Employment Barriers against People with Drug Use Histories

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ABSTRACT

Unemployment is one of the determining factors for the tendency of addicts to relapse. However, research on drug relapse due to unemployment among former addicts is still lacking and less widely studied. Therefore, this research was conducted to identify the drug addicts’ experiences of employment barriers which later force them into drug relapse. A total of 400 rehabilitees from eight Narcotics Addiction Recovery Center in Peninsular Malaysia were chosen using stratified random sampling. Data were analyzed using descriptive analyses. Results showed that many employers are still reluctant to take drug addicts as employees. Therefore, these findings suggest that further research from the perspectives of employers is needed to identify the factors of employment barriers against people with drug use histories. Such study is considered important in order to ensure former drug addicts are able to rebuild their life and be free from drugs.

Keywords: Drug relapse, employment barriers, unemployment, rehabilitation, employer acceptance

INTRODUCTION

Former drug addicts from many countries in the world face a number of challenges in searching for employment. As part of the ‘radical’ new measures to support drug misuses reintegration into society, new world drug strategy indicated that getting former drug users into employment should be given greater priority. In Malaysia, more than 88% of drug addicts detected during January-June 2010 consist of those who have employment and careers. Addicts from the general labor sector recorded the highest number of 2,529 people (25.62%); followed by the services sector of 1,411 people (14.29%). As for other addicts, a total number of 979 people (9.92%) were registered as unemployed persons (National Anti-Drug Agency, 2010).

The detention of addicts in the Narcotics Addiction Recovery Center in Peninsular Malaysia to be treated and rehabilitated during the past two years has caused them to lose their jobs. The challenge and dilemma faced by the majority of former addicts is to get back their previous employment. Studies conducted by some researchers (Bray, 2000; Delina and George, 1999; Sterling et al., 2001; Fauziah and Naresh Kumar, 2009), claimed that the unemployment factor is one of the causes that contributes to drug relapse among former addicts. Thus, studies to gather views and experiences of drug addicts on employment acceptance are explored.

In addition to examining whether drug users are more or less likely to be employed, some studies have explored the wider factors that facilitate or prevent employment among this group. According to a study conducted by Mahmood (2006) which involved 30 employers in Malaysia, it was found that 61.7% of employers would dismiss their employees if they were involved with drug addiction in the workplace. The results of this study indicated
that employers would not compromise with workers found involved with substance abuse in the workplace. Inability to get a job after being released from drug rehabilitation centers and the lack of financial support to survive has led former drug addicts to return to drug addiction activities (McCoy and Lai, 1997).

Former drug users can also be hampered in their search for employment due to what Sutton et al. (2004) describe as social disadvantage in the form of crime and financial problems. Crime can be a barrier to employment due to the fact that many drug users engage in illegal activities, often to finance their drug use. The result is that drug users with past convictions can be very discouraging prospects to employers. Another barrier highlighted by Sutton et al. (2004) is related to drug users’ inability to deal with the stigma as former addicts. They examined how drug users struggle to establish beneficial relationships with support professionals to reestablish themselves. For example, a survey of 115 drug users conducted by the Glasgow Street Intervention Group revealed that 75% of participants perceived benefit agency and employment services staff to show a negative attitude or rejection towards them (Sutton et al., 2004).

Furthermore, poor interpersonal skills and the tendency to engage in behaviors that would be commonly unacceptable in the workplace can be highly detrimental to their employability. For example, employees who are involved with drug addiction are often associated with lower productivity, frequent absence from work, often faced health problems, and caused a high risk of workplace accidents (Glen et al., 2006; Dawson, 2003). Moreover, Kemp and Neale (2005) argue that the chaotic nature of most drug users’ lives make it very difficult for them to maintain employment.

In addition to individuals who are labeled as problematic in the workplace (Delina and George, 1999), lower educational qualification is also one of the immediate barriers to former addicts to regain their jobs after release from drug rehabilitation center (Feldman, 2002; Issacscon and Brown, 2000; Shahnasarin, 2000; Kanfer et al., 2001). Similar scenario was also observed in the case of Malaysia whereby majority (78.40%) of drug addicts detected during January-June 2010 has an education at the level of Form Three.

The study conducted by Marks (2002) and Ost (2000) found that many employers exhibit biased attitudes to former drug addicts. Some employers also pay lower wages to former addicts, and not according to the qualifications and experience that they have (Yunos, 1996; MacDonald and Pudney, 2000). This discriminatory situation has put pressure to former addicts and encourages them into drug relapse. The study conducted by Huffman and Torres (2001) also found that drug addicts have a negative perception, and often assume that their chances of getting a job are slim.

Since the employment factors are one of the critical issues to prevent relapse, the study was conducted to identify rehabilitees’ experiences on employer acceptance of former drug addicts. These findings hopefully will help the government through the National Anti-Drugs Agency to develop an effective action plan for former addicts, taking into account aspects relating to employment.

**METHODS**

The primary data were obtained through a survey using self-administered questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire collected demographic information of the respondents. The second part consisted of six items created by the researchers to measure employer’s support. The respondents were asked to respond on a four scale measurement, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. From the analysis, it was identified that the Cronbach alphas of all constructs exceeded Nunnally’s (1978) recommended threshold value of 0.7. Thus, the instrument used in this study showed a good level in terms of reliability. A total of 400 respondents were chosen using stratified random sampling. Questionnaires were personally distributed to the addicts who were undergoing treatment and rehabilitation in eight Narcotics
Rehabilitation Centers in Peninsular Malaysia and later collected by counselors from the respective centers. This procedure has achieved a high response rate (100%) for this study. This is due to the high degree of cooperation between the respondents and the centers’ counselors. The data were then analyzed using descriptive statistic through SPSS Version 15.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Majority of the respondents (86%) involved in this research was aged between 30 years and above; mostly (80%) were Malays and Muslims; and in terms of marital status, 65% were single. With regards to education achievement, 91% of the respondents have Malaysian Certificate of Education, that is equivalent to O Level, and about 47% of them used to work as temporary workers.

Employer support refers to employer’s acceptance of former drug addicts as employees. The results revealed that the mean score for employer acceptance was 1.59, with a standard deviation of 0.53. The results subsequently showed that only eight respondents (2%) stated that they received a high level of support from employers (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Perceived level of employer support (n=400)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (≤2.00)</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate(2.01-3.00)</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (3.01-4.00)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While 222 (55.4%) of respondents stated that they received a moderate level of support, the other 170 respondents (42.5%) stated that they received a low level of support from their employers. Overall, the results showed that the majority of respondents (97.8%) surveyed received a moderate to low level of support from their employers. This situation gave the impression that most employers were not willing to employ ex-addicts to enable them to start a new life. These findings gave a negative implication towards the process of rehabilitation among drug addicts. Based on the result of the study, ex-addicts should be given the opportunity to get an employment since recent findings found that the majority of addicts reported high percentage of motivational and initiatives in taking steps towards positive changes (Fauziah et al., 2010; Wan Shahrazad et al., 2010).

The study also revealed in Table 2 that 72% of respondents agreed and strongly agreed with the fact that they have difficulties obtaining employment due to their former drug addict status. Difficulty in getting a job after release gave a major challenge and negative impact on rehabilitation process of ex-addicts (Bray, 2000; Sterling et al., 2001). Unemployment and the lack of financial resources to earn a living may trigger conflict and strife in the family. For ex-addicts who cannot overcome such conflicts, this can lead to a tendency for relapse (Marlatt and Gordon, 1985; Fauziah and Naresh Kumar, 2009).

The study also found that about 69.8% of the respondents surveyed gave the view that employers often provided employment service that was not fair to former addicts. Difficulty in getting a job after release gave a major challenge and negative impact on rehabilitation process of ex-addicts (Bray, 2000; Sterling et al., 2001). Unemployment and the lack of financial resources to earn a living may trigger conflict and strife in the family. For ex-addicts who cannot overcome such conflicts, this can lead to a tendency for relapse (Marlatt and Gordon, 1985; Fauziah and Naresh Kumar, 2009).

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The results further identified that the majority of respondents (59.8%) agreed and strongly agreed with the view that employers paid lower wages to former drug addicts, although knowing that they have qualifications and skills. The results of this study are consistent with the views highlighted by Yunus (1996) who found that employers who took advantage
of former addicts paid a lower salary and not in accordance with their qualifications and experiences. Such biased and discriminatory attitude by employers against former addicts has led to dissatisfaction among them, and this encouraged them to quit working and relapse (Marks, 2002; Ost, 2000; Sutton et al., 2004).

The study also found that about 73.8% of respondents acknowledged that employers would terminate their jobs if they were caught involved in drugs. Most employers did not want to bear the risk of hiring drug addicts that would affect their organizations with low productivity and frequent absence from jobs (Glen et al., 2006; Dawson, 2003), often faced health problems, and causing a high risk of workplace accidents (Kemp and Neale, 2005; Sutton et al., 2004). Former addicts were also identified as those with low education levels (Feldman, 2002; Sutton et al., 2004; Issacson and Brown, 2000) thus, making them difficult to get jobs (Shahnasarin, 2001).

The study also found that 78.5% of the respondents acknowledged that many employers have no confidence in former drug addicts, despite knowing that they have skills in technical work. While the study conducted by Hoffman and Larison (1999) found that employers’ unwillingness to hire former addicts is due to employers’ concerns over the influence of former drug addicts to form a negative culture of drug addiction in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

Research findings illustrated the complex needs of former drug addicts and some of the challenges they faced in their everyday lives particularly in obtaining their jobs back. Therefore, this study contributed to the significant impact of coordination between drug treatment services, employment services and employers. This, combined with wider availability of support to former addicts would improve outcomes for this group. Despite the fact that most addicts have low educational background, the skills acquired while undergoing vocational rehabilitation programs for a period of two years should be given proper attention. Former addicts who have recovered can also be involved in volunteer work.

TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly disagree and disagree (%)</th>
<th>Agree and strongly agree (%)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>It’s hard for me to get a job because I am a former drug addict</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>2.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Employers often provide employment service that is not fair to the former drug addicts</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>2.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Employers do not want to give me the opportunity to get the job back to continue a new life</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>2.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Employers will pay lower wages to former addicts even knowing that they have the qualifications and skills of a good job</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>2.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The employer will dismiss me from my job if they find that I am still involved in drugs</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>73.8</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Most of employers are not confident to take former drug addicts to return to work within their organizations</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>78.5</td>
<td>1.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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by agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They can be trained and given skills as facilitators to help their friends, especially among addicts who are still trying to find the best formula on how to continue their lives free from the influence of drugs. Thus, former addicts should be given the opportunity to get employment since recent findings found that the majority of addicts reported a high percentage of motivational and initiatives in taking steps towards positive changes. These findings implied that further research from the perspectives of employers is needed to identify the factors of employment barriers against people with drug use histories. This is to ensure former drug addicts are able to rebuild their lives and be free from drugs.

REFERENCES


