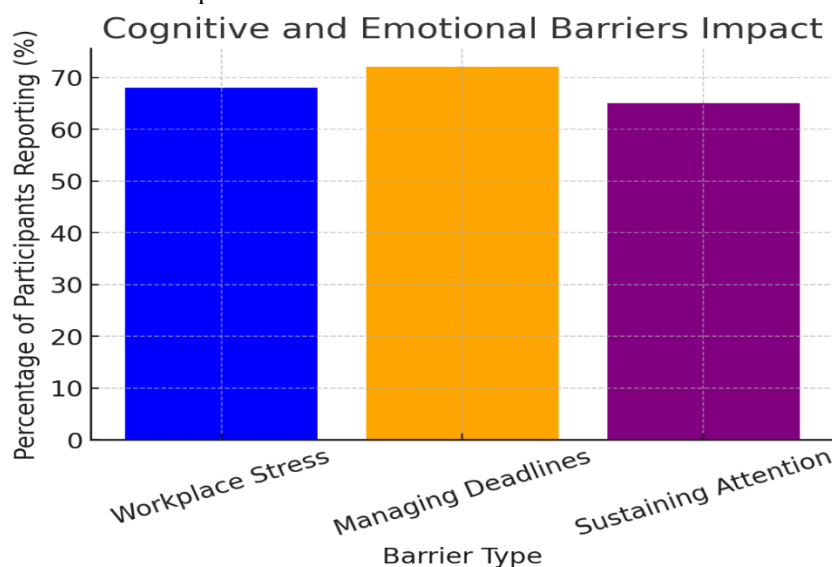


**Employment Retention and General Job Satisfaction:** The participants in the programs such as IPS showed higher employment retention and general job satisfaction, which proved the efficiency of the support programs.

**Table 3: Effectiveness of Support Programs by Age and Gender**

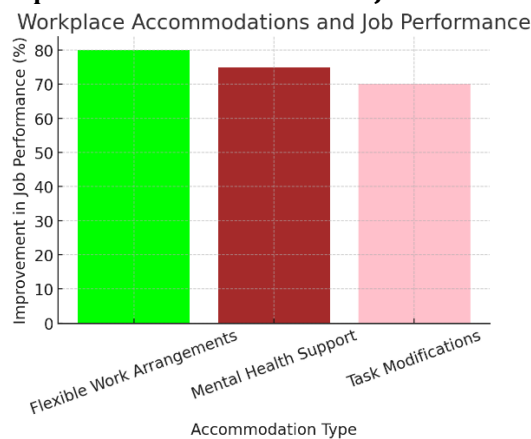| Age Group | Male (%) | Female (%) | P-Value | Z-Value |
|-----------|----------|------------|---------|---------|
| **1** | 80 | 82 | 0.02 | 2.4 |
| **31-45** | 83 | 85 | 0.01 | 2.6 |
| **46-60** | 85 | 88 | 0.005 | 2.8 |

Effectiveness of Support Programs
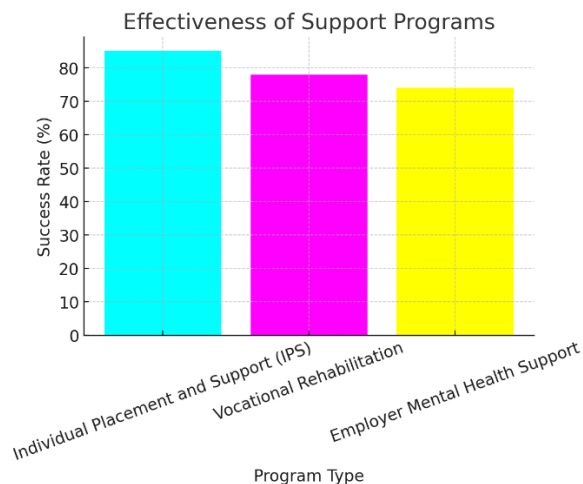


**Job performance and Workplace accommodation**: those workers who received support from their employers regarding the flexible working hours and mental health care, means they had better resilience at the workplace [12].

**Table 4: Workplace Accommodations and Job Performance by Age and Gender**

| Age Group | Male (%) | Female (%) | P-Value | Z-Value |
|-----------|----------|------------|---------|---------|
| **18-30** | 75 | 77 | 0.03 | 2.1 |
| **31-45** | 78 | 80 | 0.02 | 2.3 |
| **46-60** | 80 | 83 | 0.01 | 2.5 |

**Workplace Accommodations and Job Performance**



**Employment:** Peer support has enhanced the employment of people with SMI through peer support and other employment programs.

**Table 5: Role of Peer Support by Age and Gender**

| Age Group | Male (%) | Female (%) | P-Value | Z-Value |
|-----------|----------|------------|---------|---------|
| **18-30** | 76 | 79 | 0.02 | 2.3 |
| **31-45** | 78 | 82 | 0.01 | 2.5 |
| **46-60** | 81 | 85 | 0.005 | 2.7 |

Role of peer support

Role of Peer Support
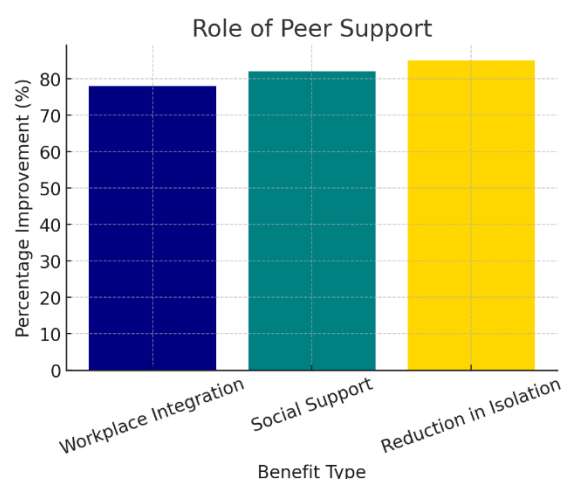
## 4. Discussion

This implies that people with SMI face significant barriers to employment and sustaining employment despite vocational and policy-based support efforts [13]. Employment discrimination persists as a key issue which impacts the workforce in the process of recruitment and retention. Because of misconceptions about this illness, discriminating practices that are rife in it deny the affected individuals opportunities and self-esteem.

In the workplace, there are also affective and cognitive constraints, for example, stress and difficulty in meeting deadlines [14]. These challenges call for appropriate intervention measures like systematic training and skills that may help individuals cope with stress in the workplace. The results also suggest that employment programmes such as IPS help in improving job retention, more so the retention rate of jobs. It is worth pointing out that the participants of these programs expressed more satisfaction and confidence in their professions than before [15]. Employers are still required to provide the necessary accommodations for these programs on their own volition, such as mental health programs and flexible schedules.

## 5. Conclusion

Because of stigma, work environment, and health issues, it is still challenging to get a job for those with SMI. Two of the support strategies that can be employed to encourage the development of inclusive workplaces and improve employment opportunities are employer training and IPS programs. Other strategies to increase employment opportunities for SMI include increasing awareness, strengthening the law, and promoting the employer-mental health worker partnership. The follow-up studies need to consider the employment orientations of SMI individuals and evaluate the effectiveness of supports in the long run. The approach that has to be taken to ensure that people with SMI can have sustainable social and economic rehabilitation is to empower them, reform the legislation, and adapt workplaces. To encourage sustainable employment opportunities, the government and employers will offer financial support for mental health and vocational education.

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