

Substance Use and Employability Study

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Executive Summary

Employment plays a crucial role as a tool that supports individuals in substance use recovery. Beyond providing financial stability, work offers purpose, structure, and a sense of belonging, which help individuals rebuild their confidence, identity, and social connections after treatment, ultimately reducing the likelihood of relapse. Meaningful employment reinforces recovery by promoting self-efficacy, accountability, and long-term stability. However, despite its proven benefits, employment is not always recognized or prioritized within many treatment settings. Some service providers continue to view recovery primarily through a clinical or therapeutic lens, focusing on abstinence and counselling while overlooking the role of employability in sustaining recovery outcomes. As a result, individual in substance use recovery may complete treatment without the necessary support to reintegrate into the workforce, missing an essential component of their recovery journey. Since employment opportunities or exposure are often not created during the recovery period, many individuals face significant challenges once they complete treatment and begin searching for jobs. The absence of employment-focused preparation and support means there is no smooth transition from recovery to the workforce. As a result, individuals may struggle with employment gaps, limited work experience, and low confidence when re-entering the labour market. These challenges, combined with persistent stigma from employers, can hinder their reintegration and increase the risk of relapse. Integrating employment support into recovery programs can therefore help bridge this gap, ensuring that individuals not only achieve sobriety but also build the skills, experience, and stability needed to sustain long-term recovery.

This research was undertaken to better understand how recovery and employment intersect in British Columbia and to identify ways to improve support for people rebuilding their lives after substance use. It examined the employment-related challenges faced by individuals in recovery and the coordination practices between substance use recovery service providers and employment service providers. The study also aimed to identify strategies, policies, and partnerships that could enhance

recovery-to-employment pathways, foster collaboration between sectors, and inform more inclusive practices that support long-term stability and workforce participation.

To explore these questions, the project followed a three-stage research process that combined evidence review and stakeholder engagement. The first stage involved an environmental scan that examined academic, grey, and policy literature to identify existing programs, policies, and challenges related to employment supports for people in recovery. The second stage was a focus group event with representatives from recovery and employment organizations across British Columbia, which brought together diverse perspectives from treatment providers, employment counsellors, and peer support staff to discuss barriers, coordination challenges, and promising practices. The final stage involved an anonymous survey distributed to organizations that could not attend the focus group, providing additional insights from across the province. Together, these methods produced a balanced understanding of how recovery and employment services currently operate, the challenges they face, and where opportunities for stronger collaboration exist.

The findings show that while substance use recovery service providers and employment service providers share the goal of helping people rebuild their lives, they often operate independently. Employment is widely recognized as an important component of long-term recovery, yet it is not consistently integrated into treatment programs. Many substance use recovery service providers still view employment as something to address after sobriety, while employment service providers often lack the knowledge or resources to support individual in substance use recovery in early recovery. Both sectors identified stigma, limited employer awareness, and uncertainty about relapse as major barriers to securing or maintaining work. Most organizations also do not track or evaluate employment outcomes, making it difficult to determine which approaches are most effective. Participants emphasized the need for stronger coordination, shared evaluation, and improved staff training to ensure recovery-informed practice across sectors. Peer mentorship and lived experience were viewed as valuable ways to help individual in substance use recovery rebuild confidence and manage workplace challenges.

The substance use recovery study aligns with and supports the Future Skills Centre's objective by addressing inclusion and equity for an often-overlooked group within the workforce. By exploring the barriers and opportunities related to employing individuals in substance use recovery, the study promotes awareness of systemic stigma and highlights the need for equitable hiring practices. This directly contributes to fostering a workplace culture that values second chances, supports diverse experiences, and builds inclusive employment pathways. In doing so, the study advances the Future Skill's Centre's broader goal of creating fair, supportive, and recovery-informed work environments that strengthen both individual well-being and organizational diversity.

Key Insights:

- Employment serves as a vital component of substance use recovery by providing structure, purpose, and stability.
- Despite its significance, employment is often underemphasized within treatment and recovery programs.
- Workforce reintegration is hindered by stigma, internal barriers (e.g., low confidence, fear of judgment), external factors, and systemic disincentives.
- Advancing recovery-informed and inclusive employment pathways can help prevent relapse and strengthen long-term recovery outcomes.

