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The Role of social work in vocational rehabilitation for people with mental health disorders in India

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Abstract: Employment is a meaningful and purposeful activity that offers individuals a sense of identity, social inclusion, and personal fulfilment. In India, for persons living with severe and persistent mental illnesses, gainful employment is strongly linked to personal recovery, improved quality of life, enhanced social integration, and reduced dependence on mental health services. Vocational rehabilitation, therefore, plays a critical role in facilitating these outcomes by addressing barriers to employment, providing skill development, and offering ongoing support. Despite its demonstrated benefits, access to structured vocational programs remains limited in the Indian context, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and policy support to promote sustainable employment among this population. Individuals with mental illness remain significantly underrepresented in India's labour market due to stigma, discrimination, and limited access to supportive services. Sustaining employment is particularly challenging in India because of multiple personal, organizational, and systemic barriers, including low mental health awareness, inadequate workplace accommodations, and gaps in rehabilitation services. The Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model, though internationally recognized as an evidence-based approach for improving employment outcomes, is still emerging in India and faces challenges related to implementation and long-term job retention. The findings suggest that adjunct interventions, including skills training, cognitive remediation, and psychological support, contribute to improved job retention among individuals with severe mental illness, and supported education can enhance job retention. In the Indian context, community-based rehabilitation, family involvement, and peer support play a crucial role due to strong social networks. Additionally, emerging approaches such as employment specialist services, use of digital technology, self-management strategies, and workplace accommodations show promise in improving job tenure. Overall, there is a need for greater integration of non-clinical, community-based, and culturally relevant vocational interventions within India's mental health system to promote sustainable employment and long-term workforce participation among persons with severe mental illness.

Keywords: Social Work Vocational Rehabilitation Mental Health Disorders Psychiatric Social Work Employment Support Severe Mental Illness Psychosocial Intervention Job Retention Disability Inclusion India



Introduction

Employment is a vital social determinant of health and a basic human right, recognized by the United Nations. In India, it ensures financial security, social inclusion, and dignity, while unemployment and insecure work are linked to poor mental health, economic hardship, and social exclusion. For individuals with severe and persistent mental illness, employment supports recovery, self-identity, and community participation. However, they remain underrepresented in the labour market due to stigma, discrimination, and limited access to structured vocational rehabilitation. The Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model, an evidence-based approach, promotes competitive employment, rapid job placement, zero exclusion, and integration of mental health and employment services. While IPS has demonstrated superior outcomes compared to traditional approaches like sheltered workshops and prevocational training, its implementation in India is still limited by systemic and contextual challenges.

Within this context, social work plays a crucial role in vocational rehabilitation by facilitating access to employment opportunities, addressing psychosocial barriers, advocating for inclusive workplace practices, and supporting sustained job retention among individuals with mental health disorders

Even where employment is achieved, sustaining jobs over time continues to be a major concern. Evidence suggests that individuals with severe mental illness often experience short job tenure, frequently engaged in low-skilled, informal, or precarious employment. In India, where the informal sector dominates the labour market, job retention is further complicated by the absence of workplace protections, limited accommodations, and inadequate employer awareness regarding mental health.

Maintaining employment is particularly challenging due to multiple interacting factors, including stigma and discrimination, fluctuating clinical conditions, lack of workplace support, and insufficient integration between mental health and vocational services. In the Indian socio-cultural context, family support, community networks, and informal caregiving systems play a crucial role in influencing employment outcomes and job retention.

Job tenure is typically defined as the duration of time an individual remains in a specific job; however, inconsistencies in its measurement across studies—such as variations in definitions, units of analysis, and follow-up periods—limit comparability and generalization of findings. Recent perspectives suggest that cumulative employment over time may be a more meaningful indicator. Indicators of vocational success extend beyond retention in a single job, particularly in dynamic and informal labour markets such as India.

While existing research has largely focused on interventions that facilitate job acquisition, there remains limited evidence on strategies that support long-term job retention among persons with severe mental illness in India. Therefore, this narrative literature review aims to examine vocational service models and approaches that enhance job tenure for this population.

