

CHAPTER SEVEN

It's More than Just a Job: Returning to and Thriving in the Workforce

1. Introduction

“People want to know they matter and they want to be treated as people. That is the new Talent contract.”

-Pamela Stroko, VP, HCM Transformation & Thought Leadership at Oracle Corporation

This chapter highlights key best practices for agencies to assist individuals in recovery from mental illness as they transition into the work environment. Strategies to identify and address challenges are also covered.

Behavioral health professionals recognize that Recovery Support Specialists (RSSs) are valuable partners in the treatment and recovery goals of individuals with mental illness. These professionals have used various strategies to incorporate individuals with lived experience into the workforce. Because of significant socio-economic, cultural, philosophical, and leadership variations, no single approach has emerged as a blueprint for success (*Results from a National Survey of Certified Peer Specialist Job Titles and Job Descriptions: Evidence of a Versatile Behavioral Health Workforce* -Schwenk, Brusilovskiy, and Salzer). Nevertheless, while it appears “one size does not fit all” when it comes to building a structure and system in which RSSs can thrive, some underlying principles help facilitate better design and integration:

- a. Throughout the process of employment, training, and professional development the RSS should be provided with the level of attention and support given to all other “precious personnel.” This includes:
 - i. significant investment of time and resources for orientation;
 - ii. careful monitoring and review of specific responsibilities and expectations;
 - iii. establishment of specific performance incentives and salary schedule;
 - iv. ongoing support for continuing education and specialized certifications; and
 - v. advancement opportunities which are comparable with other professional positions within the entity.
- b. From the very beginning, agency employees and individuals receiving services should understand the importance of the work RSSs perform. RSSs are more likely to thrive in their new positions if they are assigned meaningful tasks and are given opportunities to take on increasing responsibilities. This will allow them to gain experience and demonstrate competence. As stated by management expert and author Ken Blanchard: “Connect the dots between individual roles and the goals of the organization. When people see that connection, they get a lot of energy out of work. They feel the importance, dignity, and the meaning in their job.”

2. Best Practices - Returning to and Thriving in the Workforce

“Train people well enough so they can leave. Treat them well enough so they don’t want to.”

- Richard Branson, Entrepreneur, owner of the Virgin Group of over 200 companies

- a. Compensate the RSSs in accordance with the skills and experience they bring to the table.
- b. Structure the RSS position and its relationship to the agency hierarchy to ensure advancement opportunities and employment growth.
- c. Tie the tasks assigned to the RSSs directly to program objectives and service teams.
- d. Set goals with RSSs to continue their professional development and seek additional certifications such as Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) Facilitator, Mental Health First Aid Instructor, emotional CPR, Intentional Peer Support, Whole Health Action Management (WHAM), Nutrition & Exercise for Wellness & Recovery (NEW-R), Trauma Informed Peer Support, etc.
- e. Create with your RSSs a formal written action plan for obtaining their CRSS and other desired credentials.

3. Agency Checklist to Identify Current Progress

Check any of the following you already have in place:

_____ IPS (Individual Placement and Support) – evidence-based supported employment: IPS should be an option for someone who needs ongoing support in obtaining and maintaining employment. IPS also may help your agency with initial funding of RSS Positions as well as provide supports for the RSS staff.

_____ WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Plan)
WRAP is a framework for success, regardless of where a person is on their life journey. A person does not have to have a mental illness or emotional problem to benefit from writing a WRAP plan. The more WRAP is embedded into your agency’s culture, the greater foundation of success you will have for the RSS on your staff.

_____ Natural Supports
RSS staff should be encouraged to developed relationships with their colleagues as natural support. Hiring more than one RSS at a time will help develop natural support among the RSS on staff. Recovery Support Services should be part of new staff orientation, conducted by the RSS on staff, to help increase understanding and develop relationships among RSS and people hired into other new positions within the agency.

_____ MHFA (Mental Health First Aid)
MHFA classes should be available to RSSs as well as other members of your service teams.

- _____ Wellness Training
Evidence-based wellness trainings such as NEW-R and WHAM should be available to the RSSs and other members of your service team.

- _____ Information Sharing
Establish the practice of sharing recovery-oriented information and an increasing focus on a person-centered service model with all staff, not just the RSSs.

- _____ Role Clarity
Have clearly-established policies related to the roles and relationships between RSSs and individuals receiving services which you routinely review with all staff.

- _____ Confidentiality
Have strict guidelines relating to maintaining confidentiality in accordance with HIPAA laws and best practices.

- _____ Strengths Focus
Articulate the strengths the RSSs bring to the team as part of your effort to mitigate the fears clinical staff may express regarding incorporating individuals with lived experience into service teams.

- _____ Unique Skills
Acknowledge unique skills to underscore the RSSs as contributors to the service team.

