

## STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS: A Consumer's Guide to the Workplace

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### Introduction

***Strategies For Success: A Consumer's Guide to the Workplace*** is a resource developed for the Access to Real Work project of the Canadian Mental Health Association - National office. The project was designed to achieve employment for consumers and learn about people's needs in finding and keeping work.

***Strategies For Success:*** includes two sections; the first on Hints on Employment providing guidelines for new employees and what to expect, and the second on Workplace Accommodations. The information comes from career counsellors and the personal experiences of consumers. Members of Job Quest - a Toronto peer group for consumers interested in returning to work - shared their personal experiences in a focus group. Their quotes are indicated by the use of *italics*.

For consumers starting a new job the rewards and challenges are especially great. My own working experiences were often very stressful. A positive change occurred when I had the opportunity to work with an employer who was willing to make reasonable accommodations, such as flexible work time, so that I could

perform my job. Once my employer accepted my unique needs as reasonable requests, rather than signs of failure, my self-confidence grew and so did my abilities as an employee. Knowing what your employer expects from you is the first step to doing a good job. We use the term 'consumer' to describe someone who has a mental illness and who has used the mental health system. There are different words used when talking about people with mental illness. **Strategies For Success** uses 'consumer' because it is familiar to most people across Canada, not to support or oppose any particular viewpoints about mental illness. This booklet and the Access to Real Work Project have received financial support from the Employability and Social Partnerships Programs, **Human Resources Development Canada.**

## **HINTS ON EMPLOYMENT**

All workers experience the excitement and stress of starting a new job. There are general guidelines on 'workplace etiquette' for new employees. For consumers specifically, acknowledging the stresses of employment and developing effective coping strategies will help make your return to the work-force a rewarding experience for both you and the employer.

### **What to Expect from a New Job**

"Getting hired was just the first step. Proving yourself in those first few months is the next." [Canadian Association of Career Educators and Employers (CACEE), 1995]

### **Your First Day**

- Expect to be Confused

On your first day at your new job everything will be new to you. Your supervisors will introduce you to your co-workers, your duties, the rules of the workplace and work station. You'll be inundated with new information, but don't panic. Supervisors expect you to feel overwhelmed; most of us do in a new situation. As the days progress, the information will sink in and you'll learn the rules. But don't expect to remember everything right away. Helpful suggestions come from consumers with employment experience,

*"Know your best ways of learning. Some people prefer visual, hands-on instructions, rather than written."*

- You Will Have Many Questions

"Learn what you need to know and who can answer your questions. Does your boss want you to first ask your colleagues or go directly to the top person? It often pays to have several questions before interrupting people to ask them. Hint:

Use a small notebook to write down your questions in.” [Career Opportunities News]

“If you do not know an answer or how to complete an assignment, either ask someone or research the answer. There is nothing wrong with admitting that you don’t know something as long as you are willing to find out. In fact it’s important that you make sure that you completely understand assignments. No one minds being asked questions to ensure understanding.” [CACEE, 1995] An atmosphere where asking questions is allowed has been stressed by consumers as being essential. Consumer-run businesses have found that “employees speak of their fear of making mistakes when they first join the business”. [Consumer Survivor Business Council of Ontario/ National Network for Mental Health] One way to overcome this fear is by asking questions.

Asking questions is important but as a new employee you make a good impression when you follow the rule to listen more than you talk. “Listen to what more experienced people have to say before you add your opinion.” [CACEE, 1995]

*“You need to have active listening skills”*

Active listening involves overcoming barriers to communication. Some common barriers are resistance to new ideas, tuning out the familiar or uninteresting topics. There are a number of active listening techniques. Ask open ended questions to clarify the message. You can also re-state and paraphrase what you’ve heard to show that you are paying attention. [Sistering Resources for Front-Line Volunteers]

- Accept a Student Role

This is otherwise known as ‘paying your dues’. As the new kid on the block, your colleagues expect you to be willing to work as team member. Even if you think you have a better way of doing things remember that “very few organizations have room for stars among their new recruits. In most organizations, it is through being an effective team member that you will make the largest contribution.” [CACEE, 1995] “Be prepared to do things not in your job description. [YWCA, 1995] Give yourself time to grow into your position.

- Communicating with your Employer

The relationship with your supervisor is key to your success. Clear communication will ensure that you know what is expected of you. “You should review the priorities and the top three . . . things that have to be done in the first 6 to 12 months.” [Richard W. Van Doren, Ed.D.]

- Plan Now for Your Next Job

After all the hard work it has taken you to achieve your current position the last thing you may want to think about is future job searching. In today's economy, however, the only constant is change and being prepared is essential. You can do this by keeping your resume up to date. "You should maintain a list of your accomplishments and achievements as you go about your daily routine." [Richard W. Van Doren, Ed.D.] Not only will this prepare you for future positions but it will also make you feel good about your daily successes.

- Other Hints

- \* Know your route to work. Allow extra traveling time for traffic, getting lost, etc.
- \* Dress appropriately for your workplace. 'Appropriate' depends on your specific work site. Better to be a bit overdressed on the first day and then follow the lead of your supervisor and co-workers.
- \* Be 5-10 minutes early for your first day and punctual the other days.
- \* Know break times and respect the time limits.

## What Employers Expect from New Employees

Your new employer has done much work to hire you. They had to advertise for help, sort through resumes, interview candidates and then come to the decision that you are the person they want. Now they want to know that they have made the right decision. Knowing what employers expect of a new employee will help you meet their needs. The key is knowing that your employer "regardless of the industry, has a bottom line. That bottom line may be profit, it may be service excellence, it may be increasing market share, it may be expanding internationally or it may be all of the above. The point is that, quite separate from you, it has a goal. **Your role is to meet or exceed that goal.**"

[CACEE, 1995]

Some ways to meet that goal,

- Dependability, including completing assigned tasks, being on time, knowing and following workplace procedures
- Initiative, working with a minimum of supervision, taking on new tasks when necessary
- Social Skills, ability to get along with people, "from 75-84% of fired employees are fired due to an inability to get along with people" [YWCA, 1995]

- Boundaries, keeping your personal life separate from you professional, not letting personal problems impact upon your work

## **Coping with Stress**

Starting a new job is a stressful experience for most people. For consumers, who often identify stress as an issue, the experience of being a new employee may be particularly difficult. At the same time, the reality is that “any person without work and sufficient financial resources undergoes greater stress and difficulties maintaining self-esteem and an identity in our culture than people who are gainfully employed.” [Frado, 1993]

Coping with stress means developing effective strategies. One important strategy is developing a support network. These are people who you can call upon to advise you, listen to your concerns, and encourage you to be your best. A support network can consist of many different people,

- family, friends
- mental health professionals
- self-help peer groups
- career counsellors - you may have contact with counsellors through your university or college, or the local school board may run a career centre
- your employer and co-workers can provide professional support

*Consumers describe the ‘importance of feeling you are not alone in the process, not the first or only person to feel these stresses. ’*

In your past working experience you may have found, like many others, that the first few weeks are the most difficult period. Learning new routines and meeting new people puts everyone under stress. If you can draw upon your support network especially at this time it may make the difference that allows you to stay with your new job.

The next section on assessing your need for work-place accommodations will help you to deal with concerns you may have about the impact of mental health on work.

## **SELF ASSESSMENT FOR WORKPLACE ACCOMMODATIONS**

Workplace accommodations are “**any modification of the workplace, or in workplace procedures, that makes it possible for a person with special needs to do the job.**”[Frado, 1993] Consumers may need specific changes to the working environment to allow us to do our jobs effectively. How do you go about developing workplace accommodations for yourself?

## Know Yourself

Knowing yourself is a personal process of learning about the type of environment in which you work best. We can develop 'negative' coping habits to deal with the stress of employment. Examples of negative habits include quitting because we assume we're no good even without feedback from our supervisors, or performing inadequately because we underestimate our talents.

To develop 'positive' responses to our needs we have to evaluate what works for us. Thinking on your past work, volunteer, social or educational experiences, what were the conditions under which you performed your best? In your 'dream' job what are the working conditions?

- Do you work alone or with others?
- Do you prefer creative detailed work?
- How many hours a day would you want to work?
- What times of day are better for you?

You may want to explore your personal interests and needs with a career counsellor or mental health professional to give you a clearer idea of what works best for you. No matter how you approach the task of self-assessment, knowing yourself is the first step to having a successful work life.

Once you have a good idea of your own strengths, abilities and needs you may decide that, at the moment, you do not need special changes to the workplace environment. If, however, you do have need for accommodations, then the first step is to disclose your psychiatric disability to an employer. We discuss the issue of disclosure in a later section.

## Know Your Rights

Apart from government legislation on the human rights of people with disabilities, consumers need to believe for themselves that they are valuable employees who deserve the right to negotiate with employers for accommodations. We may hold the belief that requesting accommodations is asking for 'special treatment'. We may be concerned that we are not really equal to the task. Accommodations are **not** about lowering standards or expecting less from consumers. Changes to the work environment are a legal right that allows all employees to be their best, using their talents to the fullest. Such changes level the playing field so that your psychiatric disability does not act as a barrier to employment.