This review seeks to synthesize and organize the available evidence on sustainable employment interventions, with particular emphasis on their applicability within the Indian context. The findings are intended to inform mental health professionals, policymakers, and vocational service providers in developing culturally appropriate and context-specific strategies to improve long-term employment outcomes for individuals with severe and enduring mental illness.



Models of Supported Employment

Supported employment programs play a crucial role in vocational rehabilitation by enabling individuals with mental health disorders to obtain and sustain competitive employment. The Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model is widely recognized as the gold standard in this approach," emphasizing competitive employment, rapid placement, ongoing support, individual preferences, and integrated mental health services.

Within this framework, social workers contribute significantly by facilitating access to employment, coordinating services, addressing psychosocial barriers, and advocating for inclusive workplace practices. Although the terms "supported employment" and "IPS" are sometimes used interchangeably, IPS is distinguished by its strong emphasis on service integration and its zero-exclusion policy, ensuring that all individuals who express a desire to work are eligible to participate.

In high-fidelity IPS programmes, services are open to individuals willing to work, with employment specialists maintaining small caseloads to provide intensive support. Evidence from systematic reviews and meta-analyses consistently indicates that IPS is more effective than traditional approaches in achieving competitive employment outcomes.

However, most of this evidence is derived from high-income countries, and its applicability to the Indian context requires careful consideration. In India, the implementation of IPS remains limited due to structural challenges, including resource constraints, shortage of trained professionals, and fragmented integration between mental health and employment services. Additionally, the predominance of the informal labour sector, coupled with stigma and limited workplace accommodations, poses significant barriers to both job acquisition and retention.

While IPS has shown effectiveness in improving employment outcomes, challenges related to job retention and short job tenure persist. Evidence suggests that a substantial proportion of individuals do not achieve sustained employment, and for those who do, job tenure is often brief, frequently lasting less than six months. In the Indian socio-economic context, such short-term employment may further contribute to financial instability and reduced self-efficacy among persons with mental illness.

To address these limitations, recent research has explored the augmentation of IPS with adjunct interventions, including job-specific skills training, cognitive remediation, and social skills development. Findings from systematic reviews indicate that such combined approaches may modestly improve job tenure and overall employment outcomes compared to IPS alone. Among these, interventions targeting cognitive functioning and social skills appear particularly promising.

Nevertheless, the existing evidence remains limited, and there is a need for more rigorous research within the Indian setting to evaluate the effectiveness, feasibility, and cost-effectiveness of IPS and its augmented models. Greater emphasis should be placed on culturally relevant, community-based, and family-inclusive approaches that align with the Indian mental health care system.

Overall, strengthening supported employment services through the integration of IPS with contextually appropriate adjunct interventions holds significant potential for improving sustainable employment outcomes among persons with severe mental illness in India.

Adjunct Interventions

Emerging evidence suggests that combining supported employment with adjunct interventions can improve job tenure among individuals with severe mental illness. In India, where structural and psychosocial barriers affect sustained employment, such integrated approaches are crucial.

This section systematically categorizes, describes, and critically examines a range of adjunct interventions identified in the literature that contribute to enhanced job retention in this population. These interventions are summarized in Table 1, along with brief explanations of their potential influence on job tenure within the Indian socio-cultural and service delivery context.

Skills Training

Skills training has been identified as a significant complementary intervention for enhancing job retention among individuals participating in supported employment programmes. Structured approaches, such as the “Workplace Fundamentals” model, focus on developing core workplace skills and functional abilities” model, developed for persons with severe mental illness, focus on building essential workplace competencies, including problem-solving, interpersonal communication, stress management, and task performance. These programmes typically employ interactive methods such as role-playing, video-based learning, individualized problem-solving plans, and structured assignments to facilitate skill development over time.

However, within the framework of supported employment—particularly the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model—there is caution against delaying job placement through extensive pre-vocational training, as evidence suggests that such delays may negatively impact employment outcomes. Consequently, most studies have evaluated skills training interventions after job placement rather than prior to employment.

