

IMPACT OF EMPLOYMENT: A FOCUS GROUP

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INTRODUCTION

Hlutverkasetur is a community rehabilitation and activity centre located in Reykjavik, Iceland. Hlutverkasetur provides services and programming to individuals with a history of mental health difficulties, those who have recently immigrated to Iceland, and those searching for purposeful employment. In the summer of 2015, Hlutverkasetur sponsored the development and facilitation of a focus group. A focus group is a method of qualitative study that aims to capture several perspectives regarding a specific content area. Participants in this focus group were requested to provide answers to several predetermined questions regarding their experience of employment. The aim of this focus group was to explore how the lives of the participants have been impacted by their employment, and how accessing services at Hlutverkasetur affected their employment search and maintenance. The focus group was held at Hlutverkasetur and was facilitated by two Canadian occupational therapy students from the University of Alberta, Jacklyn Robertson and Kirsten Dembicki. Additionally, follow-up interviews were conducted with the participants to gather demographic information and any further perspectives or opinions pertaining to their experience of employment and the services at Hlutverkasetur. The findings of this focus group will be used to improve current program provision and inform future program and service development at Hlutverkasetur.

BACKGROUND

Hlutverkasetur's rehabilitation and activity programming has been successfully operating since 2007. Hlutverkasetur provides programming and service provision that address a variety of common concerns for individuals with mental illness such as social isolation, poverty of productive and leisure activity, and unemployment. Individuals who access services at Hlutverkasetur have been recently discharged from another rehabilitation program, are beginning their participation in a more structured rehabilitation program, or are just looking for a community drop-in centre. Hlutverkasetur provides a safe environment for individuals to socialize and engage in activities. Additionally, Hlutverkasetur offers the opportunity for individuals to begin to develop a routine and that can prepare them for safe and independent living, participation in a more structured rehabilitation program or re-entry into the work force.

The specialized vocational rehabilitation program project at Hlutverkasetur underwent research in 2010, and was fully developed and operating in 2013. At this time, Hlutverkasetur staff guide individuals through the development of personal and employment skills that prepare them for re-entry into the workforce. Additionally, individuals are supported in their employment search as well as provided with resources and support for employment maintenance. Individuals are not often discharged from the vocational rehabilitation program at Hlutverkasetur; rather they develop the confidence and skills to work independently.

The norm for society is employment, and often individuals who are not employed foster feelings of uselessness and inadequacy. The benefits of employment have been identified through research (Morin, 2004). Employment can have positive impacts on many aspects of life including economic, social, and health benefits. Stable employment aides in the obtainment of adequate economic resources. Those who have stable employment are better able to support themselves and participant in meaningful activities. Employment also provides the opportunity to develop relationships, discover a sense of belonging, and increase social contact. Employment allows for independence and the realization of one's own potential, termed self-actualization. Employment propels feelings of self-esteem and confidence and creates the opportunity to engage in purposeful activity with the community. With increases in economic resources and social activity, and the discovery of one's own potential stable employment can improve mental and physical health, as well as overall well-being (Morin, 2004).

PARTICIPANTS

Seven participants attended the focus group. One participant was unable to attend the focus group. This participant was interviewed individually using the same questions used during the focus group. Eight participants attended a follow up interview including the one participant who was not able to attend the focus group and was presented with the focus group questions at a later date. All participants signed a consent form, and verbal consent was confirmed at the beginning of the focus group.

The participants consisted of three males and five females. The age of participants ranged from 33 to 53. The majority of the participants described an employment history that consisted of many different jobs that were held for short periods of time. The education history of the participants ranged vastly from not completing high school to completing a University level bachelor. At the time of the focus group every participant was employed, however the years of employment differed. The years of steady employment ranged from seven months to 14 years with the mean number of months being 21.8. The percentage that the participants

worked in a day also differed, and ranged from 30 percent to 92.5 percent. The types of employment included dry cleaning, community support worker, greenhouse worker, cook, interviewer, and sewing teacher and various jobs at Hlutverkasetur. All but one participant had accessed services at Hlutverkasetur before they were employed. The participants had been attending Hlutverkasetur for a mean of 2.6 years. The majority of the participants initially accessed services at Hlutverkasetur for socialization and activity and it was not until later that they sought employment through the employment rehabilitation program. The participants were evenly distributed between those who are currently accessing services at Hlutverkasetur and those who have stopped. A variety of mental illness diagnoses existed among the participants including manic depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, personality disorder, bipolar II, paranoid schizophrenia, drug induced mental illness, depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

