

# Schizophrenia and Work: Holding Down a Job

## **Holding Down a Job.**

People who are living with schizophrenia and have a fairly good level of functioning will fare better if they are in work than when they are living “on the sick”.<sup>2</sup> However work can also have challenges of its own and particularly if you have not worked for a long time or at all there will be a whole new set of skills to learn if you are to be successful at work. Remember these skills are not difficult they are just new.

Every job has its own challenges and needs different skills. For instance some may require you to have great attention to detail whereas others may need a broader view of the subject and a more spontaneous response. However there are some human skills that are needed in all jobs where you will be working alongside others.

It is important to realise that when you go to work at an office, factory or construction site you will become part of their community and you will need to make an effort to fit in. This may not come naturally at first especially if you have not worked before so below you will find some information about skills that you may need to work on when you start work.

## **Before You Start Working**



Voluntary work and work experience are both excellent preparation for going into a paid job  
(Image: Tom Gowanlock/Shutterstock)

If you have been out of work for a long time or perhaps have never worked it is a good idea for you to get some experience of the workplace before you take the plunge and try to get into paid work. This can be done by taking voluntary work with a charity or community group or by doing a period of work experience with an employer. In fact both can be very helpful. Voluntary work will give you that all important contact with other people who do not have mental health problems and teach vital human skills in communicating with them and getting along with them. Work experience will also give you this experience but will also teach you about some of the basic skills that you need to do well in a paid job.

## **Be Positive**

You will find that in some workplace cultures there is a great deal of gossip and moaning about the job, the firm, the boss, work colleagues etc. Don't be drawn into this culture simply to try to fit in. It is much better to stay out of those sorts of conversations and to maintain a positive attitude to the organisation even if inside you are actually quite dissatisfied.

Particularly when talking about colleagues, adopt the attitude that if you can't say something positive it is better not to say anything at all about them. After all it won't do your employment prospects much good if some nasty remark you made about your line manager were to get back to them through an indiscreet colleague.

### **Be Polite**

You may not be a morning type of person but you must always start the day with a smile and a cheery good morning to everyone you meet at work even people you don't know. Similarly, please and thank you are extremely important words whether in face-to-face conversations or emails. You can't use them enough.

No matter how much you may swear when you are with your friends don't swear at work. Obscene or profane (religious) swearing can really upset some people. Even if you are working in a culture where swearing is commonplace such as a construction site it is better not to swear yourself. Similarly be very careful about telling jokes until you have a bit more experience of the people you are working with and can be sure that they won't cause offence.

Try to learn the art of small talk. When you are standing in the queue at the photocopier or at the water cooler it is always good to be able to talk to the other people around you even if they are not people that you are working with closely. Try talking about the weather or ask them if they are busy or any other non-controversial subject.

When meeting someone new first impressions count. Make good eye contact, smile, offer them your hand and say "pleased to meet you". If appropriate try to make some small talk. "Have you worked here long?" or "Are you busy these days?" are good neutral subjects that will demonstrate that you are taking a genuine interest in them and their work.

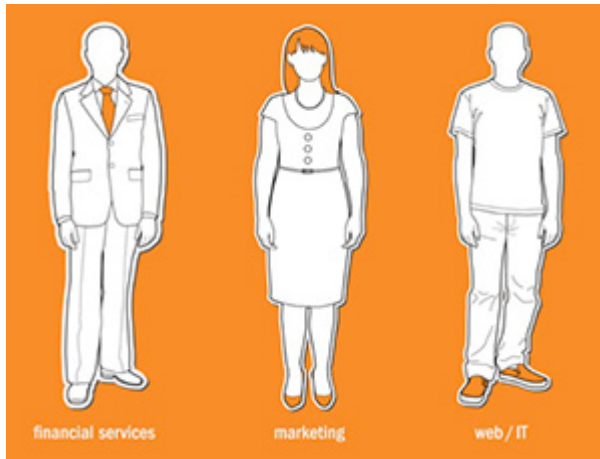
There are useful books on etiquette which can give advice on the best ways to dress and behave with other people.

### **History**

When you start work at a new place you will be asked a lot of questions about yourself by your new colleagues. They are not prying: this is perfectly natural: they are simply being curious. In particular you will be asked where you have been working and what you have been doing and if you have been a long time out of the workplace this may be a difficult question to answer. You might like to tell them about voluntary work you have been doing, or any courses that you have been studying. It is vital to anticipate these sorts of questions and to have answers prepared. If you appear evasive or unwilling to tell people about what you have been doing they may become very suspicious.

However, you should be wary about telling people about your illness until you have had a chance to get to know them. (See our advice sheet about disclosure for more advice on telling people about your schizophrenia).

### **Dress for the Job**



Be careful about what you wear to work. Many businesses have a dress code (Image: Solla/Shutterstock)

Before starting your new job it is a good idea to call the manager you will be working with and find out what the dress code for the workplace is. Different workplaces have different dress codes. For instance if you are working in a shop they may well ask you to wear a suit or smart casual clothes whereas if you are working in a factory they may ask that you have overalls.

Some workplaces have very specific requirements for instance construction sites will require you to have steel toe capped boots, a high visibility vest and a hard hat. If you need this sort of protective clothing check whether your new employer will be providing it or if you need to provide it yourself.

It is a good idea to make this call at several weeks before you start work as it may take you a while to get any new clothes you need. See our information sheet on sources of help for job-searching if you need financial help with this aspect.

Pay attention to grooming and personal hygiene and leave yourself enough time in the morning to get ready. Turning up for work looking (and smelling) as if you have just crawled out of bed will not earn you any respect.

