

Soft skills training for people with mental health issues

Challenges, success factors
and good practice

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Easy to Read Summary

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

The European Platform for Rehabilitation is a group of organisations that provide services to persons with disabilities and other people. For short we call it EPR.

This document explains what is intended with soft skills and why it is important to train students and workers on soft skills. Being proficient in soft skills is especially difficult for people with disabilities (here shortened to PWDs) and people with mental health issues. The idea of this document, which we are calling a study, is to describe the challenges encountered by service providers in training clients in soft skills, as well as the success factors.

In this document, we use the words “service user”. A service user is someone who uses a service (a client) or services that helps or supports them. In this report, the service user is the person being trained in soft skills or being generally supported.

This study is useful for service providers and people who make laws or work with people making laws. In the document, there are good practices that can help stakeholders think about whether a law, service or employment programme could work well for their country or organisation, and how a law or service could be improved. A “good practice” is a law or programme which works very well and has good results, and therefore is a good example to follow.

WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THE DOCUMENT?

This study was written by people working for EPR. Some professionals from the group of service providers in EPR who are also employment experts met with each other online to discuss the study and the topics in it. They worked together to develop the document, adding text and ideas from their experience. The working group helped find good practices about soft skills training.

WHAT DOES THE STUDY SAY?

Too many people with disabilities do not have jobs. To find work, they need different forms of support and training. Many laws, employment services and programmes try to support people with disabilities to find a job and improve their quality of living.

This study focuses on training on soft skills with people with mental health issues. Soft skills are not taught directly, even though they are crucial in finding and holding job positions and being included in a group. Indeed, in some cases, they are as relevant as hard skills and qualifications. Ultimately, it is noted that people with mental health problems have more difficulties with soft skills compared to hard skills.

Having good soft skills is important for individuals in their professional and private life. Even after the person with disabilities has found a job, it is important to continue providing individual support. People who support people with a disability and companies need to be trained well. Family support also helps.

Partnerships between service providers and employers are essential to ensure that the skills of a person match the needs of the market so that they can do their best in the new job. Access to good quality inclusive education and training, as well as to different types of services is important to make sure people can get the hard and soft skills needed for work, travel to work, and be included in the community.

About the European Platform for Rehabilitation (EPR)

EPR is a community of **service providers working with people with disabilities committed to high-quality service delivery and creating a society** where every person can co-create quality services leading to equal opportunities, social inclusion and quality of life. Our mission is to build the capacity of our members to provide sustainable, high-quality services in a competitive environment through mutual learning and training.

About the publication

A broad body of literature covers interpersonal and soft skills, describing why they are relevant for the success of individuals and their well-being both in their private and professional lives. However, their role especially concerning employment is highly disregarded in favour of hard skills and academic qualifications. The members of the EPR Mental Health Working Group decided to delve into this topic given its relevance but foremost because people with mental health issues – who are often excluded in the labour market - lack interpersonal skills more than hard skills. It is therefore reasonable to think that one of the factors leading to low occupational rates among people with mental health problems is a lack of interpersonal skills.

This document was written by the EPR Secretariat with the contribution of the EPR Mental Health Working Group. The Working Group decided to work throughout 2023 on gathering resources and good practices on service delivered by mental health professionals focusing on training for service users in soft skills. The information collected and the experiences exchanged among member organisations led to the development of this document. It provides a brief overview of the relevance of soft skills today, the practices and tools used to boost these competencies, together with presents the challenges faced by professionals and service users as well as those success factors that are believed to be effective. The good practices gathered during the year of activity are illustrated at the end of the document, together with a brief presentation of the members who contributed to them.

What are soft skills?

While hard skills are technical skills, clearly defined and measurable acquired through formal schooling and training usually accompanied by certifications, the same cannot be said about their counterpart: soft skills¹.

A consistent body of literature has analysed soft skills from various perspectives offering a very diverse range of definitions. Indeed, defining soft skills is not easy since they can be intended as synonyms or umbrella terms including personality traits, social skills, non-cognitive skills and interpersonal competencies. Each of these terms carries a different shade and set of soft skills and therefore, how and if they can be potentiated. Moreover, given the many connotations the term soft has, finding a common understating of the word is challenging.

One broad definition is the one offered by Kamin (2013)² which says

“Soft skills are interpersonal skills that demonstrate a person’s ability to communicate effectively and build relationships with others in one-on-one interactions as well as in group. Skills include listening and responding in a receptive way to others’ points of view; cooperation, and the ability to be flexible and take positive action in situations that require an understanding of the circumstances, environment, and culture of the person, organisation, or team in which specific interactions occur.”