1. Introduction

This report examines the intersection of substance use recovery and employment in British Columbia, with the goal of strengthening recovery-to-employment pathways for individuals rebuilding their lives after substance use. Employment plays a critical role in supporting long-term recovery by providing stability, purpose, and social connection; however, its importance is not consistently recognized or integrated across recovery services or employment services. As a result, individuals in recovery often face fragmented supports and persistent barriers when transitioning into the workforce. These challenges are particularly relevant at the provincial level in British Columbia, while also reflecting broader national conversations around workforce inclusion, labour shortages, and equitable access to employment for marginalized populations.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how recovery and employment services intersect in British Columbia by examining employment-related barriers faced by individuals in substance use recovery and the ways in which recovery and employment service providers operate and coordinate in supporting transitions to work. The study also seeks to identify opportunities to strengthen coordination, policies, and partnerships that can foster more inclusive, recovery-informed employment practices. Guided by these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

- 1. What employability challenges are faced by individuals in substance use recovery?*
- 2. How are recovery and employment services coordinated for individuals in substance use recovery?*
- 3. What organizational strategies are employed to strengthen recovery-to-employment pathways, including partnerships, policies, and peer support initiatives?*

The findings of this study are relevant to policymakers, recovery and employment service providers, employers, and community organizations seeking to improve workforce inclusion and long-term recovery outcomes. By identifying system-level barriers and promising practices, the report contributes evidence to inform policy

development, service design, and cross-sector collaboration, and supports broader discussions related to inclusive labour markets, workforce resilience, and skills development.

The report is structured as follows. The next section, Literature Review, situates the study within existing academic, policy, and grey literature on substance use recovery and employability. This is followed by a Research Design section outlining the study's methods, including an environmental scan, focus group discussions, and a survey. The Findings section presents key themes identified across data sources, highlighting system-level barriers and promising practices. The report concludes with Implications and Future Directions, offering considerations for policy, practice, and future research to support more coordinated and inclusive recovery-to-employment pathways.

2. Literature Review

Substance use remains a pressing public health concern in Canada, with extensive social and economic impacts. Approximately one in five Canadians, or about six million people, are expected to meet the criteria for addiction in their lifetime. (Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction [CCSA], 2017). National data from the 2015-2016 Canadian Community Health Survey indicate that more than one in ten Canadians aged 12 years and older reported using illicit drugs (Bragazzi et al., 2021). The consequences of substance use are wide-ranging and deeply felt across Canada. They affect the economy, the healthcare system, and overall community well-being.

In 2020, substance use cost the country an estimated \$49.1 billion, or about \$1,300 per person (Figure 1). The largest share, \$22.4 billion (46%), came from lost productivity due to absenteeism, reduced work performance, and premature deaths among working-age Canadians, particularly related to alcohol, tobacco, and opioids. Other major costs included \$13.4 billion in healthcare, \$9.2 billion in criminal justice, and \$4.1 billion for prevention, research, and property damage (CCSA, 2023). Together, these figures highlight the broad economic and social toll of substance use and

underscore the need for coordinated prevention, treatment, and recovery efforts across Canada (CCSA, 2023).

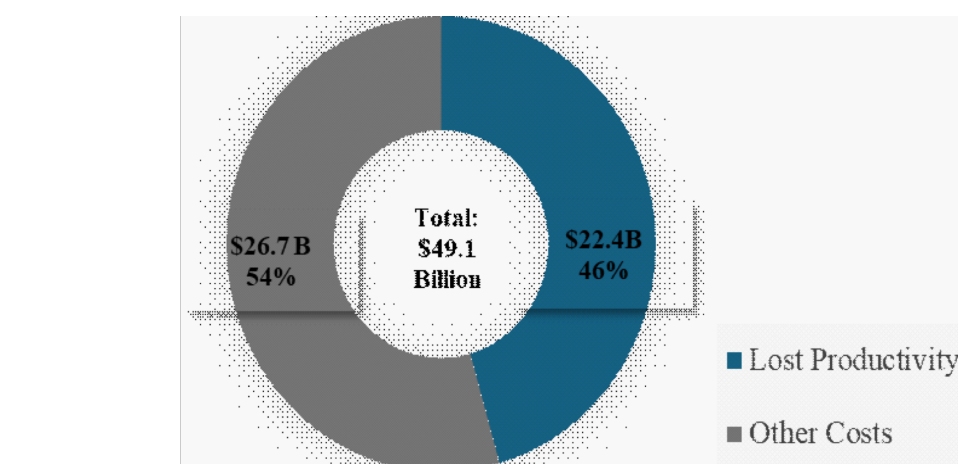


Figure 1. Economic costs of substance use in Canada (2020).

Source: Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, 2023

Recognizing the broad social and economic costs of substance use, governments have expanded prevention, harm reduction, and recovery supports across Canada. In British Columbia, “A Pathway to Hope” emphasizes community-based care, housing, and employment supports to help individuals rebuild their lives (Government of British Columbia, 2019). Employment is one of the most important yet often overlooked parts of recovery. Having a stable job provides purpose, structure, and social connection, factors known to support long-term recovery (Lusk, 2018; Suiter and Wilfong, 2021). Yet, individuals who recovered or are undergoing substance use recovery often face major barriers when trying to re-enter the workforce. Many employers expressed hesitation in hiring individuals with a history of substance use, frequently citing concerns related to reliability, productivity, and potential relapse risk. (Becton et al., 2017; Hunter & Jason, 2021). Indeed, Figure 2, shows that the employers in safety-sensitive industries, such as construction, mining, forestry, and oil and gas, report greater hesitation to hire individuals in recovery, often citing safety or liability concerns even though even though there is little evidence that recovery status

increases workplace incidents (Becton et al., 2017; Hunter & Jason, 2021; Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction [CCSA], 2025a–2025f).