METHODOLOGY

A focus group was held at Hlutverkasetur on July 22, 2015. Kirsten facilitated the interview in English and Jacklyn acted as an observer and note taker. Both Kirsten and Jacklyn are occupational therapy students from the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Both students were engaged in analyzing and synthesizing the collected data and the composition of the written report. The participants were selected using convenience sampling. They were chosen from a group of individuals who were employed at the time of the focus group. The selected participants were emailed a recruitment letter that outlined the purpose of the focus group as well as provided details including time and location. The participants were requested to confirm their participation a few days prior to the commencement of the focus group. The focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes with one 20-minute break at the 60-minute mark. The focus group was audio recorded to ensure accurate transcription of the participants' contributions to the discussion. Follow-up interviews were conducted with the participants in the week following the focus group. The follow-up interviews lasted approximately 15 to 30 minutes depending on the participant. Six themes emerged during the focus group pertaining to the impact of employment on the participants' lives. Additionally, participants spoke of how Hlutverkasetur affected their employment search and maintenance.

FINDINGS

The six themes in respect to impact of employment included: autonomy and self-determination, socialization, sense of purpose and meaning, growth in self-esteem and confidence, increased anxiety, and deprivation of leisure and other productive activity.

Autonomy and self-determination

Feelings of increased autonomy and self-determination were expressed by a few of the participants, however all the participants agreed that their employment increased their independence. For some of the participants feelings of autonomy and self-determination pertained specifically to their employment environment, as Participant 4 stated: *“Sometimes I talk to people, sometimes I don’t. I like that I have a choice.”* Other participants expressed feelings of autonomy and self-determination in different aspects of their lives, mainly in respect to the increasing economic resources associated with employment. As the participants acquired more economic resources they increased their control over their own decision-making. For one participant this meant having the ability to improve their diet and nutrition, as Participant 4 stated: *“I was just eating oatmeal and noodles before.”* Other participants stated that they were better able to engage in leisure activities with increased economic resources.

Socialization

Employment increased the amount of social contact experienced by most of the participants. Participant 4 explained her social behaviours before she was employed: *“I had no interaction with people before... I had [no] social life.”* Later Participant 4 stated that socialization at work “[makes] life really fun.” The employment environment provided not only increased social contact, it provided the opportunity to develop relationships. Participant 5 explained that they had developed friendships at work. *“Also make good friends there. You are really right if you have been there for some amount of time. We know each other inside and out, we talk about everything, maybe not everything but a lot of things.”* However this theme of socialization was not applicable to one participant, that stated in respect to her work environment. *“Don’t socialize. All are foreigners so hard to communicate with.”*

Sense of purpose and meaning

All of the participants described that being employed provided them with a sense of purpose, as Participant 6 described: *“Purpose in life, that’s the main thing.”* Although the types of employment differed among the participants, all of the participants described their

employment as a meaningful and productive activity. Participant 6 stated: *"It's nice to help others out. That's part of what gives my life meaning."* Participant 4 echoed the meaningfulness of employment stating: *"[Employment] gives life fulfilment."* For the participants of this focus group being employed cultivated a sense of purpose and meaning within themselves. Additionally, employment allowed them to engage in activity that made them feel useful and provided the opportunity to make a difference within a larger social context, as Participant 2 stated: *"Useful. I feel like I am contributing to society."* For all participants the sense of purpose and responsibility derived from employment influenced the development of a stable routine. The participants appreciated that their employment provided structure in their lives. Participant 3 reflected: *"If I were not employed, I would not be in a routine. I would sleep till 11 or 12'oclock."*

Growth in self-esteem and confidence

Most of the participants expressed that employment lead to positive developments in their self-esteem and perception of their own abilities, as Participant 2 stated: *"Now, I think step by step. I start to believe in myself more and more."* Participant 7 identified that self-esteem and confidence, did not happen all at once, but rather, *"it [took] time to learn it, to realize that you are contributing. But when you reach that point, it's, it's nice."* Participants of the focus group enjoyed being able to tell others they were working, as Participant 2 expressed: *"I feel very good to say I am working."* Increases in self-esteem and self-worth were not only evident in the participant's employment environment, but also translated to their personal lives. Participant 5 stated: *"I clean at work and clean at home. For me, [I] improve my home."* Participants also indicated that being employed influenced their motivation to further develop themselves and continue to learn. Participant 2 stated: *"I want to know more how [I] can [improve] my ability to help."* Participant 6 echoed the concepts of self-improvement and motivation stating: *"I am trying to improve myself, every day. For instance I am going to school next winter. Three years ago that wouldn't have been possible."*

