Case Study: Schizophrenia and Work: Martin’s Story

Martin had been out of work for several years following a prolonged psychotic episode which began when he was studying at university. He desperately wanted to get into work but found that employers treated his prolonged absence “on the sick” with suspicion. He thought that if he could do a period of work experience that would show prospective employers that he was capable of working again but he was afraid that if he did it might affect his benefits.

So Martin made an appointment to see the Disability Employment Advisor at the Jobcentre to discuss his plans. She was understanding and helpful and explained that a work placement would not affect his benefits as long as it was done as part of the Jobcentre’s own scheme. She also told him that the scheme would pay his travel-to work expenses while he was on the placement.

Job-searching

Next Martin researched local employers using the internet and the local press, looking for companies that might have vacancies in the sort of clerical and administrative work he thought he could do. Then he called the companies by ‘phone and speaking to the person on the switchboard checked that he had the correct postal address for them and asked the name of the person in charge of recruiting. It is vital to be able to write to a named person rather than just the Human Resources Manager.

Martin had already spent a lot of time on his CV so now he compiled a covering letter to go with it. It took him about a month to work up his CV and covering letter using books that he got from the local library. He also managed to get advice from a local back-to-work scheme recommended by the Disability Employment Advisor at the Jobcentre. Martin knew that it was essential that his letter and CV had the maximum impact.

Martin sent his CV and letter off to six employers and then waited about a week before calling them up on the ‘phone. He asked to speak to the person he had written to but if the person on the switchboard asked the reason for his call he simply said that he was calling to follow up a letter he had written.

After approaching about 20 employers in this way he finally found one who said there could be an opening for work experience in a couple of months time. So over the next three months Martin kept in touch with the company by ‘phone once a month just to let them know that he was still keen on coming to work for them.

The interview

Finally the company asked him in for an interview. Before going to the interview Martin prepared really well in advance by researching the company well and trying to anticipate the sorts of questions he would be asked. He also went to the local library and took out some books on interview techniques and managed to get on a one day course on interview skills that the Jobcentre had told him about. This included a mock interview which he found particularly useful.

The day of the interview arrived and Martin was very nervous but he was up early and washed and dressed. To be sure of being on time he left an hour early and checked out the location of the office. Then he went to Starbucks for a coffee while he waited. This gave him an opportunity to flick through his notes and prepare on some of the answers he had been working on. He made sure that he was punctual and well groomed and did his best to present himself well at the interview.

Despite being really well prepared walking through the front door of the office was one of the hardest things that he had done for years. But the receptionist was polite and could not have been more helpful.
She made him feel welcome and even offered him a coffee (which he declined).

The Human Resources Manager who interviewed Martin was very professional but quickly put him at his ease. He asked questions about his education at school, his hobbies and pastimes and his qualifications and then came the bit that Martin had been dreading when the HR Manager asked him why he had dropped out of college. Martin explained that he had had a breakdown caused by too much stress while he was at college. He went on to explain that although it was a bad breakdown it was behind him now and that with the help of his family and friends and his doctor he had been able to make a really strong recovery. He also explained that in some ways the experience had made him a stronger person and that he had matured as a result of it.

As the end of the interview approached Martin was sure that he had flunked it but the interviewer told him that he had been successful and asked him to start on Monday. Martin was delighted to be offered a period of three months unpaid work experience during which he would work for two days a week at their local office doing clerical and administrative work.

Martin was walking on air when he left the office. All his hard work had been worth it.

The next day Martin called the Disability Employment Advisor at the local Jobcentre to tell them about the offer and see how his benefits would be affected. She confirmed that his benefits wouldn’t be affected as long as he only worked for 16 hours a week.

The placement

For the next three months Martin worked hard at his placement. He made sure that he got all the basics right: being punctual and well groomed every day. At work he was helpful and got on well with the other workers. Although he was very shy at first he soon learned the importance of making small talk with his colleagues and building good working relationships.

As the end of his placement approached Martin wondered if he would be offered a permanent position. He asked the HR Manager about this but sadly he was told that there were no permanent vacancies at that time so when the end of his placement came Martin had mixed feelings. On the one hand he was disappointed that the work experience had not turned into a permanent job but on the other hand he had had three months experience in the workplace and had something to put on his CV to demonstrate to other employers that he could work. And most importantly he had that all important reference from a well respected local employer.

But that isn’t quite the end of the story. Martin continued searching for a job without success for another six months but continued to keep in touch with the HR Manager he had worked for during his work experience. One day he saw in the local press that they were advertising for a clerical assistant so he called them and explained that he was still jobsearching and would be available for this position. The HR Manager was very pleased to hear from him and said that he would call him back. The next day Martin got a call asking him to go in for an interview straight away and was offered the job.

Martin called the Jobcentre Plus helpline and found out what benefits he would be entitled to while he was working and was pleased to find out that he would be better off in work.

Martin has now been employed in his new job for two years and is delighted to be living an independent lifestyle free of the benefits culture he was in before. It has had its difficulties though. For instance Martin found that his illness had left him emotionally very sensitive and that he found it difficult to cope if his work was criticised. But he knew that this was something he had to learn to live with and gradually he managed to learn new social skills that helped him to cope better and at the same time helped him in
Martin has enjoyed the structure that the new job has brought to his life. He enjoys the work and the social contact that the job entails. He has made new friends and above all his self-esteem has grown vastly. Now when people ask him what he does for a living he no longer has to say that he is unemployed.

Some Key Points from Martin’s Story:

- Research the local job market really well
- Before writing to a firm call to check the postal address.
- Find out the name of the person in charge of recruitment. Writing to a named person makes sure your letter gets read.
- You can’t spend enough time preparing your CV and cover letter. Get as much help as you can from books, the library etc.
- When making follow up calls avoid Mondays and Fridays as these are busy days for people in business. Similarly don’t call too early in the morning or after 3.30 pm and don’t call around lunchtime.
- When making follow up calls be prepared for few false starts but use these to develop your technique. Treat the first half a dozen calls as practice calls.
- Don’t pester firms with too frequent follow up calls. Once every three weeks is about right.
- Be prepared for disappointment and don’t feel let down by it.
- Before going for an interview research the firm really well. Google and Google News and the local press are useful sources.
- At the interview make sure you get the basics right. Be punctual, clean and well groomed.
- It is perfectly normal to be nervous at an interview. Try to minimise the nerves by making sure you have planned and prepared well and getting a good night’s sleep beforehand.
- At the interview you may be asked about your illness. Be honest but there is no need to disclose your diagnosis at this stage unless you are asked directly: a broad brush explanation such as “a breakdown” is sufficient.