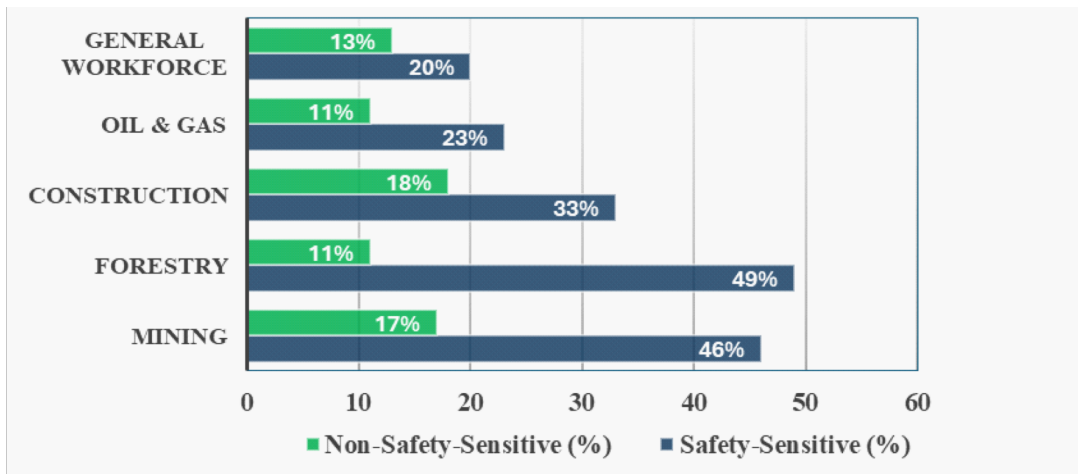


Figure 2: Substance-use prevalence in safety-sensitive and non-safety-sensitive roles by sector.

Source: Data collected from “Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction Workplaces and Substance Use” briefs (2025)

In contrast, hesitation levels across non-safety-sensitive roles remain relatively consistent and considerably lower, indicating modestly greater openness to hiring. However, stigma and misconceptions about relapse risk persist across all sectors. These patterns illustrate persistent gaps between recovery-oriented policy goals and workplace realities. As a result, such biases lead to exclusionary employment practices that prevent many qualified individuals from making meaningful contributions to the workforce.

Research indicates that prolonged unemployment among individuals in recovery can increase stress and social isolation, potentially heightening the risk of relapse (Lusk, 2018; Suiter and Wilfong, 2021). Meaningful employment is strongly associated with better recovery outcomes because it offers stability, purpose, and community connection, factors that help maintain sobriety and improve quality of life. Persistent stigma in hiring, therefore, has both personal and economic consequences, keeping individuals marginalized and limiting labour-market inclusion. Addressing these barriers

is crucial to reducing the risk of relapse and supporting long-term workforce integration. These national patterns are also evident at the provincial level, particularly in British Columbia, where recovery-oriented employment supports remain inconsistent and fragmented. In British Columbia, people who use drugs and those in recovery continue to encounter systemic barriers to achieving stable employment. The province has advanced harm-reduction and treatment efforts through initiatives such as A Path Forward: BC's Mental Health and Addictions Strategy and the work of the Overdose Emergency Response Centre but supports that help individuals transition from recovery into employment remain limited (Government of British Columbia, 2023; WorkBC, 2023). Workplace stigma, unstable housing, criminal records, mental-health challenges, and limited education or work history frequently intersect, creating persistent obstacles.

Currently, there is no coordinated, province-wide model in British Columbia that bridges the gap between recovery and employment. Existing programs are small, localized, or time-limited, resulting in fragmented access to services. This project aims to identify the employment needs of individuals in recovery, assess existing support services, and propose practical strategies for developing a more inclusive and sustainable approach to recovery-to-employment pathways throughout the province.

2.1. Reviewing the Interconnection Between Substance Use Recovery and Employability

Emerging evidence suggests that employment is not merely an outcome of successful recovery but also a driver of it, highlighting why vocational support should be an integral part of post-treatment care. Reflecting this growing recognition, more individuals are pursuing recovery, supported by expanding treatment and recovery services across provinces. The Life in Recovery from Addiction in Canada survey found that steady employment increased from 52.6% during addiction to 79.1% in recovery, illustrating the connection between recovery and economic and social stability (CCSA, 2017).

