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|  Social Inclusion and Natural Supports  |
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|  | Promoting positive change in the workplace through natural supports for people with mental illness |
|  | **Joseph Jang** **EDGE Employment (Division of Connect Supporting Recovery Inc.)** 1/1/2015 |

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**Preface**

Employment is important for all people, whether disabled or not. Apart from financial rewards, it provides a sense of satisfaction, social contacts and participation in the community. Meaningful employment is particularly important for people with mental health issues because it improves their level of confidence, health, social status and identity, and their social relationships/inclusion. Nonetheless, unemployment rates amongst people with mental illness are higher than the general population in New Zealand, and they have the highest rate of unemployment amongst all disability groups. Moreover, when employment is gained, it is reported that their job tenure is alarmingly short.

While supporting the above group of people, I observed that a system of natural supports in the workplace is critical to the success of supported employees. However, I found there is little research conducted on natural supports in New Zealand. Although this study is based on a small sample of employment specialists in supported employment agencies, I hope this research will provide insights into possible ways to develop natural supports towards non-discriminatory, supportive and inclusive environment in the workplace, and help employment specialists to utilise potential sources of support in the individual’s life and community during all the phases of the supported employment process.

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**Executive Summary**

**Background**

This research has been undertaken in association with the Think Differently campaign 2014 – 2015 to promote positive change within the workplace through natural supports for people with mental illness.

**Natural Supports in the workplace**

Competitive employment represents a normalized and valued social role for individuals with or without disabilities. Employment is regarded as one of critical components in ensuring people with mental illness are included in society and supported in their recovery. The recovery approach involves minimising the discrimination against people with mental illness and enabling them to fully participate in society. Indeed, workplace is seen as an important route to social inclusion.

Supported employment is an effective method of supporting individuals with mental illness (supported employee) to access and maintain paid employment in the open labour market. As the primary support provider, job coaches or employment specialists focus on securing employment and supporting the training of a supported employee to complete the tasks and duties required in a role. However, the use of ‘natural supports’ has been advocated as a better support strategy to maintain a job and increase integration in the work place in the long term rather than the reliance on job coaches or employment specialists primarily.

In fact, a system of natural supports in the workplace is essential for the success of supported employment, as well as an integral part of a healthy workplace for all parties. The most salient value underlying the traditional job coach model of supported employment is the productivity of individuals, whereas the notable value of natural supports is social integration.

**Research**

Nonetheless, little research has been done on natural supports in New Zealand. This study aims to understand a non-discriminatory, supportive and inclusive environment in the workplace through development of natural supports for people with mental illness. Specifically, this research focuses on the natural supports characteristics in the workplace from employment specialists’ perspectives. An exploratory study utilising a qualitative approach was conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interview sessions, with four participants from supported employment agencies.

**Findings**

* The participants have no consensus on the definition of natural supports, but provided some core aspects of natural supports, namely integration, workplace culture, work-related supports and workplace relationships. These findings are relatively consistent with those in the supported employment literatures. Also, it was further revealed that natural supports are considered being used far less frequently during the job assessment, job development, and job placement phases of supported employment.
* The involvement of employers and co-workers in supporting or training supported employees is at the heart of natural supports. Employers and co-workers are the ones who supported employees encounter on a regular basis, and those workplace personnel play a key role in developing and implementing natural supports in the workplace. In particular, co-worker involvement broadly encompasses training and evaluation of supported employees, which are instructional in nature. Additionally, co-workers may be involved in support roles such as associating, befriending and advocating.
* The employment specialist plays a crucial role in facilitating natural supports and provides ongoing supports to sustain supported employees’ success. They can assist employers and co-workers in in the identification and development of natural supports based on (a) their knowledge of the abilities of supported employees; (b) their knowledge of resources that exist outside the employment setting; and (c) their ability to analyse the work environment to maximize existing resources. In short, employment specialists encompass employers, co-workers and a broader context in their support efforts and gradually fade out of the natural supports process in time.
* The implementation of natural supports is directly linked to disclosure of mental illness. The finding shows that there are low rates of disclosure of current or previous mental illness and the clients experience high levels of anticipated discrimination as well as self-stigma. This implies that discrimination and stigma in the workplace are still relatively common, disabling individuals with mental illness to disclose such issues. In practice, non-disclosure seriously affects the development of natural supports in the workplace. This is because employment specialists are unable to access the worksite for facilitation of natural supports. Rather, they simply provide their ongoing in-work support to their clients behind the scenes, not on the frontlines.

**Conclusion**

The participants indicated that there are extremely low rates of disclosure of mental illness because of high level of anticipated discrimination as well as self-stigma. In fact, both external (employers and co-workers) and internal (supported employees) changes are necessary to develop and implement natural supports resulting in more non-discriminatory, supportive and inclusive environment at work for all interested parties. In this regard, this research recommends (i) a supplementary investigation evaluating the current anti-stigma framework in New Zealand; (ii) natural supports strategies to be incorporated into employment policy for people with disabilities; (iii) workplace education and training through employment specialists to promote mental wellbeing as well as to create a safe and healthy workplace; (iv) individualised strategic plan to disclose mental illness in the workplace; (v) expansion of natural supports beyond workplaces by seeking potential sources of support at a community, family and individual level; (vi) further research on non-stigmatising supports within the workplace from perspectives of people with mental illness; and (vii) future research on disclosure of mental illness strategies in the workplace.

**Chapter 1: Introduction**

**1.1 Social Inclusion and employment**

Employment is important for all people. It goes without saying that employment provides people with income contributing to their economic standard of living. Moreover, it offers a sense of satisfaction and achievements through feelings of being productive, and provides both personal wellbeing and professional growth (McLaren, 2004). It is recognised that employment is associated with positive mental health as it provides for social contacts, and participation in the community (Chan, Tsang, & Li, 2009).

Employment is particularly important for people with mental illness. In addition to common benefits as stated above, employment is regarded as one of critical components in ensuring people with mental illness are included in society and supported in their recovery (Ministry of Health, 2005). The recovery approach involves minimising the discrimination against people with mental illness and enabling them to fully participate in society (Mental Health Commission, 1998; Mental Health Commission, 2011a). Therefore, engaging work and employment improves their level of confidence, health, social status and identity, and social relationships (Duncan & Peterson, 2007).

Competitive employment represents a normalized and valued social role for individuals. Indeed, work provides access to the socially valued role of ‘employee’ for individuals who have been historically denied full citizenship: society places a high value on work and those who work are considered to be valuable, contributing members of society (Novak, Rogan, & Mank, 2011). In this regard, workplaces are regarded as an important route to social inclusion and provide multiple benefits to people with mental illness and to society (Mental Health Commission, 2011b). The literature consistently reports that people with mental illness want to work (Harvey, Modini, Christensen, & Glozier, 2013; Leufstadius, Eklund, & Erlansson, 2009; Morgan, 2013; Rinaldi, Killackey, Smith, Shepherd, Singh, & Craig, 2010; Villotti, Corbiere, Zaniboni, & Fraccaroli, 2012; Waynor & Pratt, 2011, as cited in Gordon & Peterson, 2015). In New Zealand, it is reported that people with psychiatric/psychological impairments were among the most likely to want to work if a job was available (Statistics New Zealand, 2014).

However, the vast majority of people with experience of mental illness are denied the basic human right to work despite the fact that they can and want to work (Gruhl & Rebeiro, 2010; Sayce, 2008, as cited in Shankar, Barlow, & Khalema, 2011). In New Zealand, unemployment rates amongst people with mental illness are higher than the general population, and are the highest rates of unemployment among disability groups (Gordon & Peterson, 2015; Jensen, Sathiyandra, Rochford, Jones, Krishnan, & McLeod, 2005). Moreover, it is found that when work is obtained, the employment tenure is alarmingly short (Murphy, Mullen, & Spagnolo, 2005).

**1.2 Supported Employment and critiques**

In regard to social inclusion through employment, supported employment is an effective method of working with disabled people and other disadvantaged groups to access and maintain paid employment in the open labour market (Duncan & Peterson, 2007; European Union of Supported Employment, 2010; Kamp, Lynch, & Haccou, 2007; Weston, 2002). The emphasis in supported employment is on helping individuals with disabilities find paid employment in integrated settings in the community. It is recognised that supported employment is completely consistent with the concepts of empowerment, social inclusion, dignity and respect for individuals (Duncan & Peterson, 2007; European Union of Supported Employment, 2010). Most of all, a key aspect of the principles of supported employment is zero exclusion: no one should be excluded from employment opportunity. This method is also a proactive policy in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities recognising the right to gain a living by employment of choice in a work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to individuals with disabilities (European Union of Supported Employment, 2010). In particular, supported employment is widely recognized as the most effective approach to increase work opportu­nities for people with severe mental illness (Bond, 2004; Cook, 2006; Crowther, Marshall, Bond, & Huxley, 2001).

