

## Promoting Themselves – Preparing People to Find Jobs in Hong Kong SAR

### The Challenge

Of all people with disabilities seeking employment assistance through the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, the former mentally ill had the least success. And yet, their education level and work experience were impressive. Part of the problem resulted from negative publicity generated by media reports describing how people with mental illness experienced relapses in public. Officials in the Selective Placement Division of the Labour Department seeking jobs on behalf of people with disabilities repeatedly observed that employers preferred people with any disability other than mental illness. How could the Labour Department officials help former mentally ill people find employment opportunities in the face of negative perceptions and discrimination?

### Meeting the Challenge

The Hong Kong Labour Department decided that former mentally ill clients should handle their own job searches instead of relying on referrals made by placement officers. That way, they could sell themselves first and disclose their medical history later, if they so chose. But the Government did not send them off unprepared to seek jobs. Instead, in April 2000, it launched a training programme in its three Selective Placement Division branch offices. Called the Self-Help Integrated Placement Service (SHIPS), the programme involves small group counselling classes, instruction in job searching, links to mainstream services and job-hunting resources. SHIPS was such a success that the Labour Department officials extended the service to people with all types of disabilities.

**The Good Practice:** Building confidence and independence among former mentally ill clients to take charge of their job search.



## • Background •

Selective Placement Division (SPD) officials in Hong Kong's Labour Department have been charged with assisting people with disabilities in securing open employment. SPD maintains branches that provide office and computer support to programme participants to assist them in their job search. In the past few years, SHIPS has experimented successfully with some innovative approaches to increasing the placement of workers with disabilities. As a result, the number of job referrals grew from 3,379 in 1992 to 9,218 in 2000, representing a 173 per cent increase attributable to expanded services. The number of placements grew from 1,366 in 1992 to 2,007 in 2000, representing a 47 per cent increase.

One of the novel approaches the SPD launched was the 1998 Trial Placement Scheme to encourage employers to offer job vacancies to people with disabilities for one month, thus enhancing employers' understanding of disabled peoples' working abilities. Participating employers receive a financial incentive for the trial placement that equals 50 per cent of the wages paid to employees in a particular position, with a ceiling of HK\$2,965 (US\$385) and a certificate of appreciation as recognition.

Then, in 1999, SPD experimented with the SHIPS pilot scheme to help its formerly mentally ill clients look for jobs on their own. Three months into the experiment, seven (54 per cent) of the 13 participants in the pilot scheme found jobs on their own. That placement rate was 23 per cent higher than what had been achieved by the traditional personal placement service for the former mentally ill group.

## • How SHIPS is Structured •

**Training seminar.** The relatively short SHIPS programme is now tailor-made to fit the needs of particular disability groups (originally it dealt only with former mentally ill people). A one-day training seminar brings a group of 10 to 20 people, typically with the same disability, into a classroom located in SPD branch offices. SPD officers conduct the training. The topics focus on:

- The current job market situation;
- Goal planning;
- Job-listing sources and job-search plan development;
- Writing a resume and completing job applications;
- Applying for jobs by telephone; and
- Interview skills and responses to frequently asked questions.

Training materials include a SHIPS-produced film on interviewing techniques and the videotaping of mock interviews. Sometimes the placement officers vary the programme's content, adding subjects such as stress management, work ethics and so forth, depending on the needs of the particular group. The placement officers keep abreast of labour market trends and issues that can benefit clients. As well, they are familiar with the problems that job seekers often encounter during job interviews and prepare clients for any possible situation.

As part of the classroom session, participants practice their job-seeking skills in a half-day exercise that involves visits to the job centre of the Employment Services Division of the Labour Department (open to all job seekers) and to a Regional Central Library. The visits help familiarize clients with different channels for gathering information on job vacancies and job searching.

The Labour Department has 11 job centres that provide recruitment and employment services to employers and job seekers, respectively. Employers place vacancy orders at the centres. Job seekers can read the job cards or search the vacancies through the "vacancy search terminal" installed at the centres. If the employers release their contact information to the public, job seekers can contact the employers directly to request a job interview.

In addition to the local newspapers with their recruitment advertisements, the public libraries maintain reference books on job-seeking and interviewing skills. Computers are available for the public to search the Internet for employment sites and vacancies.

As a final exercise in the classroom session, the placement officer demonstrates the different resource tools available to clients at the Employment Resources Corner located in each SPD branch office. Clients can use a computer to practise their typing and computer skills. In addition, newspapers with recruitment advertisements, reference books and videotapes on job interviewing and application skills are available.

**Progress review session.** After the one-day training seminar, clients are free to use the Labour Office resources to initiate their job search. Each week, clients meet individually with SHIPS officers to report their job-search progress and share their job interview experiences.

**Follow-up service.** In October 2002, SPD organized a "refresher" seminar for SHIPS participants who had not yet secured employment. A psychologist and a human resources manager shared their expert knowledge on job-searching and interviewing techniques. According to the participants, the follow-up service provided additional benefits. Approximately 95 per cent of them felt more motivated in seeking a job. Encouraged by such a favourable response, the SPD intends to organize similar seminars once a year to strengthen the self-confidence and job-searching skills of SHIPS participants.

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## Accomplishments

The essence of the SHIPS programme is “to help the job-seekers to help themselves,” says Patrick Chow, head of the Selective Placement Division of the Labour Department. Before SHIPS, some job seekers presumed it was the placement officers’ responsibility to find them a job after they registered with SPD. Now, the responsibility for finding a job rests mainly with the job seekers. It is interesting to note that before introduction of the programme, adds Mr. Chow, job seekers usually called the placement officers from time to time to check the latest progress in finding them job possibilities. Today, it is the placement officers who ring up the job seekers to see what interviews they have arranged for themselves or what job they have found.

