

Schizophrenia and work: What kind of work can I do?

What Sort of Work Can People With Schizophrenia Do?

After you have experienced a period of schizophrenia, particularly a prolonged one, it is often difficult to get into work. One of the biggest hurdles facing people in this position is knowing where to start. Many people who have suffered from schizophrenia have little or no experience of work and do not know what sort of work they can do. Answering the question "What sort of work could I do?" is the starting point on your journey back into the mainstream.

For people who have worked before it is not such a huge issue as they have a better perception of their strengths and skills in the workplace. However it may be that you don't feel able to go back to your old job or perhaps you have never worked. In both cases it may be really difficult to know what sort of work you could manage or better still work that you could do really well at.

In general people who have worked before their schizophrenic illness began will find it easier to find a job and will find it easier to cope with work than those who have never worked.²

You may not be able to develop a clear idea of what sort of job best suits you until you have spent a lot of time job-searching or even tried some work experience but it is a good idea to have some ideas before you begin your job-search and this involves taking a long hard look at your personal qualities.

If you have never worked before it may be quite difficult to envisage different types of work. Similarly if you have worked before but don't feel that you want to return to your old trade then you will need to think hard about other things you could do. Fortunately it needn't be just a shot in the dark. There are ways of trying out jobs before you commit to paid employment. Work experience is one very good way and voluntary work for a charity is another.



If you are physically fit and enjoy the outdoors work in a park or on a farm may be for you. (Image: Shutterstock)

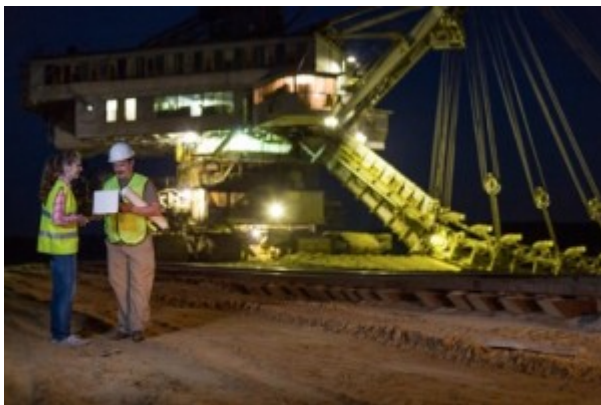
Your personal qualities

But before you get to that stage it is a good idea to take an in depth look at your own personal qualities such as your strengths, your weaknesses and your abilities to get an idea of what sort of work would suit you. For instance if you have an eye for detail and are good at managing your own finances then you may do well in financial administration, say working for an accountant or an insurance company. Are you physically fit and enjoy the outdoors then a job looking after a park or in farming might be good for you?

At this stage it is a good idea to start to put your thoughts down on paper. Make two lists: what you are good at and what you enjoy doing then look to see if there are any overlapping areas between your lists. Don't just rely on your own thoughts and ideas, ask people close to you what they think you are good at as well.

How your schizophrenia will affect you at work

However it is also important to be realistic about how your schizophrenia will affect your ambitions to work so alongside your first two lists write another list of ways in which your condition will affect your working life. Some of these will be quite obvious. For instance if your body clock has been affected and you like to stay up all night and sleep during the day then a job on a night shift might suit you. Or maybe you find it difficult to get up in the morning in which case a part time or shift work job that allows you to start later may be best.



People with schizophrenia who have difficulty with their body clocks often find work on a night shift to be the answer. (Image: Shutterstock)

Many people who have suffered from schizophrenia find that they are not able to do as much as they used to and need to spend more time relaxing and re-charging their batteries. In this case it is better to look for a job that does not require very much overtime working or needs the worker to achieve set targets. Jobs with flexi-time working are also useful as they help you to cope with those "bad days" when you need to be able to start a bit later than normal or leave a bit earlier from work.

