

Schizophrenia and work: Work experience

Using Work Experience to Help Find a Job

How can work experience help people with schizophrenia?

For many people their experience of schizophrenia begins in late teens or early twenties just as they are starting out on their career or while they are at college. Some may make a prompt recovery and get back in the saddle quite quickly but others may be off work for several years. When the time comes to think about getting back into work they find that they are out of touch with the needs of employers or that their occupation has moved on and they are no longer qualified to do the job they once did. So getting back into work can be one of the biggest challenges that a person living with schizophrenia will face during their recovery.

When starting to look for work you could be forgiven for thinking that a diagnosis of schizophrenia is the biggest obstacle that you face. Of course a diagnosis of this kind is an obstacle, but it is not necessarily insurmountable. Nowadays awareness of disability is greater than it used to be and there is legislation that requires employers to not discriminate against people with disabilities such as schizophrenia when they are recruiting.

However one obstacle that is difficult to overcome and which many people living with schizophrenia face is a long absence from the workplace. When recruiting, most employers tend to view any period of unemployment longer than a few months with great suspicion. In addition if you have been out of work for a long time you may have lost important skills like the ability to organise your time effectively and these are skills that you will need if you are to be successful in a job.

Another problem is that technology is constantly moving ahead and a long period out of work may lead to you falling behind with important skills such as computer literacy.

For this reason it is important to keep any period out of work as brief as possible and as soon as you are able, get back into some sort of useful occupation such as study or voluntary work so that you have something to show on your CV.

However if you have had a prolonged spell out of work and you want to find a job now you will be faced with the problem of how you can convince a prospective employer that you can cope with their job vacancy. And one answer to that is to undertake a period of work experience sometimes called a placement.

What does work experience involve?

Work experience entails going to work for an employer for a period of between a few weeks to a few months to try out working. The work can be part time or full time. You will usually not be paid for your time but there are schemes run by the Jobcentre which enable you to keep receiving your benefits while you are on the placement.

Of course there is no guarantee of a job at the end of your placement but many work experience periods often do turn into a job opportunity as employers would rather take on someone that they have experience of working with and who they know is hard working rather than recruit someone that they don't know.



A large number of employers offer people the chance to get experience of working as a part of their job search (Image: mangostock/Shutterstock)

When you start on a placement you will go into work at the employer's premises either on a full time or part time basis. You will be expected to keep to fixed starting and finishing times and to take your meal breaks at agreed times with the other staff. Whilst there you will be expected to carry out work tasks but you will be given instruction in how to do them. You will be able to try out the kind of work you would like to do but will also have the opportunity of seeing at first hand what other people's jobs involve.

What are the benefits of work experience?

A period of work experience will give you very valuable advantages when you start to look for a permanent job:

- It will help you to learn new skills related to the kind of work you are looking for.
- It will give you the chance to try out particular kinds of jobs before you commit to a paid job.
- It will help you to learn basic job skills such as punctuality and reliability.
- It will give you the chance to impress your employer with your qualities such as enthusiasm and hard work and demonstrates to employers that you are committed.
- It will give you a "foot in the door" with the employer.
- It will give you that all-important reference that you can offer to other prospective employers when job-searching.

How to find a work experience placement

In looking for a placement you will need to do most of the spadework yourself i.e. finding a suitable employer and approaching them. Don't rely on the Jobcentre to do it for you. However it is important to speak to the Jobcentre first before you start approaching employers so that you don't end up breaking any of the rules around entitlement to benefits.



If you are looking for work experience talk to the staff at your local Jobcentre first (Photo: 1000 Words on Shutterstock)

A good first step is to make an appointment to see the Disability Employment Advisor at the Jobcentre and to discuss your ideas about getting a placement with her. She will be able to tell you about any schemes that are running in your area and how you can undertake work experience without it affecting your benefits. She will also be able to tell you if any other help is available such as help with travel-to-work expenses.

There are basically four steps to finding a work experience placement:

1. Speak to your Jobcentre advisor and tell them about your plans.
2. Decide what sort of work you would like to try out and that you would be suited to.
3. Research the local job market for suitable employers then find out who you need to approach in the organisation.
4. Approach a selection of employers and then keep in touch with them until they have made a decision about you.

