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# Individual Placement Support is the keyhole: Employer experiences of supporting persons with mental illness

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## Abstract

**Background and objective:** Rehabilitation professionals are increasingly interested in the vocational rehabilitation approach called Individual Placement and Support (IPS) for persons with serious mental illness. Since employers play a crucial supporting role for the IPS service user in the workplace, the aim of this study was to explore the experiences and views of employers in Sweden who have participated in the IPS network and taken IPS service users into their workforce.

**Methods:** Grounded theory with situational analysis was used to analyze data from nine employers.

**Results:** The core category *being socially committed* was identified. Six stages/categories illustrated the employer process, from taking on IPS service users to supporting them at work: 1) *IPS is the keyhole*, 2) *being ready to open the door*, 3) *making a job offer*, 4) *removing barriers*, 5) *achieving the goal*, and 6) *pride mixed with negative feelings*.

**Conclusions:** The study results suggest that collaborative relationships with employers must be based on trust and professionalism, and that employers must be provided with adequate support.

**Keywords:** Supported employment, vocational rehabilitation, occupational therapy, severe mental illness

## 1. Introduction

One of the challenges faced by professionals in vocational rehabilitation is enabling persons with serious mental illness (SMI) to gain and keep preferred and chosen employment (Arbesman & Logsdon, 2011; Waghorn, Lloyd, & Clune, 2009). The evidence-based supported employment approach called Individual Placement and Support (IPS), which was developed to provide a means for people with a SMI to seek and obtain competitive employment, has shown to be two to three times as effective as traditional prevocational training services for gaining employment (Arbesman & Logsdon, 2011; Bond, Drake, & Becker, 2008, 2012; Waghorn et al., 2009). IPS is guided by seven evidence-based principles that emphasize 1) the goal of gaining and keeping competitive employment, 2) service users willingness to work, 3) a rapid job search, 4) close collaboration with mental health care team, 5) service user preferences and choice, 6) an individualized time-unlimited support to minimize work disabilities, and 7) benefit counselling at an early stage (Bond, 2004). Recently, systematic development of relationships with employers was described as a critical part of IPS as it relates to the workplace (Glover & Frounfelker, 2011). Consequently, an eighth IPS principle was added to address this issue (Bond et al., 2012). To date, however, employer experiences and views of participating in the IPS network and taking IPS service users into their workforce has not been researched.

The employment specialist (ES) is the key person within IPS. The ES follows the principles, and performs and coordinates all steps in the vocational process. The ES, with an intermediate and supportive role in relation to clients and others, becomes the visible part of the IPS intervention. Besides providing unlimited on- and off-worksite support, the ES organizes an IPS network. This network includes relevant individuals from the mental health and welfare systems, employers, coworkers, and friends and family members if needed (Lexén, Hofgren, & Bejerholm, 2013a). This means that not every participant is part of the

IPS network at all times. The inclusion of employers is dependent on whether the IPS service user decides to disclose the mental illness or disability as he or she is applying for a job.

Disclosure is an important factor for optimizing the IPS since it enables on-worksite support and the opportunity to collaborate with the employer (Lexén et al. 2013a). From the perspective of IPS service users, employers can help negotiate and provide workplace accommodations. Moreover, employer attitude and engagement are important for IPS user work satisfaction (Lexén et al., 2013a, 2013b). In this study, we focus on the point of view of the employer, using employers who are part of the IPS network and who thus know about the specific shortcomings as well as the skills and strengths of their employees. The employer perspective is vital to explore, since the IPS service user starts work without prevocational training (Cocks & Boaden, 2009), and the IPS places high demands on engagement and collaboration with the employer (Lexén et al., 2013a).

Disability research shows that employers vary in their openness to hiring persons with disabilities (Gilbride, Stensrud, Vandergoot, & Golden, 2003; Ju, Roberts, & Zhang, 2013). According to Gilbride and colleagues (2003), employers are more likely to hire persons with disabilities if the employer is flexible, has a personal management style, focuses on work performance instead of the disability, is positive toward accommodations, finds an effective job-person match, and views rehabilitation programs as an ongoing resource and support. Persons with psychiatric disabilities are shown to endure greater stigmatization in the workplace than those with other disabilities (Ju et al., 2013; Kirsh et al., 2009). Many employers are concerned about work performance, personality, and symptoms (Ju et al., 2013; Kirsh et al., 2009). There is even a “common understanding” that this group of individuals cannot work (Rinaldi & Perkins, 2005). Nevertheless, persons with psychiatric disabilities are

more successful in workplaces that accept diversity and have an atmosphere of respect and caring (Kirsh, 2000).

Greater knowledge of employer experiences and views on supporting persons with SMI, who are IPS service users, as well as the employer role in the IPS network, is needed (Lexén et al., 2013a, 2013b). Despite the success of IPS compared to traditional vocational rehabilitation, only about 60% of those who enter IPS are eventually employed (Bond & Campbell, 2008; Drake & Bond, 2011), and not every IPS service user benefits fully from the intervention and remains employed (Drake & Bond, 2011; Mak, Tsang, & Cheung, 2006; Mueser, Becker, & Wolfe, 2001). More knowledge is needed on how to build collaborative relationships with employers, the support areas that are important to address promotion of job tenure among IPS service users, and the development of a worker role and a sustainable career. The aim of this study was to explore employer experiences and views of participating in the IPS network and taking IPS service users into their workforce.

## 2. Methods

A grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) with supplementary situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) was chosen for this study. Grounded theory is an appropriate method for explaining actions and processes in a situation, and when a theoretical framework for further research is desired (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). The situational analysis is applied as a supplementary analytical tool to grounded theory for approaching the complexities and differences in the situation or research area of interest. Situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) was developed to resituate grounded theory to better address the differences and complexities of the empirical world articulated through the postmodern turn. According to Clarke the complexity of our social world places great demands of reflexivity and relationality when looking at a research situation. Situational analysis thus emphasizes positionalities,

complications, instabilities, irregularities, and contradictions among others in the situation. According to Clarke (2005) and Clarke and Friese (2007) situational analysis builds on Strauss's social worlds/discourse theory and offers situational maps and analyses as innovative supplements to the basic social process analyses characteristic of traditional grounded theory.

## **2.1. Sampling of participants**

Eligibility criteria included employers in the southern parts of Sweden with experience of participating in the IPS network, providing on-worksite support, and taking IPS service users into their workforce. The study was approved by the Regional Ethical Board in Lund, Sweden, (Dnr 202/2008). The employers were recruited gradually; after the first interview had been transcribed and subjected to preliminary analysis, the next employer was theoretically chosen on the basis of how he/she could contribute to the development of the analysis (see data collection below). This is in line with the concept of theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). The process implied that we included employers of different ages and gender from both public and private sectors and from workplaces with different levels of profitability. Participants were recruited in three steps. First, the ES introduced the employer to the study and asked if he or she was willing to participate and be contacted by the interviewer (A.L.). Second, additional information about the study was given to the employer by the interviewer when an interview appointment was set. This information specified that no sensitive data, which could reveal the identity of the service user, should be revealed during the interview. Last, at the time of the interview, the information previously provided was repeated and supplied in a written form. All employers who were asked to participate agreed to do so (N=9), provided written consent, and completed the interview.



Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants.

Employer	Age (years)	Gender	Higher education (yes/no)	Employer experience (2-16 years)	Type of workplace	Size of workplace (No. of employees)	Sector	Type of employment
1	62	Male	Yes	6	Camera store	>5	Private	Internship
2	44	Female	Yes	4	Day center	>5	Public	Employment
3	49	Female	Yes	4	Pet shop	>5	Private	Employment
4	60	Female	Yes	4	University library	<50	Public	Employment
5	39	Female	Yes	2	Information technology company	10-50	Private	Employment
6	40	Male	Yes	5	Information technology company	10-50	Private	Internship
7	46	Male	No	10	Property management company	<50	Public	Employment
8	50	Male	No	6	Paper industry	>5	Private	Internship
9	47	Male	No	16	Printing house	>5	Private	Internship

The socio-demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1. Five employers provided competitive employment and four employers offered internship placements for IPS service users. While internship placements are not considered part of IPS a Swedish implementation study showed that there is a traditional and obligatory rehabilitation route for Swedish citizens who have been inactive in the labor market because of long-term unemployment or disability (Bejerholm, Larsson, & Hofgren, 2011). In this implementation study, internship rather than competitive employment was generally recommended to the IPS service users before competitive employment. In this situation, employers received economic compensation. Employers could also be compensated by various wage subsidies if they employed the persons later. As a result many employers consider offering such an internship placement before employment.

## **2.2. Data collection**

As described earlier the data collection was directed by theoretical sampling, where the emerging analysis guided the selection of participants (Corbin and Strauss, 2007). Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and was conducted at the participant's workplace. The interviews were conducted in the native language of the participants, i.e. Swedish, by the first author (AL), and were recorded digitally with consent of the participants. Initially, a pilot interview was conducted. The grounded theory interview format was a good way to get employers to share their views and experiences and corresponded to the research aim. The question areas were based on a structured literature search of the topic area. First, the employer was asked to recall events related to participating in the IPS network. Later in the interview, question areas included employer support, IPS professional support, work-related factors, views/attitudes, experiences, and society. If another topic of relevance was brought up, the employer was encouraged to share that as well (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). As the interviews were performed and analyzed, codes and preliminary categories gradually added more specific and modified question areas. After the first interview, questions on humanity, employer traits, and experience of mental ill health were added. After the second interview, the consequences of providing support, cooperation with the ES and the IPS network were included. The third interview resulted in questions on internship versus competitive employment, wage subsidies, social environment, and possibilities and limitations in a larger company. The fourth interview produced queries about the hiring process, disclosure, adapting a personal approach, and tolerance of diversity. After the fifth interview, questions on direct support strategies, goodwill, and differences in demands were added. Following the sixth interview, indirect support strategies and work complexity in relation to work ability were added. After the seventh interview, free labor, dependence on the welfare system, and possibilities and limitations within the industry were incorporated. This process of feeding

initial results back into the data collection is viewed as essential in grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). No additional ideas that added to the emerging categories appeared during the eighth and ninth interviews, and thus no further interviews were performed.

### **2.3. Data analysis**

Throughout the analysis process, the program Open Code 4.01 was used as a structuring tool and memos were written to aid the analysis process. We preceded through the stages of open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). The process of open coding involved reducing data to manageable pieces and developing codes by identifying concepts and the properties and dimensions that represent the ideas contained in the data. Axial coding occurred in concurrence with open coding. During this process, crosscutting and related concepts were subjected to constant comparisons. This part of the analysis focused on codes and concepts that refer to the process, ie ongoing actions and interactions, employer emotions as they incorporated an IPS service user into their workforce and participated in the IPS network. One core category and six main categories were identified and illustrated in the conceptual process model.

Situational analysis was used as a supplemental approach during the analysis process. Abstract messy maps were used during the open coding and axial coding. The purpose was to open up the data and look at it from different angles. This helped plan further theoretical sampling. Relational analyses between the different codes in the map supplemented the grounded theory comparative analysis. Finally, a positional map was created to highlight the major positions taken or not taken by employers for the reasons they incorporated IPS service users. To increase the trustworthiness of the findings, data were coded separately after each interview by A.L. (first author/interviewer) and U.B. (co-author). All parts of the analyses

were continuously discussed among all authors, until consensus was reached. The data collection and analyses took about eight months to complete.

### 3. Results

The analyses resulted in the core category *being socially committed*. Each employer had been socially committed in the past and strived to maintain social commitment throughout the process of participating in the IPS network and taking IPS service users into their workforce. The process consisted of six stages or main categories: (1) *IPS is the keyhole*, (2) *being ready to open the door*, (3) *making a job offer*, (4) *removing barriers*, (5) *achieving the goal*, and (6) *pride mixed with negative feelings*. The stages in the process do not coincide with the numerical order (Figure 1).

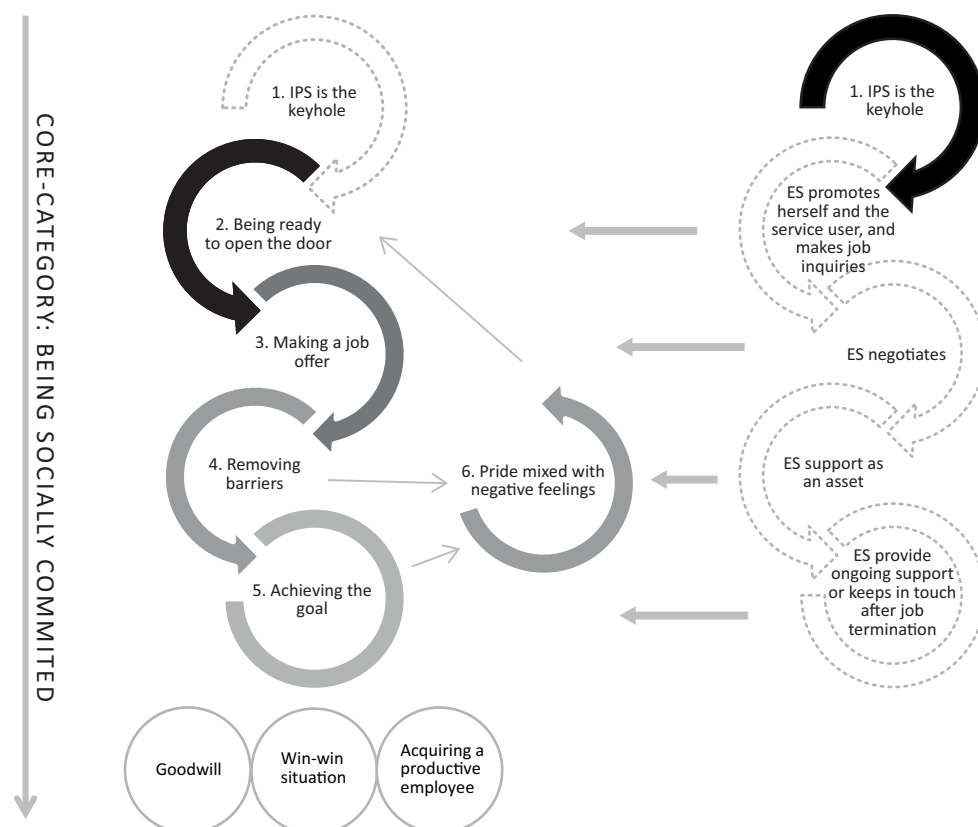


Figure 1. Conceptual model of employer experiences and views of participating in the IPS network and taking IPS service users into their workforce, presented as a process.

### **3.1. Stage 1: IPS is the keyhole**

The employers experienced the support provided by the ES, the visual part of the IPS, as *the keyhole*. The IPS was expected to enable persons with SMI to enter and keep a job in the labor market. Employers described it as crucial that the ES was trustworthy and professional when promoting the IPS service user and themselves, making job inquiries, and negotiating on the IPS service user's behalf. Among other things, the ES provided information on the comprehensive, individualized, time-unlimited, on-worksites support that could be provided. Employers viewed this as a necessity. Support of the ES was perceived as an asset, especially as the employer tried to remove barriers by using strategies to accommodate for the user's work-related disabilities. The employers valued the support they personally received from the ES. They could rely on the ES for strength, a feeling of safety, for support, and to discuss and solve problems. Furthermore, active ES involvement at the worksite, ie, support given to the employer, colleagues and the IPS service user, was also greatly appreciated by employers. In this situation, the ES provided information on user abilities, disabilities, and reasonable accommodations that opened up new views on matters concerning the user and dealt with false expectations of user abilities and disabilities. ES support also included a mediation or support role in social interactions between the user, employer, and colleagues, as well as provision of hands-on support in work performance. If the IPS service user terminated the job, the ES often kept in touch with the employer afterwards. As shown in Figure 1, from the employer perspective, ES support played a crucial role at several stages in the process.

### **3.2. Stage 2 and 3: Being ready to open the door and making a job offer**

Employer previous experience, personal traits, and views were of importance for employer readiness to 'open the door' and include IPS service users in their workforce, and make a job

offer of competitive employment or internship placement. Furthermore, external conditions also played a role (Figure 2).

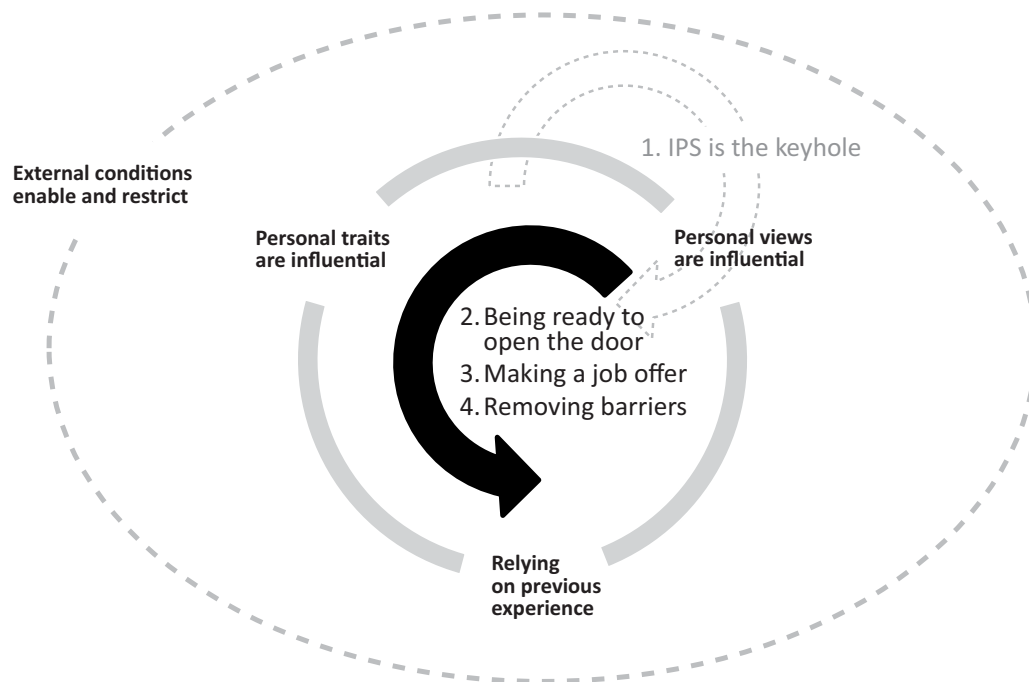


Figure 2. Illustration of factors that influence employer readiness to open the door, make a job offer, and the employer's choice of strategies when removing barriers.

### 3.2.1. Relying on previous experience

Each of the employers had previous experience of employees, family members and/or friends with mental illness, or meeting persons in vulnerable situations. One employer shared his experience of living with a person with mental illness:

The person I used to live with had a mental health illness. She became ill in connection with the birth of my son, so I've seen it up close. My son had a really tough period but is stable now. She is severely bipolar.

Some employers had experience with providing accommodations to employees with SMI; others had dedicated their past to other vulnerable persons such as homeless young people. Negative experience of the inadequate support from traditional vocational services also affected their readiness to be open to working with the IPS network and service users.

### *3.2.2. Personal traits and views are influential*

Employers were generally open-minded and socially engaged, and had a social conscience. They were brave when it came to trying new things, innovative, and had a positive ethos that allowed them to see opportunities rather than obstacles. This influenced their readiness to open the door and make a job offer. One employer said “I am a person who always sees the glass as half full instead of half empty. I always have a positive outlook on people and their resources.”

The employers believed in the positive and vital role of work, and found unemployment and being on sick leave devastating. By this, they meant that work creates a feeling of belonging to society and provides a sense of participation. Work was expected to make a person feel worthy and provide opportunities for personal development, growth, and self-esteem. In contrast, being on sick leave was described as creating psychological problems, a lack of daily routines, social exclusion, loneliness, and feelings of not being worthy. Employers described the Swedish system as “inadequate” because they experienced the system to be deficient in helping persons with SMI get back to work. Many employers viewed the Social Insurance Agency and the Public Employment Service as having the wrong approach: “There is a need to find new ways to include persons with SMI in the workforce.” Internship placements for persons with SMI were seen a win-win situation. An internship created opportunities such as job training and references for persons with SMI who have not recently been working. In addition, the employer got an “extra pair of hands” at a lower cost,

since they received financial compensation. Many employers argued that “to be part of society requires a social responsibility, and employers should equip themselves with humility when their company is doing well, and contribute by helping others”. Personal views such as, “In the long run, goodwill is profitable for a company” and, “Diversity is instructive” had impact on their readiness to open the door and make a job offer. Employers also believed in the IPS service users’ potential as workers: “Not using persons with mental illness in the workforce is a desperate waste of resources.”

### *3.2.3. External conditions enable and restrict*

The employers described that financial issues and dependence on the welfare system affected their readiness to open the door and make a job offer. Employers in small companies with few employees described their company’s finances as “a stumbling block”. High employment taxes also had an impact and resulted in many of the companies depending on subsidized labor: “It’s kind of a win-win situation. We get someone who does some chores and the person gets work experience and references.” Some companies were under severe pressure to create profits, and this also had an influence.

### **3.3. Stage 4: Removing barriers**

This stage of the process involved the employer trying to remove barriers in the work environment. Direct and indirect support strategies were used to accommodate the IPS service user’s disabilities. Direct support strategies included making a job-person match, ie, assigning work tasks that were in line with what he or she was able to do, adjusting work hours, modifying work tasks, and adapting a personal approach. Adapting a personal approach could include having a tolerant and flexible approach. It could also mean having to remind, check, set boundaries, and nag: “It’s a little bit like being a mother. You must not be afraid to nag or



correct the person”. Other mentioned strategies were to help the IPS service user cope with the mental illness and provide hands-on support in work performance. Indirect support strategies involved using ES support as an asset in the workplace. This is described more fully under the heading “IPS is the keyhole”. Employers also urged employees to take social responsibility and include the IPS service user at work. Sometimes supervisor responsibility was delegated to other employees. Another indirect support strategy used by the employers was to bring their own needs into account when making decisions. As evident in prior stages of being ready to open the door and make a job offer, the employers’ relied on previous experience when using these strategies. Personal traits and views, as well as external conditions, also had an influence (Figure 2).

### *3.3.1. Relying on previous experience*

Previous employer experiences were important once the IPS service user had started work and employers tried to remove work environment barriers. Their previous experience with mental illness and/or experiences of meeting persons in vulnerable situations functioned as the rationale, and the employer’s life experience gave self-awareness and confidence when using different support strategies:

“Through experience, I have learned that sometimes it is better to be the first to admit you made a mistake. I think that I have gained increased self-confidence with age. It makes it easier to handle personnel matters. In the past, I was more afraid to cause conflicts.”

### *3.3.2. Personal traits and views are influential*

When providing on-worksites support, employers were engaged, empathic, tolerant, and problem-focused. They tried to understand the IPS service user’s situation, problems, and

disabilities, were tolerant to diversity, and focused on solving problems related to the work situation. Employers thought “the greater the challenge, the better”. These personal traits also affected their choice of support strategies.

Employers believed in providing support for work performance, to accommodate the service user’s disabilities. Personal views such as, “A mental illness is not a cold - appropriate accommodation is necessary”, and “To make accommodations is neither complicated nor a personal sacrifice” were evident in employer narratives. They also believed in a realistic approach: “It is important to have a realistic approach, because changes take time.”

### *3.3.3. External conditions enable and restrict*

Organizational and work culture issues had an impact on how barriers could be removed to enable service user work performance. External conditions could restrict the options for adequate worksite support. These included things such as whether the company was private or public, organization type, staffing and size, and if the company offered relevant work tasks. The social atmosphere among employees also mattered. On one hand, employers perceived it to be facilitating if other employees were tolerant towards differences, helpful, and understanding. On the other hand, they felt limited if employees showed lack of understanding or tolerance towards IPS service user disabilities and needed accommodations.

## **3.4. Stage 5: Achieving the goal**

During the analyses, three goals emerged concerning employer reasons for taking on IPS service users: goodwill, win-win situation, and acquiring a productive employee (Figure 1). To elaborate further on the different positions taken or not taken with regard to these goals, a positional map was created (Figure 3).

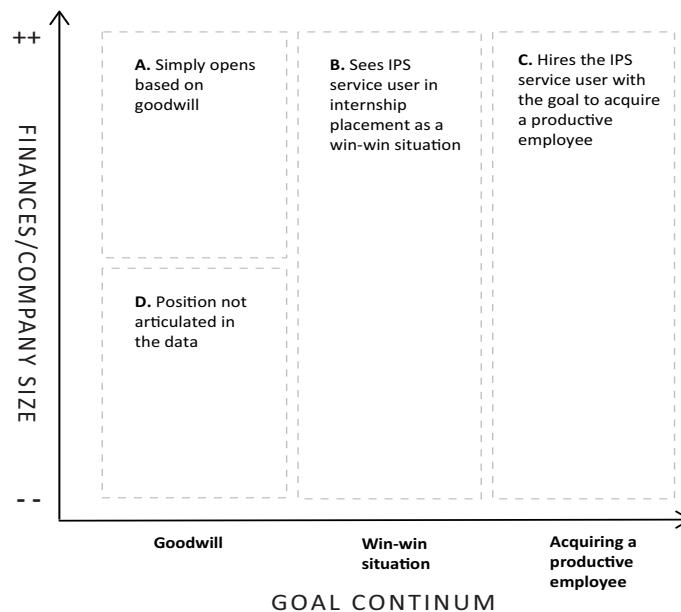


Figure 3. Major positions taken, or not taken, by the employers on taking on IPS service users in their workforce in relation to company finances and size.

Position A comprises employers in profitable larger companies who simply open their workplace because of goodwill, and allow the IPS service user to participate at the worksite without any specific job requirements. Position B includes employers of companies that see the opportunity of having subsidized labor as a win-win situation. The company gets an extra pair of hands, while the IPS service user gets work experience and references. This position was articulated by employers in larger profitable companies that were not dependent on the welfare system for internship and subsidized labor, as well as in smaller companies with constrained finances that use the welfare system as a survival strategy. Position C encompasses employers in larger and smaller companies who hire IPS service users based on merit, on the same premises as other employees, and the goal is acquiring a productive

employee. The employers in smaller companies, who hire a person despite constrained finances, are driven by strong social engagement that goes beyond the company budget. Position D was not articulated in the data. It would, however, include employers in smaller companies with strained finances who simply participate because of goodwill, and allow the IPS service user to participate at the worksite without specific job requirements.

### **3.5. Stage 6: Pride mixed with negative feelings**

According to employers, taking on IPS service users and being part of the IPS network evoked experiences of pride, mixed with negative feelings. They felt proud to be able to contribute to another's development, to see someone grow, and to feel connected to him or her. These experiences served as a driving force that reinforced the employer's social commitment. Incidents that created negative feelings had an adverse impact on the employer's future willingness to consider opening the door. Employers could become frustrated and angry when the service user did not keep their promises. Employers felt stressed and inadequate if supporting the service user contributed to a larger workload. They might also be afraid to make demands that would affect the well-being of the service user. One employer said: "The meeting with the mental health personnel really affected me. They treated him as really vulnerable and afterwards I was really afraid to make demands for fear of causing him to relapse in his mental illness." The employers also felt frustrated and sad when they had to deal with reactions and conflicts among the other employees. For example, lack of social skills of the IPS service user or differential treatment by the employer compared to other employees might cause issues. Furthermore, employers in smaller companies became frustrated when they had to struggle to manage sickness absence: "It is really difficult and you know that he is going to be on periods of sick leave because of his illness. We don't really have that flexibility in our business".

## 4. Discussion

Our study underlines the importance of the eighth principle of IPS and the critical role the employer collaborative relationship plays for persons with SMI who begin work. Our study provides a unique and enhanced understanding of the employer point of view that is not described in earlier IPS or disability research. As reflected by the core category, the employers were socially committed from the beginning, and strived to be so throughout contact with the IPS service user. Their social commitment was decisive for initial provision of opportunity within their company as well as for taking an active role in the IPS network.

Employers described IPS as the keyhole. They argued that the IPS allowed persons with SMI to begin and keep a job in the labor market. Employers said that it was crucially important that the ES was trustworthy and professional. The support provided by the ES was also considered a necessity. These results are consistent with an earlier study of employer experiences of successful support provided by supported employment services and other disability groups (eg, neuropsychological and intellectual disabilities) (Gustafsson, Peralta, & Danermark, 2013). Employers in the present study valued the time-unlimited ES support and that the ES kept in touch even if the service user terminated the job. This is in contrast to the study by Gustafsson and colleagues (2013), in which support was limited in time and intensity. In light of this, our study supports the IPS principle of unlimited and ongoing support for the service user, but with a new perspective. In addition to the eighth principle of systematic development of collaborative relationships with employers which are based on trust and professionalism, it is important to emphasize the principle of time-unlimited and ongoing worksite support for employers.

Despite the heterogeneous sample (eg, duration of employer experience, type and size of company), our results reveal a homogenous and unique group of employers. These employers

had previous experiences, personal traits, and individual views that made them willing and ready to open the door for persons with SMI and to be part of the IPS network. In general, the employers were socially engaged, open-minded, and had positive outlooks toward people. They also had experience of what having a mental illness may entail, or of meeting persons in vulnerable situations. In a review addressing research on employer attitudes towards workers with disabilities, employers varied in their openness to hiring persons with disabilities. However, those with previous experience of people with disabilities were more positive towards hiring such individuals (Ju et al., 2013). In one study (Gilbride et al., 2003), several employer characteristics were similar to those found in our study, including view of the vocational service as an asset and support, tolerance of diversity, positive ethos, adapting a personal approach, and striving to make an appropriate job-person match. Hence, there are common features among those employers who will hire various disability groups and those who invite persons with SMI into their workplace. The clinical implication is that it is desirable for the ES to look actively for employment opportunities at workplaces with employers who have these characteristics. Moreover, Ju and colleagues (2013) showed that employers generally are reluctant to hire persons with certain types of disabilities such as schizophrenia. Employers are often uninformed about how a psychiatric disability may affect work performance and how to accommodate a psychiatric disability. For an employer with less experience, what a psychiatric disability may entail or when there are limited personnel resources, another ES strategy is to focus on filling this knowledge and experience gap and thus increase openness to employing and accommodating persons with SMI disabilities (Gilbride et al., 2003). This may be an effective approach to reducing barriers to employment for persons with SMI.

We may have captured a group of employers who are unique when it comes to personal traits and views. Another possibility is that certain leadership styles are more likely to support IPS service users. Employer strategies of removing barriers through direct and indirect support are leadership styles that are shown to create trust (Burke, Sims, Lazzara, & Salas, 2007) and employment engagement (Attridge, 2009). Employment engagement is essential for organizational success, and refers to when employees are committed to, involved in, and passionate about their work. These leadership styles include creating a supportive work context and job structure that focuses on strengths, and giving work tasks that are empowering and motivating. Such leadership styles may be assumed to be protective for employer attitude towards, and engagement in, providing worksite support and participating in the IPS network.

The employers felt that external conditions affected the opportunity to remove barriers. For example, the social atmosphere among colleagues both enabled and restricted the employer support strategies. This is consistent with previous general disability research, in which supportive colleagues are described as key enablers of work integration (Kirsh et al., 2009). In our study, one enabling, indirect support or leadership strategy was to urge other employees to take social responsibility and delegate supervision to another employee. How the ES and employer organize IPS support and use the IPS user colleagues in the workplace is another important research focus.

The results showed that some employers focused on the IPS service users' psychiatric disability and the opportunity to gain economic compensation by providing internship for IPS service users. As shown in the positional map (Figure 3), the larger companies in this study were more willing than small firms or companies to hire or employ IPS service users. This corroborates the results of Ju et al. (2013). Smaller firms were overrepresented among the

employers who provided IPS service users with internship placements and saw this option as a win-win situation. This might reflect the Swedish traditional vocational route of rehabilitation, and its welfare system, rules and regulations, which has been described in previous implementation research as constituting a barrier for implementing IPS in Sweden (Bejerholm et al., 2011). As described in the method section, this route recommends internship before competitive employment as the pre-determined route of vocational rehabilitation. Furthermore, a culture of free labour also has shown to constitute an implementation barrier, being as many employers expected an internship placement before considering hiring the IPS service users (Bejerholm et al., 2011; Gustafsson, et al., 2013). Based on this, the companies' constrained financial status, in combination with high employment taxes, may have played a role. In this perspective perhaps there is a need for further national work incentives to enable employers in smaller companies to hire more persons with SMI. In an IPS perspective, however, a clinical implication is that it is important for the ES to focus on client strengths instead of weaknesses or disability, as well as the job requirements and the employer needs in order to make a good job-person match. These aspects are also important to emphasize and take into account when promoting the IPS service user in the initial contact with the employer, to achieve competitive employments to a greater extent.

The IPS practice and quality may be helpful for an employer's readiness to consider a person with SMI. Employers in the present study described that supporting an IPS service user evoked feelings of pride, which served as a driving force for their social commitment, but also evoked negative feelings that could affect future readiness to support an IPS service user. For example, a larger workload, or conflicts among colleagues evoked stress, frustration, and anger. Personnel on the mental health care team who made the employer realize that the



service user was seriously ill made the employer afraid to make demands that might affect the service user's well-being. To actively provide on-worksites support, especially in the initially stages of work, may reduce such negative events. Furthermore, as described earlier on in the discussion, the IPS network needs further investigation. Knowledge in this area may contribute to an understanding of how the network can be organized around the individual for provision of optimal support.

#### **4.1. Methodological considerations**

Grounded theory is considered as an appropriate method for approaching the study aim since it is explanatory in nature and little is known about the employer point of view. As data collection and analyses were directed by theoretical sampling and performed in parallel, the data were deepened, interpretations could be checked, and the evolving categories could be tested. By contrast, many qualitative researchers collect much of their data prior to analysis and this may limit the depth of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Situational analysis was a helpful, supplementary, analytic tool during the analysis process of making abstract messy maps and relational analyses, and when making a positional map to highlight the major positions. Grounded theory alone may have limited the depth of the data and narrowed the chance to reflect on the data and its complexity in a broader perspective.

Corbin and Strauss (2007), and Chiovitti and Piran (2003) provide guidelines to enhance quality and rigor in grounded theory research, and these guidelines were used throughout the study. To increase study credibility and make the results truly reflective of employer experiences and views, the Swedish employer context was described. In addition, participants were allowed to guide the inquiry process by feeding initial results back into data collection. Employers had the opportunity to comment on the analyses, and *in vivo* codes were applied in the coding process. Moreover, memos were written continuously about researcher experiences

and pre-conceptions. The analysis was developed among the authors, who had backgrounds in occupational therapy, sociology, and global health, as well as different competencies with regard to the IPS approach and grounded theory situational analysis methodology. These differences made it possible to challenge each other's interpretations. Additionally, the draft article was reviewed by an external expert in grounded theory situational analysis methodology. A thorough methodological description was made to further enhance credibility and auditability. To allow readers to assess transferability of the results to other settings, details of sample characteristics and settings are provided. To further enhance transferability, a positional map that reflects the results in relation to the Swedish context was made. It was through this map that the results on internship became evident, since some employers' viewed the internship placements as a win-win situation. It is noteworthy, however, that the context specific features of internship were not decisive for the main results of the study. The opportunity of subsidized labor in combination with high employer taxes, as reflected in the Swedish culture of free labor that forms part of the traditional and obligatory rehabilitation route, may have influenced employer readiness to open the door. The group of socially committed employers in the present study can reasonably be assumed to be transferable to other national contexts since similar findings are found in other countries (Gilbride et al., 2003; Ju et al., 2013).

Only employers where the IPS-service user had chosen to disclose that he or she has a mental illness or disability and with experience in providing on-worksites support and participating in the IPS network were interviewed for this study in order to protect the IPS service users' confidentiality. Consequently, this study does not reflect the experiences of all employers who hire persons with SMI. It is also possible that this study reflects employer experiences and views of taking IPS service users with more severe disabilities than those

with only off-worksites support. This may be the reason why nearly half of the employers provided internship placements. As described earlier, in the Swedish employer context, internship is often recommended as a stepping-stone to the labor market and is part of the traditional route of vocational rehabilitation (Bejerholm et al., 2011). Our results are in agreement with previous research findings (Bejerholm et al., 2011; Gustafson et al., 2013), and illustrate the risk that Swedish employers expect such a placement, or win-win situation, if a person has been on sick leave for a longer period. Additional research in other contexts and countries is needed to explore further employer experiences of being part of an IPS network.

The positional map (Figure 3) shows that employers in smaller companies with constrained finances, who simply open their workplace because of goodwill, and allow the IPS service user to be at the worksite without specific job requirements, were not found in the data. According to the ES, who mediated contact with likely employers, employers in such companies did not exist among their clients. It is conceivable that employers with constrained finances are less likely to hire a person with SMI, based on goodwill alone.

According to Creswell (2007), a grounded theory study should include a larger number of interviews. In spite of the limited number of interviews, however, we believe that we gained a greater understanding of employers' experiences and views. This may be because the study aim targeted a limited group of employers with common characteristics. They were socially committed, had unique and similar personal experiences, traits and views, and the interviews were comprehensive and detailed. The implications are, however, that there is a need to corroborate the findings in larger samples and in different contexts. The results of this study should be considered part of a larger puzzle of knowledge related to the field that generates hypotheses for further research.

## **4.2. Conclusions and implications for practice**

The study results suggest that professionals in vocational rehabilitation who work according to IPS principles may find it essential to:

- systematically develop collaborative relationships with employers based on trust and professionalism, in line with the eighth IPS principle.
- actively look for work opportunities where the employers have experience and characteristics shown to be related to a willingness to hire persons with mental illness.
- actively encourage, inform, guide and support employers who have less experience with hiring and working with persons with mental illness, as well as limited personnel and economic resources.
- emphasize the provision of ongoing on-worksite support to the employer, and other employees, to prevent incidents that create negative feelings and stress, in line with the IPS principle of time-unlimited support.
- focus on seeking work based on the match between the strengths and abilities of service users, job requirements, and employers' needs.

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