



Clubhouse Employment: 'Tried and true' strategies, and new initiatives for a changing world

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Fountain House Stockholm was founded in 1980, one of the first Clubhouses outside of the USA. We are located in the center of the capital in a three-story house. We have a kitchen unit and a clerical unit and about 50 active members daily.

Our Employment program is called 'Ways Out.' How it has been organized has changed over the years. I will share some of our mistakes and success stories and also talk about how we work today. This speech is mainly about how we reach those in our clubhouse that need extra support to gain employment. Also, I will explain how the Swedish context affects how we work and even though that it is specific for our Clubhouse, I hope it might inspire you.

Background

I started working at the Clubhouse in Stockholm about seven years ago. At that time our Clubhouse was in a transition with a new director and new staff members. We didn't have an Employment or Education unit. Also, we had lost the majority of our Transitional Employment jobs due to changes in those organizations. So, we started small.

We invited everybody to meetings and for a while we just explored who came and for what reasons.

Initially these meetings didn't have any specific themes and many members came but after a few months we felt a bit lost. Different interests started pulling us in too many directions. From regular meetings without agendas, we learned that we need to be more specific and clear about the purpose of our meetings. This was a long process. It is not always easy to balance spontaneous and instant interests and link it to long-term strategic work in a way that will benefit the whole community.

Collaboration and knowledge

We knew we needed inspiration and help. Through our board, we found a connection to an employment placement agency. With their guidance, we started planning an elaborated course. It would run for four months in the Clubhouse.

The course covered presentations on how to write a cover letter; a resume; thoughts on body language; communication skills and much more. Also two government agencies visited us to inform us about laws and regulations concerning benefits and employment. The latter was very important. To this day we are continuously learning about how our system works and how knowing the system helps our members immensely.

The course invited peer-support and tools for self-help to overcome certain fears of change. Some members started growing into positive role models offering hope and optimism for others that had negative experiences with government officials.

The course taught us a lot. But for many members, the intensity of the course was tough. We experienced that all of the topics were useful in themselves, but also it was too much to take on in this fashion. Many needed a softer

approach. Those that were not job-ready needed to address the fear of leaving the Clubhouse, and the fear of not being good enough for employment. And everybody wanted to talk about the anxiety over losing benefits. The fear of losing financial security is deeply rooted and it turned out it was one of the strongest reasons to not try taking a first step towards employment.

Individual approach attracts those with significant challenges

Together we evaluated our work and summarized needs and wishes. We scheduled themed meetings but also left room to just touch base, and offer space for organic communication.

As staff, we also started to offer individual guidance. This has been a very important part in supporting our members that have had the most significant employment challenges. It has also been the most resource demanding work. I am very proud and happy that we have had the ability to work like this. So many members voice disappointment in not being taken seriously and not understanding their rights. Also, many feel they have too little time with government officials and health care representatives to be fully engaged in their recovery.

We felt we could be a support and link between these services. Taking the first steps for a member in this situation demands coordination of services, overcoming bureaucratic obstacles, seeing the whole individual and applying a multi-systemic approach. While wanting to help with this co-ordination, we didn't want to re-invent the wheel. We needed to learn more about our system and use it to our advantage.

Swedish context

If a member wants to work they have to notify the government. Depending on what type of income they receive and what year they got their benefits, they will have different options. I am sure it's like this where you live too.

In Sweden if someone works five hours or less per week they can keep their disability benefits, but still have to contact the government agencies. Just this initial contact, has made many members hesitate. We have one TE equivalent of five hours a week. This TE is the only one we have and we sometimes struggle with manning it for different reasons. Fear is one, also it is not necessarily financially beneficial.

The salary will be deducted from housing benefits and will be subject to taxes and for some that will result in a lower income. A TE that would amount to 20 hours a week could be the equivalent of full benefits. But it would probably lead to a conclusion by the Social Insurance Agency that the individual can now in fact work part time and they would lose their benefits. That is why we have not worked on building more TE collaborations. For the majority of our members a TE with more hours would be a stressful and financially undependable option as soon as the TE would be over.