*When negotiating accommodations "it comes down to how I feel about myself". It can be difficult to "speak up for myself" but in the end "you have to come first. "*

## Know Your Employer

Accommodations are ultimately up to the employer to implement. Most employers will have no prior experience in making accommodations for people with psychiatric disabilities. Even if they are open-minded they may be unsure of their responsibilities to employees with mental illness or how to explain the situation to other employees.

As an employee you can make the situation less stressful by being informed of the different options that are available. Let your employer know that they may already be making similar kinds of accommodations for parents of young children, or employees with sick or elderly relatives. Know what accommodations you need, know your rights and help the employer take the necessary steps. Act as a resource for information. You can refer employers and work colleagues to **CMHA's Diversity Works: Accommodations in the Workplace for People with Mental Illness**. In many provinces, the Ministry of Labour can act as a resource. Use the knowledge of the individuals in your support network.

## Know Your Accommodations

Many consumers are currently working under less than perfect working conditions. They do not know they have the right to request accommodations or even know how accommodations could help them work better with less stress. The example often given of a workplace accommodation is a ramp for an employee who uses a wheelchair. Accommodations for consumers are of a different nature. They can include such things as,

- flexible work hours, for example, starting later in the morning and ending later
- a work station modified to allow more privacy for someone who has difficulty with concentration
- a job coach for someone who needs social support at work
- see **Diversity Works** for more ideas

*"Flex time was allowed for health and family reasons so long as the work was done. "*

## Disclosure

The basis for an employer making workplace accommodations is your disclosure of your psychiatric disability. In disclosing, you need to discuss a personal issue - your mental health - in a professional manner. You do not have to go into great detail or give a specific diagnosis. *Focus on how the disability impacts upon your ability to do the job and what positive steps can be taken to accommodate your needs.* You may want to practice with a friend or someone from your support network how you will disclose.

Once you've made the decision to disclose the next step is the timing and method. Melanie Astaire Witt provides nine different ways for you to disclose (see below). You will base your decision on the specifics of your own situation.

Ask yourself the following, *Does disclosure of my disability at this time and in this way support my objective of getting hired?* [ Witt, 1992 ]

<b>Method of Disclosure</b>	<b>Use When...</b>
<b>Third-party referral</b>	someone else can 'sell' you to the employer
<b>Resume</b>	Employer will see it as a positive (e.g., if you're applying to an organization that works with people with disabilities)
<b>Cover Letter</b>	It helps meet specific job responsibilities
<b>Employer call for an interview</b>	Generally, for people with visual disabilities who want to avoid awkwardness during the interview
<b>Your call to disclose</b>	Again generally for people with visible disabilities
<b>Application</b>	Asked a direct 'job performance limitation' question that you must answer Yes and you have already disclosed in your paperwork; if you haven't already disclosed, <i>write Will discuss</i>
<b>Interview - the moment of meeting</b>	For people with visible disabilities
<b>Interview – pre-offer</b>	You have an invisible disability that may affect a job-related function or require accommodation
<b>Interview – post-offer, pre-acceptance</b>	You have an invisible disability that will not affect any job-related function nor require any accommodation; may choose not to disclose all

From Melanie Astaire Witt, Job Strategies for People with Disabilities, Princeton: Peterson's Guides, 1992, p141.

## Summary

This booklet contains a number of hints for employees starting a new job. Here is a summary of these strategies.

- Expect to be confused on your first day.
- Learn what you need to know and who can answer your questions.
- Develop "Active Listening" skills to clarify then messages you receive.
- Accept a student role.
- Communicate clearly with your employer.
- Plan now for your next job.
- Know your route to work.
- Dress appropriately for your workplace.
- Be **5-10** minutes early for the first day and punctual the other days.
- Know break times and respect the time limits. Be dependable.
- Take the initiative.
- Work on getting along with fellow employees. Keep your personal life separate from your working life.
- Develop a support network outside the workplace.
- Identify the types of workplace accommodations you require.
- Know your rights.
- Learn the different kinds of accommodations offered in your place of work. If you decide to disclose your disability to your employer, focus on positive steps that can be taken to accommodate your needs.

## CONCLUSION

This brief introduction to employer expectations and workplace accommodations is designed to be quickly and readily accessible to you during the first days and weeks of a new job. Having this information can hopefully make your work experience more enjoyable and productive for both you and your employer. Good Luck!

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