Existing recovery programs such as detoxification, counselling, peer support, and harm reduction help individuals manage withdrawal, maintain sobriety, and reintegrate

into society (CCSA, 2017; Health Canada, 2024). However, research increasingly shows that employment itself is a powerful recovery mechanism that reinforces structure, purpose, and financial independence (Rumrill and Bishop, 2023). Individuals who gain or retain employment after treatment report higher life satisfaction, stronger social ties, and lower relapse rates (Rumrill and Bishop, 2023).

Individuals in addiction recovery face a range of internal barriers that hinder their reintegration into the workforce. Existing literature highlights that self-stigma, unstable housing, and poor health conditions often limit their ability to secure and sustain employment (Boffin et al., 2020; Yamashita et al., 2021; Stevenson et al., 2025). In addition to these barriers, research emphasize that employment status is positively associated with higher recovery capital and better couple adjustment, suggesting that meaningful work contributes to greater emotional and relational stability during recovery (Lee and Ofori Dei, 2022). Gender differences further shape these experiences. Women in recovery frequently encounter unique challenges that compound their reintegration difficulties. Arnold (2021) found that women in methadone maintenance programs often report trauma and ongoing mental health concerns, while Berge et al. (2022) observed that participants in specialized employment programs faced psychiatric and family-related burdens that affected work sustainability. Similarly, Nyamathi et al. (2016) reported that trauma exposure and limited educational attainment further constrain employment and reintegration opportunities for women.

Recent interventions have shown encouraging results in mitigating these barriers. Holtyn et al. (2021) identified key factors associated with employment success through the Therapeutic Workplace model, demonstrating that structured, incentive-based work environments can enhance both job readiness and substance use abstinence. These programs help build confidence, develop practical skills, and support individuals' transition back into the labour market. However, when combined with persistent stigma, such personal barriers continue to contribute to productivity losses and labour shortages across sectors, emphasizing the need for inclusive, recovery-informed employment pathways.

Beyond personal limitations, systemic barriers further constrain employability. Employer stigma remains a major obstacle, with concerns about relapse risk, reliability, and liability (Becton, 2017; Hunter & Jason, 2021). Ware et al. (2024) found that employer referrals to treatment programs have declined, suggesting limited workplace engagement in recovery support. Unclear disclosure policies and unsupportive workplace cultures exacerbate stress and turnover among employees in recovery (Brady, 2022). Nirmala (2020) also observes that stigma and inadequate counsellor training restrict employment opportunities for those with substance use or mental health histories.

Efforts to create supportive work environments have gained increasing attention. Ferguson (2016) and Bejerholm et al. (2024) advocate for supported employment and Individual Placement and Support (IPS) approaches that connect individuals to jobs while aligning with clinical recovery goals. However, to sustain such approaches on a broader scale, structural reforms are also essential. Xiao and Zhou (2020) emphasize the importance of formalized employment rehabilitation policies and enhanced counsellor training to better support individuals in substance use recovery. Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of both systemic inclusion and well-trained rehabilitation staff in enhancing long-term employment outcomes.

Employment provides more than financial stability; it also supports social and emotional recovery. Suiter and Wilfong (2021) found that having a job helps structure daily routines and rebuild a positive sense of identity. Similarly, Morash et al. (2020) observed that meaningful work strengthens self-worth and reduces the likelihood of returning to substance use. Lee and Ofori Dei (2022) further noted that employment enhances recovery capital and family well-being, while Hagaman et al. (2023) emphasized that peer specialists, many of whom are in recovery themselves, promote social connection, engagement, and hope within treatment settings. Together, these studies demonstrate that employment fosters a sense of belonging and reduces social isolation, both of which are essential for long-term recovery.

Beyond social and psychological benefits, employability provides clear economic gains. Jones-Sanpei and Nance (2020) note that financial capability supports recovery

by promoting stability and self-sufficiency. Von Horn et al. (2024) found that fiduciary interventions, in which a fiduciary manages a client's finances, improve treatment engagement and overall functioning. Ferguson (2016) and Xiao and Zhou (2020) argue that inclusive employment rehabilitation models transform marginalized groups into productive contributors, thereby helping to address labour shortages associated with the retirement of the baby boomer generation. These approaches foster a sustainable and inclusive workforce that benefits both individuals and the broader economy.

Technological innovation is also reshaping recovery and employability. Elison et al. (2015) demonstrated that digital treatment programs, such as Breaking Free Online, improve engagement and self-management, thereby indirectly supporting employment outcomes. Similarly, Lockard et al. (2022) found that telemedicine for opioid use disorder expanded treatment access and patient engagement, stabilizing recovery trajectories that enable consistent employment. Integrating technology with recovery-based employment programs offers a modern, scalable approach to bridging treatment and economic participation.

3. Research Design

The primary objective of this project is to examine whether existing practices facilitate or hinder employment opportunities for individuals in substance use recovery in British Columbia, Canada. To achieve this objective, three research questions were formulated to explore the challenges and opportunities associated with transitions from recovery to employment.

