

Trading the Workshop for the Worksite – Building Competency and Confidence Among People with Psychiatric Disabilities in Hong Kong SAR

The Challenge

Too many former clients of the New Life sheltered workshops for people with psychiatric disabilities were returning to the centre, as of 1992. Many reported that they had failed in open employment. They found the new situations overwhelming and claimed that they needed more training. New Life staff believed that the former clients were seeking refuge from the challenges of coping with open employment. As more former clients returned, the staff realized that, even though clients had learned vocational skills at New Life, they had not been properly prepared for adjusting to the new work environment.

Among the several issues affecting New Life's returning clients was the rejection of their job applications or, in the case of employed clients, the difficulty of managing the changes necessitated by meeting new people in the work setting or taking on new tasks associated with a given job.

In 1992, staff members of Hong Kong's New Life Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association recognized "a need to change" and offer "more realistic and comprehensive vocational services". If people with psychiatric disabilities were to move out of sheltered work and into open employment, they would need to build up their confidence as well as develop vocational competency. The public also needed to cultivate a more receptive attitude toward people with psychiatric disabilities and their abilities. How could one programme address all three needs?

Meeting the Challenge

New Life decided to take its workshops outdoors. Specifically, it realized that training in real-world work situations with ongoing support from a job coach would provide an effective learning experience. Instead of training people with psychiatric disabilities in an isolated setting, New Life created businesses and found jobs that required crews of workers in community settings. In fact, one of New Life's recent service contracts calls for cleaning and sweeping up around a popular campground.

In any given year, 200 people in the New Life programme benefit from the association's Supported Employment Service. The approach includes a range of job options. Workers

start with simple tasks and progress through job promotions and advanced skills training. Monetary incentives encourage upward mobility and underscore the importance of the work ethic. And, the programme emphasizes eventual work in open employment with ongoing support.

The shift required New Life's staff to become job coaches and to work alongside trainees. The programme emphasizes social skills, with work skills taught on the job. The staff devised a system that builds confidence through a gradual increase in responsibilities. New Life prefers work settings that integrate trainees with the public. Such settings offer preparation for dealing with encounters with strangers and the shift in workplace demands. They also offer a chance for the public to learn about people with disabilities and adjust biases.

The Good Practice: Supported employment service in a variety of fields with emphasis on jobsite training in community settings.



• Background •

The supported employment component is part of an already comprehensive programme offered by New Life. The association began operations in 1959 when a group of former psychiatric hospital patients organized the New Life Mutual Aid Club. In 1965, the club reorganized as the New Life Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association and offered a variety of services that now include temporary residential facilities for free or on modest terms, vocational training, sheltered employment and recreation and rehabilitation activities. New Life currently operates two long-stay care homes, one supported housing unit, 11 halfway houses, six sheltered workshops, one aftercare service, two training and activity centres and three hostels.

The Supported Employment Service is targeted to people with psychiatric disabilities in New Life's sheltered workshops and halfway houses. The approach, which New Life calls "placement training", provides employment opportunities in cleaning recreation facilities, car washing, working for a delivery service, selling vegetables in a stall or snacks and handicrafts in a kiosk in parks, retailing in a convenience shop and operating a restaurant. The association continues to provide classroom training in woodworking, handicrafts, sewing and printing.

When New Life opted to change most of its training to real-world work settings, it first set up a vegetable stall. Next, it opened a convenience store in a hospital. The New Life restaurant opened in 1998 and currently employs 33 people. In the 2002-2003 fiscal year, the restaurant earned approximately US\$350,000. It serves as a training space for several people with disabilities. Trainees develop restaurant skills and learn how to deal with a crowd of constantly changing customers, thus building their confidence in working with the public. Trainees also learn to work with a variety of colleagues (both nondisabled and those with disabilities), thus preparing them to cope with co-workers in open employment.

New Life currently operates six businesses termed “simulated businesses”, so called because the people working in them are considered trainees rather than employees, though they do earn wages. For work crew experience, staff members pursue contracts that are bid on in the open market for cleaning services. The first work crew contract acquired by New Life required the cleaning of a small barbeque area in a popular park. Under the contract, New Life had to recruit and train staff to operate cleaning equipment and grass mowers. As well, they had to learn about the Government’s occupational and safety regulations.

• The Structure of Supported Employment •

New Life’s trainees generally have been residing in New Life’s halfway houses and can choose a training mode from three possibilities:

- They can stay in a sheltered workshop for work training. This arrangement is typically appropriate for people who are not yet ready for employment.
- They can find a placement in open employment, such as in an office. This arrangement is typically appropriate for people who require minimal, if any, training. A job coach works with both the trainee and the employer to prepare for employment.
- They can participate in jobsite training in either a business or as part of a work crew. A job coach is an important part of the training structure.

The following describes the elements of New Life’s supported employment service for jobsite training.

