

# Workplace Accommodations that Work for Persons with Mental Illness

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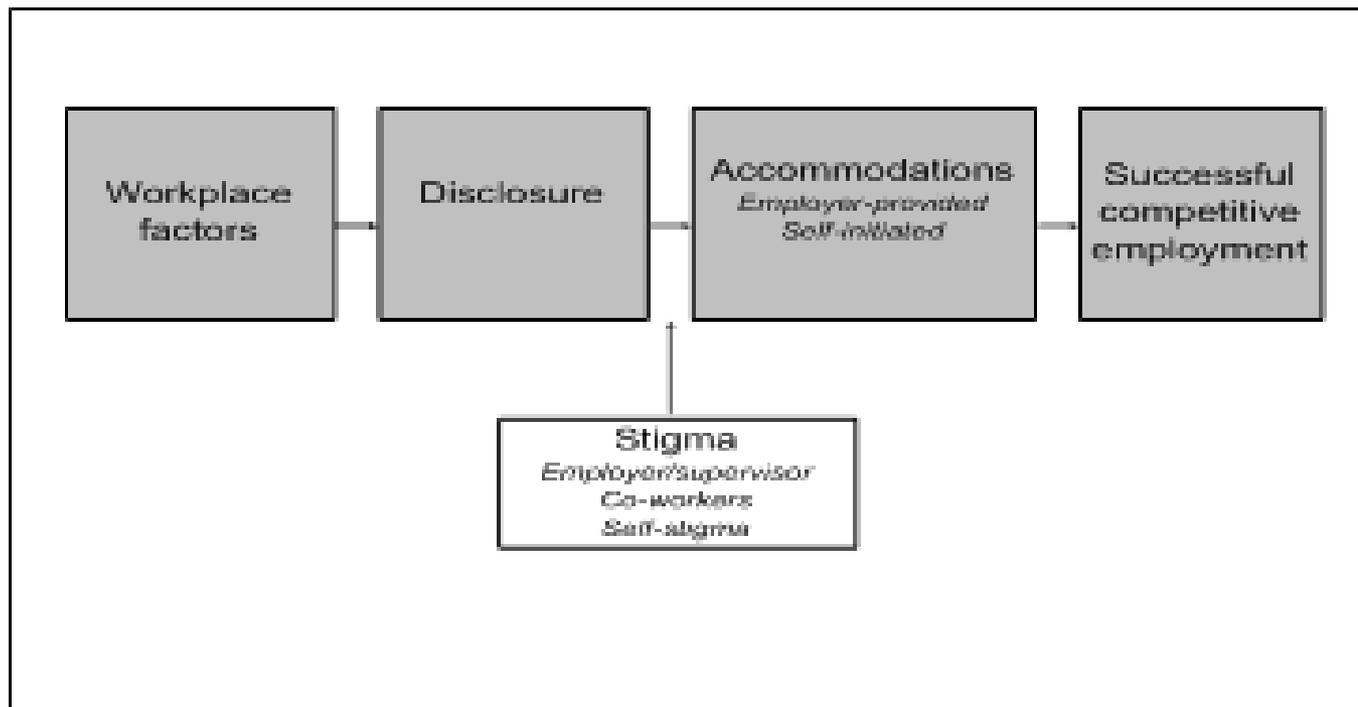
## Introduction

- **Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)**
  - requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations to workers with mental disorders provided they can perform essential functions of the job
  - employers have no obligation to accommodate unless the worker discloses a disability and makes a request
- **The ADA does not specify**
  - what constitutes reasonable accommodations for workers with mental disorders
  - how much such accommodations can reasonably disrupt the workplace
  - how such accommodations can be implemented without generating stigma against the disabled worker

## Purpose

- To explore real-world experiences of workers and employers in accommodating workers with serious mental illness in competitive jobs
- **Serious Mental Illness (SMI)**
  - Psychotic disorders, bipolar disorder, dissociative disorder
  - Anxiety disorders, OCD, PTSD, panic disorder
  - Major depression
- **Competitive Jobs**
  - Pay at least minimum wage
  - Are not set aside for persons with disabilities
  - Do not have ongoing support from a mental health professional

## Model of SMI and Competitive Employment



## Research Questions

- What is the typical process for disclosing a mental disorder in the competitive workplace?
- What types of accommodations are effective for workers with mental disorders?
- What are the direct and indirect costs of accommodations?