3.1. Research Questions

- 1. What employability challenges are faced by individuals in substance use recovery?*
- 2. How are recovery and employment services coordinated for individuals in substance use recovery?*
- 3. What organizational strategies are employed to strengthen recovery-to-employment pathways, including partnerships, policies, and peer support initiatives?*

An exploratory research design was adopted, and the analysis was conducted in three stages. Stage 1 involved a scoping review to synthesize existing literature, including both grey and academic sources, on the topic. Stage 2 consisted of a focus group discussion that gathered insights from representatives of addiction and treatment organizations, as well as employment-related organizations across British Columbia. Stage 3 involved distributing open-ended survey questions to collect the perspectives of representatives from organizations that were unable to participate in the focus group session.

3.1.1. Stage 1: Environmental Scan

An environmental scan was conducted to examine employment support for individuals in substance use recovery, analyzing academic and grey literature, including policy documents. Broad sources ensured identification of key challenges, policies, and gaps. Three researchers independently performed the scan to enhance rigour, minimize bias, and ensure objective and comprehensive coverage. Table 1 presents the inclusion criteria for both peer-reviewed and grey literature.

Table 1: Inclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion
Search Terms	"substance use recovery AND employment"; "substance use recovery AND employability"; "substance use recovery and bridge employment"; "substance use recovery and job retention"; "addiction treatment AND job readiness"; "addiction treatment AND job Opportunities"; "addiction AND job placement"; "vocational rehab AND recovery"; "early recovery AND workforce re-entry" "work integration AND substance use"; "substance use recovery and employee assistance".
Language	English
Duration of the search	April 2025 – May 2025
Search Engine	Scopus, Google scholar, Google search

3.1.2.Stage 2: Focus Group Analysis

Focus group studies were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the issues at the grassroots level. The study aimed to capture the perspectives of the substance use recovery service providers and employment service providers, on:

- 1. Barriers to employment faced by individuals in recovery*
- 2. Coordination between recovery and employment services, including time-sensitive recovery needs and opportunities for service improvements.*
- 3. Organizational perspectives on enhancing the transition from recovery to employment.*

The invitation for the potential participants to participate in this study was identified based on the following criteria:

1. *Individuals who represent organizations that offer substance use recovery services*
2. *Individuals who represent organizations that provide assistance in navigating employment or career development*

Based on the selection criteria, 138 email invitations were sent to potential participants. Of these, 88 individuals expressed interest, and 47 ultimately attended the session. To accommodate participants' availability, the session was conducted in a hybrid format, offering both in-person and online participation options. All participants were informed of the research project's purpose and their rights as participants, and they were asked to sign informed consent forms prior to the session (Refer to Appendix 1). Identical questions were used across sessions to maintain consistency (Refer to Appendix 2). To reduce bias, enhance reliability, and control for confounding variables, participants were rotated after each 30-minute discussion round. Facilitators monitored the sessions, encouraged engagement, ensured that all questions were addressed, supported the flow of conversation, and took detailed notes. The participants were expected to contribute in three rounds, and the discussion for each round was based on:

- Barriers to Employment for Individuals in Recovery (Round 1)
- System Gaps and Service Coordination (Round 2)
- Solutions and Capacity Building (Round 3)

3.1.3. Stage 3: Survey Analysis

To gather extensive insights, an anonymous survey was shared with recovery and treatment centers, as well as employment agents, in British Columbia, alongside invitations to focus groups. We have also informed participants the research project's purpose and their rights as participants, and they were asked to sign informed consent forms (Refer to Appendix 3). Of the 138 emails, 50 expressed interest, and 20 participated with consent. The open-ended survey, based on the environmental scan and input from the Pacifica Treatment Centre, employed a mixed-methods design to

gather comprehensive insights from participants. A copy of the survey can be found in (Refer to Appendix 4).

3.2. Research Limitations

The study focused on the perspectives of recovery service providers and employment service providers to examine recovery-to-employment pathways at the systems and organizational levels. Through this approach, the research captured service providers' insights into the challenges they face in delivering supports, as well as their perspectives on the barriers and issues experienced by their clients. While these perspectives offer important system-level and practice-based understanding, service providers' representations of client experiences cannot fully substitute for the direct voices of individuals with lived or living experience of substance use recovery. As such, the absence of direct client perspectives represents a limitation of the study design and may have constrained the depth of insight into individual-level experiences.

4. Findings: Recovery-to-Employment Pathways

The findings from this study highlight the complex interplay between recovery, employability, and organizational support systems for individuals in substance use recovery in British Columbia, Canada. Analysis of the environmental scan, focus group discussions, and surveys revealed five main themes from the current landscape of recovery-to-employment practices in British Columbia. These themes include: (1) the limited evaluation and measurement of employment supports; (2) the perspectives of recovery services and employment agencies on the role of employment in recovery; (3) internal and external barriers that hinder individual in substance use recovery's employment readiness and sustainability; (4) the need for capacity building through staff training and resource development; and (5) the importance of collaborative networks and cross-sector partnerships to bridge existing service gaps. Together, these themes provide a comprehensive understanding of both the strengths and challenges shaping recovery-oriented employment supports across the province.