Evidence from randomized controlled trials indicates mixed outcomes. While some studies report improvements in workplace knowledge, job satisfaction, and reduced job turnover, they do not consistently demonstrate significant gains in objective employment outcomes such as job tenure, wages, or hours worked. Notably, certain findings suggest that participant characteristics, such as higher educational attainment, may independently influence longer job tenure.

Approaches to Enhance Job Tenure-

Approaches to enhance tenure		Rationale for how approach enhances job tenure	Key features of approach and strategies used	References
Skills training	Workplace fundamentals: group skills training approach focused on general skills for work	Improvement in generic work skills is likely to enhance job tenure	Manualized modules addressing; problem-solving, managing stress, socializing at	(29–32)



			work & improving performance. Role play, individualized planning, homework	
	Social skills training	Tailored work-related social skills training to address social skill challenges experienced by people with schizophrenia in sustaining employment (33)	Work related social skills training (33)	(34, 35)
Cognitive interventions	Cognitive remediation	Cognitive remediation (systematic efforts to learn and practice more effective cognitive strategies) addresses cognitive impairment that hampers job retention for people with schizophrenia	Computer-based cognitive training with/ or without individual/group instruction such as Neurocognitive Enhancement Therapy (NET)	(36–38)
			Thinking Skills for Work – 7–11 month program of cognitive training through computer based cognitive exercises and coaching from a Cognitive Specialist to learn and practice cognitive self-management strategies	(39–41)



	Cognitive remediation + employment support and social skills training	Addressing both cognitive impairment and social skills deficits will enhance job tenure	6 h pw computer training and 10 sessions social skills training	(42)
	Errorless learning	Acquisition of new work-related skills while avoiding reinforcement of errors in learning likely to enhance job tenure	Verbal/visual cuing, backward or forward chaining to support learning	(43, 44)
Psychological interventions	Cognitive behavioural interventions	Targeting maladaptive beliefs that are barriers to maintaining job likely to enhance job tenure	For example, CBT for Work Success: 12 × 1 h sessions on work goals, self-efficacy, motivation and coping strategies	(45–49)
	Motivational interviewing	Addressing motivational issues may improve capacity to sustain employment	A counselling approach used to facilitate change and attain goals	(50–54)
Supported education	Support (based on IPS principles) to enrol in and complete qualification provided when education/qualifications identified as goal	Increased education/qualifications enable greater job choice & skills for work. Increased fit and satisfaction with employment likely to enhance job tenure	Support to engage in mainstream education based on IPS principles	(55, 56)
Social firms	Businesses employing a significant proportion of employees with disability/disadvantage and pay at market rates	The supportive and flexible work environments of social firms (enhanced supports and accommodations and decreased stigma) are	Workplace accommodations and natural supports likely to facilitate the acceptance, satisfaction and	(57–61)



		likely to enhance tenure	integration of workers are freely available and enhance worker-job fit	
Peer support	Additional support from peers to anticipate and problem solve issues at work	Unique lived experience and attitude of peer worker enable support and encouragement toward sustaining employment not available from other workers	Peer workers trained in IPS provided IPS interventions	(62)
Support from family and friends	Encouragement, problem solving, practical support	Timely supports from family and friends to provide encouragement or address challenges that arise at work likely to enhance tenure	Supports included friendship, understanding, inspiration, encouragement, financial support, transport, support to build routine	(63, 64)
Employment specialist practices	Recovery focused principles/ client-centered approach/ strong working alliance (beyond IPS)	Strong therapeutic alliance between employment specialist and employee leads to improved results including enhanced tenure	Relationship felt like a friendship and employee felt valued and hopeful about employment	(49, 65)
	Building and maintaining relationships with employers	Support provided to employers in the context of an existing strong relationship, when problems arise for an employee	Building and maintaining relationships with employers and working collaboratively with them to address any difficulties that arise	(66)



