What can workplaces do to support employees with persistent pain conditions?

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Background

Those in employment have been found to have better health than those who are unemployed\textsuperscript{1}. However, for people with persistent pain conditions including arthritis, low back pain, ankylosing spondylitis maintaining productive employment can be a significant challenge.

A good person-environment fit is critical and careful planning is required for those with chronic conditions to ensure that work is appropriately matched to their physical capabilities. This issue is of increasing importance with an ageing population, as working lives are extended\textsuperscript{2}.

Individual capacities are highly varied and due to the nature of many chronic conditions change across time. However, a range of supports can improve this match between person and their environment enabling individuals to continue work with some adjustments. However, this relationship between employees and employers of people with persistent pain requires further exploration to improve the focus of these supports.

The aim of this project was to improve understanding of the relationship between employees with persistent pain and their workplace. We sought to identify any supports—work and non-work—used by employees to assist them in maintaining productive employment and then use these to develop recommendations for future policy development.

Method

This is an exploratory mixed methods study comprising a questionnaire followed by semi-structured interviews to collect in-depth qualitative data. The questionnaires gathered descriptive background data used to select participants for interviews. Thirty-five semi-structured interviews were undertaken (14 males and 21 females). Topics covered in the interviews included: employment situation, workplace challenges, workplace supports, coping strategies, motivations, future options and resources.

Results

Thematic analysis of the data was undertaken and four key themes emerged: barriers to working productively, enablers to working productively, condition disclosure at work, planning for work. A key determinant of maintaining productive employment was a supportive manager or supervisor. In addition, flexibility in work organisation was also pivotal in undertaking sustainable employment. An important issue emerged with regard to disclosure of an employees’ condition and for some this was a significant barrier to employment. For Australian employees with non-compensable injuries the current compensation system is a barrier to employment as some employers were reluctant to employ those with pre-existing non-work-related issues.

Recommendations and future implications

Based on the findings from derived from this study a number of recommendations were developed to assist those with persistent pain in maintaining productive employment. Recommendations are framed in either supporting individuals in their career, or targeted at employers and the general public.

For individuals

- Career planning to support individuals with persistent pain conditions to make decisions in work occupations that are matched to their capacities.
- Support for making the decision about whether to disclose your condition at work

For employers and the public:

- Educate employers about the role of workplace accommodations in assisting people with persistent pain conditions to work productively
- Increasing public awareness of persistent pain conditions and the implications for work and life
Conclusion
To ensure ongoing sustainable employment is attainable for those with persistent pain conditions, a good match is required between employee and their work. One significant barrier to achieving this match is the issue of whether an employee discloses their condition. Those that do not disclose may not receive the assistance they need, and those that do may not be treated with equity. Weighing up the costs and benefits of disclosure is difficult, and may be assisted by knowing what support might be available to assist with maintaining ongoing employment.

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References