More specifically, Schulz (2008)³ offers a very detailed list of specific soft skills from the most basic to the most undervalued and often overseen such as cultural awareness, integrity, responsibility and negotiating skills. Schulz indicates that communication skills are most important (mostly because they are spendable in various fields and contingencies and from them are dependable other hard and soft skills). Secondly, there is structured and critical thinking in order to develop informed and rational solutions and decisions. This one is the basis of what is considered a hard skill such as problem solving. Lastly, we found creativity in the capacity to think outside the box and find innovative solutions to solve current problems and issues. Creativity relies evenly on an open mind attitude to give relevance to paths, ideas and realities that were not considered before.

¹ Putra, A. S., Novitasari, D., Asbari, M., Purwanto, A., Iskandar, J., Hutagalung, D., & Cahyono, Y. (2020). Examine relationship of soft skills, hard skills, innovation and performance: The mediation effect of organizational learning. *International Journal of Science and Management Studies (IJSMS)*, 3(3), 27-43.

² Kamin, M. (2013). *Soft skills revolution: A guide for connecting with compassion for trainers, teams, and leaders*. John Wiley & Sons.

³ Schulz, B. (2008). *The importance of soft skills: Education beyond academic knowledge*.

Why is it important to train people in soft skills?

Despite their importance, soft skills are not directly taught by parents, educational institutions or Vocational Education and Training (VET), rather they are subconsciously acquired throughout our life. However, they can be trained and, therefore, acquired and enhanced.

In today's rapidly evolving job market, the importance of soft skills has increased significantly. With the automation of a growing number of tasks and jobs by machines, it has become crucial for professionals to possess a distinct set of interpersonal abilities that cannot be replicated by technology. Being able to leverage these soft skills can have a significant impact on one's personal life and likeability but also career success and overall job performance. Therefore, individuals and employers need to focus on developing and refining these soft skills to remain competitive and relevant in the modern workforce⁴.

The importance given to the teaching of soft skills differs among various countries. While some consider it to be a mandatory component of education, others present it as an elective opportunity for students who express a keen interest in enhancing their soft skills. There are various methods available to teach soft skills. Soft skills teaching can be integrated into a regular course that corresponds to a specific discipline or dedicate extra school hours to teach them (such as workshops, visits, and journeys). In all scenarios, educational institutions formulate comprehensive courses and activities to impart soft skills to their students effectively⁵.

Numerous research and surveys have highlighted a discrepancy in the labour realm: there appears to be a significant gap concerning the presence of soft skills more than hard skills, leading to many open positions remaining unfilled. This shortage of skills pertains to various areas but it mainly pertains to communication, leadership, problem-solving, and strategic thinking abilities. In line with this, according to the 2014 McKinsey Report "Education to Employment: Getting Europe's Youth into Work"⁶ the skills gap issue is prevalent in several countries, but it is particularly severe in those with the highest rates of youth unemployment, such as Spain, Estonia, Greece and Italy⁷.

⁴ Lau, Y. (2021). Soft Skills Are Essential To The Future Of Work. Forbes.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeshumanresourcescouncil/2021/01/20/soft-skills-are-essential-to-the-future-of-work/?sh=19bf97901341>

⁵ Cimatti, B. (2016). Definition, development, assessment of soft skills and their role for the quality of organizations and enterprises. International Journal for quality research, 10(1), 97.

Cimatti, B. (2016). Definition, development, assessment of soft skills and their role for the quality of organizations and enterprises. International Journal for quality research, 10(1), 97.⁷ McKinsey & Company. (2014). Education to employment: Getting Europe's youth into work. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/converting-education-to-employment-in-europe>

⁷ McKinsey & Company. (2014). Education to employment: Getting Europe's youth into work.

<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/converting-education-to-employment-in-europe>

Challenges identified by service providers

The EPR Mental Health Working Group collected information on the challenges and obstacles encountered by service providers as well as some factors that can limit the development of soft and interpersonal skills of individuals dealing with mental health issues. It is important to say that, as noted by service providers, people with mental health conditions often encounter a diverse range of difficulties, both in their personal lives and in their support systems. These challenges can include issues related to communication, employment, and societal inclusivity.

