Chapter 9

Creating Supportive Work Environments for People With Mental Illness

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CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- To encourage readers to consider environmental interventions for clients with mental illness who have goals related to work.
- To identify key physical, cultural, and institutional aspects of workplace environments that facilitate or hinder clients’ participation in work.
- To suggest strategies to create supportive work environments.
- To offer a broad conceptualization of work and alternative paths to meaningful work.
- To frame occupational performance for clients with mental illness within the recovery process.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional approaches to assist individuals with mental illness to succeed in work roles have tended to focus exclusively upon interventions directed at the person with the illness, and have not been supported by research or the consumer literature. Despite intensive training and support of workers in community placements, less than 15% of people with serious mental illness successfully obtain and maintain traditional paid employment (Anthony, Cohen, & Farkas, 1990). In fact, “mental illness is associated with the lowest employment outcomes among various disabilities” (Davidson et al., 2001, p. 376). Thus, the potential for consumers of mental health services to enjoy the benefits of full citizenship and to escape the cycle of poverty, which significantly defines their existence, remains intangible (Church,