The Employment Market for Young Adults with Serious Mental Health Conditions: Barriers and Solutions

Charles W. Lidz, Ph.D.
Lisa M. Smith, B.A.

February 10, 2015

Acknowledgements

The Transitions RTC aims to improve the supports for youth and young adults, ages 14-30, with serious mental health conditions who are trying to successfully complete their schooling and training and move into rewarding work lives. We are located at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, Worcester, MA, Department of Psychiatry, Center for Mental Health Services Research.
Visit us at:

http://labs.umassmed.edu/transitionsRTC/index.htm

Why are young adults a special case?

- **Supported Employment (SE) developed to provide employment for chronically mentally ill people, often subsequent to long-term state hospital stays**
  - **Expectations were low and any employment was seen as an achievement**
  - **However: typically episodic, part-time, and entry level**
  - **Rarely has this provided a long-term path to recovery.**

Why do we need to develop a different approach for young adults? 1

- **Different job market**
  - **There are fewer entry level jobs**
  - **Relatively lower wages do not compete well with disability benefits.**
  - **Growing difficulties with some supported employment procedures (as we will discuss).**

Why do we need to develop a different approach for young adults? 2

- Different goals
  - Broader acceptance of recovery as a goal both among young people with serious mental health conditions (SMHCs) and professionals
- Greater employment potential
  - No history of long-term unemployment
  - Absence of institutionalization experiences

Questions the Study Addresses

How does the employment market for young adults differ from the employment market for older people with a history of chronic mental health conditions?

What are the barriers to full-time employment in career advancing jobs for young adults?

What are the problems with current supported employment programs that might be improved to facilitate young adult careers?

IPS and Young Adult Careers

The Evidence-based Practice in employment for people with mental illness (MI) is Individual Placement and Support (IPS). Key Features are (will discuss):

1. Open to anyone who wants to work
2. Focus on competitive employment
3. Rapid job search
4. Systematic job development
5. Client preferences guide decisions
6. Individualized long-term supports
7. Integrated with treatment (will touch on this)
8. Benefits counseling included

Methods

Intensive semi-structured interviews with:
- 9 employers who have employed people with MI
- 12 employment specialists
- up to one hour long
- in person/telephone

SOME FINDINGS:

Young Adult Goals

I: *"Do you feel they want careers more? Do they express that they want more of a career than just…"*
P: *"They want something that is meaningful."* **ES11**

"they do think that they can…go on to college. They can get the career. They can live the "normal" life. So yeah, I mean a lot of them do say 'I think right now I can only work at a grocery store but I do want to go to college and I do want to get a career', which is like yay!" **ES10**

Barriers to careers: Stigma

"I'll be honest, I don't necessarily market it as a program that helps people with mental illness. I market it as, okay we're a program that market's people with disabilities with employment. … I say well-they have some cognitive challenges or I'll say mental health challenges." **ES5**

"Instead of phrasing it that I work for somebody with a disability, I say of varying abilities…because if I say disabilities, oh…so you say varying abilities 'cause then it's- there's people like oh well what does that mean? And so I have people who can do everything and everything under the sun and then there's other people who well they might have an injury or you know something like that. You kind of make it sound more normal so that way it doesn't quite sound as negative." **ES10**

Barriers to careers: Stigma

"…start with the real challenge, which is breaking down the stigma … teaching staff…some people tend to be scared of people that have a mental illness. **EMP 06**

"Because there is that stigma--I don't want to hire anybody with a disability. I don't want to hire anyone with a mental illness." "You know, we're not ready to hire people with disabilities. We don't have the infrastructure." **EMP 05**

"…younger people are maybe a bit more shy about disclosing…maybe a stigma or maybe they will feel that's gonna hurt them…[I] emphasize its not gonna to keep them from doing the job…from living their lives..." **EMP 02**

Barriers: Mental Health System Scheduling

"They [clients] do have really full schedules at the [Service], a lot of it is not mandatory but you better be there (laughs) kind of thing. So you start getting into okay IMR is in the middle of Wednesday and the transportation ends at 7 and you know they have DBT group on Thursday and they have therapy once…a week. They have psychiatry once a month. They start really having some availability problems." **ES9**

Barriers: Benefits Counseling

The biggest barrier is the support system… it is such a fear base thing. It is the Department of Mental Health. Parents. It starts in the adolescence. It's docs and therapists and benefits, don't risk your benefits…. They go home and hear what their parents are saying, be careful before you take that you're going to lose your SSI." **ES1**

"The pressure that's being put on young adults by their family, we see therapists, we see social workers, really telling them don't risk your benefits, don't – you're too young to do this or start that. Or you're applying to work at the pizza place, you're gonna lose your benefits, don't work there! Wait 'til you graduate from school." **ES3**

Barriers: Benefit Restrictions

"…we would probably make him full-time [but] due to his restrictions with SSI and…other benefits…he needs to work under a certain number of hours per week." **EMP 08**