Increased anxiety

Some participants experienced increased feelings of anxiety. For the participants of this focus group re-entering the work force following break from employment, inconsistency of employment, interpersonal conflict, and the responsibilities employment entailed all caused increased feelings of anxiety. Participant 5 commented: *"It was, for me, quite a challenge to begin again, work, after 10 years"*. Participant 2 described feelings of anxiety with respect to the inconsistent nature of employment stating: *"I am still not with the official contract. This makes*

me nervous”. For one participant obtaining more permanent employment through the signing of a contract brought relief and increased feelings of self-esteem, as Participant 4 stated: “...and then she gave me a contract... it took time to get a hold of the job. It was good. Gave me self-esteem to be working.” For others, the permanency of a signed contract escalated feelings of anxiety. Participant 6 explained: “The contracts make me nervous. I was volunteering. So at the beginning of the year I was offered this contract that was the first time I ever got nervous about my job.” For one participant feelings of anxiety and stress in respect to employment existed due to interpersonal conflict. Participant 4 stated: “My boss is always on my shoulder... it scares me. That’s not the way I want to be working... but I don’t work with her often”. Despite the interpersonal conflict, this participant continued to have good working relationships with peers and expressed positivity towards employment.

Deprivation of leisure and other productive activity

Some of the participants identified that being employed interfered with their ability to engage in leisure and other productive activities, as Participant 6 stated: “I haven’t got the physical energy to do as much...and I use those hours up at my job. So then leisure time kind of suffers because of that.” Participant 5 echoed these concerns regarding their leisure activity of knitting: “I don’t have the energy after work. It’s bad not being able to do what I want to do.” Participant 4 identified that the financial stability received from employment interfered with leisure activity of walking: “I was unemployed, was walking, long distances because I didn’t have money for bus fare”. The economic resources the participant acquired through employment enabled him to afford bus fare. Interestingly, this affected the amount of time he spent walking, which was an activity enjoyed. Engaging in leisure and other productive activity was not impacted by employment amongst all of the participants. Participant 3 explained: “I still can do what I want to do because I work from 7:00 in the morning to 12 and then half of the day is there still.”

Additionally, most of the participants identified that Hlutverkasetur supported them in their employment. The participants in this focus group felt they received the necessary guidance and support for employment from staff and peers at Hlutverkasetur, as Participant 4 described: “Hlutverkasetur, always people complementing me, and talking to me, and that was the main support before I went to work. I got [my] job... [Hlutverkasetur staff] helped me get it. A lot of support.” Hlutverkasetur also provides the adaptability and flexibility to assist individuals in transitioning to employment. Participant 5 discussed how Hlutverkasetur helped “[take] first

steps” towards employment. The participants spoke of how not only the staff, but also their peers and the environment at Hlutverkasetur were very supportive and cultivated a sense of community and belonging. Participant 2 commented on the sense of community stating: *“I think I am very connected with Hlutverkasetur.”* The participants expressed using the activities offered through Hlutverkasetur to aid in the development of a routine, as Participant 2 describes: *“Now if I not working I think Hlutverkasetur is the only place, only one opportunity for me to wake up, to shower, and put some make up on.”*

CONCLUSION

The findings from this focus group outlined that being employed was both challenging and rewarding for the participants. All participants agreed that there were very few disadvantages to being employed and identified employment as a meaningful and purposeful activity. The staff and peers at Hlutverkasetur created an environment that fostered the development of supportive social relationships. Additionally, the scheduled activities at Hlutverkasetur allowed many of the participants to develop a routine to aid in their transition back into the work force. It was evident that Hlutverkasetur played an important role in returning to work for the majority of the participants. This focus group provided a more in-depth understanding of how the participants’ lives have been impacted by employment, and how Hlutverkasetur has been involved. The findings of this focus group can be used to guide the activity provision at Hlutverkasetur, and specifically shape any future developments in the vocational rehabilitation program.

REFERENCES

Morin, E.M. (2004). The meaning of work in modern times. In *10th World Congress on Human Resources Management, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil* (Vol. 20).