It is best to try for placements which will give you some experience in the field of work that you are ultimately trying to get into. For instance if you want to go into retail then try one of the large retail chains such as Tesco or Sainsbury first. You may also like to put employers that you know are recruiting locally at the top of your list as getting a foot in the door with them will put you at an advantage when you apply for a paid post later on.

It is also a good idea to choose large employers or small ones who are well known in the local area, as a reference from them will count for more than from an employer who is not well known. If you are currently studying it would be a good idea to link your work experience with the field of study that you are doing.

Are any special skills needed to find a placement?

You may find, especially if you have been out of work for a long time, that your job-searching skills will need to be improved. Researching the job market, writing a good CV, writing your applications for work experience are all skills that have to be learnt again after a long period out of work. Of course some skills can be self-taught by getting books from Amazon or from your local library but there are also schemes that can help you improve these skills. Your Jobcentre may be able to introduce you to some of these schemes but you may be able to find others on the internet or by asking at your local library. (See our information sheet on sources of help for job-searching for more help).

The internet is a good place to start looking for work experience opportunities. Just Google work experience and see what comes up. All large employers such as the Civil Service, local councils, the NHS, the military and blue light services and major retail chains offer opportunities for work experience.

What will happen during the placement?

Before you start, think about practical questions like how you are going to get there, what you will wear and what time to arrive. Look at our information sheet on holding down a job for more information about this aspect. If you join a large organisation expect to be given a formal induction procedure on your first day which should cover basic health and safety issues and company procedures as well as introducing you to the existing staff. Smaller organisations may not do this.

Initially you may find that you are asked to do fairly menial tasks such as making the tea or stuffing envelopes but don't worry about this: it is quite normal for employers to give new employees fairly basic tasks in their first few days in the job. After a while you should find that you are being given more challenging activities and that you are getting genuine experience in the industry.

Work experience placements tend to last no more than a few months and may be only a few weeks. You should not be asked to work any overtime during your placement although do expect to work the hours that industry works as normal. For instance if you are working in retail expect to be asked to work at weekends and bank holidays.

On the last day of your placement it is good to leave on a high note, so bring in a cake and make a point of thanking everyone you have worked with for their help.

What to expect from your employer

You can expect a period of work experience to be slightly challenging. It should teach you new skills and activities and so take you just outside of your comfort zone. It should also teach you about basic work-related disciplines such as punctuality and reliability that you will need when you get a paid job.

However it is important that you are not simply thrown in at the deep end and expected to swim. The employer should be prepared to manage your placement by spending time with you to give you instruction in the tasks you are being asked to do. The placement should also give you the opportunity to see what various other roles within the organisation involve.

You will probably not be given a written contract of employment for your period of work experience, however as far as the basic employment legislation is concerned such as health and safety, equal opportunities and data protection you are regarded as an employee and have the same rights as paid employees.

What can go wrong?

Finally a word of warning. Most employers will be welcoming and will give you as much help as they can during your placement. However not all employers are good employers and you may find that the people you are working with on your placement are not very welcoming and helpful or that they may see you as a source of cheap labour and simply use you to do menial tasks around the office without having any intention of giving you the experience that you need. Sometimes it happens: human nature is sometimes unpredictable. If this does happen to you, don't lose hope. Finish your placement and move on. Find another placement as soon as you can and try again.

Conclusion

Getting back into the workplace is one of the biggest challenges faced by people living with schizophrenia but work experience is an extremely useful tool in the job seeker's toolkit and provides an invaluable stepping stone between long term unemployment and a career. Remember: you can never have too much work experience

References

1. This information sheet is based on the author's personal experiences.

Further Reading

1. National Careers Service website has lots of useful information including how work experience will affect

benefits.:

<https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/advice/getajob/workexperience/Pages/faq.aspx>

2. All About Careers is aimed at 16-24 year olds but has useful information for anyone looking for work experience:

<http://www.allaboutcareers.com/careers-advice/work-experience/why-is-work-experience-important>