4.1. Triangulation of Findings Across Data Sources

To ensure methodological consistency and strengthen the reliability of the findings, this study employed triangulation across three complementary data sources: an environmental scan, focus group discussions, and an organizational survey. The objective of this triangulated approach was to emphasize evidence-informed analysis that integrates research, practice-based insights, and system-level perspectives to inform workforce development and inclusion.

The environmental scan examined global trends in recovery-to-employment policies and program models, highlighting recurring structural barriers and gaps in evaluation practices. Focus group discussions then offered applied, practitioner-based insights from recovery and employment service providers across British Columbia, enabling the research team to compare global evidence with how these challenges are experienced and addressed in frontline service delivery. To ensure that findings were not based solely on focus group discussions, a survey was conducted to capture the perspectives of a wider range of recovery and employment service providers across British Columbia who were unable to participate in the focus group event. Together, the survey responses broadened the evidence base and strengthened the representativeness of service provider perspectives across the province.

Themes were identified through an iterative process that compared patterns across all three data sources. A theme was retained when it emerged consistently in at least two data sources and was strengthened when evidence converged across all three. This process ensured that findings were not driven by a single method, organizational context, or viewpoint, but instead reflect shared challenges and opportunities across the recovery and employment ecosystem. By triangulating evidence in this way, the findings offer a robust and policy-relevant understanding of recovery-to-employment pathways that supports inclusive, resilient, and skills-focused labour markets.

4.1.1. Environmental Scan: Reviewing Existing Recovery-to-Employment Supports

An environmental scan provides critical insights into the intersection between recovery and employability. The search yielded 435 academic publications and 1,580 grey literature sources. Each source underwent a three-stage screening process: title review, abstract review, and full-text analysis. Based on relevance to the study objectives, 288 academic publications and 142 grey literature documents were retained from full-text analysis. Figure 3 shows that 67% of academic journal articles focused on analyzing employment accessibility for individuals in substance use recovery, compared to only 37% of grey literature sources that addressed the same issue.

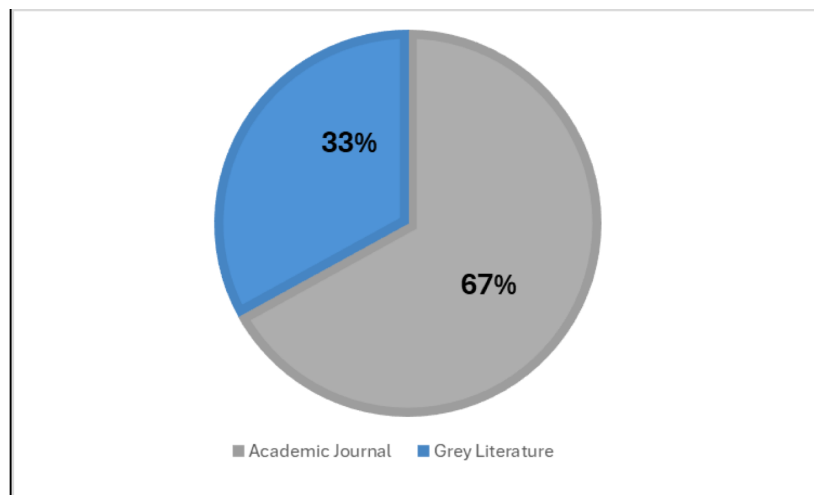


Figure 3: Distribution of literature focused on employment accessibility among individuals in recovery: academic journals vs. grey literature.

Source: Data collected from environmental scan

An in-depth analysis of the literature revealed that most authors emphasized the challenges and barriers individuals in recovery face when seeking employment. However, few studies proposed concrete policies aimed at mitigating these barriers. Figure 4 illustrates that academic journals predominantly diagnose systemic problems (e.g., discrimination, health issues, criminal records). In contrast, grey literature is more likely to offer policy evaluations and implementation strategies, possibly due to its practical and governmental orientation.