Traditionally, supported employment has been seen as a means for people with disabilities, many of whom have been considered ‘unemployable’ or capable of only sheltered work, to obtain employment in the open labour market (Murphy, Rogan, Sures, Dague, & Kalina, 1993). In supported employment, job coaches or employment specialists act as a primary support provider with a focus on securing employment and supporting the training of an individual with disability to complete the tasks and duties required in a role (Duncan & Peterson, 2007; Kamp et al., 2007; Weston, 2002). Although supported employment is a less segregated option than sheltered work, a common concern is that integration of employees with disabilities tends to be more physical than social (Hagner, 1989; Nisbet, 1992). In other words, it is criticised that the traditional role of employment specialists has the potential to socially distance supported employees from their co-workers and others in the workplace, limiting their social integration and the natural interactions that might develop with co-workers without disabilities (Irani, 2000).

**1.3 Natural supports and little research**

In response to dissatisfactions with the traditional job coach model, it is proposed that natural supports is an essential ingredient in achieving successful supported employment outcomes (Storey, 2003). In brief, the natural supports approach focuses on using co-workers, supervisors, and other supports intrinsic to the job setting to facilitate job skill acquisition, maintenance, and integration (Storey, 2003, as cited in Murphy et al., 2005).

The supported employment literature recognises the natural supports approach as a better strategy for providing long-term vocational supports than reliance upon paid professional services from employment specialists (Mank, Cioffi, & Yovanoff, 1997; Nisbet & Hagner, 1988; Test & Wood, 1996). An important finding reported in the literature is that “individuals who are naturally supported are more apt to be better integrated and more stable on their jobs” (Mank et al., 1997). These natural supports are particularly effective, which may be both formal and informal, because they enhance the social integration and acceptance of an employee with a disability in the workplace. Additionally, it is reported that natural supports tend to be more permanent, consistently and readily available, thereby natural supports facilitate long-term job-retention of supported employees (Murphy et al., 2005). Specifically, it is found that natural supports improve supported employment outcomes for individuals with mental health issues (Banks, Charleston, Grossi, & Mank, 2001). In summary, the most salient value underlying the traditional job coach model is the productivity of the supported employee, whereas the prominent value of natural supports is social integration (Chambless, 1996).

Nonetheless, it appears that far too little attention has been paid to the use and effectiveness of natural supports in New Zealand. Up to now, the research has tended to focus on the use and effectiveness of supported employment in general rather than those of natural supports as an essential ingredient in supported employment (Chambless, 1996; Corbière, Villotti, Lecomte, Bond, Lesage, & Goldner, 2014; Murphy et al., 2005). Whereas most of the natural supports literature was conducted in the United States, with most articles sourced in or before 1990s. Even a recent New Zealand study regarding mental health and employment was restricted to open employment whilst precluding supported employment (Gordon & Peterson, 2015).However, it seems that the authors in that study have overlooked the core value of supported employment, which is to help people with disabilities find and retain a job in the open labour market.

**1.4 Aim of Research**

Using a social inclusion lens, the underlying question in this study is how to enhance the likelihood that individuals with mental illness (supported employees) will be included in the social fabric of a workplace, be accepted and valued as equal peers, and experience feelings of belonging and support from employers, supervisors and co-workers (Novak et al., 2011). In response to the above question, this research project is conducted among supported employment agencies in the mental health field.

In fact, this study aims to understand a non-discriminatory, supportive and inclusive environment in the workplace through the development of natural supports for people with mental illness. More specifically, there are two main aims in this study. Firstly, this study will focus on the natural supports characteristics in the workplace from an employment specialists’ perspective. Secondly, it will provide insights into possible ways to enhance natural supports in the workplace. In order to respond to the above aims, this study will focus on the central question of ‘How do employment specialists perceive natural supports in association with facilitating non-discriminatory, inclusive and supportive environments in the workplace for people with mental illness?’

In order to achieve these aims, an exploratory study utilising a qualitative approach was conducted. Semi-structured and in-depth one-to-one interview sessions were conducted with four participants who are employment specialists in supported employment who have had more than two years work experience with people with mental health issues. The following questions guided this project:

* What is your understanding of natural supports?
* To what extent do natural supports help employees with mental illness?
* What are the strategies for natural supports in your agency?
* How effective are the strategies in place?
* What are the barriers to develop natural supports in the workplace?
* What suggestions would you have in seeking possible ways to enhance natural supports in the workplace?

As a result, the purpose of this study is to find a way to facilitate positive change amongst employers, supervisors and co-workers in the workplace in terms of their beliefs and attitudes towards people with mental illness. In addition, this study aims to make suggestions for practitioners and to recommend directions for future research in regard to implementation of natural support strategies in supported employment settings.

Relevant literature indicates that there are several different models of supported employment (Duncan & Peterson, 2007). For this study, supported employment specifically refers to the traditional supported employment, known as the Job Coach model: a job coach or employment specialist is primarily responsible for providing assessment, job development, job placement, job-site training, and ongoing in-work support to the individual for the duration of his or her employment (Unger, Parent, Gibson, Kane-Johnston, & Kregel, 1998).

Although in different contexts the terms may be used quite specifically, for the purpose of this research, the terms ‘employers’ and ‘managers or supervisors’ are used interchangeably.

**1.5 Structure of the research**

Following this introduction, Chapter Two presents the literature review surrounding the concept of natural supports. Relevant literature, key concepts and themes within an international and national context are discussed. Chapter Three is the methodology outlining an overview of the research design, data collection methods, analysis and limitations. Chapter Four outlines the main findings of the research and the interpretation of these findings from the interviews. Chapter Five discusses these findings in line with the appropriate literature. The last chapter highlights practice and policy implications and also makes recommendations in relation to this study.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

**2.1 Emerging natural supports in supported employment**

Contemporary supported employment arose from dissatisfaction with the outcomes of a ‘train and place’ model adhering to the key principle of pre-vocational training before moving people into open employment (Weston, 2002). Instead of pre-vocational training, proponents of supported employment proposed trying to place people as quickly as possible in competitive employment positions, where they would receive intensive on-the-job support and training from personnel, known as ’job coaches’ (Anthony & Blanch 1987; Corbière, Brouwers, Lanctôt, & van Weeghel, 2014; Weston, 2002). This is referred to as the job coach model of supported employment. In short, the model commonly used in supported employment is not a ‘train and place’ model of pre-vocational training, but the reverse - ‘place, train and maintain’ (Weston, 2002).

When supported employment became commonly used, the primary role of employment specialists was to help people with disabilities to gain access to competitive jobs in the community, and provide the training or onsite job assistance to them. In particular, it is reported that follow-along or long term employment supports are critical to the job retention for people with mental illness (Irani, 2000). However, Nisbet and Hagner (1988) suggested that there had already become an over-reliance on the funded supports for supported employment and that more natural sources of support should be developed for individuals in supported employment. The rationales for shifting toward natural supports were to enhance the integration and job retention of supported employees in competitive employment (Callahan, Griffin, & Hammis, 2011; Nisbet & Hagner, 1988). In fact, supported employees can become dependent upon paid professionals such as job coaches and employment specialists (Callahan et al., 2011; Storey, 2003). Moreover, conventional onsite job coaching might impede the integration and acceptance of individuals with mental illness in the workplace by bringing attention to the new employee receiving specialised services that were not provided to other co-workers in the employment environment (Fabian & Luecking, 1991; Hagner, 1989; Hagner, Rogan & Murphy, 1992). In consequence, the presence of an employment specialist may limit the natural interactions that would develop with co-workers in the workplace (Irani, 2000; Weston, 2002). The traditional job coach model can further hinder inclusion in other ways. A supported employee may by-pass the training which co-workers with no disabilities go through. This may result in exacerbating a sense of difference and distinction. In addition, low job retention amongst job coaches may affect the consistency and continuity of support (Trach, Beatty, & Shelden, 1998; Weston, 2002). In efforts to remedy this situation, many professionals viewed natural support strategies as a viable alternative to the traditional job coach model of supported employment (Unger et al., 1998).

Researchers have noted that successful employment for individuals with severe disabilities is contingent upon the implementation of natural supports provided by people other than agency personnel (Callahan, 1992; Fabian & Lueking, 1991, as cited in Storey, 2003). The philosophical underpinnings of this approach is that people with disabilities should be provided supports in ways that are as close to ‘normal’ as possible and that services should be provided with an emphasis on increasing and enriching relationships between people with and without disabilities (Storey, 2003). Therefore, it is recognised that a system for developing on-going natural supports is necessary in order to fade out the professional support offered from a job coach (Murphy et al., 2005).

**2.2 Definition of natural supports**

Since the term ‘natural support’ was first introduced in the 1980s in the field of supported employment, this concept has been discussed widely and acquired a variety of interpretations in the supported employment literature (Wehman & Bricout, 1999; West, Kregel, Hernandez, & Hock, 1997). As noted earlier, the concept of natural supports was proposed as a strategy to eliminate the discrimination and separation produced by the presence of employment specialists providing direct training, coaching, and support to individuals with disabilities (Banks et al., 2001; Nisbet & Hagner, 1988).

