

8th Australasian Clubhouse Conference ***“Employment in All Its Forms”***

Probably, clubhouses are much more important to mental health employment than most of you realise. I'm going to spell out why, from a personal viewpoint, and much from within the clubhouse.

In April this year, I represented the Australian Mental Health Consumer Network, the national peak body, at a Federal Government consultation for the National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy

(see: <http://www.workplace.gov.au/workplace/Publications/PolicyReviews/EmploymentStrategy/>). To prepare, we had to read a discussion paper which made significant reference to the concept of “pathways” to get people back to employment, a point I started making a few years back in speeches as something which clubhouses have a long track record of doing. (see diagram at end)

It was suggested we also read a report by the Mental Health Council of Australia called “Let's Get to Work” (2007)

(see: <http://www.mhca.org.au/documents/MHCAEmploymentReport-final.pdf>) which includes several pages contributed by Steeping Stone Clubhouse. Unusually, on the day, the consultation was actually attended by the Minister for Employment Participation, the Hon. Brendan O'Connor, who also chaired it for about 3.5 hours. This meant we could actually talk about politically sensitive issues. I was fortunate enough to speak twice, especially about the need for “pathways” rather than series of disjointed static outcomes, which is what you tend to get from traditional employment agencies. Several other speakers I didn't know supported what I had to say. [subsequently I expanded all this into a written submission].

Why am I telling you all this detail? Because it greatly illustrates my opening words: people all across Australia, even at national levels, are now noticing the major importance of the clubhouse approach to employment, and approving of it.

To bring this all back to our familiar clubhouse day, just what is it we do that works so well? For a start it has nothing to do with employment, at least on the first look. We welcome people into a community of good attitude and acceptance, where members get encouragement to be the best human beings they can and part of an effective group. We all know that clubhouse offers specific employment supports. Yet, in many ways I think our broad activities are just as important as activities which are directly about getting a job. Over the last few decades many studies have found that the best predictors of success at work were abilities like

- being able to handle frustration, control emotions, and get along with other people (Snarey & Vaillant, 1985);
- The ability to manage feelings and handle stress (Lusch & Serpkenci, 1990);
- and empathy: meaning that people who were best at identifying others emotions were more successful in their work as well as in their social lives (Rosenthal, 1977).

Collectively, these are called “emotional intelligence”, and to my ears they also sound like the positive qualities that make up what we now call “recovery”.

When I first joined clubhouse (10 years ago) I just wanted a life and something interesting to do with my day. Employment never entered my head. Over time, by

participating in many and varied work ordered day activities I learned that I could be part of a group (without having to be defensive and competitive), could actually have functional relationships with clear boundaries and could develop a level of confidence that just stopped me worrying about everything. I felt like I was growing into a real person and in time started to see employment not as a set of bad past experiences, but as a natural progression: it's just part of having a life!

Through clubhouse I found out about things I could do to grow along this pathway. In 2002 I did a Cert IV in Workplace Training at TAFE and while this gave me some employable skills, it expanded my understanding of how other people learn in different ways and increased my ability to empathise enormously. Not only did clubhouse facilities help me get my assignment written, the clubhouse community itself was really appropriate as the content for those assignments.

In this way, tasks like chairing meetings, driving members home in the clubhouse bus and organising projects took on a new significance. Making a speech or talking to a group stopped being a competitive, battle-weary experience where I risked shame and guilt at every word. It just became a typical thing I did at clubhouse. I started to think of seeking flexible, yet interesting, employment that would suit me and not make me unwell again.

In 2006 I signed up to knock on doors as a Census Officer. After completing the training and noticing that no one could actually see the mental illness label I thought was plastered on my forehead, I found I could divide the work up into manageable chunks of 2-4 hours per day, had scripts of what to say and organised a support network, at least to get me started. I could even take a buddy along if I wished. In short, through clubhouse I had learned enough about myself to be aware of what I could do, plan how to go about it in a healthy way and have fall-back supports for the times things might not go so well.

I did find that disclosure to employers had a lot to do with developing trust and respect. As these two qualities grew with employers I could disclose a little more about myself, so disclosing my mental health problems did not become an all-or-nothing drama. The Minister was very interested in this topic.

To my mind all clubhouses experiences accumulate as we go on, even when we might think we're going backwards. Last year I achieved a Graduate Certificate in Management Communication *with Distinction*. I did this at a different TAFE in the city, where I found out they had the best psych. disability support and the head teacher of my course was well-acquainted with clubhouse. This involved some considerable disclosure but I was rewarded with more appropriate support and eventually some employment opportunities at the recommendation of that teacher. I used my clubhouse again as the setting for my many assignments, and some of these I have been able to contribute back as part of its management plans and tools.

Achieving distinction level without repeats was very important to me, as it contrasts with the 10 years up to 1983 I spent battling what I now know as mental illness in order to get my law degree, with nothing more than a pass level for any subject. However, I have learned that the intense and isolating world of law and finance is unsuitable for my particular challenges. At clubhouse I was able to find another way without feeling like I had failed the first time around.