"All my peer workers won't work more than a certain number of hours…there're afraid…it's going to affect their benefits, and that's a battle we've always had....A big piece of it is, 'Oh my God, I'm working; they're going to take all my money away,' which isn't true."
I: Do they have goals or career aspirations…moving in to a full-time job?
P: My youngest…worker…she wants to get off benefits. She wants to have full-time job…a degree in school…raise her [child]…EMP 07

SE for Young Adults – Job Development 1

"…that's extremely important with my employment staff, one of their primary things, they spend 70% of their time in the community talking to employers and advocating for the youth that we serve." **ES12 (supervisor)**

I work mostly with individuals helping…them try to find their own jobs." **ES3**

"…in the time I've been here…at least two jobs that people have gotten [was] because of development and that's probably about it. So, and unfortunately, neither of them ended well so there's not like the chance of plugging in another person or building on that." **ES9**

SE for Young Adults – Job Development 2

*"So yeah and sometimes the places where we go, even the management, the turnover is high…*so even every time I go in and meet someone I may have to start over.* ES8*

"Part of the problem is that it's all online and a lot of the kind of discretionary decisions are taken away from managers*…. They could think I'm great and love [our service] and think this is fantastic work but okay, hope they get through the assessment. So, that's a big problem. So that's why* I get apply online over and over and over again*. ES9*

SE for Young Adults – Developing the Employer Relationship

"The businesses are our customers too and I don't want to put someone in a business that's not going to be able to do the job because we want to maintain the relationship with them and give them employees because they need quality employees too. They need people with skills." ES5

"When we bring her someone it has to be the best person if you want the first impression to be the best. Rather than starting off with an oops that one didn't work." ES8

SE for Young Adults – Job type

"Its been challenging to find people work. Like the entry level things are easier and Dunkin Donuts and those things are easier but to find something that's more career oriented or put them on a path that's been challenging." **ES11**

"I don't think even like when they hire people for entry level, I don't think that there's a whole lot of intention for growth… People are kind of stuck in the same dead end job and just being grateful for what they have, which is good, but like the growth is not the same." **ES6**

SE for Young Adults – Job Supports in Interviews

"She presents herself very very well….but…her self-confidence is very very low. One of the things is she wanted me to go on an interview with her…I respected her request and went in with her. And the employer was okay with that and so I'm calling to follow up later with the employer and they basically said they didn't feel that she had the confidence to do this job. And I came back and I said to her... 'I think I actually did you a disservice by coming in on the interview with you.'" **ES5**

SE for Young Adults – Job Supports in Interviews

" But I would say 98% of the time, when they show up for the interview, they have someone with them…I don't want to interview their service….and a lot of the time if they feel more comfortable with that person sitting…with them..that's perfectly fine. But when…my store manager does the interview…you know he's directly speaking to the candidate, not whoever's with him…he still needs to make sure they can communicate with a customer …physically handle the job requirements….they're going to be safe…that they're customers are going to be safe.
EMP 08

SE for Young Adults – Employers and Job Supports

I: *"Do employers ever call you and want to problem solve with you?"*

P: *"Not yet, the closest I've had happen like that was an employer called me to inform me of the job openings that were available. Generally, they don't outreach me."*
ES6

I: *"Have you had a young adult in a job where the employer actually used you as a support person?"*

P: *"Me, personally? No I haven't had an employer…Once someone's working, I've helped the individual but I haven't had the employer like call me and say there's an issue."*
ES8

Strengths of SE- Immediacy

"There's a goal planning, I try not to focus on that right away. Sometimes it can be- 'oh I got to do this first, I thought you were going to help me find a job now you're telling me I got to do a goal plan?'" ES3

"Maybe I have time today, maybe I can clear the afternoon and we can go looks for jobs today… Rather than just talk about it, let's go! You know where you want to apply? That's great let's go there now. Versus, oh well…can you come next week, next week I'll take you, but be a little bit more spontaneous with it, let it happen now." ES3

Weakness of SE- Immediacy

"I'd like to see something developed where people wouldn't feel like they were going into a job blindly. Something kind of educational, maybe involving worksheets, but not being condescending, like something that people can actually learn from?" **ES6**

"(training) It's not part of our model. I'm not sure cause we try to focus on employment but with the economy, I will lead them to a training." **ES8**

Conclusions

Traditional Job development is largely irrelevant career development for youth due to:
- **Online application process**
- **Centralization of hiring policy**
- **The jobs that can be developed are entry level only**

Many young adults want careers, but need more training and education (Supported Education?)

Rapid placement is particularly important for young adults (perhaps in paid internships or education)

Conclusions 2

Social Security Benefits should not be encouraged although preserved for those who need them.

New methods of job development are essential.

Innovative Job Development Strategies:

- **Coordinated efforts by one central job development group to reach higher up in the corporate hierarchy. Buy-in needed from corporate leadership, managers and supervisors.**

- **Collaboration among various mental health services that provided supported employment i.e., shared known job opportunities and one central job development group was able to speak for all of them and contact senior managers among the employers.**