Modern workplace. The most recurring factor across different organisations and countries was linked to the post-Covid era rapid technological advancements in the form of remote and digital adjustments. Indeed, the contemporary workplace has become more demanding, emphasizing the importance of digital and "screen's soft skills" - which are both very limited. This shift can affect the employability of individuals with mental health conditions, necessitating flexible training programs tailored to their unique needs. Together with the expectation of constant connectivity, they can lead to feelings of isolation and stress among service users with mental health conditions.

Non-verbal communication. The ability to interpret non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice is a crucial soft skill, which is however challenging for individuals with mental health conditions. In remote service settings, catching these cues can be difficult and lead to potential misunderstandings or miscommunications.

Funding. The quality of mental health services can be hindered by factors like insufficient time for activities, poor quality or effectiveness of services underpayment of professionals, staff shortages, and precarious employment conditions. These issues can affect the accessibility and effectiveness of care for service users.

Staff Training. The evolving landscape of service users' needs requires ongoing staff training and development, also concerning soft skills. Low-skilled staff can strain the mental health system, necessitating investment in formalized training programs, staff consultancy, and education on innovative support methods to better serve clients.

Awareness and empowerment. Some individuals with mental health conditions lack awareness of their issues, making it challenging for them to seek the necessary help and support, and follow through with the recommended therapies, especially on soft skills since these are highly seen as subjective. Allowing them to have an active role in their recovery process is vital to ensure their compliance.

Employment opportunities. Many service users with mental health conditions face difficulties in finding suitable employment. These challenges can range from extended periods of unemployment to concerns about losing disability benefits if they obtain and maintain a working position. Moreover, limited access to sheltered employment opportunities further complicates their situation.

Success factors and tools

The responses have also highlighted success factors that led to positive outcomes and led service users to have better soft and social skills, despite the initial challenges faced.

Assessment and Measurement Scales. The use of standardized measurement scales, including assessing disability in social work, measuring soft skills, and identifying areas for improvement in psychoeducation, is a tool that can help standardize methods of assessment and show more objectively service users' progress. These scales help professionals quantify and evaluate the progress and needs of individuals.

Training and Staff Development. Clients are diverse as diverse are their needs and specific situations. Developing staff expertise in areas like transgender awareness or neurodiversity, or providing training to individuals in support groups. Continuous learning and skill development are crucial for effective support.

Tailored services and Co-production approach. It involves tailoring support and resources to an individual's unique needs, preferences, and circumstances, whether it is in mental health support, vocational training, or rehabilitation. Listening to the person and involving him or her in designing their services and their recovery can help with motivation and compliance in the process.

Digital and Technological Tools. The use of digital tools, such as online platforms and virtual reality environments, is mentioned as a way to enhance training and development. These tools can provide cost-effective, engaging, and practical solutions for skill-building and education. Moreover, they are suitable and available to those not willing or unable to travel to the facility.

Support and connection. Establishing a strong interpersonal connection is essential for service users with mental health conditions, especially in virtual environments. Of particular importance is the support of the family and the specialists and service providers working with the client. Service providers must employ specific strategies like active listening and open dialogue to close the existing communication gap with their clients.

Resource Allocation and Funding. The need for increased public funding is highlighted as a common factor in several contexts. Adequate resources and funding are crucial to providing effective support services and training programs and boosting service providers' motivation and commitment

Good practices from EPR members and beyond

The **Cedar Foundation** uses with its clients the “**Outcomes Star**”⁸: an evidence-based tool designed to measure and evaluate performance and achievements through visual stars. One of the key strengths of the Outcomes Star is its holistic approach that takes into account diverse fields of life such as health, education, interpersonal relations and employment while providing a common metric system and framework. The tool also promotes person-centered approaches by involving service users in self-assessment, goal-setting, and tracking progress thus it helps organizations and professionals better understand and improve their programs and activities. Furthermore, the Outcomes Star's evidence-based nature ensures its reliability and effectiveness. Overall, the Outcomes Star is a valuable tool for organizations and individuals seeking to assess and improve their services and their delivery. Service users praised the tool's capacity to enhance communication between service providers and recipients, improve goal setting and tracking, and ultimately lead to more person-centred approaches to service delivery.