Instead, we focus on a useful collaboration between The Employment Agency and the Social Insurance Agency. Entering this collaboration starts with a meeting with the member, the agencies, their doctor and usually a staff-member from the Clubhouse. It is a coordinated, multi-systemic initiative, aimed at improving the individual's capacity for gainful employment. We have learned so much from attending these meetings.

The program's purpose is to explore if one can work 10 hours a week or more, and one can try working in one or different places. The case workers will help the individual to find a suitable internship, and simultaneously, the Clubhouse is present and offers support in this process.

Some members just need to try to go to a new place. The subway ride there, entering a new building, meeting new people is the first big step. Others are past that, and need more of a challenge and work at a placement that is a merit within the field that they later want to work in. Many of our members want to do an internship first, before employment, because they feel safer to try it step by step. Most importantly, knowing they can safely return to their disability benefits has increased the number of members actually trying this step.

Our job is to support the member through this process and prepare them for what is ahead, whether they get employment, continue into a Labor Agency employment program, or go back to benefits. Cynthia will share more about her inspiring journey experiencing these initiatives.

Follow-up

We have learned that the follow-ups we have with these members are very important. Sometimes having been away from the Labor market for years can lead the member to be uncertain of what is an ok work load, how much responsibility is reasonable. Our follow-ups with members ensure them that they have the right to voice concerns about stress, lack of feed-back on the job, and so on. Even though the Employment Agency is involved with follow-ups, our strength lies in our Clubhouse relationships and knowing each other, and being alert.

Empowerment

Simultaneously, as we work on inviting members to this collaboration, we also run a course in the Clubhouse about Empowerment. The material is produced by a local organization that supports people with mental illness to access employment or education opportunities. The material is very simple. It covers 10 themes, including: discussing what empowerment is, dreams, how to come prepared for important meetings, how to handle set-backs, etc. Each theme contains a short introduction, questions for group discussion and individual exercises. The material gives the group an opportunity to reflect on what they want to do, to actually voice or write down the first steps, to discuss courage and fear and support each other. We have found that mixing this material with other themes such as member stories, presentations from organizations, etc. has been a very successful formula to keep members engaged, supporting each other, reflecting on their needs in a safe space and giving those that are ready a compassionate push in the right direction. This course also reveals who is not ready and sometimes that can be the first step to understanding how to move forward. We have worked with this material for one and a half years and it is very popular, and helps us understand better how we can be of service to our members.

What works for us:

- Working with a multi-systemic approach, seeing the whole individual.
- Benefits planning and knowledge about income regulations and house benefits.
- Inviting representatives from national and local government agencies to our Clubhouse, so they can inform our members about these services.
- Educating our members about their rights as employees.
- Encouraging members like Cynthia, that offer peer support and personal member stories to overcome stigma and act as role models for maintaining hope and optimism.
- Evaluating our work together with members thoroughly twice a year: what works, what is lacking?
- Not being afraid to talk about obstacles, fears, insecurities. We work with the course material 'Empowerment'.
- Being a medium sized Clubhouse, we can follow all of our members, and continuously encourage individuals to come to meetings, remind them of what is going on etc.
- All staff-members are involved in informing, supporting and following up members' employment journeys.
- To trust ourselves when we feel something is missing, to take time to get inspired, look at what other organizations or clubhouses are doing, and be part of Facebook groups, mailing lists, and visit exhibitions and so on.
- For our members that have lost an employment position, we offer them a safe place to return to, to regroup and gain confidence again.

After seven years I am so proud to be part of this universal and human model. In our Clubhouse, during 2018, 16 members began an employment, 13 began studying, 5 members started an internship. In total 34 members *started* employment, internship or studies in 2018! All of us sitting here, we are truly an important, empowering, inclusive community and our strength lies in our relationships, offering support and being a safe place to return to without judgment. Thank you!