Approaches to enhance tenure		Rationale for how approach	Key features of approach and strategies used	References
	Strong emphasis on job matching	Strong person-job fit likely to	Attention paid to skills and preferences of the job seeker including how this change over time once employed	(67–69)
Technology	Technology based tools to support recovery, engagement and collaboration with support providers or workflow.	Technology based solutions that can be tailored to challenges faced by individuals in the workplace or in sustaining employment are likely to enhance tenure	Working well mobile app to support task management, stress management, and support from family, peers and professionals	(70)
Self-management	Health Optimisation for Employment (HOPE)	Self-management skills and strategies may improve job tenure	Structured, 20 h self-management program for job seekers with mental illness; cofacilitated by a peer educator	(71)
	Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP)	Enhanced hopefulness, self-advocacy and symptom management influenced by WRAP (understanding of self, health and wellness, and skills and strategies to support self-management)	WRAP tools learnt through 8-week WRAP course can be used to support job retention by managing daily stressors, using supports, taking responsibility, managing difficult situations and accepting feedback	(72)



		are likely to enhance job tenure		
Workplace accommodations	Negotiation of accommodations – reliant on disclosure of MI	Increased use of multiple accommodations is likely to increase tenure	Awareness of, and uptake of, the range of accommodations available under legislation such as flexibility, additional training or supervision, ability to swap tasks with colleagues, or recognition from employer	(73, 74)
	Disclosure of MI	Disclosure of MI to employer increases access to accommodations and understanding from employer that may enhance job tenure	Employment specialists can support development of disclosure plans – what to disclose and to whom – that weigh benefits (access to accommodations) and costs (stigma, discrimination)	(75–77)

Cognitive Interventions

Cognitive Remediation

Cognitive impairments are prevalent among individuals with severe mental illness and are strongly associated with reduced psychosocial functioning and occupational performance. Within the Indian context, such deficits can significantly hinder employment opportunities and job retention, especially in environments where rehabilitative services are limited, such as difficulties in attention, memory, and problem-solving—can further limit employment opportunities and contribute to shorter job tenure, particularly within competitive and informal labour markets.



Cognitive remediation is considered an important intervention for improving vocational outcomes by addressing cognitive deficits associated with severe mental illness. These programmes typically involve computer-based training along with individual or group therapeutic support to enhance cognitive functioning and adaptive skills. Evidence from international randomized controlled trials indicates that cognitive remediation can improve cognitive abilities and increase engagement in work-related activities. Studies from high-income countries have reported gains in weeks worked and overall vocational participation when combined with employment support services.

Interventions such as Neurocognitive Enhancement Therapy (NET) and the “Thinking Skills for Work” programme have demonstrated positive effects on employment outcomes, including job placement, hours worked, and earnings, when integrated with supported employment. Some evidence also suggests improvements in job retention and long-term employment trajectories. However, findings remain mixed, particularly regarding sustained competitive employment.

Evidence from Asian contexts presents mixed outcomes. While some studies report improvements in cognitive and social functioning, as well as reductions in psychiatric symptoms, these do not always translate into significant gains in employment duration or job tenure. It has been suggested that longer follow-up periods and stronger integration with vocational services may be necessary to observe meaningful employment outcomes.

In the Indian setting, the implementation of cognitive remediation programmes faces several challenges, including limited availability of trained professionals, resource constraints, and inadequate integration between mental health and vocational rehabilitation services. Additionally, access to technology-based interventions may be restricted in low-resource or rural settings. Despite these barriers, certain practical and low-cost cognitive support strategies can be incorporated into routine vocational services.

For example, employment specialists and psychiatric social workers can use compensatory strategies to address cognitive impairments, such as simplifying tasks, providing memory aids, using structured routines, and offering repeated practice. Evidence suggests that the use of a broader range of cognitive support strategies is associated with better employment outcomes. Overall, while cognitive remediation shows potential in improving vocational functioning, its impact on job tenure remains inconclusive. There is a need for more context-specific research in India to identify feasible, culturally appropriate, and resource-sensitive cognitive interventions that can be effectively integrated with supported employment programmes to enhance Sustained employment outcomes among individuals with severe mental illness.