There is a large volume of published studies in attempting to define natural supports in supported employment. According to a definition provided by Trach and Mayhall (1997), natural supports refer to human or technical resources that are available or easily offered in a setting to facilitate integration, acceptance, and satisfaction, and to promote the goals and interests of everyone in a given setting. These include organisational, physical, social and training supports at various levels (Corbière et al., 2014). For Rogan, Hagner and Murphy (1993), natural supports mean any assistance, relationships or interactions that allow a person to secure or maintain a job in the community in ways that correspond to the typical work routines and social interactions of other employees. Storey and Certo (1996) proposed that natural supports are people who are not disability service providers but who provide assistance, feedback, contact or companionship to enable people with disabilities to participate independently, or partially independently, in integrated employment settings or other community settings. According to West et al. (1997), natural supports refer to the resources inherent in community environments that can be used for habilitative and supportive services. In other words, the ‘natural’ in natural supports refers to the relative access to the support strategies available to all individuals rather than to an artificial source of support that might not actually be ‘natural’ in some settings (Callahan et al., 2011). Nonetheless, the widely practiced concept of natural supports has yet to be clearly and unambiguously defined.

**2.3 Natural supports characteristics**

Even though a lack of consensus on definition of natural supports exists in the field of supported employment, the use of natural supports has been advocated as a better strategy for providing supports and increasing integration in the workplace (Storey, 2003). These natural support approaches to employment for people with disabilities are a process involving workplace mentors, using existing workplace resources, training and support similar to those supports given to co-workers without disabilities. Natural support approaches emphasise integrating individuals into the workplace culture in ways that are natural and typical, rather than accentuating limitations of individuals and supporting individuals with specialised assistance from a professional (Banks et al., 2001; Hagner, Butterworth, & Keith, 1995; Inge & Tilson, 1997; Storey & Certo, 1996). In short, the philosophical underpinning of natural supports is that supports should be provided in ways that are as close to ‘normal’ as possible (Storey, 2003).

Although differences of opinion still exist in the natural supports literature, there are some common elements among nearly all explanations of natural supports. In general, natural supports:

1. involve both process and outcome,
2. involve both assistance provided spontaneously and through facilitation,
3. reflect the typical activity evident in a particular work setting or culture, and
4. are used to help people get and keep employment and achieve goals in their life areas (Lowe, 2007).

In effect, the underlying concept of natural supports highlights that ‘typical’ people that one may encounter on a regular basis have great potential to help people with disabilities learn on the job, maintain employment and live independently (Gardner & Fishman, 2001, as cited in Lowe, 2007). It is important to note that natural supports are not a model to be universally applied. Rather, they are a more individualized strategy building upon such a focus (Hagner et al., 1992; Weston, 2002).

**2.4 Categories of Natural Supports**

For people with experience of mental illness, the symptoms of the disability often fluctuate between periods of remission and reoccurrence, which may interfere with workplace performance and relationships with employers and co-workers (Banks et al., 2001).Although no standardised measure of natural supports for people with mental illness has yet been developed or validated, a number of authors recognise the following categories of natural supports and work accommodations as useful for those people:

1. modified time schedule because of medication side effects or visits with mental health professionals during working hours,
2. job restructuring (e.g., redistributing tasks in the work team),
3. adjusting supervisory methods (e.g., communicating assignments or giving some feed-back or support),
4. modified training (modification of the manner in which training is provided),
5. social skills training (e.g., stress management, assertiveness training),
6. accommodation for memory deficits (e.g., assistive technologies to remind tasks or meetings),
7. working from home (e.g., part time),
8. environmental changes (e.g., reducing noise or other external stimulation) (Banks, Novak, Mank, & Grossi, 2007; Center, 2011; Gates & Akabas, 2011, Shultz, Duplassie, Hanson, & Winter, 2011; Trach & Mayhall, 1997, as cited in Corbière et al., 2014).

**2.5 Facilitating Natural Supports**

Although there is no consensus on the definition of natural supports, the natural supports approach focuses on interpreting workplace culture, and the involvement of supervisors and co-workers is at the heart of natural supports (Chambless, 1996). In supported employment, ongoing support for employees with disabilities is a key criterion, and supervisors and co-workers have been viewed as a promising source of natural supports because of their consistent presence in the workplace (Mank, Cioffi, & Yovanoff, 2000; Rusch & Minch, 1988). In short, the natural supports approach stresses the participation of supervisors and co-workers in hiring, training, and supervising supported employees (Mank et al., 1997; Murphy et al., 2005).

In addition to supervisors and co-workers, employment specialists play a key role in developing and implementing natural supports in the workplace by working collaboratively with supervisors and co-workers. The literature on natural supports emphasises the employment specialist as a training consultant with a broader range of responsibilities for promoting social integration in the workplace (Chambless, 1996). When the role of employment specialist is considered, there are three different views. According to several authors, the employment specialist has an important role in developing and maintaining natural supports for the duration of employment (Rogan, et al., 1993; Storey & Certo, 1996; Unger et al., 1998; West et al., 1997). They contended that the role of an employment specialist is to facilitate natural supports. It means this does not imply that job coaches are natural supports while it does not rule them out from acting as such. However, other authors view the employment specialists as totally exogenous to natural supports. It appears that Storey and Certo (1996) exclude job coaches in their definition of natural supports by stating: “Natural supports are people who are not disability service providers (p.63). Occupying the middle ground on the above two views, Fabian, Edelman, and Leedy (1993) seem to suggest that the job coach will fade out of the natural supports process in time by stating: “Natural workplace support approaches require more intensive efforts up front to link the employee to available supports since the approach does not rely on the continuing presence of the job coach.” (p.31).

Some authors even suggested that the concept of natural supports is extended beyond the workplace to the extent that other parties may be involved in natural supports as well, including friends, families, and community members (Hagner et al., 1995; West et al., 1997). Certainly, some advocates of the use of natural supports are keen to point out that the traditional job coach model of supported employment still have their place and that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive or incompatible (Hood, Test, Spooner, & Steele, 1996; Storey & Certo, 1996; Unger, 1999, as cited in Weston, 2002).

In fact, natural supports are regarded as those supports that remained in place after the training had been completed consisting of supervisors or co-workers who provide assistance, supervision, or other informal supports at the workplace. These supports often allow supported employees to remain successful in their job without the continuous supervision of employment specialists (Corbière et al., 2014; Storey, 2003).

To maximise the advantage of natural supports, the following strategies were suggested along with the role of employment specialists in all phases of supported employment:

1. The Employment specialist assists job seekers in identifying members of social networks, friends, neighbours, relatives, and using such personal connections before looking for jobs.
2. It is crucial for the employment specialist to get to know individuals personally by spending time with them in a variety of community settings. The employment specialist is required to gain a subjective sense of the workplace social climates prior to and during placement.
3. Relying on knowledge and experience of supervisors and co-workers, the employment specialist strengthens their involvement by seeking suggestions in relation to personal and technological supports for the supported employee.
4. The employment specialist acts as a facilitator or consultant to the employers.
5. The employment specialist broadens the scope of consultation on person-environment fit to benefit the individual and setting by looking at the larger work environment (Rogan & Hagner, 1993, as cited in Chambless, 1996).

**2.6 Barriers to development of natural supports**

It is reported that natural supports strategies can enhance supported employment outcomes in integrated employment settings in several ways such as cost effectiveness, customer satisfaction, and service delivery quality (McHugh, Storey & Certo, 2002; Parent, Wehman & Bricout, 2001; Sandow, Olson, & Yan, 1993; Zivolich, Shueman, & Weiner 1995, as cited in Lowe, 2007).

However, much of literature indicates there are a number of real barriers to their success in some cases. For this study in particular, an important issue related to natural support strategies is disclosure of a mental illness in the workplace. Long term persistent mental illness is sometimes an invisible disability (Banks et al., 2001). A person with mental illness needs to disclose, at least somewhat, his or her disability to an employer to initiate a discussion about obtaining natural supports and work accommodations (Corbière et al., 2014).The decision whether or not to disclose a disability in the workplace is certainly a dilemma given the multiple potential consequences, both positive and negative (Allen & Carlson, 2003; Krish, 2000). In general, many people with mental illness prefer not to disclose their illness because of stigma or because their co-workers or supervisor are perceived as unsupportive (Allen & Carlson, 2003; Corbière et al., 2014). Another barrier is that employers might be unwilling to implement the natural support strategies recommended by the supported employment programme and are resisting the notion that they should assume sole responsibility for the training, supervision, and support of the employee with a disability (Vander Hart, 2000). Also, not all co-workers are supportive of supported employees in the workplace, and natural supports outside the workplace, such as over-protective families, can constrict supported employees rather than supporting them (Hagner et al., 1992). Interestingly, it is contended that the use of natural supports may be a barrier to its own success. This is because the concept of natural supports is becoming axiomatic to a certain extent, and therefore employers claim to use them without actually doing as such. In labelling natural supports, others believe that social services will adopt the concept and consequently, co-workers may be reluctant to fulfil the role of a natural support while feeling that they do not possess the relevant qualifications to do so (Anderson & Andrews, 1990; Mank et al., 1997, as cited in Weston, 2002). Constraints of time and funding may become another barrier. With limited time and funding, employment specialists may have difficulties in identifying staff members with the skills necessary to implement natural support strategies, as well as providing training to supervisors and/or co-workers in the use of natural supports (Vander Hart, 2000).

**Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter sets out the research design that was used to explore the research question: How do employment specialists perceive natural supports in association with facilitating a non-discriminatory, inclusive and supportive environment in the workplace for people with mental illness (supported employees)? It outlines the research design (3.1), sampling (3.2), data collection (3.3), data analysis (3.4), limitations (3.5), and concludes with a section on ethical considerations (3.6).

**3.1 Research design**

To offer meaningful insight into the purpose of this research, this small scale exploratory study utilised a qualitative research methodology because it is interested in looking at lived accounts of the participants’ experiences from their engagement with supported employees (Smith, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2008). In fact, this study aims to encourage employment specialists to present in their own words how they perceive natural supports in association with facilitating a non-discriminatory, inclusive and supportive environment in the workplace for supported employees. Therefore, this approach allows for a deeper understanding of (1) who is involved with natural supports, (2) in what settings natural supports are found, and (3) what activities or features constitute natural supports.

This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a qualitative methodology. IPA is oriented towards exploring and understanding the experience of a particular phenomenon (Smith, 2004). As a methodology in its own right rather than simply a means of analysing data, IPA recognises that people perceive the world in different ways based on the their personalities, culture, prior life experience and motivation (Smith, 2004). In fact, IPA involves the detailed examination of participants’ ‘life worlds’ (Smith, 2004) and attempts to understand how participants themselves make sense of their experiences while seeking the meaning which those experiences hold for the participants (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

**3.2 Sampling**

IPA researchers usually recruit a small number of participants because IPA pursues the deeper understanding of the participants’ lived accounts (Smith & Eatough, 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Considering the limited scope, resources and time for this research, a purposive sampling was chosen to obtain the best information by selecting a small number of participants most likely to have the experience to provide quality information and valuable insights on the research topic (Denscombe, 2010). In this regard, employment specialists among supported employment agencies in Auckland region were selected as a purposive sampling group because their roles are directly relevant to the research topic through their engagement with supported employees.

In line with this sampling strategy, the recruitment criteria for this research are presented as below:

1. Those who are employment specialists in the mental health field; and
2. Those who have minimum two years’ work experience in supported employment.

Through word of mouth, four interview participants were recruited and each participant was contacted by email with an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, the interview process, the strategy of confidentiality and privacy and participants’ rights in this study. Upon receipt of their interest to participate in this research, each participant was asked to nominate a time and place for their individual interview. Prior to the commencement of interviews, written informed consent was gained from all participants confirming that they voluntarily agreed to take part in this study, and gave their permission to record the interviews. The participants were given an explanation about possible follow-up interviews in case there is need for clarification of information while analysing the collected data.

**3.3 Data collection**

To collect data from participants, this research used semi-structured, in-depth one-to-one interviews in this study. This is because semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to be prepared and confident during the interview while allowing the participants the freedom to express their views in their own terms (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Also, in-depth one-to-one interviews enables the researcher to identify non-verbal communication, complex questions, extensive probes to delve deeper into the subject matter, and monitoring of the interview environment (Henn, Weinstein, & Foard, 2006; Neuman & Kreuger, 2003). Considering the semi-structured interview, the researcher developed an interview guide incorporating a list of questions and areas to be covered during the interview.

Interviews for this study took place in Auckland in June 2015. By mutual agreement, all participants were interviewed at their work places with their manager’s permission. Interviews took on average 45 minutes to complete, which were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher. After the interview, they were offered a $40 petrol voucher.

**3.4 Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to extract themes and sub-themes from the collected data according to Ritchie, Spencer and O’Connor (2003)’s five stages process: (i) Being familiar with the data; (ii) Developing a thematic framework; (iii) Indexing data; (iv) Devising thematic charts; and (v) Mapping out and interpreting data.

As is noted above, the interview was recorded and the data transcribed for initial data management. At first, the researcher looked through the contents of all interviews and then categorised them into several themes. In each category, information was thoroughly reviewed and analysed to ensure the themes derived from the original data was responsive to the aims of the study. Following the above process, the findings from the data analysis were supplemented by examining relevant literature for discussion in this study.

**3.5 Limitations**

As with all qualitative research projects generalisation is not possible - since that is not an objective in qualitative research - there are other potential limitations in this study arising from sampling and methodology. Firstly, the discussion of natural supports in this study is primarily limited to those in the mental health field. As every work setting and each individual is unique, the ideas and recommendations presented in this study should not be interpreted as a formalised model to be applied in some prescribed, uniform manner. Rather, a natural supports orientation to integrated employment should be seen as a lens through which to view job environments, individual support need, and workplace relationships, and to construct individualised supports with and for, people in specific settings (Murphy et al., 1993). Secondly, the responses may have been contaminated by the researcher’s presence during data gathering and what participants felt might be the expected answer (Anderson, 2010). Lastly, research findings might have been influenced by the researcher’s personal biases or perspective while conducting the interview and data analysis. In other words, the researcher may have unconsciously looked at *what the researcher wants to find* rather than *what participants actually want to address* while conducting this research, although every effort was made to avoid this possible bias. These limitations must be recognized when considering the following findings and discussion of the results.

**3.6 Ethical issues**

Prior to the interview, the researcher explained critical information about this study to the participants as per the prepared information sheet for this study. It included the aims and processes of the study, confidentiality, privacy and the participant’s right to withdraw from the study. The participants were invited to ask any questions in association with the interview and the study before and during the interview. Further, the researcher informed participants of the process of data storage and anonymity when the researcher uses the data. Voluntary informed consent, including permission to use audio recording, was obtained from each participant. No client information was obtained during the interviews.

Although qualitative research methods make it difficult to predict how data will be collected through interviews, the researcher adhered to an obligation to weigh both the benefits and potential harms from the study throughout the research (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2000). To minimise potentially harmful consequences, the researcher cautiously screened all interview questions and the interview process with support from the research advisory group.

**Chapter 4: Findings**

This chapter sets out the findings from the interviews with the four participants. Through thematic analysis, four overarching themes emerged from the data: Natural Supports Characteristics (4.1), Facilitating Natural Supports (4.2), Barriers to development of Natural Supports (4.3), and Participants recommendations (4.4). These themes and their meanings will be discussed by using the participants’ own words to illustrate the main points. All participants have worked in supported employment as employment specialists supporting individuals with experience of mental illness into work. Brief descriptions of the interview participants in this study are as below:

Barbara: Employment specialist with six years’ work experience in supported employment

Henry: Employment specialist with six and half years’ work experience in supported employment

Mary: Registered Social Worker having six years’ work experience in supported employment

Sandy: Employment specialist with seven years’ experience in supported employment, started off as a community support worker in mental health

**4.1 Natural Support Characteristics**

All participants described natural supports as any assistance, relationships and interactions available in the workplace to facilitate a supported employee’s integration, acceptance and satisfaction. They offered various descriptions of natural supports from their own perspectives. They highlighted that a broad concept of support is crucial. This should include both the informal support and formal structures such as mentoring, socialising at work, and employee training by using human and technical resources available at work. In attempting to define natural supports, the following quotes are representative of their comments addressing the characteristics of natural supports: integration, the work environment, work-related supports, and workplace relationships.

**Integration**

*In the workplace, I think natural support is helping clients to fit in, to become part of the team or the organisational culture… helping that person, you know, to stand on their own two feet, to become part of the team, to become self-reliant, rather than picking someone from completely outside that environment. So the integration and being a part becomes sort of more natural…* (Sandy)

*It is part of the process of being independent in the community… so I start towards developing natural support so that they can move on towards independent* (Henry)

**Work culture**

*[As each workplace is different]Each person will have a different natural supports*. (Henry)

*I know some call centre, I saw an advertisement in the paper the other day, ‘we love feeding you’. They do social things and provide lunches once a month or things like that. It means that you are making the staff a lot happier, and it’s a nice working environment, especially when you are in a call centre, uplifting the energy, you know, which gives them motivation, and then that reflects in their work* (Sandy)

**Work-related supports**

*The client feels part of the organisation, part of that team, and that’s all going to help and enhance their performance. They just wanted to be treated normally like anybody else.* (Sandy)

*I would see natural supports as they can be individuals within that company or organisation… People that you can talk to with issues at work, people you can go to ask a question between you and your roles, they are happy to give you advice and goals around your work, duties and work roles. So that is what I see as natural supports at the work place, people who can support you in your work role.* (Barbara)

**Workplace Relationships**

*We discuss whom they have met and who you know which of their colleagues and managers that they particularly felt they can get along well with or they might trust, or whose advice they valued.* (Barbara)

*She didn't get on with her manager, but she got on with her work colleagues. And it was her work colleagues who have supported her and helped her to stay in that job.* (Sandy)

**4.2 Facilitating Natural Supports**

All participants highlighted the important role of employers, co-workers and employment specialists respectively to facilitate the development of natural supports in the workplace.

