Quality Employment Services: Where Research and Practice Meet

Introduction
Providing quality employment services to people with disabilities requires a substantial commitment of time, energy, and resources. Given this investment and our obligation to individuals with disabilities, we as providers must deliver the most effective services possible. Too often, services are developed based on either anecdotal evidence—our own experiences—or what funding agencies request. However, research has emerged that demonstrates that a core set of services—evidence-based practices—yields better employment outcomes.

What are Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs)?
EBPs are interventions that empirical research has found effective. Are there EBPs in employment?
Yes. The federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) considers Supported Employment an effective approach that helps people with psychiatric disabilities find competitive jobs. Over the past decade-plus, multiple research studies using various designs have demonstrated that Supported Employment results in better outcomes.

A lot of programs call themselves “Supported Employment”—and they’re all different. How do I know which ones are evidence-based?
To be considered an EBP, a Supported Employment program serving individuals with mental illness must adhere to six specific principles:

- Eligibility is based on consumer choice. A person who wants to work can receive services despite their work or treatment history.
- Competitive employment is the goal. Programs help people get jobs in the community, in an integrated setting, paying prevailing wages.
- Supported Employment is integrated with mental health treatment.
- The job search starts shortly after an individual expresses an interest in working. It is not recommended that a person or be required to complete extensive pre-employment assessment and training before starting the job search.
- Follow-along supports are continuous. Individualized supports continue for as long as an individual wants assistance.
- Consumer preferences are important in determining placement. Providers increase their success when they help consumers get jobs that match their interests, skills, and abilities.
How do I know if a program is actually following the Supported Employment EBP?
The Supported Employment Fidelity Scale provides detailed standards for each of the practices above. Agencies can use this scale to determine the degree to which their services align with the key principles of Supported Employment, or as an excellent tool to guide the development of Supported Employment services.

It is important to remember that you don’t have to work for a Supported Employment agency to apply EBP principles to an individual’s employment goals. For example, a key principle is integrating mental health and employment services. Case managers can help clients create connections between clinical and vocational services. Residential staff can provide ongoing supports to residents who are working. Counselors can convey a positive message about work and assist people to explore their aspirations.

How can I start?
A section of the SAMHSA website focuses on EBP: http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/communitysupport/toolkits/employment. These Implementation Resource Kits include articles, workbooks, and audience-specific tip sheets.

I don’t work with people with mental illness. How does this EBP apply to me?
The most important message to take away is that agencies should develop services based on research and data. Promising research across disability groups can inform your programs. Associations such as APSE and the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (formerly AAMR) give members access to professional publications. Other practitioner-focused publications such as Infolines often highlight promising practices and new research findings. Check the resource section for additional information.

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This issue of MassWorks is funded by the Medicaid Infrastructure and Comprehensive Employment Opportunities Grant (Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services CDFA #93-768), a collaborative project of the Mass. Executive Office of Health and Human Services, the Center for Health Policy Research at UMass Medical School, and the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston.