

INTRODUCTION:

- Low workforce participation of individuals with Substance Use Disorder (SUD) is a well-established problem. Job acquisition is often put on hold as people work through earlier stages of treatment but can be an important part of maintaining recovery. Addressing this need was the focus of this community-academic partnership between Powell Recovery Center and University of Maryland, Baltimore.
- One way to support successful employment among persons with SUD is to provide training in “soft skills” such as communication, planning and problem-solving.
- The intent of this study was to enhance “soft skills” of peer coaches, in long-term recovery from SUD, who work with clients in the early stages of recovery, and to seek their perspectives on the value of integrating such training into the treatment program for their clients as well as their own professional development.

References:

1. Jackson LA, Buxton JA, Dingwell J, et al. Improving psychosocial health and employment outcomes for individuals receiving methadone treatment: a realist synthesis of what makes interventions work. *BMC Psychol.* 2014;2(1):26. doi:10.1186/s40359-014-0026-3
2. Bell JS, Kang A, Benner S, et al. Predictors of Health in Substance Use Disorder Recovery: Economic Stability in Residential Aftercare Environments. *J Soc Work Pract Addict.* 2024;24(3):297-308. doi: 10.1080/1533256x.2023.2170592. Epub 2023 Jan 22. PMID: 39268410; PMCID: PMC11390098.
3. Sigurdsson SO, Ring BM, O'Reilly K, et al. Barriers to employment among unemployed drug users: age predicts severity. *Am J Drug Alcohol Abuse.* 2012 Nov;38(6):580-7. doi: 10.3109/00952990.2011.643976. Epub 2012 Jan 13. PMID: 22242680; PMCID: PMC3985289.

METHODS:

Study Design and Analysis

- Current peer coach employees with a history of SUD were recruited to test the utility of an online instrument (Barriers to Employment Success Inventory – BESI) to identify participant concerns about personal, financial, educational, and other obstacles to their occupational achievement.
- The feasibility and usefulness of short online training videos from the ej4 e-learning platform were assessed. These videos were designed to develop “soft skills” that facilitate successful workforce participation, and a personalized curriculum plan and schedule was made for study participants.
- Measurements included baseline and final BESI scores, time spent using the training, and courses taken.
- Feedback was collected about experience with this resource using a survey and focus group at end of project. Focus group data was analyzed using rapid qualitative analysis to code, identify themes, and summarize key points.

RESULTS:

Table 1. BESI Scores (Range: 10-40. Higher scores indicate higher levels of concern about employment barriers)

BESI Categories	All Participants (N=13)		Completers (N=5)*		High Training Users (N=7)**	
	Baseline (N=13)	Final (N=5)	Baseline (N=5)	Final (N=5)	Baseline (N=5)	Final (N=5)
Personal and Financial	26.3	26.8	27.8	26.8	26	26.8
Emotional and Physical	24.6	23.6	26.8	23.6	24.4	23.6
Career Decision-Making and Planning	28.2	25.8	28.4	25.8	26	25.8
Job-Seeking Knowledge	26.5	23.2	27.8	23.2	26.1	23.2
Education and Training	27.9	25.4	28.6	25.4	26.6	25.4
Average all categories	26.7	25	27.9	25	25.8	25

*Completed all three BESI assessments and most assigned training.

**Completed just two BESI instruments but took at least 5 hours of training. High training users group includes completers.

RESULTS (cont.):

Table 2. Survey Responses

Survey questions	Average response (N=9)*
The training videos were overall good	4
It took me more time to complete the training videos than I expected	2.44
I enjoyed the training videos	3.89
Video topics were important to me	4
I learned something new from the training program	3.89
I gained skills because of the training program	3.78
I am more confident in my ability to keep a job	4
I liked the online format	3.89
I recommend that my peers should take this training	4
I recommend people in recovery should take this training	3.89
I was able to picture myself in the training video situations	3.44
People in the training videos looked like me	2.89

*Likert scale 1 = Disagree completely; 2 = Somewhat disagree; 3 = Somewhat agree; 4 = Agree completely
One participant responded twice with slightly different answers; this is counted as a separate response; the number of participants responding was 8

- The technology skills needed to complete the study milestones through the BESI and ej4 online platforms were a barrier for many participants.
- Those who remained in the study until the end found the training videos highly enjoyable and valuable for skill and confidence building around job retention. Participants found the BESI instrument questions difficult to understand as posed about level of concern, and were not sure the results accurately reflected their job skills gaps and needs.
- The most critical feedback about the training videos was that participants felt that the actors did not look like them, both because actors’ racial/ethnic backgrounds predominantly did match their own, and because of the video corporate settings.

CONCLUSIONS:

- Though limited by low enrollment and attrition (attributed in part to technical skills barriers, and resulting in too small a sample for statistical analysis), the training was found to be very valuable to study milestone completers.
- BESI responses were somewhat helpful in crafting a personalized educational plan. Most participants did not like using the BESI and had some confusion about the wording of the questions.
- The content of the training videos, although developed for corporate employee training, still resonated well with participants who completed study milestones.
- If planning to use online resources for a similar population, using instruments and training materials more culturally relevant to participants’ backgrounds and work settings would be ideal, however this is a challenge as there a lack of such resources designed for those in substance use recovery.
- An initial assessment of computer skills proficiencies may support participant selection, orientation, initial technical training, and ongoing supports to maximize participant benefits from online tools.