In 2002, 178 job seekers from the former mentally ill group joined SHIPS. Of them, 130 found jobs within the first six months of entering the programme (placement rate of 73 per cent). The overall placement rate for the former mentally ill group for the year was higher than for any other disability group. Total SHIPS participation among all disability groups was 714 people, of whom 495 found a job within six months.

Between September 1999 and October 2002, SHIPS conducted 88 sessions for 1,701 job seekers from different disability groups. Of them, 455 participants had a history of mental illness and succeeded in achieving 256 self-help placements, representing a placement rate of 56 per cent.

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## Lessons Learned

SHIPS is most useful for job seekers with disabilities who can read and write and have some work experience. The following experiences contributed to the success of Hong Kong’s SHIPS:

**Good job-search motivation is critical.** People who are unable to conduct an independent job search or lack motivation to secure employment will not benefit from the SHIPS programme.

**Support and encouragement from the family members of job seekers are important.** The need for encouragement during the job-searching process is obvious; clients will likely encounter difficulties or even failure in the course of seeking employment. But to adapt themselves to society again after a prolonged period of sick leave or unemployment, some clients may decide to re-enter the workforce by taking up part-time work. With the support of family members, clients need not worry too much about their earnings and thus might identify a wide range of job opportunities.

## One Woman's Success Story

Judy's mental illness, schizophrenia, began in 1986. She suffered from insomnia, loss of appetite and auditory hallucinations. She recovered after several years of psychiatric treatment. Looking to pick up the pieces of her life, she registered at the Selective Placement Division of the Labour Department in August 2000. In November 2002, she joined SHIPS.

Before joining SHIPS, Judy (not her real name) had applied for several jobs, following up on referrals made by her placement officer. She was never offered employment. She suspected that her failure to receive job offers was related to her lack of confidence and unsatisfactory performance in job interviews. After joining SHIPS, she learned to find more job opportunities by reading recruitment advertisements on the Internet. In the SHIPS class, she was able to make friends with other former mentally ill job seekers. They formed a support group and shared job-searching difficulties and experiences. Judy grew more confident and could better handle questions in job interviews.

Judy succeeded in finding a job as a temporary secretary in December 2000 and stayed until July 2001, when her contract expired. In October 2001, also through her own efforts, she was hired as a contract clerk in the Building Services Department of the Government of the Hong Kong SAR.

**Follow-up services are needed.** Although SHIPS participants may have polished their job-searching skills, they may still experience difficulty in securing employment. They require the continued support and back-up services of SPD placement officers. Placement officers closely monitor the job-searching progress of SHIPS clients and provide advice and counselling as appropriate. When several clients experienced difficulty in finding regular employment, SHIPS officials realized from their many follow-up sessions that clients needed a refresher seminar to hone their job-seeking skills.

## Looking Forward

SPD placement officers recognize the importance of sharpening the job-searching skills of job seekers. But they also believe that job seekers' self-confidence and ability to face times of adversity play a role in whether or not individuals secure employment. To achieve this, SHIPS plans to:

- Organize more SHIPS classes that are tailor-made to specific disabilities;
- Invite professionals, employers, human resources experts and successful clients to classes to share their experiences; and
- Organize confidence-boosting seminars with psychologists at least once a year. Experts on human resources management will also be invited.

### Another Woman's Success Story

Cindy experienced the onset of schizophrenia in 1998. She received medical treatment and has recovered well. In April 2002, she registered at the Selective Placement Division of the Labour Department for employment services and joined SHIPS in the same month.

Before joining SHIPS, Cindy (not her real name) was nervous and lacked confidence in searching for clerical work, the type of work she preferred. However, her placement officer noticed that, after participating in SHIPS, Cindy was reading more recruitment advertisements, was sending out her resume more frequently and was contacting employers for job interviews nearly every day. She polished her interview skills in accordance with the SHIPS trainer's demonstration and the mock job interviews. She grew more confident that she could better handle interview questions. In July 2002, after performing well in an interview, Cindy was put on the waiting list for a general clerk position in a government department.

Through SHIPS, Cindy learned how to develop an understanding of the job market and that she needs to be open to a range of job opportunities. In January 2003, she became a temporary packer, a position not much to her liking. However, the placement officer monitored Cindy's job-searching progress closely and gave advice and counselling as appropriate. With the frequent encouragement and support from the placement officer, Cindy found a job as a general clerk in a hospital in May 2003.

**Replication**

SHIPS is relatively simple to replicate. It lends itself to any setting and requires little funding, if any – depending on the organization. It does, however, require a trainer and certain types of equipment to enhance service delivery. The following steps are prerequisites to setting up a basic programme scheme similar to SHIPS:

- Run a pilot scheme by selecting a small group of job seekers with good job-searching motivation and basic job search skills in job searching.
- Plan the contents of the training to suit the needs of the participants. What do they lack? Do they have the courage and skills to make telephone calls? Do they know what to say during job interviews? It is important at the outset to identify the difficulties faced by participants.
- Design the mode of delivery – using interactive activities and exercises.
- Find a suitable training venue, preferably with facilities such as an overhead projector and screen, computer notebook, television set, video recorder and video camera.
- Plan for a follow-up review to assess programme effectiveness and determine if modifications are required.

**For More Information**

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