Errorless Learning

Errorless learning is a structured instructional approach designed to support individuals with cognitive impairments in acquiring new skills with minimal mistakes. Unlike traditional trial-and-error methods, this approach emphasizes guided learning, where individuals perform tasks correctly from the outset, thereby preventing the reinforcement of errors. In vocational settings, employment specialists or job coaches provide structured verbal, visual, or physical cues to facilitate accurate task performance and skill acquisition.

Techniques commonly used in errorless learning include step-by-step prompting, use of visual aids, and systematic procedures such as forward and backward chaining to gradually master task sequences. This approach is particularly relevant for individuals with schizophrenia, who



often experience deficits in explicit memory while relatively preserving implicit or procedural memory systems.

Evidence suggests that errorless learning improves task accuracy, especially in entry-level roles, but has limited effects on work speed. Findings on its integration with supported employment models, such as IPS, remain inconsistent, with some studies reporting no significant gains in employment duration or weeks worked. Additionally, employment rates in such studies have been relatively low, with many participants discontinuing work within a short period.

However, when findings from multiple studies are considered together, there is some indication that combining errorless learning with supported employment may lead to modest improvements in job tenure compared to supported employment alone. These findings suggest that errorless learning may be particularly beneficial for individuals with severe mental illness who experience cognitive impairments and are engaged in structured or entry-level employment rolls.

From an Indian perspective, errorless learning represents a practical and low-cost intervention that can be incorporated into vocational rehabilitation services. Given the limited availability of specialized cognitive remediation programs and trained professionals in many parts of India, this approach can be effectively implemented by psychiatric social workers, vocational trainers, and community-based rehabilitation workers. Its adaptability to low-resource settings and suitability for individuals engaged in informal or semi-skilled employment further enhances its relevance in the Indian context.

Overall, although the current evidence base is limited, errorless learning shows promise as a supportive strategy to improve work performance and potentially enhance job tenure among persons with severe mental illness in India. Further research is needed to evaluate its effectiveness in diverse Indian settings and to establish standardized protocols for its implementation.

Psychological Interventions

Cognitive Behavioural Interventions

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) has been identified as an effective approach for improving employment outcomes among individuals with severe mental illness by addressing maladaptive beliefs and cognitive distortions that hinder obtaining and sustaining employment. These interventions focus on modifying negative thought patterns related to work, enhancing motivation, and strengthening self-efficacy.

Evidence from randomized controlled trials conducted in high-income settings suggests that integrating CBT with supported employment may lead to modest improvements in vocational outcomes. For instance, preliminary findings from a Canadian study indicated that participants receiving a group-based CBT programme in addition to supported employment worked slightly more consecutive weeks compared to those receiving Supported employment alone showed slightly better outcomes; however, the difference was not statistically significant. Final results from the same trial indicated improvements in job attainment and weekly working hours, but no significant effect on overall job tenure.

Similarly, another randomized controlled trial reported that individuals with schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder who received both group-based and individual CBT interventions demonstrated significantly longer durations of employment compared to control participants



receiving treatment as usual. Building on this evidence, structured programmes such as the “CBT for Work Success” model have been developed, incorporating multiple sessions that focus on identifying work-related goals, improving coping strategies, enhancing motivation, and addressing dysfunctional beliefs about employment.

Findings from implementation studies suggest that such interventions may be particularly beneficial for individuals who do not respond adequately to supported employment alone. Participants have reported improved confidence, greater clarity of vocational goals, and enhanced readiness for employment. However, the evidence regarding sustained job tenure remains limited, and many studies have been conducted without control groups or within specific populations, limiting generalizability.

From an Indian perspective, cognitive behavioural interventions hold considerable promise due to their adaptability and cost-effectiveness. These interventions can be integrated into existing mental health and vocational rehabilitation services and delivered by trained psychiatric social workers, psychologists, or counsellors. In the Indian socio-cultural context, where stigma, low self-esteem, and fear of discrimination significantly affect employment outcomes, CBT-based approaches can play a critical role in enhancing work-related confidence and resilience.