**4.2.1 Involvement of employers and co-workers**

All participants agreed that employers and managers are one of the key players for successful development of natural supports in the workplace. In particular, they emphasised the employers not only enhance a supported employee’s job performance and confidence, but also they can create a supportive and inclusive workplace culture for social integration. Two participants indicated that employers are in a position to navigate a wide range of supports available that can be tapped into to assist the supported employee to become both trained in a particular job and connected and socially included in the workplace.

*They have got skills, good work skills, and they can contribute to their workplace environment. My clients just want to be treated normally like anybody else. So employers should be educated to value their employees and respect them whether they are disabled or not.* (Sandy)

*The employer obviously knows the organisation. The employer has some prior knowledge about their new employee [with mental health issues]and the employee knows that they can go to the employer whoever and say look……. It is so open, and that I guess it is the ideal situation.* (Henry)

One participant addressed the importance of good relationship between an employer and supported employee affecting the amount and type of formal and informal support the supported employee receives from the employer or manager.

*She was able to make this relationship with another manager who was happy to just double check her. That was really good for her, because her confidence was raised around making decisions. So it was great for her to just have someone who was happy to and who was willing to.* (Barbara)

In addition to the involvement of employers and managers, all participants indicated the importance of co-worker relationships which have a unique influence on the supported employee’s job performance and motivation. They said that co-worker relationships truly help ‘make the place’. When these relationships are positive, supported employees are more likely to find their needs met and feel motivated and committed to their organisation.

*She was in a call centre, so you imagine that how busy that is, how stressful that is. She stated that she did not get on with her manager, but she got on with her work colleagues. It was her work colleagues who have supported her and helped her to stay in that job* (Sandy)

*Well, colleagues, peers groups with colleagues, and supervision that we have with the team leader.* (Mary)

*As I said, it could be basically developing workmates. People that you can talk to with issues at work, you know, people you can go to ask a question, and those people are not necessarily managers, they can be people you are happy to [engage with] in a tolerant sense between you and your roles, they are happy to give you advice and goals around your work, duties and work roles.* (Barbara)

**4.2.2 Role of employment specialists**

Participants indicated that they act as a consultant and facilitator to sustain supported employees’ success. They navigate supports that already exist in the workplace and community for supported employees such as accessing the expertise of the employer, co-workers and personal support network. They highlighted that one of the roles of the employment specialist is linking the individual to the support or to the support provider once an individual is employed. In other words, assistance predominantly provided by co-workers is seen as crucial for facilitation of natural supports.

*Natural support has already been established from day one. That is the ideal. So it is not only me providing ongoing employment support, you have got an employer who understands and who can immediately stand up and navigate through any problems.* (Henry)

*We need to try and identify someone else in the workforce that was not just willing to give her that advice, was actually happy to do it.* (Barbara)

They indicated that employment specialists need to understand the unique informal rules and norms in each workplace in order to assist supported employees in developing supports and social connections. For this purpose, the participants emphasised on the importance of building a meaningful and constructive relationship with employers in order to develop natural supports in the workplace.

*Well, it all depends and every story is different. You can’t just say it is all the same, every story is different.* (Mary)

*But within our capacity as employment consultant, we endeavour to and do build up relationships with employers. That is part of our roles, just probably one of the most important ones, is to build up relationships with employers.* (Henry)

In this study, all participants reiterated their role as the primary trainer. However, they believe that the professional support should be progressively faded out from the workplace as natural supports are developed.

*Yes, always putting a fading plan in place because all the things we do is to support people towards [being] independent. So we don't have a time frame for when we do that, we would only put a fading plan when we are confident that there are natural supports there but we are always available even if when we have completed a fading plan. So if there is any issues, and we have been phoned up and we will be there.* (Barbara)

*You see a time when you have natural support in place, and then in-work support is no longer required.* (Henry)

*Yea yeah, it is that fading out process. So initially we have that intensive support, intensive you know, helping them initially, and settling in and then clients they fall out of work and then they sort of go back in, and then they can sort of do that, you know, so they may be kept a little bit longer because it’s just where they are at, yeah…* (Sarah)

Interestingly, there was only one participant indicating the need of natural support from the very beginning of engagement with job seekers throughout all phases of supported employment.

*I see natural support as support that comes after my [first] meeting with the client* (Henry)

**4.3 Barriers to development of natural supports**

While acknowledging the involvement of employers and co-workers to foster development of natural supports in the workplace, all participants identified non-disclosure of mental illness as the barrier that employment specialists face. They stated that most of supported employees choose not to disclose mental health issues to employers or co-workers.

*In our team, a lot of our clients, I would say probably around 90 to 95% of our clients, really don’t like to disclose to the employers. (Sandy)*

*I think the main barrier would be non-disclosure. Because if the person is non-disclosed, then I have no access to their worksite.* (Henry)

The participants highlighted that their clients fear anticipated discrimination at work from employers, managers or co-workers. They also indicated that self–stigma contributes to non-disclosure of mental illness.

*I think the reason behind that is felt that they would be discriminated against by their employers, which would hinder the process of them actually getting into work… they just wanted to be treated normally like anybody else.* (Sandy)

*They are not willing to disclose because they are concerned about discrimination. There is also a lot of self-stigma around mental illness. So they don't want to disclose because they self-stigmatise the fact that they have experienced mental health illness.* (Barbara)

In addition to the above two main reasons, one participant indicated that supported employees do not believe it is necessary to disclose their mental health issues due to 90 days probationary period.

*With 90 days legislation, a person can be let go with no reason within the first 90 days of your employment, so what is the point of disclosure, some people say that.* (Henry)

With regard to difficulties in developing natural supports in the workplace, all participants stated that non-disclosure of mental illness makes it hard for employment specialists to approach employers seeking development and implementation of natural supports in the workplace. Because of this reason, one participant indicated there is no specific strategy in her agency for the development of natural supports for supported employees.

*That is a problem that all employment consultants have faced. If your client chooses not to disclose, you cannot support them in the workplace, because it will be automatic disclosure.* (Barbara)

*Well, a lot of our clients do get a job and don’t really want much support. You know, I have never gone to the employers and their workplaces... because how could I explain myself?* (Mary)

*A person who is willing to disclose their mental illness to the employer and then it is going to be a lot easier. I think bit more straight forward to develop natural support within the workplace. If a client is not disclosed, obviously I cannot develop natural support within the workplace together with them.* (Henry)

As a consequence of non-disclosure of mental illness, the participants stated that they normally provide support ‘behind the scenes’ to their clients instead rather than work on the frontlines.

*None of my clients are confident to disclose. So it makes in-work support more difficult. I* have to work in the sideline, and I have to do it in the background really. (Barbara)

I have several clients who are in jobs and who have never disclosed and of course I have to honour that, so I work behind the scene with the client only to provide the ongoing employment support. (Henry)

*But unfortunately, in that instance, we cannot go on into the job, as an employment consultant, we just pop in and see them as if we were friends of some sort, for example* (Sandy)

**4.4 Participants Recommendations**

While indicating non-disclosure of mental illness as the barrier to development natural supports in the workplace, the participants commented that natural supports are the relationships that occur in everyday life associated with the setting of supported employees. They went on to say that building natural supports does not have to be limited to service providers or people in the workplace, but anyone who supported employees know can contribute to building natural supports through a variety of experiences.

*I got a couple of clients who volunteer at SPCA or volunteer at Salvation Army. That’s also the area where natural supports could be developed. I have some people belonged to churches. Church groups could possibly provide a more natural supports.* (Henry)

*Even if it is not in the work environment, it could be sort of other natural supports, could be other family members, or could be in the community, someone could be belong to a sporting group or a church group, and sometimes through those people they could find work. You know, so they support them. And even sort of social groups, so where the individual is, people that are in their environment could all help them, and they could also be steps to take them to finding employment.* (Sandy)

*[When we prepare client’s exit planning], we take into account whether they have natural supports not just they are in the role, but also within the community.* (Barbara)

**Chapter 5: Discussion**

This chapter will discuss the findings of this research in light of the literature review under three main themes: natural supports characteristics (5.1), the involvement of employers and co-workers, (5.2), the role of employment specialists (5.3), and barriers to development and implementation of natural supports (5.4).

**5.1 Natural Supports Characteristics**

In this study, participants agreed that the concept of natural supports was an important component of supported employment. This finding is reflected in the literature review which focuses on the benefits of natural supports in enhancing the integration in the workplace and job retention of supported employees in competitive employment. However, the participants do not appear to have consensus on the main topic of this study: what distinguishes natural supports from other workplace or work-related supports. This clearly reflects the fact that the concept of natural supports has not been easy to define or operationalize in the supported employment literature (Wehman & Bricout, 1999).

In spite of a lack of consensus among the participants in this study regarding the definition of ‘natural supports’ and what is or is not a natural support, there was considerable overlap between natural supports characteristics in the literature review and the themes to emerge from the participants’ accounts. The following four themes are examined in turn: (1) Integration; (2) Work culture; (3) Work related supports; and (4) Interpersonal Relationships.

