0442

Working in a social firm: a supportive work environment for people with mental illnesses.

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Introduction: People with mental illnesses find it difficult to get and keep jobs; tenure is frequently only a few months. Research has identified that the work environment contributes to problems with job retention for this population. Social firms are innovative businesses that addresses this problem by providing inclusive and supportive work environments. The number of social firms internationally is growing, however there is minimal research exploring social firm work environments.

Objectives: To understand what it is like for workers with a mental illness to work in a social firm and to explore factors in this work environment that support workers to retain their jobs.

Methods: Seven workers employed as cleaners in an Australian social firm for six months or longer provided their views on the work environment, including factors that enabled them to sustain their jobs. We used the Work Environment Impact Scale (Moore-Corner, Kielhofner, & Olsen, 1998) to guide individual interviews and analysed data inductively using thematic and narrative data analysis techniques.

Results: Workers described finding work tasks and routines easy and enjoyable; relationships with supervisors, co-workers and clients supportive and friendly; and the rewards and conditions of the job beneficial. Working in this firm held multiple and individual meanings including: recovery from illness; reengagement with the role and rewards of being a worker; opportunity to progress a work-life plan. Despite these differences all workers stayed in this job for now because the work environment was enjoyable, supportive and secure.

Conclusion: The social firm work environment had a positive impact on the well-being of workers with mental illnesses and supported them sustaining their employment.

Contribution to evidence: This evidence supports the social firm model as providing a work environment that people with mental illnesses view as supportive and beneficial. Social firms could draw on occupational therapists to make recommendations about work environments that will enable people with mental illnesses to sustain employment.

Moore-Corner, R., Kielhofner, G., & Olsen, L. (1998). Work Environment Impact Scale (WEIS) (Version 2.0). Chicago: Model of Human Occupation Clearinghouse, Department of Occupational Therapy, College of Applied Health Sciences, University of Illinois at Chicago.