I have noticed that as members progress, they see clubhouse differently and perhaps appreciate that they now need to go beyond its much protected community and link into a larger one. Employment raises many issues that can be prepared for at clubhouse, but rarely experienced there. Examples include dealing with bullies, having bosses who treat you like an object, coping with potential intimate relationships in the workplace, and maybe most of all, coping with extra money and loss of it.

[Just a quick practical tip – as money gets earned Centrelink (social security) and public housing start eating into it, sometimes leading to a cash-flow crisis, so I recommend saving up a contingency fund of, say, \$500 and keeping it, before you buy that new TV, computer or car. These agencies also have a style of communication that sounds like we are all guilty of something until we can convince them otherwise, so knowing clubhouse can help plan and support for this is a great relief. Much of this help I actually picked up from other members].

In case it's not obvious by now, I just cannot function well in a continuous 9-5, M-Fri work environment. Yet these days, what used to be called typical employment tends to be a minority. I work for about six different organisations, doing training or interviewing services. This includes training consumers to be advocates and peer-support workers. At two community colleges I train senior citizens and others how best to use all our new information technologies. To maintain standards I am regularly evaluated by supervisors who sit in on my lessons, and this I find validating and a reminder that I am not trapped in the mental health system. Sometimes I am called an employee, sometimes a contractor, and how much tax is taken out of my pay seems to vary with those titles. At least I can compare notes with others at clubhouse on how best to deal with such variety – there's nothing like good, regular record keeping to stay on top of reporting to government and your own budget! Clubhouse is also a needed support when market forces and seasonality cut back my work opportunities – it's somewhere to go.

[Postscript: Since writing this paper we have had the NSW Local Government Elections. Another member (Mark M...) and I worked at the Dee Why Public School voting centre on Saturday, supporting each other. The result on the front of today's Manly Daily (holds up copy – see below) shows Michael Regan as the new Mayor of Warringah, and Mark and I know that's right because we counted his votes!]

I think I'm really an advocate at heart, so public speaking and clarifying issues so people can get on and do things they first thought they could not, are immensely satisfying to me. It would be great to build up more of this on a regular, paid basis, so that I could have enough independence to repay the charity and human generosity that I have been lucky enough to receive.

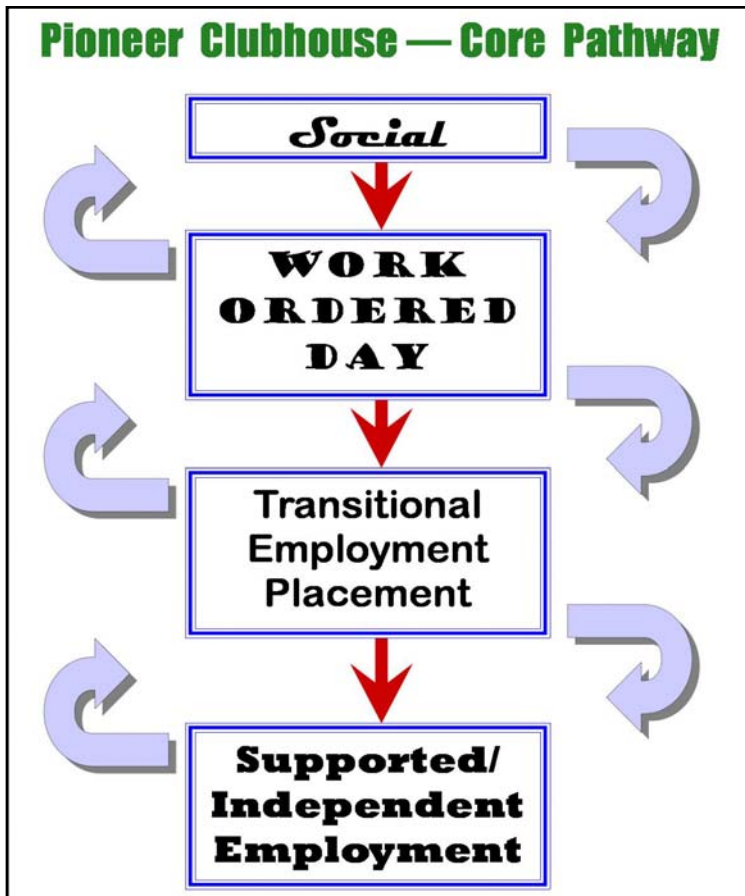
References:

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Lusch, R. F., & Serpkenci, R. R. (1990). Personal differences, job tension, job outcomes, and store performance: A study of retail managers. *Journal of Marketing, 54*(1), 85-101.

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NOTE: [pictures on next page \(they may take a little while to appear on older PCs\)](#)



During the presentation of this paper the diagram on left, as well as screenshots of the two websites referenced earlier were run in a continuous loop on a screen above the podium to reinforce the main point, namely, that wider Australia is increasingly interested in the clubhouse approach to employment, and approving of it.