## Study Design

- Data come from a study of SMI and work disability, conducted in 2002-2003, that collected qualitative data from key stakeholders
- Data collected through
  - Face-to-face individual interviews with consumers, employers
  - Focus groups with case workers
- Interviews were open-ended, semi-structured
  - 20 persons with serious mental illness who have worked or are working in competitive jobs “employees”
  - 10 managers who have directly supervised persons with serious mental illness in competitive jobs “employers”

## Study Design

- **Employees**
  - 15 with affective disorders, 2 with anxiety disorders, 3 with psychotic disorders
  - 25% with a college degree
  - 80% employed at time of interview
- **Employers**
  - Asked to recall experiences supervising a particular employee with SMI
  - Most described supervising employees with affective disorders or psychotic disorders

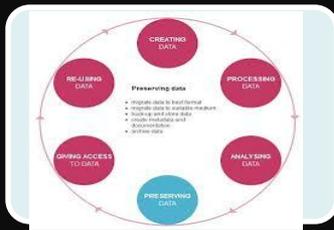
## Occupational Distribution

- Bookkeeper, fuel station attendant, physician, radio journalist, teacher, secretary, manager, vice-president, customer service clerk, sales representative, food service worker, city planner



## Data Analysis

### Data reduction



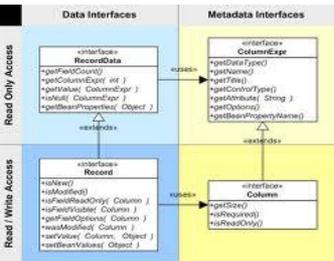
- Code responses into six domains: individual, illness, workplace, human capital, family & community, stigma

### Data display



- Identify key themes in each domain: disclosure & accommodations appeared in the workplace domain, disclosure also appeared in the stigma domain, costs appeared predominantly in the employer interviews

### Conclusion drawing and verification



- Many workers with SMI initiate job accommodations themselves.
- Many say they do not need or want accommodations, even though they may be receiving what we would call accommodations.

## Results - Disclosure

- **Employee perspective**

- Vast majority of employee respondents report they neither receive nor request job accommodations because “no one at the workplace knows” about their mental illness
- The predominant reason for choosing not to disclose is fear of what will happen, or what others will think
  - Co-workers may reject them
  - Medical history may be exposed
  - May be labeled with negative stereotypes of mental illness

“I must be doing something right because everybody thinks I am just like them, so I like it like that “

## Results - Disclosure

- **Employee perspective**
  - A hierarchy of internal stigma appears with affective disorders more acceptable than psychotic disorders
  - One way to conceal a diagnosis while explaining symptoms is to admit to a less stigmatized condition
    - “I am depressed” (rather than schizophrenic)
    - “I take anti depressants “ (rather than antipsychotics)

“I admit I have a disability but I just say “it’s something physical.”

## Results - Disclosure

- **Employer perspective**
  - Overwhelmingly, employers say they learned of their employee's mental disorder in a period of crisis.
  - As if the symptoms of the illness and their impact on work performance manifested in an observable disability

“It was hard for him to stay focused. And when he was focused he was off the Richter scale. He would just be pounding away back there typing, typing, typing, and inputting opinion and that kind of thing. When you produce one of our reports, it's basically an investigation to gather the facts and that's it. We don't want your opinion.”

## Results - Accommodations

- **Employee perspective**

- When asked if they receive accommodations, most employees said no.
- We had to probe to discover if they were in fact being accommodated

“I am one of their best workers, so if I need something they try and help me get it.”