An orientation programme. Every prospective trainee is orientated through a site visit and trial training period of about one month. Job coaches assess individuals’ work adjustment and performance during the trial period to determine their starting level. After a successful trial, coaches admit individuals as trainees.

Meeting individual needs with a rehabilitation plan. After a trainee chooses a field, he or she and a job coach set goals in an individual rehabilitation plan for the necessary skills needed for a specific job. The trainee agrees to spend six months in training before seeking open employment.

Many options. The jobsites offer a wide range of work activities that meet the different functional abilities of workers. In the case of the work crews, for example, simple tasks such as sweeping and general cleaning are suitable for workers with a lower functional ability or for newly admitted workers-in-training. Experienced workers take on more complicated jobs requiring multiple tasks such as tidying rooms or the use of advanced machines and chemicals. Not all jobs involve full-time work. Some jobsites require service only two days a week.

Work-habit building. The training elements focus on five objectives:

- Developing good work habits through demands for regular attendance, punctuality and work concentration;
- Building a good work attitude that is reflected in self-motivation, responsibility, problem solving, overcoming difficulties, work quality, discipline and flexibility;
- Enhancing social skills such as building relationships with co-workers, communication skills with supervisors, improving personal hygiene and image, seeking assistance when necessary, expressing emotions and developing cooperation and team spirit;
- Teaching work skills in cleaning, using tools and equipment, following regulations, handling enquiries, following safety practices and so forth; and
- Managing stress.

Intensive interaction with nondisabled colleagues and customers greatly improves interpersonal and communication skills. Workers cultivate support networks and positive relationships so that they can lean on each other in times of frustration and difficulty. Work experiences build trainees' self-confidence and self-awareness. Direct assistance from job coaches helps workers upgrade their skills and improve their attitude toward work.

Monetary incentives. The capabilities of New Life trainees tend to vary with an individual's progress during rehabilitation. To encourage improvement in a trainee's confidence and skills, New Life adopted a progressive training allowance scheme that links income and performance. The range of allowances, or payments, reflects trainees' actual performance, though the incentive averages about HK\$140 (US\$18) per day.

On top of the training allowance, workers receive an incentive payment of about HK\$42 (US\$5) per month for good performance. They receive another HK\$203 (US\$26) per month for full attendance. Shift workers receive an additional allowance. A worker's wages could reach about HK\$4,990 (\$640) in a typical month. Wages could go higher

if an individual works more than 26 days a month. The resulting pay is nearly comparable to that in open employment. In New Life's businesses, the income from sales covers the employees' and trainees' salaries. For the work crews, the contract fee includes the wages of the trainees.

Other incentives. In addition to the pay incentive, a promotion path helps motivate trainees to perform professionally. Workers start as "trainees" and graduate to "worker" status, a path that provides the first experience of upward mobility. More experienced workers can be promoted to foremen. The graduated positions give trainees a chance to work toward and achieve leadership roles. When in a leading role, trainees have a chance to help guide other trainees, further developing their social skills as well as boosting their confidence. The system inspires participants to work harder and provides a continual source of empowerment. The promotion path from trainee to worker to foreman gives participants the opportunity to explore their potential and experience a sense of achievement. They are required to work independently, to make decisions and to work with commitment, which, all combined, help prepare participants for open employment.

Advanced skills development. As trainees gradually assume increased responsibilities, they learn new skills appropriate to their competency. Skills might be associated with more demanding tasks, such as the operation of outdoor sweeping machines and indoor floor polishers.

• On-the-Job Guidance •

In all training situations, New Life staff provide the critical element of guidance and support in two ways:

Job coach. Staff trainers act as job coaches charged with two duties:

- Overseeing the performance of contract duties, with the delivery of high-quality service; and
- Providing trainees with supervision and support.

The amount of time a job coach spends with a trainee depends on the nature of the job and the person's level of ability. Someone placed in an office position may require little supervision, whereas a trainee in a store will likely need daily guidance in learning how to maintain the store and sell items. As a trainee's competency increases, the job coach gradually withdraws and thus helps build the trainee's confidence.

In addition to the assistance offered by the job coach, work crews are structured as support networks. Trainees can rely on each other for help. As team members, trainees also value their own work ability and their contributions to the crew.

Workers' meetings are conducted each day to discuss any difficulties or to highlight the efficiency of the work crew. Discussing the day's progress helps to instil further confidence in trainees and builds strong relationships among co-workers.

Counselling. New Life social workers provide counselling, advice and referrals for other services, such as house hunting or financial consulting for social security, taxes or other issues.

— Alone Means Achievement for Mr. So —

Mr. So lives alone in an apartment. By his measure and that of the New Life Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association staff, his independent living is a sign of success. Four years ago, he resided in the New Life Halfway House and had just joined its sheltered workshop for people with psychiatric disabilities. Within three years, Mr. So began working with the cleaning project at a popular campground, one of the nine New Life mobile crews that prepare trainees for integration back into the community and open employment. "I realized in the work project that my abilities were beyond what I was doing in the workshop," he says. After only seven months at the campground, he applied for a security guard position with a property management company and was hired. And that's when he went apartment hunting.

