

Minutes of Mental Health Focus Group Meeting

7 September 2004

Tim welcomed the group and covered all domestic arrangements. The aims and purpose of the group were revisited for the benefit of new members.

Tim mentioned two notices:

1. 24 November 2004 Employers Seminar
2. Job Centre Plus Meeting

Both of these events were fully explained and the contribution requested from clients outlined. Two clients expressed an interest in taking part. Tim invited the group to revisit the minutes of the last meeting (point 3.7) and familiarise themselves with past issues raised. It was emphasised that the dates given were not confirmed and at this moment we were looking for interested parties and encouraged the group to think about attending and feedback thoughts to their Placement Officer.

OBJECTIVE OF THE MEETING

The group discussion was open and focused on issues around recruitment and selection ranging from completing an application form to starting a new job.

Recruitment

- The group were asked about their experiences of applying for a job. The reactions received were mixed.
- One member of the group said that they had never really had any problems applying for a job. The problems started when they began work.

Application Forms

Views on completing application forms included:

- The majority of the group felt that there was too much focus on explaining previous time off and thought it inappropriate to ask this at such an early stage.
- Putting a request for an attendance record on the first page of an application form is off putting and does not give you the opportunity display your skills.
- If your illness is known you feel you have to work harder to prove yourself both on the application form and during the interview. If you are lucky enough to get the job you feel like this all the time. This is true for a physical disability also.
- Indirect discrimination – treated differently.
- Feel very strongly about being forced to declare your disability as this automatically puts you at a disadvantage, but because many application forms have a statement on the end stating you could lose your job you feel obliged.
- The lengthy medical questionnaire is quite intrusive. It homes in on your negatives before you have even started.
- I feel forced to lie to give myself a chance, I take a chance that if the organisation does not have their own occupational health then there is no reason they should ever find out.
- You feel like you have to flower your disability on the application form.
- You have to justify your disability.
- You have to classify yourself as 'normal'.
- Employers' lack of understanding of mental health does not help; they tend to have a very poor knowledge of certain types of illness.
- Employers should have someone on the selection panel who has some knowledge of

- mental health or at least general disabilities when shortlisting.
- Availability of a person who has some knowledge of a range of disabilities and effects in employment.
- Find the equal opportunities statement added to adverts offensive, it reads as if they are doing you a favour, like you should be grateful they sent you the application in the first place.
- If employers really want to treat you as an equal then they should hold back on the equal opportunity statement or at least consider changing it.
- There is more work for the employer if you have had problems in the past unless support from Bury EST offered.

Supporting letters from Bury EST – what is the best time to tell an employer that you are working with Bury EST? Does this have a positive or negative effect?

Thoughts included:

- The letter can give a negative picture right from the start.
- I mentioned Bury EST twice in previous interviews and both times I felt that the interview went downhill from there on.
- Negative media view of mental health does not help – there is a lack of public information.
- If the employer is a member of the forum then it is all right to tell them before the interview because they understand what Bury EST is about so they know where we are coming from.
- If the job has been found by Bury EST there is less pressure on you.
- If the employer has no prior knowledge of Bury EST I would prefer that they are told after the interview and that no letter is sent with the application form as it might be seen as an added complication.

What do you think of the CV Bury EST produces? Does it have the desired effect?

- Only two members of the group actually have a CV produced by Bury EST.
- Other members felt that this part of the service was not being promoted enough.

Selection: How do the group feel about interviews?

- Enjoy interviews if they are face to face as you get an idea of the employer.
- Perform better over the telephone than I do face to face.
- Don't feel comfortable being interviewed over the telephone.
- You need to have worked for the employer to know how their mind works and what words they want to hear.

What do the group feel is an appropriate way for Bury EST to approach an employer on their behalf?

- The positive effects of work experience should be outlined and working interviews used more.
- One member of the group raised the question whether this creates an unfair advantage?
- This question was opened up to the group and they were asked what arguments could Bury EST put forward to employers to support this?
- Employers can offer this to all prospective employees.
- At what stage do you tell an employer that your pay is restricted to £20?
- Problem of offering to work for less pay.

Starting Work: When do you think is a good time to introduce Bury EST?

Answers included:

- This is down to the individual.
- The subject of mental health is totally taboo in the work place.
- Employer/manager needs to be more aware of how to approach the subject of mental illness when returning to work after being ill.
- Return to work interviews should be done more but less formal – not in front of other people either.
- Someone who has worked with you should conduct the interview not a 'stranger' from staffing.
- Bury EST involvement with employer prior to interview has worked well for some clients.
- Employment has been positive when Bury EST and employer have worked together from the beginning. Set up from the word go.
- When the employer has been informed of Bury EST at a later stage things has been more complicated and experience not as positive.