### **Prepare for Being the “New Boy”**

When you go to work in a new work place where there is already an established team of workers you will for a while be very much the “new boy” and will be seen by your colleagues as an outsider. Don’t be surprised if you find that at first they are stand-offish with you. This is very natural. People are tribal and will often close ranks against an outsider. In some organisations which have very tight cliques this culture can prevent you from becoming fully accepted for several months or longer.

However, don’t despair. Eventually they will accept you as one of their own and often you will find that workplace cliques that are the hardest to get into can often be the most supportive in the long run

### **Don’t Be Afraid to Ask Questions**

Your first couple of months in a new job will be a very steep leaning curve. Some employers are very good at providing their new employees with thorough induction procedures to help them get used to their new workplace but alas other employers are really very poor at this aspect. If you are uncertain about how to do something don’t be afraid to ask your colleagues or your boss. It is better to risk annoying them than to try to do the job anyway and risk making a complete hash of it.

## **Develop a Thick Skin**

For people who are recovering from schizophrenia after a long period of ill health this is one area that is very difficult. An episode of schizophrenia inevitably leaves you very sensitive emotionally and often it is quite difficult to cope with the emotional rough and tumble of life.

No matter how hard you work and how much you try to fit in you will find that there will be some people who for their own reasons will dislike you. This is natural: sometimes the chemistry is just not right. For this reason it is important to develop a thick skin emotionally. If you find that some people at work don't get on with you just learn to roll with it. Very often you will find that people who don't get on with you at first are the people you become quite close to over time and you will eventually be able to count them among your close friends.

In addition it is important to realise that we all have good times and bad times and if someone is short with you or snaps at you it may simply be that they are having a bad day and may be under pressure themselves from their boss or that they are having problems at home.

## **Learn to Accept Praise and Criticism**

Earning a bit of praise from your boss for a job that you have done well will help your self-esteem but it is important to acknowledge that praise by thanking him. Similarly if your boss or a colleague criticises your work don't get upset. After all when you are new to the job they do know best and getting feedback from them is all part of your learning curve. In this case try to acknowledge what they have said for instance by saying "I see so it would be better to ....."

## **Manage Your Time**

One of the biggest shocks of going to work after a long absence from working is being able to fit in all of the things that you used to do before. For instance chores like housework and shopping will now need to be fitted into evenings and weekends rather than done during the week. If you are living at home it may be a good idea to discuss this with your family and negotiate some distribution of the work. If you are living on your own then you will need to re-organise your time to suit the new demands on your time. Try to anticipate this before starting work so that it isn't too much of a shock.

Similarly make sure that you organise getting to work well. Leave plenty of time for travelling and make sure that you get a good meal at lunch time.

To make best use of your time you should make a list of what you need to do during the day the night before. But beware of making lists that are so long they are unrealistic and you won't have any chance of completing them.

## **Be Well Organised**

At work try to plan your day and keep a diary to help you remember future meetings etc. Keep your workplace tidy and well organised. Get into the habit of washing up your own cups and keep the kitchen area, if you have one, clean tidy. Use a note book and Post-It notes to help you remember things. Try to spend the last 20 minutes of your day writing your to-do list for the next day and tidying up any loose ends.

## **Punctuality**

Being punctual is a vital skill. If you get a reputation for lateness you will find it very difficult to live down

and it may well threaten your future employment. Always plan your journeys well and allow extra time for unforeseen delays. Aim to get into work ten minutes early in the morning and to leave ten minutes after your official end of work. Similarly don't allow meal breaks to drag on for longer than the allotted time.

You may find that some of your colleagues are not very punctual or do take long meal breaks. Don't make the mistake of thinking that because they can get away with it that you can. As the new boy you need to play very much by the rules.

### **Learn to Manage Your Stress**

If you haven't been in work for a long time then getting a job will inevitably be a challenging and sometimes stressful experience. However the advantages of working will soon become apparent. Nevertheless it is important to learn to manage the stress that the job will entail.

- Allow yourself plenty of time in the evenings to unwind
- Make sure you get to bed early enough and get enough sleep
- Allow time at the weekend for rest and relaxation
- Consider seeing a counsellor about once a month to help with any emotional issues that arise from work
- Beware of working too much overtime
- Don't skip lunch breaks
- Organise your time well
- If you do feel under pressure don't resort to alcohol: it will make things worse
- Consider discussing anti-anxiety medication with your doctor if you think it would help
- Monitor your mental health and don't let stress build up to the point that it would threaten a relapse of your psychosis
- If you feel that you can't cope see your doctor or Community Psychiatric Nurse

Try to spend a short time (say 15 minutes) at the end of each day reflecting on how things have gone during the day. Ask yourself what went well and what not so well. In particular ask if there were any areas that you feel that you need more experience or further training on that may need to be discussed with your line manager.

### **Be Prepared for Conflict**

In any environment where human beings interact there will sometimes be conflict and the workplace is no different. There will be times when you will have disagreements with the people that you work with and sometimes these disagreements may develop into arguments. Sometimes you just have to admit defeat and at others you may feel that you need to stand your ground. This is a difficult subject and there are no easy answers.

At first, if you feel a conflict developing, it may be best just to roll with it and not to put up too much resistance. But as you gain experience in the workplace and develop confidence in your abilities you may feel better able to stand your corner.

If you feel that you need to be able to handle these situations better then it may be useful to try some training in assertiveness skills.

### **References**

1. This article is based on the author's personal experiences.
2. Bevan S et al, February 2013, Working with Schizophrenia: Pathways to Employment, Recovery and

Inclusion, The Work Foundation.

### **Further Reading**

1. How to be a Gentleman, John Bridges, Thomas Nelson.
2. The Business of Assertiveness, Rennie Fritchie and Maggie Melling, BBC.
3. Assertiveness at Work, Ken Back and Kate Back, McGraw Hill