**5.1.1 Integration**

From the beginning of supported employment, integration has been a defining feature of good practice. As both physical and social integration are considered key aspects of supported employment, facilitating integration has been one of the functions assigned to job coaches (Rogan, Banks, & Howard, 1999). However, social integration has not always accompanied physical placement in natural settings included in the workplace. A review of supported employment literature indicates that individuals with mental illness were less likely to engage in non-work related social interactions than their co-workers (Chadsey-Rusch, Gonzalez, & Tines, 1989, as cited in Hagner et al., 1992).

In this study, participants recognised that natural supports can facilitate and improve integration into the job and the workplace, which will result in enhancing full integration into the community, social networks and friendships, and social status. By developing a naturally occurring support network for individuals with mental illness, the need for paid supports will decrease and social integration will increase. This will lead to promoting longer job tenure (Murphy et al., 2005), the higher the wages and benefits (Rogan et al., 1999).

**5.1.2 Workplace Cultures**

Every work setting has, to some degree, a set of shared beliefs, customs, meanings and traditions known as the organisational culture (Sathe, 1983; Schein, 1985; Smiricich, 1983, as cited in Hagner et al., 1992). Organisational cultures are complex and require time to understand. According to Mank et al. (1997), the concept of natural supports underscores an understanding of workplace culture that, in turn, dictates what is ‘natural’ or ‘typical’ for that particular situation. In any work setting, people come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, and the culture or climate of the work setting is complex. As each work setting is unique, it is important to recognise that what is natural will change from context to context (Murphy et al., 1993).

In this study, participants gave their attention to the culture or climate of the work setting. They mentioned that there is no one-fits-all type of natural supports because each workplace and each individual is unique and different. For example, employers being supportive of a diverse workforce with disability awareness could have influence on co-workers. In fact, the effectiveness of natural supports will depend to a great extent on the culture of the setting and the people in the setting. In other words, workplace cultures can enhance or impede the success of supported employees.

**5.1.3 Work-related supports**

The commitment to ongoing supports is the unique feature of supported employment that makes it possible for supported employees to sustain employment over time (Wehman & Bricout, 1999). The primary discussion area regarding ongoing supports is job training procedures. In supported employment, the term ‘ongoing supports’ refers to those services helping a new employee to stabilise in the job and be performing the required job tasks consistently and satisfactorily with less intensive support (Murphy et al., 1993). While recognising the importance of such long-term employment supports, the participants indicated that workplace personnel play a key role in providing work-related supports as employment specialists gradually fade out of the natural supports process in time. In other words, they highlighted that a system for developing on-going natural supports is necessary through typical people at work. However, it is important to note that the support needs of individuals with disabilities are similar to the variety of employment-related issues that occur among individuals without disabilities (Miano, Nalven, & Hoff, 1996, as cited in Unger, 1999).

**5.1.4 Workplace relationships**

People always need to connect, talk and share feelings and thoughts. The interpersonal relationships and supportive social networks that we may take for granted, however, are often elusive for individuals with disabilities such those with intellectual disabilities or mental illness (Novak et al., 2011). Social interactions may be difficult for some individuals, but are a critical aspect of supports in the workplace (Rogan et al., 1999). In fact, social interactions are more likely to occur among workers who are physically proximate, but even more so among workers who have similar jobs and responsibilities and who interact as part of their job (Burke, Weir, & Duncan, 1976; Peponis, 1985, as cited in Hagner et al., 1992). When these relationships are positive, employees are more likely to find their needs met and feel motivated and committed to their organisation (Basford & Offermann, 2012). In this study, participants described having managers and co-workers on hand for support in dealing with any problems invaluable. They indicated that a sustained positive relationship with managers and co-workers enhances the job performance and job retention. This finding highlights the potential for workplace interactions and relationships to have both negative and positive effects on employment outcomes for supported employees (Novak et al., 2011).

The participants in this study seem to agree about what constitutes a natural support as discussed above: integration, workplace culture, work-related supports and interpersonal relationships. However, the natural supports that are being used by supported employment agencies appear to be limited in scope. The finding revealed that natural supports are considered being used far less frequently during the job assessment, job development, and job placement phases of supported employment (West et al., 1997).

**5.2 Involvement of Employers and co-workers**

In line with the above characteristics of natural supports, the participants highlighted the importance of employers including managers and supervisors, co-workers and employment specialists regarding their respective roles in implementation of natural supports in the workplace.

In discussions of natural supports, there is a high degree of consensus that natural supports involve employers and co-workers in the supported employee’s work environment. In this study, the findings confirm the instrumental role of employers and co-workers in providing natural supports to their supported employees. These findings are consistent with the concept of natural supports: employers, supervisors and co-workers that supported employees encounter on a regular basis play a key role in developing and implementing natural supports in the workplace.

**5.2.1. Employers**

The quality of training, the nature of interpersonal relationships in the workplace and workplace culture itself depended in large part on employers or managers concerned (Secker & Membrey, 2003). The findings revealed that employers are in a position to provide a wide range of supports available that can be tapped into to assist the supported employee to become both trained in a particular job and connected and socially included in the workplace. This confirms that employers can make company procedures including job training, job modification, supervision and other supports accessible for supported employees. For example, employers and supported employees are capable of suggesting appropriate intervention strategies to deal with the job-related social skill problems of supported employees (Baumgart & Askvig, 1992). Also, employers can provide job training supports to supported employees through co-workers. Such procedure can not only assist supported employees in performing their job successfully, but also be viewed by co-workers for their own everyday duties (Mank, Oorthuys, Rhodes, Sandow, & Weyer, 1992). For employers, natural supports can help them to overcome their fear around employing and supporting individuals with disabilities, and suit both supported employees, and those they work with (Weston, 2002).

**5.2.2 Co-workers**

As mentioned in the literature review, the co-worker is also the most commonly appearing in almost every definition in the natural supports literature (Fabian et al., 1993; Fabian & Luecking, 1991; Hagner et al., 1995; Lee, Storey, Anderson, Goetz, & Zivolich, 1997; Mank et al., 1997; Rogan et al., 1993; West et al., 1997). The most obvious finding in this study was that supportive co-workers could play a key role in enabling supported employees to sustain their jobs through times of tension or difficulty. The participants indicated that co-workers can provide social support, mentoring and formal training for supported employees. Therefore, the support given by co-workers facilitates and strengthens integration into work routines, familiarisation with a company’s culture and creation of interpersonal relationships.

In fact, relationships between co-workers differ from those between managers or supervisors and subordinates. Managers interact with employees from a position of hierarchical authority whereas relationships between employees are generally horizontal or lateral without the added element of formal authority. Due to proximity in the workplace, co-workers are likely to have more frequent interactions with supported employees than the employer, and their influence is widely seen as quite powerful whether it is beneficial or detrimental (Basford & Offermann, 2012). Accordingly, co-workers can establish behavioural norms, serving as positive or negative role models at work. Moreover, co-workers can greatly affect organisational climate, helping to build supportive and inclusive workplaces or to destroy them. Likewise, organisational culture can affect co-worker relationships (Basford & Offermann, 2012). Indeed, the relationship between organisational culture and co-worker relations is reciprocal: workplace culture affecting the co-worker relations and relations in turn affecting the culture (Basford & Offermann, 2012).

**5.3 Role of Employment specialists**

As noted in the literature review, the role of employment specialists has evolved from that of being the primary provider of services to that of a facilitator of services in arranging supports for individuals to access (Unger et al., 1998). However, the finding in this study shows that employment specialists are identified as part of natural supports positioning them in the middle ground between job coaches and unpaid natural supports.

**5.3.1 Navigating and facilitating natural supports**

In this study, the participants stressed that employment specialists navigate supports that already exist in the workplace and community for supported employees such as accessing the expertise of the employer, co-workers and personal support network. For example, the employment specialist can assist employers in the identification and development of workplace supports based on (a) their knowledge of the abilities of the individuals they are working with (b) their knowledge of resources that exist outside the employment setting, and (c) their ability to analyse the work environment to maximize existing employer resources (Unger, 1999). However, it is suggested that specialist efforts always be coordinated carefully with those of internal support systems. This is because techniques were developed and imposed externally by employment specialists who had limited understanding of workplace environments and functioning (Nisbet & Hagner, 1988). Thus, it is suggested that employment specialists walk a thin line, demonstrating but not doing, being available but not taking over, focusing their interventions on employers and co-workers as well as on supported employees (Hagner et al., 1992).

**5.3.2 Ongoing support and fading out**

Within a natural support frame, it was suggested that the employment specialists' efforts to use natural supports is required during all phases of the supported employment process (Unger et al., 1998). In this study, there was only one participant considering the needs of natural supports from the job assessment phase. Whereas the other participants recognised that a strategy for developing ongoing natural supports is necessary at the commencement of employment and then employment specialists gradually fade out of the natural supports process in time. These findings appear to reflect the fact that natural supports are used far less frequently during the assessment, job development, and job placement phases of supported employment in practice (West et al., 1997). These findings imply that the employment specialists may need to make efforts from the beginning of the supported employment process in order to get to know the individual, assess the individual’s abilities, and identify potential sources of support in the individual’s life and community. As employment specialists are most often relied on to identify and arrange supports or assistance, their knowledge of the specific types of workplace supports and community available to supported employees is critical. In other words, it is necessary for employment specialists to secure the type and level of ongoing support available to supported employees through collaborative work with employers and co-workers in the process of fading out in time (Unger et al., 1998).

