

## ★ Supported Employment and traumatic brain injury

Does participation in a supported employment programme increase return to work rates for those with traumatic brain injury? Shane Heasley looks at the literature.



Return to work is a key outcome for those undergoing vocational rehabilitation, and can be particularly challenging for persons who have sustained a traumatic brain injury (TBI), where rates of return vary significantly from 20% to 90%. Supported Employment is one approach to this challenge and has seen success in other populations including severe mental illness, and spinal injury. It is characterised by a place-then-train approach, and focuses on open competitive employment. This study looks to examine the effectiveness of Supported Employment through a review of existing literature, and identify whether it is in fact efficacious.

### **Search Strategy**

Using the PICOT framework, search terms were developed. Searches were completed using Medline, PsychInfo, and ProQuest. Key search terms were applied using an AND/OR strategy [(‘supported employment’ OR ‘vocational rehabilitation’) AND (‘traumatic brain injury’ OR ‘TBI’)]. Results were limited to English, and no limit was placed on time. The reference lists of the most relevant papers were searched by hand to identify any papers that may not have appeared in search results.

### **Eligibility**

Papers that looked specifically at traumatic brain injury, and where supported employment and/or vocational rehabilitation were being considered with regards to their effect on return to work outcomes, were included. With the exception of one paper, only those that could be obtained online in full text were selected.

### **Findings**

Three papers, which met the above criteria were selected. Two definitions of return to work are persistent in the literature; inclusive and restricted. An inclusive definition of return to work (encompassing paid work and other productive activities) can inflate return to work outcomes, above those studies where a restricted definition (i.e. paid competitive employment only) is used. A synthesis of studies found there was a statistically significant relationship between the intervention of vocational rehabilitation (including supported employment) on return to work rates, when compared to no intervention at all. Supported employment has been observed to be more effective at returning people to competitive employment than standard vocational rehabilitation alone. Consumers of such services have identified that outcomes must be weighed against personal values of success, which include work, self worth, and self-fulfilment, as well as the sustainability of work and non-work life balance.

### **Discussion**

Supported employment appears to be effective at returning people to competitive employment; however, this alone cannot be the whole measure of achievement. Factors of success identified by TBI clients may be achieved in other meaningful pursuits. Alternative

forms of vocational rehabilitation are also capable of returning people to productive activity; though potentially not as successful, their proficiency is nevertheless significant.

High levels of heterogeneity amongst clients, providers, and approaches make significant comparisons amongst rehabilitation designs difficult. Although not considered as part of this study, the long-term cost of supported employment, as compared to other vocational rehabilitation interventions may impact on its acceptability to funding organisations. Reported low durability of employment outcomes across the spectrum of interventions also demands further inquiry. Further opportunity for research exists, owing to the limited availability of literature on this topic.

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#### References:

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