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Intersecting Identities at Work

A Flourish@Work Initiative

Workers with lived mental illness experience come from diverse backgrounds and hold identities that also shape their path through the workplace. One Mind Lived Experience's research, along with many other experts in the field, identify workers with lived experience of Serious Mental Illness as an often undervalued population with immense and diverse strengths. One Mind at Work will be offering Flourish@Work programming to enable organizations to more fully support their workers with lived mental illness experience. In order to strengthen this work, it is vital to understand the ways that experiences of other marginalized identities may intersect with lived mental illness experience in the workplace.

Crucially, organizations must recognize that through their intersecting identities, workers hold unique and valuable perspectives that amplify their work, that communities with shared identities are an important organizational resource, and that leadership with lived experience is vital in order to truly maximize the potential of the workforce.



To guide this work, Flourish@Work first identified themes in multiple focus groups on the experiences of workers with lived mental illness experience. These themes were further explored through a landscape scan focusing on emerging evidence on the experiences of workers of marginalized identities with lived mental illness experience and resources currently available to support such workers. Finally, qualitative interviews with targeted participants holding relevant experience were analyzed to explore themes not currently reflected in available literature.

DEFINING INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES

Intersectionality relates to the complex ways that different social identities such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or ability interact to shape a person's experience. Each dimension of social identity is experienced through the perceptions and beliefs in culture, with many identities experiencing marginalization. In preliminary research, Flourish@Work uncovered several identities that workers with lived mental illness experience commonly hold, including disability, non-White culture or race, justice-involvement, and houselessness or housing insecurity. These identities impact the work experiences of individuals with lived mental illness experience in multiple ways. Proper support of workers with lived mental illness experience must speak to the intersecting identities of this talented workforce in order to leverage their greatest potential.

INTERSECTING IDENTITIES HOLD VALUABLE PERSPECTIVES

While an organization may create a workplace where all identities are valued, external societal processes of marginalization may still impact workers. For example, workers with intersecting marginalized identities may experience unintentionally discriminatory obstacles to the application process, prior to even being hired. Depending on their identity, they may face expectations to behave or perform in specific ways that can create pressure and self-doubt, and some experience additional pressure to achieve higher than individuals without a marginalized identity, creating stress that can negatively impact health and performance. However, these intersecting identities also hold great strength. Workers with unique cultural identities may identify novel opportunities that would not be immediately apparent to workers from the dominant culture. Due to the complexity of their experiences, many workers with marginalized identities hold greater curiosity about and empathy for others, making them ideal teammates. Individuals with marginalized identities are often more resilient, having grown in their ability to advocate for themselves and create resources to support themselves, such as informal community spaces.

COMMUNITY CREATES SUPPORT

Many individuals with multiple marginalized communities have learned the power of community first-hand, by building and relying upon it themselves. Often periods of hardship due to these marginalized identities are buffered by support from others who have similar experiences. Community can be an immense support for workers with marginalized intersecting identities, be it organically formed community or more formal structures like Employee Resource Groups. Regardless of the format, creating a community where workers with shared identities can support, counsel, and encourage each other comes at little to no cost to employers, but brings big benefits. Workers with lived experience describe community as a primary source of self-esteem and confidence, enabling them to thrive in the workplace.



LEADING THROUGH EXPERIENCE

Workers with lived mental illness experience overwhelmingly cite a desire for and benefit from seeing individuals with their experience in positions of leadership; the same is true of workers with additional marginalized identities. For individuals whose identities are not historically represented in leadership, having examples of pathways for success and achievement are crucial to gaining employee trust and loyalty. Without faith that individuals with diverse backgrounds can flourish within an organization, employees report feeling discouraged, aimless, and unvalued, which can lead to work stagnation. Additionally, mentorship from leaders with shared identities can offer tailored approaches to the unique challenges these identities can face in the workplace. Workers with marginalized identities share that they are drawn to “leaders who are like them”, and identify mentorship from leaders with a similar background as pivotal in career growth and development. In order to deeply support workers with intersecting marginalized identities, organizations must invest in and promote rising talent with these identities.

WORKERS WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE ARE UNIQUE, SUPPORT CAN BE UNIVERSAL

Workers with marginalized identities are not monolithic- their backgrounds vary, as do their talents. Each worker brings their own unique experiences, strengths, and challenges, and organizations must invest strategically to support them. This is best achieved through a universal approach of curiosity, openness, and humility. Employers must recognize that their workers hold lived experiences that they may not understand, and be curious about how those experiences can amplify the work, rather than assuming they understand them. In order to enrich their talent pool, employers must be open to advocating for and supporting leadership from diverse backgrounds. Finally, employers must remain humble in their approach to learning from their workforce, recognizing where missteps may have been made in the past and working thoughtfully to create space for these talented workers to thrive.