**5.4 Problems in accessing natural supports**

**5.4.1 Non-disclosure of mental illness**

In the supported employment literature on natural supports, there are a number of barriers to the development and implementation of natural supports for individuals with mental illness, namely non-disclosure of mental illness, non-cooperative employers and co-workers, over-protective families and lack of local programmes.

Whereas this study found that non-disclosure of mental illness acts as a sole barrier to the implementation of natural support strategies among the above barriers. Because of non-disclosure, the participants indicated that they cannot access the worksite in most occasions. The participants in this study pointed out fears of supported employees surrounding the disclosure of mental illness in the workplace. They described that such fears stem from the prejudice or discrimination of employers and co-workers based on misunderstanding of mental illness as well as the self-stigma attached to mental illness.

In fact, whether or not to disclose experience of mental illness was a particularly difficult issue for people with mental illness (Human Rights Commission, 2010). It is obvious that the decision whether or not to disclose mental illness in the workplace is certainly a dilemma given both positive and negative consequences (Allen & Carlson, 2003; Krish, 2000). A study conducted in New Zealand reflects that there were risks either way – disclose and risk not being considered for the job; don’t disclose and risk being unsupported or dismissed if you become unwell (Human Rights Commission, 2010). Considering the nature of business today, employers are often seeking to minimise risk. Therefore, if they think taking on a person who discloses will bring greater risk of disruption and/or problems, they generally are likely to go with what they consider the ‘less risky’ option (Lennan & Wyllie, 2005). Also, many people prefer not to disclose their mental disorder because of stigma or because their co-workers or supervisor are perceived as unsupportive (Allen & Carlson, 2003). Hence, people with mental illness often internalise stigma and limit their opportunities through anticipated discrimination (Ministry of Health and Health Promotion Agency, 2014).

Another interesting finding was that a 90-day probationary period acts as a contributing factor to non-disclosure of mental illness. A possible explanation for this might be that these conversations might be better had after the probationary period, to ensure both employer and employee are confident in their ability to do the job, and that disclosure can be made without fear of prejudice or discrimination (Gordon & Peterson, 2015). Another possible explanation for this is that individuals may be able to obtain needed accommodations without disclosing their disability status, if natural supports are present in the workplace (MacDonald-Wilson, Russinova, Rogers, Lin, Ferguson, Dong, & Kash-MacDonald, 2011, as cited in Corbière et al., 2014).

**5.4.2 Working behind the scenes**

Due to non-disclosure of mental illness as such, the most important finding was that employment specialists have to work behind the scenes, not on the frontlines, in most cases while supporting their clients. Given that supported employees do not disclose their mental illness in the workplace, the existence of employment specialists is unknown to the worksite, and accordingly, they are unable to examine job environments, individual support needs in a particular setting, and work site relationships, and to facilitate natural supports with, and for, people in specific settings (Murphy et al., 1993). Rather, it appears that their supports are limited in scope being pure professional services as the primary provider of services through ongoing in-work support.

It is evident that the natural supports may occur spontaneously in some situations, in others they may be facilitated through human service assistance or consultation (Butterworth & Kiernan, 1996; Hagner & DiLeo, 1993, as cited in Vander Hart, 2000). In fact, individuals may be able to obtain needed accommodations without disclosing their disability status, if natural supports are present in the workplace (MacDonald-Wilson et al., 2011, as cited in Corbière et al., 2014). However, it is difficult typically for supported employees to take full advantage of all the support resources available. In other words, the fact that a support is available in the workplace does not necessarily mean that supported employees will automatically access it or benefit from its use. In many cases, supported employees do not know what potential supports are available, how to choose among the alternatives, or how to go about accessing a desired support. In the use of a variety of supports, a critical factor is the presence of a knowledgeable resource: who assists supported employees in identifying, choosing, and accessing needed supports at whatever level of assistance they prefer (Wehman & Bricout, 1999). In particular, long term persistent mental illness is sometimes an invisible disability implying a complex cluster of impairments that are not physically apparent (Banks et al., 2001). Accordingly, it is important to note that the supports for individuals with mental illness are distinctly different than those for physical disabilities (Paetzold, 2005, as cited in Corbière et al., 2014). This introduces the next topic of implication for policy and practice in an effort to the development of natural supports for a non-discriminatory, supportive and inclusive environment in the workplace.

**Chapter 6: Conclusion**

The purpose of the current study was to explore the perspectives of employment specialists about natural supports in the workplace among people with mental illness. More specifically, this study focused on the natural supports characteristics in the workplace from an employment specialists’ perspective. Secondly, it was to provide insights into possible ways to develop natural supports for non-discriminatory, supportive and inclusive environments in the workplace. In this regard, four main findings emerging from this study are particularly noteworthy.

First, the participants have no consensus on the definition of natural supports, but provided some core aspects of natural supports, namely integration, workplace culture, work-related supports and workplace relationships. These findings are relatively consistent with those in the supported employment literatures. Also, it was further revealed that natural supports are considered being used far less frequently during the job assessment, job development, and job placement phases of supported employment (West et al., 1997).

The second finding was that the involvement of employers and co-workers in supporting or training supported employees is at the heart of natural supports. Employers and co-workers are the ones who supported employees encounter on a regular basis, and those workplace personnel play a key role in developing and implementing natural supports in the workplace. In particular, co-worker involvement broadly encompasses training and evaluation of supported employees, which are instructional in nature. Additionally, co-workers may be involved in support roles such as associating, befriending and advocating.

Thirdly, the finding demonstrated the crucial role the employment specialist plays in facilitating natural supports and providing ongoing supports to sustain supported employees’ success. They can assist employers and co-workers in in the identification and development of natural supports based on (a) their knowledge of the abilities of supported employees; (b) their knowledge of resources that exist outside the employment setting; and (c) their ability to analyse the work environment to maximize existing resources (Unger, 1999). In short, employment specialists encompass employers, co-workers and a broader context in their support efforts and gradually fade out of the natural supports process in time.

Lastly, the implementation of natural supports is directly linked to disclosure of mental illness. The finding shows that there are low rates of disclosure of current or previous mental illness and their clients experience high levels of anticipated discrimination as well as self-stigma. This implies that discrimination and stigma in the workplace is still relatively common, disabling individuals with mental illness to disclose such issues. In practice, non-disclosure seriously affects the development of natural supports in the workplace. This is because employment specialists are unable to access the worksite for facilitation of natural supports. Rather, they continuously provide their ongoing in-work support behind the scenes, not on the frontlines.

**6.1 Implications for policy and practice**

**6.1.1 Policy recommendation**

In this study, the participants indicated that there is extremely low rates of disclosure of mental illness because of a high level of anticipated discrimination as well as self-stigma. In this regard, both external (employers and co-workers) and internal (supported employees) changes are therefore likely to be necessary to make the workplace more inclusive and supportive. In order to create a socially inclusive New Zealand that is free of stigma and discrimination towards people with mental illness, there has been considerable policy interest in diminishing public stigma through Like Minds Like Mine campaign along with Blueprints I & II in New Zealand (Mental Health Commission, 2012; Ministry of Health, 2007). In particular, Like Minds focuses their efforts on promoting workplace policies, structures and cultures that are inclusive and supportive of people with mental illness (Ministry of Health and Health Promotion Agency, 2014). Nonetheless, it seems that Like Minds have had little direct effect on changing employer or employee knowledge, attitudes or behaviour in the workplace. As an example of a more direct method, it is suggested to eliminate the discriminatory use of pre-employment questionnaires, which are widely perceived as being used to weed out potentially difficult employees (Baumann, Muijen, & Gaebel, 2010). Given this situation, there is a need for a further investigation to evaluate the current anti-stigma framework as well as to develop it further with the aim of enabling the structures and cultures within workplaces to be more inclusive and supportive.

Given that employment is an important route to social inclusion and that all those who wish to work should have the opportunity and support to do so, the government launched a new contracted case management service in 2013 as part of the Welfare Reform changes to support people with mental illness into work. Six employment agencies were contracted to deliver such a service with aim of helping people with mental illness return to and stay in work. The agencies are supporting people to overcome any factors impacting on their ability to find employment and working with employers to make sure the right supports are in place (Ministry of Social Development, 2013). However, the programme was criticised in that the outcomes have fallen short of expectations in terms of weighing the effectiveness against the cost, mainly because those on the programme did not stay in work for longer, or earn more(Jones, 2015).