“I don’t want any accommodations. I like it just like it is. I am just like everybody else so they don’t have to make accommodations for me.”

## Results - Accommodations

- **Employee perspective**

- Refusal to disclose a mental disorder does not preclude the possibility of receiving accommodations - our respondents report many types of employee-initiated accommodations
- The key to employee-initiated accommodations is having a job with *flexibility*

“When I was working with the DD population and my illness was affecting me at work, I would take them out. We would go to a movie, or go bowling or something. I kind of just redirected my attention.”

“When it gets really busy and there are a lot of sounds I can’t discern what I ought to be listening to or not listening to. I just hear it all. So I go out and walk around the building.”

## Results - Accommodations

- **Employer perspective**

Supervisors need to "take time for a worker with mental illness"

- **Relationship accommodations** are mentioned frequently by our respondents, and the relationship of primary importance appears to be between the worker and supervisor
- Some employers said they had to shift their expectations to accommodate the cyclic nature of a mental disorder

"I got used to the fact that once or twice a year she would just not show up for work for a few days. Then I knew she had a relapse and would be gone for weeks so I hired a temp until she returned."

## Results - Costs

- **Employer perspective**

- The indirect costs associated with providing job accommodations for workers with mental disorders can be substantial

- **Supervisory time:**

- More detailed explanations
- More frequent praise
- Re-doing work;
- Taking over job duties
- Working extra hours
- Managing tensions in the work group

“He asked to come into work an hour later and stay an hour later because it was hard for him to get going in the morning. I approved the change but it meant I had to stay an hour later too, because there has to be a supervisor whenever an employee is working.”

## Results - Costs

- **Employer perspective**

- Job accommodations provided to a worker with SMI can look like ‘special treatment’ to other workers, causing productivity losses
  - Effects on **co-workers**
    - Resent having to do extra work or change work hours
    - Question extended absences
    - Lower morale
- Problem is exacerbated because supervisors cannot reveal why the worker with SMI is being treated differently

Other employees, who don't understand, wonder why this employee is getting away with everything or being allowed to complain and end up with a nice work schedule."

"Some people have been wondering about where is he and why isn't he here. I think their response would have been better if I had been allowed to let them know what the problem was."

## Key Findings – Employee Perspective

- **Disclosure**
  - The primary barrier to disclosing a mental illness at work is fear of stigma and discrimination.
    - Some workers also view disclosure as demeaning, or admitting a weakness.
  - But disclosure may reduce stigma if it helps co-workers understand the need for accommodation.
- **Accommodations**
  - Many job accommodations for workers with SMI are self-initiated, with or without knowledge of their supervisor.
  - A key factor enabling accommodations is flexibility
    - Job demands, supervisor, co-workers

## Key Findings – Employer Perspective

- **Accommodations**
  - Some of the most common job accommodations for workers with SMI involve relationships – with supervisors and/or co-workers
- **Costs**
  - Job accommodations for workers with mental disorders may have very little direct cost
  - But still have indirect costs in terms of reduced productivity

## Limitations

- Results are not generalizable to larger populations
  - Non-random, self-selected samples
  - Selection biases
    - Employers with above-average interest in accommodating persons with mental illness in the workplace
- Cannot conduct hypothesis tests
  - Small samples
  - Questions not standardized

## Next steps

- Survey of workers with SMI who are or have been employed in competitive jobs after their diagnosis
  - Ask about job and workplace characteristics, human capital, support systems, illness and treatment, experiences of stigma
- Survey of managers who have directly supervised a worker with SMI
  - Ask about job and workplace characteristics , disclosure, accommodations
- ‘Piggy-back’ screening method
  - 208 worker interviews completed

## Reference

Baldwin, Marjorie L. and Rebecca M. B. White. "Workplace Accommodations that Work for Persons with Mental Illness." In *Perspectives on Disability and Accommodation*. Edited by Kelly Williams-Whitt and Daphne G. Taras, pp. 115-131. Victoria, BC: National Institute of Disability Management and Research, 2010.