New Life first won the cleaning contract from the Sai Kung Outdoor Recreation Centre (SKORC) in 1998 and then renewed the contract in 2000 and 2002. SKORC is a popular day and over-night campground that offers the public recreation facilities, such as a swimming pool, a roller skating rink, squash and tennis courts, educational activities, bungalows, dormitories and a variety of indoor and outdoor activity centres.

The cleaning contract, which New Life won in open bidding, covers a wide range of activities and therefore requires coordination, teamwork, advanced skills and use of cleaning equipment. Because of the many visitors to the campground, tasks are highly demanding and must be completed within a rigid time frame and according to strict cleanliness standards.

The SKORC project has provided several chances for community integration. Workers meet campers (the public) every day and communicate directly with campground staff in carrying out their duties. Because the worksite is a highly popular public centre, workers constantly interact with nondisabled people.

• Open Employment Preparation, Follow-Up and Ongoing Support •

Trainees work in supported employment for an average of two years. They are discharged when they reach a level of independence. "We don't want them training forever," says Deborah Wan, New Life's chief executive officer. "They have to find a job."

When trainees reach a satisfactory work performance level, they prepare for discharge from New Life. They receive guidance in completing job applications, setting up interview appointments, developing interview skills and following up on job leads. New Life staff help trainees find job vacancies through the government placement agency or newspaper classified advertisements.

For a six-month period, a job coach follows the progress of a former trainee once he or she is hired. Follow-up may involve visits to the jobsite, discussions with the employer and telephone calls to the former trainee.

Accomplishments

Enhancing the self-confidence and self-image of trainees while upgrading their skills helps build a sense of empowerment, which New Life regards as an important output of its projects. That service users move from welfare dependence at New Life to self-reliance in society is another highly regarded accomplishment of the programme.

Before the launch of New Life's Supported Employment Service, more than 75 per cent of residents in New Life's halfway houses had no particular work activity or training or only minimal work experience. Given the shift from traditional training to real work experiences, the number of people moving into open employment has been impressive. The placements in 2002-2003 were as follows:

- 251 people (109 females) were engaged in the Supported Employment Service. Of these participants, 61 found individual training placement in open employment in office, clerk and cashier positions or on cleaning crews.
- Some 108 people, were working in mobile crews and 82 were working in New Life businesses. Salaries ranged from about HK\$1,500 (US\$192) to more than HK\$5,500 (US\$705).



Lessons Learned

Shifting from the workshop environment to real-world work situations involves much trial and error. It also yields experiences with invaluable insights, such as the following lessons:

A backup pool of workers is critical. If New Life is to maintain its work contracts, it needs to deliver professional, reliable and top-grade service. The reality of working with disabled trainees is that trainees often need time to develop a good work ethic. For example, a trainee may decide – for whatever reason – not to show up for work on a given day. Service providers need to recognize the possibility of erratic attendance and ensure that a staff person or another trainee is on call to fill a temporary vacancy.

Earning money during training builds self-respect and generates respect from the community. The empowerment gained from participating in a real-world work environment allows trainees to build up their self-esteem at a rapid pace. The income they earn adds to their sense of worth and their status as paid workers encourages respect from the public. The support of job coaches and social workers, combined with real-world work training and the demands of a contract, accelerates the rehabilitation process, often pushing many halfway house residents and sheltered workshop participants into open employment more rapidly than might be expected.

Work experience that involves interaction with the public offers tremendous training. Contacts with new people can be stressful. Without a work project as a transition, trainees would have few opportunities to prepare for open employment and self-reliance. Gradual integration into public situations with the immediate back-up of social support from co-workers and a job coach helps trainees adjust to meeting new people. At the same time, the positive interaction between disabled workers and community members helps build the public's acceptance of people with disabilities.

Looking Forward

New Life will continue its practice of using real-world work sites for its training activities, especially sites that employ cleaning and maintenance crews. It plans to continue offering integrated employment in supported rather than sheltered work settings. However, New Life needs additional service contracts and, with the hope of fostering the full integration of public and private sector interests, will seek out contracts with property management companies.

Replication

To begin, the New Life Supported Employment Service model requires worksites and therefore competent staff members who know how to find, bid on and manage contract work. Initial funding is also needed for equipment purchase. At the same time, replicating the New Life model requires trained job coaches familiar with the services required by the ongoing contracts; such coaches are essential for teaching appropriate skills. Not all job coaches need to have completed advanced education, but they do need to demonstrate a strong commitment to working with people. For example, supported employment requires weekend work and work beyond typical business hours. Especially critical to the success of such a programme is the promise of dependable, high-quality professional service in carrying out contract jobs. These factors and expectations must be considered in replicating such jobsite-based services. Once established, promoting the work through the media increases public acceptance of people with psychiatric disabilities and offers of employment and contract work.

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