However, challenges such as limited availability of trained professionals, high service demand, and variability in service delivery settings may affect implementation. Therefore, there is a need for culturally adapted, scalable CBT-based vocational interventions and further research to evaluate their effectiveness in improving long-term employment outcomes, including job tenure.

Motivational Interviewing

In India, individuals with severe mental illness face significant challenges in obtaining and sustaining employment due to stigma, low motivation, limited vocational support services, and inadequate integration between mental health and employment systems. Although interventions such as supported employment and motivational approaches show promise, there is limited evidence regarding their effectiveness in improving long-term job tenure. This highlights the need for culturally appropriate, low-cost, and scalable interventions within the Indian mental health care system to enhance sustainable employment outcomes.

Supported Education

Supported education has been identified as a significant complementary intervention to supported employment models, including the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model, particularly to address limitations like short job tenure. Based on IPS principles, supported education focuses on enabling individuals with mental illness to access, engage in, and successfully complete post-secondary education. In the Indian context, where educational qualifications significantly influence employment opportunities, this approach may enhance employability by improving skills, job readiness, and access to better-quality work.

Supported education has gained increasing attention, especially among youth with mental illness, as higher education is often essential for long-term career development in India's competitive labour market. While some studies have explored the integration of supported



education with supported employment, evidence regarding its direct impact on job tenure remains limited.

From an Indian psychiatric perspective, supported education holds promise as a strategy to improve vocational outcomes; however, there is a need for longitudinal research to examine its effectiveness in terms of educational completion, sustained employment, and long-term career progression within diverse socio-economic settings.

Social Firms

Organizations that generate employment for individuals with mental illness and other marginalized groups are often termed social enterprises, social firms, or affirmative businesses, promoting inclusive workplaces with both disabled and non-disabled employees.

In the Indian context, such models are particularly relevant given the limited availability of formal employment opportunities and the persistent stigma associated with mental illness. Social enterprises often provide supportive and flexible work environments, including on-the-job assistance, job security, and reduced performance pressures, which may not be readily available in mainstream employment settings.

International evidence suggests that these organizations function as “enabling spaces,” offering greater flexibility, stability, and workplace support. Studies have reported that employees with mental illness in such settings tend to have longer job tenure compared to those in conventional employment.

Other Supports for Sustaining Employment

Peer support plays a key role in managing workplace challenges and sustaining employment among individuals with severe mental illness, with qualitative evidence emphasizing its contribution to adaptation and job retention, including friends, members of vocational and mental health groups, and spiritual networks, in promoting continued employment.

A pilot study evaluating the delivery of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) by peer employment specialists demonstrated that a proportion of participants were able to obtain competitive employment, with moderate job tenure outcomes. The findings also indicated that individuals with lived experience of mental illness can be effectively trained to deliver vocational services with acceptable fidelity. Their experiential knowledge may enhance engagement and trust among service users. However, employment outcomes should be interpreted cautiously, considering contextual factors such as participant characteristics, socio-economic conditions, and broader labour market challenges.

Support from family, friends, clinicians, and other significant individuals has consistently been identified as a crucial factor in sustaining employment. Qualitative research highlights that such supports contribute to problem-solving, emotional stability, and continuity in work roles. In the Indian context, where family systems play a central role in caregiving and decision-making, family support is particularly influential in shaping employment outcomes.

Studies indicate that encouragement, guidance, and practical assistance from significant others help individuals with mental illness maintain a sense of identity as workers and build confidence in their ability to sustain employment. Furthermore, support from employers and mental health professionals also contributes to better workplace adjustment and long-term job retention.



Employment Specialist Practices

Employment specialist practices play a crucial role in influencing job tenure among individuals with mental illness. Key practices, such as developing effective relationships with clients and employers, adopting a client-centered approach, and providing consistent support, are associated with improved employment outcomes. However, the quality and effectiveness of these practices may vary across supported employment programmes, particularly in low-resource settings.