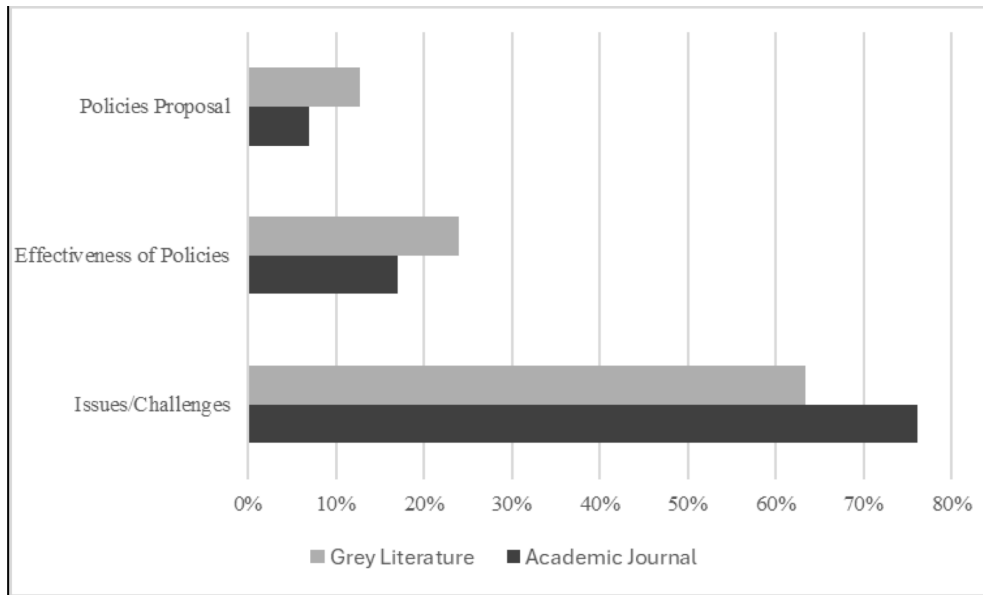


Figure 4: Policy-Related Themes in Employment Accessibility for Individuals in Recovery.

Source: Data collected from environmental scan

The review identified a range of recurring issues/challenges faced by individuals in substance use recovery. These include discrimination, health conditions, traditional healthcare services, working environment, and skill development (Figure 5). The literature highlights limited job skills or work history, legal complications, and poor physical or mental health. Challenges within workplaces and treatment systems further contribute to the problem. Traditional healthcare services may also hinder workforce reintegration by failing to accommodate the ongoing needs of individuals in recovery. For instance, blue-collar workers may face major obstacles, including unsafe work environments, scheduling conflicts between treatment and employment, and inadequate recovery support.

Stigma and negative judgment from employers and co-workers often lead to discrimination, which can affect both the hiring process and performance evaluations. A fear of such discrimination may deter individuals in recovery from entering the labour

market, ultimately undermining their financial stability. Additionally, rigid workplace policies, pre-employment drug testing, and a lack of recovery-friendly environments can exacerbate health issues and reduce job performance. While some sources identify promising policies and interventions, significant gaps remain. Overall, the pathway from recovery to employment is shaped by complex and intersecting social, legal, organizational, and personal barriers, underscoring the need for comprehensive, recovery-oriented employment strategies.



Figure 5: Issues / challenges faced by individual in substance use recovery.

Source: Outcome from the focus group discussion

While some promising interventions, such as supported employment and trauma-informed workplace training, have been identified, they remain underutilized across the province. The employment pathway for individuals in recovery is shaped by a complex interplay of social, legal, organizational, and personal factors, necessitating a holistic and recovery-oriented approach.

This environmental scan provides valuable insight into the intersection of substance use recovery and employability in British Columbia. The findings underscore the need for an integrated, evidence-informed policy approach that addresses systemic barriers while promoting employment as a vital component of recovery and social

reintegration. The results of this scan were subsequently presented to both substance use recovery service providers and employment service providers.

4.1.2. Focus Group Analysis: Perspectives from Service Providers on Recovery and Employment

The first round focused on the challenges individuals encounter when returning to work during/after treatment. Participants consistently identified stigma and unstable work histories as major obstacles. Employers often hesitate to hire individuals in recovery due to concerns about reliability or relapse risk, while individuals in substance use recovery themselves experience low confidence and fear of judgment. One participant noted, “If they call in sick, people assume they’re using again.” Although the environmental scan identified stigma and discrimination from employers and co-workers as key external barriers, focus group findings revealed that individuals in substance use recovery face greater internal challenges (Figure 6). These include low confidence, unstable work histories, long employment gaps, limited education, and insufficient interview experience.

System-level barriers were also discussed. Participants pointed to the Persons with Disabilities (PWD) benefit program as a disincentive to full-time work, since benefits are reduced when earnings exceed a certain threshold. This discourages individuals in substance use recovery from pursuing stable employment. Additional practical barriers, such as a lack of transportation, affordable childcare, or suitable clothing for interviews, were frequently mentioned. Practitioners also observed that repeated setbacks can lead to loss of motivation among individuals in substance use recovery. Overall, discussions emphasized that addressing both personal and systemic barriers requires a holistic approach that combines mentoring, skills training, and emotional readiness.