Remember that job satisfaction is very important. It is important not to be over-ambitious but to choose a job that you can expect to do quite well in so that you can get a sense of fulfilment and achievement from your day's work. A job in which you are constantly struggling to keep up will not give you any job satisfaction and will only add to your stress levels.

Your previous work experience and qualifications

Finally draw up a list of your educational and vocational qualifications and any previous experience in work that you have. You should include here any experience you have gained from voluntary work, studying or from hobbies and pastimes. For instance if you are a keen gardener in your spare time then that may be an important skill for you when you come to look for work.

Other factors

You should also ask if there are any external factors that will affect you. For instance how far will you be able to travel to work or do you have any family commitments such as children that will affect the picture?

Getting an idea of what sort of work you can do

At this point you should start to build up a picture of what sort of work will suit you. Just to recap, here's what you need to know about yourself:

1. What sort of things do you enjoy doing?
2. What sort of things are you good at?
3. How will your illness limit your ambitions?
4. What previous experience in work do you have?
5. What qualifications do you have?
6. External factors such as travel to work and family commitments?

By drawing these factors together you should now be able to draw some definite conclusions about the sorts of work that will suit you.

Try to be as realistic as possible. We would all like to have glamorous careers as celebrities and earn bucketfuls of cash but the reality for most people is a modest job doing something they are good at and enjoy, and bringing home enough money to provide a comfortable existence for them and their family.



Vocational training courses in areas like construction and engineering are available in most areas. (Image: Shutterstock)

Improving your prospects for getting into work

You have now completed the first step to finding out what sort of work you could do. The next step is to ask if any of your existing abilities could be improved to make you better suited to getting the sort job that you would like. For instance if you have poor literacy or numeracy skills then that would be a serious drawback and something that you will need to work hard on.

If you want to move into a particular area of work, you may be able to find vocational training courses in your area available at a reduced rate or free for people on benefits. To find these courses you will need to ask at the Jobcentre or local library or search on the web. If you can't find a free course then you may be able to get help with your fees from a charity.



A first aid at work course like those run by the Red Cross and St John's Ambulance will be valued by most employers (Photo: Andrey_Popov on Shutterstock)

Some courses are good to have in any job: first aid at work or computer skills for instance are always valued by employers. Have a look at our information sheet on sources of help for job-searching for more information.

At this point it is important to say something about computers. Like them or loathe them, computers are an important part of modern life. You will have a better chance of finding a paying job if you have good computer skills, so if you are not very computer literate at the moment, a course in IT skills would be a good place to start your job-searching process.

Remember that today's job market is very competitive and you will be up against other candidates who may have good qualifications so any way that you can enhance your qualifications now will pay dividends in the long run.

What sort of jobs are available?



The reference library is a great source of advice and information about the local jobs market. (Image: Shutterstock)

The next step is to try to marry up what you now know about your own aptitude for work with knowledge of the sorts of jobs that are available in the local area. This means researching the local job market. There are a number of sources that you can use for this such as the Jobcentre Plus website (<https://www.gov.uk/jobsearch>), on line job boards such as Totaljobs.com (<http://www.totaljobs.com/>) or CV library (<http://www.cv-library.co.uk/>) or by visiting the local library and looking in the local press.

The aim of your research at this stage should be to get a general impression of the sorts of job openings that are available in your area rather than to look for specific vacancies although if you do spot something that looks up your street then don't pass up the opportunity; apply for it. For instance if there are a lot of service industries then there may be good openings for administrators whereas in a more rural area there may be more farming jobs available.

Conclusion

For most people living with schizophrenia, getting into work after a long period on sickness benefits is one of the biggest challenges they will face. It isn't easy. So it is absolutely vital to understand your own particular aptitude for work by looking at your personal qualities and researching the job market before you start your job-searching. The old saying "Know thyself" is nowhere more important than when starting out on a new career.

References

1. This information sheet is based on the author's personal experiences.
2. Fuller Torrey E, 2001, Surviving Schizophrenia, Quill, P264.

Further Reading

1. Ultimate Job Search, Lynn Williams, Kogan Page