Evidence suggests that certain competencies of employment specialists—such as strong interpersonal skills, ability to engage employers, and commitment to recovery-oriented practice—are positively associated with both job acquisition and job retention. Recovery-focused and strengths-based approaches, which emphasize individual capabilities, empowerment, and collaborative working relationships, are particularly relevant in promoting sustained employment.

In addition, the intensity and nature of support provided by employment specialists appear to influence outcomes. Greater community engagement, frequent contact with clients, and ongoing post-placement support—such as job coaching and workplace problem-solving—have been linked to improved job retention. From an Indian perspective, where workplace challenges and stigma remain significant, continuous support and follow-up are especially important.

The therapeutic or working alliance between professionals and clients is another critical factor. A strong, trust-based relationship enables access to resources, enhances motivation, and supports collaborative problem-solving. Such relationships often extend beyond formal roles, incorporating empathy, flexibility, and individualized support, which are essential for persons with severe mental illness.

Research also highlights that high-performing employment specialists tend to focus on building strong relationships, addressing previous negative work experiences, and using basic psychological strategies such as problem-solving, motivational techniques, and social skills training. They also actively engage with employers by providing education about mental illness, facilitating workplace adjustments, and promoting supportive work environments.

Furthermore, job matching—aligning an individual's skills, interests, and preferences with job roles—is considered an important factor in enhancing job satisfaction and retention. However, evidence on its direct impact on job tenure remains mixed, with some studies reporting no significant association.

Technology

Technology offers considerable potential to improve the effectiveness of supported employment services for individuals with severe mental illness. With the growing accessibility of mobile phones and internet services in India, technology-based interventions can facilitate communication, provide remote support, and enhance access to employment-related resources, digital interventions can be utilized to support recovery, provide vocational guidance, and improve coordination between service providers. Additionally, technology can



facilitate service delivery processes such as screening, assessment, and monitoring of employment outcomes.

Digital platforms may also serve as effective tools for engaging individuals who are otherwise difficult to reach, thereby improving continuity of care and adherence to evidence-based practices. While there is growing evidence supporting the effectiveness of internet-based mental health interventions, research specifically examining their impact on employment outcomes remains limited.

Preliminary studies, such as those exploring mobile applications designed to support job retention, indicate that individuals with mental illness are generally receptive to technology-based solutions. These tools may assist in managing work-related tasks, coping with stress, and maintaining communication with professionals, family members, and peers.

Self-Management

Self-management is a critical factor in sustaining employment among individuals with severe mental illness. Structured self-management and psychoeducation programmes can effectively complement supported employment interventions.

The Health Optimisation Program for Employment (HOPE) has demonstrated improvements in self-efficacy, with a substantial proportion of participants engaging in meaningful social roles, including paid employment, education, or voluntary work following programme completion. Similarly, the Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) has shown potential in facilitating employment by enhancing self-awareness, coping skills, and recovery-oriented practices. Evidence also suggests a reciprocal relationship, where employment further supports recovery. However, existing studies have largely relied on small samples and qualitative methodologies, with limited focus on objective outcomes such as job tenure. From an Indian perspective, self-management approaches are particularly relevant due to their low cost, adaptability, and potential for integration into community-based mental health services.

Workplace Accommodations

The ability to negotiate reasonable workplace accommodations is an important factor influencing job tenure among individuals with mental illness. Although disability-related legislation in India, such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, provides a legal framework for inclusion, 2016, provides provisions for workplace adjustments, awareness regarding these rights remains limited among individuals with mental illness, employers, and service providers.

Reasonable accommodations—such as flexible work schedules, additional supervision, task modification, and on-the-job support—can significantly improve job retention. However, in the Indian context, these supports are often underutilized due to lack of awareness, stigma, and limited implementation of policies within formal and informal employment sectors. Evidence suggests that greater availability and utilization of workplace accommodations are associated with improved job tenure, although research in this area remains limited.

Support from supervisors and co-workers also plays a crucial role in sustaining employment. Informational, practical, and emotional support within the workplace can enhance job performance and reduce the risk of job loss. In particular, positive reinforcement, task-sharing, and collaborative work environments contribute to better employment stability.