The “**Social Club**”, offered by **Fundación Rey Ardid**, provides a supportive space for those with mental issues to develop social skills, stimulate their cognitive and physical abilities, and ultimately expand their social networks and their autonomy. The initiative follows a participatory approach, with users, volunteers, and professionals collaborating in activity design, realization, and evaluation. Another project Rey Ardid follows is “**Espacio Visiones**”: an artistic project that encourages creativity for people with mental health issues. Through workshops in various artistic disciplines, including visual arts, dance, theatre, and literature, participants are allowed to showcase their creative abilities, break down societal stigmas, and actively engage in their community. Both initiatives prioritize user participation, community engagement, and the development of life skills, promoting autonomy and inclusion. Furthermore, they strive to improve language development, and online communication to expand participants' horizons and social networks. On a similar note, we find “**Delyramus**”, an international project focused on training adults in craftsmanship and music, while contributing to their quality of life and addressing various dimensions of personal development, community integration, and self-expression. The “**UME Debate Workshop**” aims to stimulate participants' capacity for synthesis, verbal expression, listening, respect for dissent, and the fulfilment of roles and responsibilities. Finally, the “**Autonomy Program**” focuses on multiple facets of personal development, such as basic life skills, domestic skills, community integration, language and communication skills, socialization, and basic literacy and numeracy.

Fundación INTRAS supports people with mental health problems by recovering their life projects. They offer professional and individualized services to meet people's needs: accommodation, training, employment, personal assistance, leisure and free time, mutual support, research, psychology and psychosocial rehabilitation. Fundación INTRAS is currently adapting to the care paradigm “**Attention Centred on what is Important for the Person (ACIP)**” (Carlos Salgado): a functional contextual approach to the care and psychosocial support of people at risk or in situations of social vulnerability,

⁸ For more information visit www.outcomesstar.org.uk and contact Triangle, the social enterprise behind the Outcomes Star via info@triangleconsulting.co.uk

both in the social and health context. It is a model of care that highlights the person, their essence and their value as a human being and what matters to them, both from what they like, are passionate about and are good at doing, and from what makes them suffer. It is based on foundations - pillars that are: depathologization, dignity, shared vulnerability, construction, real empowerment and social connection that allow the activation of the life project in a non-invasive way, respecting and taking into consideration what the person values.

"Personal Assistant Support" is offered by Fundación INTRAS which assists in daily living, decision-making, participation in the community, and crisis management, empowering individuals to make choices and engage in the community. The **"Therapeutic Support/Accompaniment"** instead involves professionals working closely with individuals in their daily environments, helping them navigate social situations and restore damaged connections, ultimately promoting well-being. Following, **"Therapeutic Sports Support"** recognizes the mental health benefits of physical activity and encourages its inclusion, particularly for individuals with severe mental disorders. Personal sports assistants help individuals improve their physical and mental well-being, instill values like commitment and camaraderie, and enhance social skills. Lastly, **"TEO"** is a virtual educational program aimed at young people, providing information about mental health problems and promoting values of equality, tolerance, and solidarity. Its goal is to train young people to reduce and fight discrimination against individuals with mental health disabilities and encourage their active participation in society.

Rehab Group has a longstanding history of involvement with the **Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP)**, which is an approach to wellness and recovery that serves several purposes. Firstly, it assists individuals in reducing and preventing intrusive or troubling thoughts and behaviours. Additionally, it fosters personal empowerment, enabling individuals to enhance their quality of life and work towards achieving their life goals. Furthermore, a WRAP includes assistance in situations where an individual is unable to make decisions, care for themselves, or be safe. On the same line, **"Rethinking Your Future"** is a personal skills program designed to help individuals overcome emotional and behavioural difficulties. The program is grounded in the principles of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) by Albert Ellis. At its core, REBT theory posits that emotional and behavioural disturbances primarily stem from irrational beliefs. "Rethinking Your Future" builds on the foundation of REBT to assist individuals in preventing irrational thinking. By doing so, it aims to enhance emotional well-being and overall quality of life. The **"DAT Central" project** focuses on digital and assistive technology. It serves as a comprehensive resource centre, supporting inclusion through digital and assistive technology. Ultimately, **"The Tech Wheel"** goal is to give training to staff members on various technologies, like podcasting. This training initiative aims to empower instructors to develop their digital skills with different technological tools, enabling them to utilize these applications to engage students in new and innovative ways.