If there are ways to reduce costs while maintaining a program’s quality, service providers would do well to take these into account. It is important to note that cost analysis should not be the final word in any discussion determining the merits of selecting one support strategy or programme over another. There are a number of other nonmonetary factors to consider such as consumer choice, dignity, satisfaction, and long-term outcomes. However, the economic constraints faced by service providers including supported employment agencies cannot be denied. In this regard, finding ways that produce cost-effective results may be critical to the future success of individuals with mental illness who wish to work within their communities (Cimera, 2007). In this regard, the utilisation of natural supports can significantly reduce the overall cost of services (Cimera, 2007). In fact, it has been claimed that utilising supports that occur naturally or can be developed within the workplace will not only help supported employees successfully retain their jobs, but also significantly reduce costs of services they require (Cimera, 2001; Cimera, 2007; Fabian & Luecking, 1991; Hanley-Maxwell & Millington, 1992; Zivolich, Sueman, & Weiner, 1997).

**6.1.2 Practice recommendation**

As compared to the literature review, the most interesting finding in this study is that employment specialists are likely to support their clients behind the scenes due to non-disclosure of mental illness. As their existence is unknown to the worksite, they are not in a position to evaluate the workplace setting where the clients are placed. They have no access to employers or co-workers, and thereby they cannot act as a facilitator of natural supports in the workplace. Considering the above, the following approaches seem to be useful for employment specialists to place natural supports strategies.

In supported employment, it is good practice to maintain a positive partnership and healthy contact with prospective employers. Through developing such positive relationship, satisfied employers are a valuable source for new jobs or referrals (European Union of Supported Employment, n.d.). There are creative ways for the employment specialists to involve those employers regularly in a positive way. For example, it is possible to improve the inclusive behaviours of the general public who come into contact with people with mental illness along their journey to seeking, getting and maintaining employment. This includes enabling the structures and cultures in the workplaces to be more inclusive and supportive in order to diminish stigma and discrimination against people with mental illness (Ministry of Health and Health Promotion Agency, 2014). In this regard, employment specialists can access a worksite and act as a general workplace health promotor without revealing their relationship with any supported employees. This includes facilitating more workplace education, providing more training for Health and Safety Officers so that disabled people are not perceived to be a ‘risk’, and increasing awareness of what reasonable accommodations are and how they can be made. As employer attitudes to mental illness are likely to reflect those in the general workforce and community, this approach also reduces stigma against individuals with mental illness amongst employers, managers and co-workers (Family & Community Development Committee, 2012).

Mental health problems in the workplace have serious effects not only for individuals, but for the productivity and competitiveness of businesses and thus the economy and society as a whole (Baumann et al., 2010). It is true that a worker may develop his or her mental illness prior to employment or during employment. The New Zealand research *Employer Attitudes and Behaviours Relating to Mental Illness* (Lennan & Wyllie, 2005) reported an apparent inconsistency. It is found that employers were often reluctant to employ someone who disclosed experience of mental illness in an interview, but if a person became unwell while working, the emphasis would shift to trying to retain valued staff, including employers going out of their way to make reasonable accommodations.

Under the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992, employers are obliged to take appropriate steps to eliminate and minimise health and safety risks in the workplace. The Act requires employers to protect both mental and physical health of their employees. Moreover, the new Health and Safety at Work Act coming into effect in 2016 places a positive duty on directors to exercise ‘due diligence’ to ensure the health and safety of workers in their organisation (New Zealand Law Society, 2013). Therefore, the legal responsibilities on employers will be much greater than they used to be. Such legislative change can be used by employment specialists to help employers to incorporate natural supports strategies into their policies and procedures for the health and wellbeing of people at work: recognising and promoting mental health is an essential part of creating a safe and healthy workplace (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010).

The findings revealed that the implementation of natural supports is linked to disclosure in the workplace (Corbière et al., 2014). There may be legal obligations in place on individuals with mental illness to disclose under the Health and Safety in Employment Act where illnesses may pose a potential risk or harm to themselves. In addition, Employment Relations Act (2000) requires both employers and employees to act ‘in good faith’ which might put further legal pressure on them to disclose.

Disclosure is a personal decision that depends on the circumstances, the context, how the illness is being managed and how comfortable the worker feels about discussing the issue (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010). A person with mental illness needs to disclose such issues, at least somewhat, to an employer if they wish to initiate a discussion about obtaining natural supports along with ‘reasonable accommodation’ guaranteed under the Human Rights Act 1993 (Duncan & Peterson, 2007). Therefore, it is crucial that employment specialists should assist their clients in planning and implementing more effective disclosure strategies. For example, putting a personal information plan in place consisting of different steps will help the employment specialist and the client decide what is needed to disclose, how, and the client’s strengths to put forth (Corbière et al., 2014).

Support is an essential element of supported employment and therefore it is something that is present in all the phases of the supported employment process. In this study, it is found that the use of natural supports during consumer assessment, job development, and job placement activities were reported as far less frequent. However, natural supports comprise more than just work site personnel participation in training, and more than just on-site support. Rather, families and support networks are a great potential source of support and information for the individual in employment. They are the experts on the individual in need and can provide useful information about interests, past experiences and abilities. They can also provide supports or assistance even outside of work hours that help the individual acquire and maintain their job. Therefore, efforts should be made to approach supports in a holistic manner, and the scope of natural supports should extend beyond the work place seeking assistance from friends and neighbours, family and community members. This is because they participate maximally in all aspects of the work lives of supported employees (Murphy et al., 1993). In summary, employment specialists should give greater attention to efforts from the very beginning of the supported employment process in order to get to know the individual, assess the individual’s abilities, and identify potential sources of support in the individual’s life and community at large (West et al., 1997).

**6.2 Further research**

Natural supports focus on making integrated settings more normal (Rusch & Hughes, 1996). However, it is important to note that what is natural will change from context to context. The effectiveness of natural supports will depend to a great extent on the culture of the setting and the people in the setting (Trach & Shelden, 1999). In addition, the findings revealed that employment specialists often cannot navigate or facilitate natural supports through the involvement of employers, supervisors and co-workers due to a high percentage of non-disclosure of mental illness. Given the above, there might be a discrepancy between the natural supports available in a supported employment situation and the individual’s support needs. Therefore, it is recommended that further research on natural supports is conducted from the perspectives of people with mental illness regarding the delivery of non-stigmatising supports within the workplace to them.

In this study, the findings suggest that non-disclosure of mental illness poses the main barrier to development of natural supports for individuals with mental illness. Disclosure of mental illness may have both negative and positive aspects: It exposes individuals with mental illness to discrimination, but it also enables them to claim reasonable accommodations in the work place at least. However, choosing the right time to disclose, to whom to disclose, and maintaining control over who is told, is important. Thus, it is recommended that future studies should address and accommodate the above issues.

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**Appendix: Research Participants Information Sheet**

**Project Title**

Development of Natural Supports in the workplace

**Introduction**

Employment is important for all people regardless of disabilities. Apart from financial rewards, it provides a sense of satisfaction, social contacts and participation in the community. In particular, employment has a number of benefits to people with mental health issues. It improves their level of confidence, health, social status and identity, and their social relationships/inclusion. To help these people, Supported Employment (SE) was developed and incorporated into the mental health field. But, it is observed that a system of natural supports in the workplace is essential for the success of SE, as well as integral part of a healthy workplace for all parties. For this project, natural support in supported employment can be defined as the process of helping an organisation or company build its capacity to support an employee with mental health issues.

**Project Description**

This project is conducted among supported employment agencies in the mental health field. The purpose of this project is to gain insights into the agencies’ strategies for natural supports, the effectiveness of the strategies and possible ways to enhance natural supports in the workplace.

**Invitation**

We would like to take this opportunity to invite you to participate in this research project, as we believe that you can make an important contribution to the research. If you wish to accept our invitation, you can contact us to confirm your interest to participate in our research project.

**Participant Identification and Recruitment**

Your participation is voluntary. We hope to interview 5-6 employment consultants who have worked in the mental health field for at least 2 years. We are interested in interviewing you about your personal ideas and experiences on the subject of this research. We will offer you a $40 petrol voucher to cover any travel costs.

**Project Procedures**

If you agree to take part in the research, a suitable time and venue for the interview to take place will be discussed with you. We anticipate that the interview will last 90 minutes at most. Prior to the interview, you will be asked to sign a consent form and be given an interview guide outlining the topics of discussion. We will then ask you to choose a pseudonym (false name) for the purpose of the project. No discomfort or risk is anticipated. However, if participants experience any discomfort, the interview will be stopped. You will be offered time out as well as chance to seek support. Participants are free to withdraw at any point during the interview.

**Data Management**

All information you provided to us will be kept confidential at all times. Under no circumstances will identifiable responses be provided to any other third party. Also, your identity will be confidential with any identification markers of yourself and place of work removed. A pseudonym will be selected.

With your permission, we will record the interview with a digital recorder and the content of the interview will be transcribed by us. Once the interview is transcribed, the original recording will be destroyed and the transcripts will be retained electronically on a computer in password-protected file. A summary of the research report will be available to all participants on completion of the project.

**Participant’s Rights**

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

* Decline to answer any particular question
* Withdraw from the study to one week after the interview
* Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation
* Provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used
* Be given access to summary of the project findings when it is concluded
* Ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview

**Project Contacts**

If you have any enquiries or concerns regarding this research, please contact us:

**Researcher** **Project Manager**

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***Thank you for taking time to read information about this research project***