4. Processes for the Manager and Administrative Team to Consider

- a. Work with supervisors and RSSs to set realistic performance expectations and goals (see Exhibits 7A and 7B). If the employer sets the goals without RSS input and the employee fails to achieve them, the RSSs may view the employer as demanding or unreasonable. It is important to ask the RSSs what supports they believe will help them meet the performance expectations and to brainstorm solutions with them. If you set goals with them rather than for them, they are more likely to be invested in the improvement process.
- b. Routinely monitor the RSSs work environment and evaluate for any unexpected complications. It is important to regularly review with the RSSs the goals that have been established and how their performance related to these goals is measured. As necessary, rework goals in concert with the RSSs within the established timelines.

5. Practices Which Provide the RSSs Opportunities to Thrive in the Workplace

- a. Allow for a flexible work schedule and other reasonable accommodations based on the RSSs' needs.

- b. Include goals which allow for personal and professional growth.
- c. Provide the RSSs with formal staff development opportunities to earn required training hours for their CRSS.
- d. Encourage and support RSSs' participation in staffing and treatment team meetings.

Examples of strengths relevant to this area:

- i. The supervisor for the RSSs has lived experience and is a CRSS.
- ii. The agency's psychiatrist and clinicians have received advance notice and formal instruction on the role of RSSs in the staffing and team meetings.
- iii. All direct care staff have been provided orientation on the requirements to obtain the CRSS credential.
- iv. RSSs that are new to agency staffing and team meeting participation are provided with guidance from their supervisor and experienced recovery support staff. Difficult conversations are role-played prior to the first staffing or meeting they are to attend.
- v. The agency CEO/Executive Director has formally endorsed RSS/CRSSs as full, integral members of the agency's clinical team.

List your agency's strengths:

6. Goals to Help Move your Program Forward

- a. Allow time for the RSSs to become skilled in the areas of recovery support, mentoring, advocacy & professional responsibility
- b. Provide support from the agency as a whole
- c. Ensure RSS staff have the ability to pursue the CRSS credential without undue agency pressure
- d. Provide networking opportunities
- e. Embrace the recovery model as an agency

Examples of potential goals you may consider:

- i. Have the RSS complete WRAP classes as a participant.
- ii. Provide a list of training opportunities to your RSS.
- iii. Encourage the RSS to take the 8-hour MHFA or YMHFA course.
- iv. Arrange for the DMH Recovery Support Specialist to meet with your RSSs

- v. Hold a recovery-oriented training for all agency staff.
- vi. Enable your RSSs and clinical staff to attend your region's annual recovery conference.
- vii. Have an experienced WRAP facilitator conduct an "Organizational WRAP" for the agency.

List your agency's goals:

What resources do you currently have that will help you reach your goals?

Examples of relevant resources:

- i. Trained WRAP Facilitators on staff
- ii. Adequate conference/training budget to enable new RSSs to attend recovery conferences and other recovery oriented trainings

List your agency's resources:

How do you/your staff feel about your goals?

Examples of ways feelings and attitudes may be expressed:

- i. Has your agency completed a Recovery Snapshot?
- ii. Are RSSs in the strategic planning of the agency?
- iii. What opportunities are there for RSSs within the agency?
- iv. Are RSSs able to pursue CRSS and CEUs and not get lost in day to day demands at the agency?
- v. Is there someone within the agency experienced with benefit planning who is available to meet with the RSSs to address concerns and stresses related to losing benefits vs. work experience/career advancement?

List your agency's feelings and attitudes:

7. Challenges You Might Encounter and Strategies to Overcome Them

“For many, starting work as an RSS will be a springboard to a better peer support position or to another job in the behavioral health field. Others will transition from working as an RSS to employment outside the field of mental health. And, unfortunately, some will determine that they aren’t capable of sustaining recovery and working as a peer.”

-National Report on Peer Support Certification, Oct. 2016

- a. Criminal background checks might reveal items that eliminate a candidate or raise concerns on the part of the other staff.
 - i. Conduct a thorough background check before offering an RSS position to a candidate. Should there be a non-disqualifying finding, address and resolve the concern before hiring the individual.
- b. Returning to the workforce may conflict with benefit eligibility.
 - i. Encourage candidates for RSS positions to consult a Benefits Counselor to review and discuss the impact of working on benefits eligibility.
- c. The work schedule may require consideration of maximum number of hours allowed and the need for periodic time off.
 - i. Carefully map out the RSSs work schedule for a month or more at a time.
 - ii. Discuss work schedule in detail with potential RSS candidates to ensure clear and open lines of communication on both sides.
- d. Returning to the workforce may create additional stress for the RSSs.
 - i. As with all staff, RSSs’ will benefit from initial orientation and training which includes relaxation techniques and other ways to manage stress.
 - ii. Encourage RSS staff to incorporate wellness and stress management strategies on the job.
 - iii. Evaluate existing resources and offer these to your RSSs. Organizational resources may include an employee assistance program, peer support, or a wellness department.
- e. If agency policies prevent the RSSs from receiving services while employed with your agency, it might prove difficult for him or her to find needed services.
 - i. Develop a list of other service providers that the RSSs can use.
 - ii. Pursue a mutual working agreement with other agencies so that your agency can provide this resource for any staff that may need it.
- f. Medication side effects may impact physical health and stamina.