Disclosure of mental illness in the workplace is a complex and context-dependent issue. While disclosure may facilitate access to workplace accommodations and support, it may also expose individuals to stigma and discrimination. Research findings on the impact of disclosure on job tenure are mixed, with some studies indicating positive outcomes and others showing no significant association.

From an Indian psychiatric perspective, careful planning and support are essential in managing disclosure decisions. Employment specialists and mental health professionals can assist individuals in developing informed strategies regarding what to disclose, when, and to whom, while also helping them negotiate appropriate workplace accommodations.

Discussion

This paper explores non-clinical interventions that can improve sustainable employment outcomes for individuals with severe mental illness, synthesizing existing evidence on strategies to enhance job retention.

High-fidelity IPS programmes improve employment outcomes, especially job acquisition, compared to traditional approaches; however, job retention remains a challenge. Adjunct interventions—such as skills training, cognitive and psychological support, and supported education—show potential to enhance job tenure. Alternative models like social enterprises, along with social support, employment specialist practices, technology use, self-management, and workplace accommodations, further contribute to sustained employment outcomes.

The current evidence base is variable and still evolving. The reviewed interventions include both individual-focused approaches (such as cognitive and psychological interventions and skills training) and context-focused strategies (including workplace supports, social enterprises, and policy measures). However, limited attention has been given to broader structural factors—such as labour market conditions and policy environments—which are especially relevant in low- and middle-income countries like India.

From a recovery-oriented perspective, no single intervention can adequately meet the diverse and complex needs of individuals with severe mental illness. Instead, a flexible, individualized approach is required—one that considers the person's strengths, preferences, and challenges, and integrates multiple interventions as needed. For example, cognitive strategies may benefit individuals with cognitive impairments, while social skills training may be more relevant for those experiencing interpersonal difficulties. Peer support and family involvement can further strengthen coping, problem-solving, and sustained engagement in employment.

The role of employment specialists is central to achieving positive outcomes. There is a need to better define core competencies, enhance training and supervision, and develop systems for knowledge sharing across vocational services. In the Indian context, strengthening the capacity of psychiatric social workers and employment specialists is essential to address gaps in service delivery and improve employment sustainability.

Furthermore, most existing studies have focused on broad diagnostic groups without adequately addressing individual differences in needs, contexts, and employment trajectories. Future research should adopt a more nuanced approach, considering diverse subgroups and contextual influences such as socio-economic conditions, cultural factors, and availability of mental health and vocational services. Qualitative research may provide deeper insights into lived experiences, barriers, and facilitators of sustained employment.



There is also a pressing need for high-quality randomized controlled trials, longitudinal studies, and context-specific research in low- and middle-income countries, including India, to evaluate the effectiveness and scalability of these interventions. Exploration of alternative or complementary models to IPS is necessary for individuals who do not benefit from existing approaches.

Conclusion

Sustainable employment supports financial stability, social participation, and personal purpose, while poor working conditions and early job loss can harm mental health and confidence. Job retention is also an economic priority. This review identifies strategies to enhance job tenure among individuals with severe mental illness, with robust evidence favouring the IPS model.

There is a need to advocate for its wider implementation within India's mental health services through appropriate funding, policy support, and capacity building. At the same time, adjunct interventions are necessary to support individuals who require additional assistance to sustain employment.

In the Indian context, where labour market conditions can be challenging and the informal sector is predominant, it is also important to promote job creation initiatives with higher retention potential, such as social enterprises and community-based vocational programmes. The findings of this review indicate that job tenure is a complex and multifactorial outcome. Therefore, single or narrowly focused interventions may be insufficient to achieve meaningful improvements.

Enhancing job tenure requires a comprehensive and individualized approach that considers each person's strengths, needs, and socio-cultural context. This includes the use of tailored interventions delivered by skilled professionals, supported by family and community systems, and implemented with adequate intensity and duration. Such a holistic and context-sensitive approach is essential for improving durable employment outcomes among individuals with severe mental illness in India.

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