"Transition of Young People to the Labour Market" offered by **URI Soča** is a comprehensive program that aims to empower young individuals with special needs with professional support, expanding their competencies to meet the demands of the labour market and enhance their social inclusion. This holistic approach recognizes that their transition is not solely about gaining employment or accessing higher education: it is about creating a path that is harmonious with their unique needs and aspirations contributing to both their professional growth and their overall well-being and participation in society. Furthermore, **"Jump to Job"**, a project in collaboration with EPR, offers a structured framework of support, resources, and guidance, to close the gap between education and work. It empowers individuals to acquire the skills, knowledge, and experience they need to access and succeed in the job

market. In doing so, Jump to Job improves the employability and overall quality of life of service users. It is a valuable endeavour that recognizes the importance of a holistic approach to career development and employment, addressing not only the technical skills but also the personal and social elements necessary for professional success.

Theotokos Foundation's activities are supported by speech therapists and psychologists engaging in a range of psychoeducational and therapeutic group activities aimed at addressing various aspects of individuals' well-being such as communication improvement, education about human rights, stress management, and emotional self-regulation. An example is the **"Self and Peer Advocacy Group"** where individuals become advocates for themselves and their peers. It fosters self-empowerment, and the ability to stand up for one's rights through learning how to navigate various challenges and issues. On a similar note, there is **Voice Of Learning and Teaching (VOLT)** focusing on fostering inclusive education by emphasizing the importance of empowering students to take an active role in their learning, enhancing their decision-making and life skills. Also, **Video Peer Modelling** helps individuals, especially children, learn and develop various skills by observing peers. This innovative approach is an effective way to teach and reinforce specific behaviours and abilities. Relying more on art and creative production, we find **ABLE (Art-Based Learning for Empowerment)** which leverages art therapy to empower individuals with disabilities through emotional expression. Also, **Workable**, offered in collaboration with EPR, is designed to equip people with disabilities with the skills and resources needed to successfully integrate into the workforce, both hard (especially digital skills) and soft skills.

EPR members who contributed to this paper



The **Cedar Foundation** delivers a wide range of services in Northern Ireland, ranging from community inclusion, training, employment and housing support. It is committed to a rights-based approach to disability through the design and delivery of innovative services which are co-produced with the service users. Cedar is very active in the field of mental health and well-being, not only for its service users but also of its professionals. In its Strategic Plan 2021-2026 it developed a Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for its staff.

Fundación Rey Ardid (FRRA) is a non-profit organisation created in 1991 to attend to the needs of people with mental health issues. After 29 years of experience, FRRA has grown and increased its social presence, working with other collectives (the elderly, migrants, young people in difficulty, etc.). The common denominator is vulnerability and social exclusion. They work for social and labour integration of groups at risk of exclusion developing different actions: training, awareness, leisure activities, etc. To attain these goals, FRRA has established diverse agreements with official bodies and private institutions to develop assistance, prevention, rehabilitation, socio-professional integration and training activities.



Fundación Intras is a Spanish non-for-profit organisation, founded in 1994. The organization has 10 centres across Spain with more than 120 psychiatrists, psychologists and professionals from the social and economic fields. INTRAS' services include psychosocial and labour rehabilitation programs, occupational and vocational training and professional guidance to empower people with mental health issues to live a self-determined and self-confident life by reflecting on their potential wishes and providing them with accordingly.

Rehab

Investing in People, Changing Perspectives

The **Rehab Group** is a charity that provides various types of social and rehabilitation services for over 20,000 adults and children throughout Ireland and the UK, and champions the value of diversity and inclusion for people with disabilities in their communities. Their areas of expertise include mental health and wellbeing, quality of service and employment. Rehab Group has various subsidiary companies, among which the National Learning Network, which is the largest private provider of personalized education, training and employment services in Ireland for people with a disability, mental health issues or additional support needs.

The **University Rehabilitation Institute Republic of Slovenia Soča** (URI Soča) is a public institution in Slovenia that specializes in providing comprehensive rehabilitation services to both adults and children suffering from disorders of the central and peripheral nervous system. We also cater to patients with muscular and neuromuscular diseases, chronic pain, and cancer. The team of experts is dedicated to helping patients improve their movement-related body structures and functions, and overall quality of life.



REHABILITATION CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND
YOUNG ADULTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES
AND AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

Theotokos Foundation is a non-profit welfare organization that was established in 1954 in Athens, Greece. It provides services to children and young adults with intellectual developmental disorders and autism spectrum disorders, as well as to their families to ensure equal rights to life and employment. Services include special education, therapy services, vocational training and rehabilitation, and areas of expertise include mental health, quality of life and quality of services.



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