- i. Encourage RSSs to watch for and address physical symptoms before they become severe.
- g. Prior connection with staff as a service provider might create boundary confusion.
 - i. Encourage RSS staff to be open with their supervisor about any such prior connections.
 - ii. RSS and supervisor should discuss together the best way to proceed, based on the new context of the RSS as colleague to a former service provider, taking into consideration any agency policies that are in place.
- h. Self-doubt and prior adverse workplace experiences may make RSSs vulnerable to feeling they don't have sufficient support to be successful.
 - i. Meet with RSSs on a regular basis for short periods of time to help create a sense of continuity and support that will make these goals much more achievable.
 - ii. Look for ways to help RSSs gain confidence, such as pointing out how resilient they've been to get this far.
 - iii. Ask "What can I do to help you succeed at your job?" This is a sign of respect for the RSS's ability to consider solutions. It is also an important way for the supervisor to receive the RSS's commitment to finding a solution.
- i. RSSs could experience performance problems which may or may not be related to emotional or mental health crises.
 - i. Clarify the changes in performance that are causing you concern without putting your employee on the defensive by listing specific times and dates of offenses.
 - ii. On the other hand, avoid vagueness such as, "Your performance could be better." If your employee has been missing critical deadlines or goals, help them understand how this affects the organization.
 - iii. Review the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) for managing mental health issues. Advise the RSS Supervisor about the guidelines for special accommodations.
- j. For many, starting work as an RSS will be a springboard to a better support position or to another job in the behavioral health field. Others will transition from working as an RSS to employment outside the field of mental health.
 - i. With the RSS, establish measurable goals.
 - ii. Ask him or her to do as much self-assessment as possible.
 - iii. Provide guidance on how to conduct a self-assessment which includes specific examples.

List your agency's challenges and your strategies for overcoming them:

Establish agency goals in this area.

Examples of relevant goals:

- i. Create and maintain a clear RSS job description which is expressly linked to other relevant positions in the agency.
- ii. Have regularly scheduled meetings with your RSSs, preferably on a weekly basis.
- iii. Create a formal support system for RSSs using experienced staff as mentors.
- iv. Research the possibility of forming a recovery support group for RSS, including RSSs of other agencies.
- v. Consider producing an RSS hotline.

List your agency's goals:

8. How will you celebrate when you reach your goals?

Examples of ways you might celebrate:

- i. Reserve some time in a staff meeting or other gathering to issue a certificate of achievement and/or recognize an RSS as Employee of the Month
- ii. Create a High Five and/or Kudos Bulletin Board where staff can post comments to express gratitude and recognize fellow employees for extra efforts.
- iii. Community newspaper or agency newsletter.
- iv. Hold a special lunch or snack day for the team.

Enter your agency's own celebration ideas/plans:

Resources:

International Association of Peer Supporters (formerly National Association of Peer Specialists)

Link to website: <http://na4ps.wordpress.com/>

EXHIBIT 7A

Checklist for Supervisors

As you spend time completing and discussing these questions, you are more likely to build trust and teamwork with your new staff member. In your focus on the job at hand, please consider the special needs of some individuals facing medical challenges as they work toward their career goals. The following questions will help you communicate and develop goals with your employee, thus helping you to build a strong team.

1. What obstacles did your employee face before starting the job?
2. Does your employee understand how going to work can affect the benefits they are currently receiving?
3. Will their assigned work hours meet the organization needs?
4. What special accommodations might the employee need to be successful in this position?
5. What supports does the employee have outside of work that will help him or her deal with the obstacles at work?
6. Will your employee be valued as part of the team and able to build trust with the staff? What steps will you measure this by?
7. Can you arrange a flexible schedule if the needs of the employee change?
8. Are you knowledgeable about self-disclosure?
9. Do you follow the ADA guidelines?
10. How will you strategize to help the employee with challenges in the position?
11. How will you ensure that other staff members view the RSS as an important part of the team?

EXHIBIT 7B

Checklist for Supervisors to Give RSSs

You have a new job and you are excited to start! However, you have certain worries associated with your wellness and recovery. The purpose of the following questions is to strengthen your communication skills with your supervisor. Here are some examples of questions to ask your supervisor to help you become successful from the day you start. There are also some questions to help you think about the challenges to consider regarding your income and benefits.

1. Do I have a plan in place to help me if I have unforeseen obstacles?
2. How will this new income affect my benefits? Will I need to speak with a professional who knows how the income will affect my benefits?
3. What training opportunities will I have to advance my career within the organization?
4. Will time to pursue continuing education units be part of my job description?
5. Will I have the opportunity to increase my hours if I feel that I'm ready?
6. What benefits come with the job?
7. Can I trust myself to be successful and independent?
8. Have I considered when disclosure is appropriate, in what types of situations, and how much to disclose?
9. Do I have a good support system in place, including natural supports in the community?
10. How will this position fit in with my life goals?