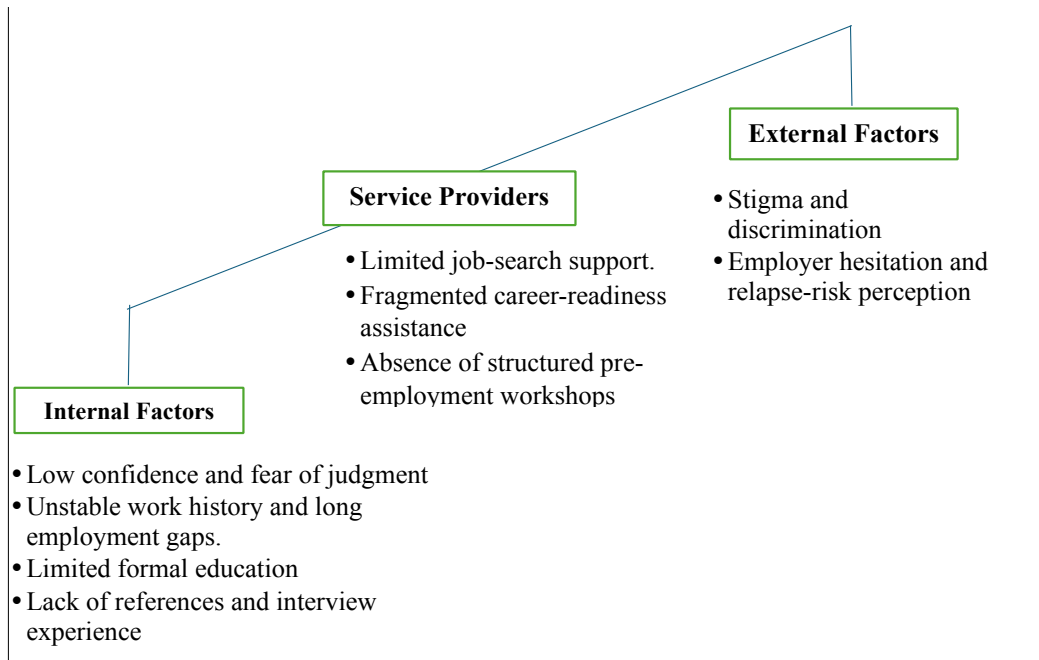


Figure 6: Multi-Level Challenges Faced by individual in Recovery.

Source: Outcome from the focus group discussion

Building on the first discussion, the second round examined coordination gaps within the employment and recovery systems. Participants described fragmented services, duplicated referrals, and inconsistent communication between agencies. Recovery and employment programs often operate in silos, leaving individual in substance use recovery to navigate disconnected systems with differing eligibility criteria and timelines. Few treatment centres provide structured career development, while employment agencies rarely integrate recovery-informed practices. This fragmentation leads to lost follow-up, frustration, and a reduction in continuity of care.

Participants also highlighted how short-term funding contributes to staff turnover and program disruptions, undermining client progress. Despite these challenges, several examples of effective collaboration emerged. Some substance use recovery service providers partner with WorkBC centres to co-locate counsellors or share client updates, while others utilize informal case-management networks to track client progress after discharge. These collaborative approaches foster wraparound support, build trust, and enhance stability during the early stages of recovery. Participants recommended shared referral processes and information-sharing systems to reduce

duplication and improve navigation. As one participant stated, “We meet clients where they are, but the system rarely meets us halfway.” This round concluded that stronger cross-sector partnerships, more transparent communication, and integrated funding models are essential to improving outcomes and reducing fragmentation across the province.

The final round focused on solutions and capacity-building strategies to sustain progress in recovery-to-employment efforts. Participants proposed embedding employment counsellors within treatment and second-stage housing programs to ensure ongoing job-readiness support. Transitional and volunteer placements were highlighted as valuable low-pressure opportunities for individual in substance use recovery to rebuild structure and confidence before returning to full-time work.

Peer mentorship emerged as a particularly effective approach. Peers with lived experience were viewed as key to helping individuals recovering in substance use stay accountable, manage relapse risks, and rebuild recovery capital through social connection. Participants emphasized that peer support should be formally recognized, compensated, and integrated into program design, rather than being treated as an informal add-on. Additional suggestions included expanding mentorship within job and employment programs to help individuals recovering in substance use develop employable skills alongside peers in recovery. Participants also emphasized the need for sustainable funding, regular inter-agency meetings, and ongoing staff training to maintain recovery-informed practice. They agreed that program success depends on consistent communication between partners and on funding cycles that are long enough to allow outcomes to stabilize.

4.1.3. Survey Analysis: Insights on Recovery-to-Employment Pathways

The survey explored how recovery and treatment centers, along with employment agencies, support individual in substance use recovery who are navigating both recovery and employment. Overall, responses clustered around five overarching themes that reflect organizational practices and systemic factors shaping service delivery. These themes include the effectiveness of current employment supports and

evaluation practices, how staff frame and discuss employment within recovery contexts, and the personal and structural barriers, individual in substance use recovery face in balancing recovery with work. Notably, 70% of respondents from employment service centers reported providing comprehensive support. In contrast, only 40% of participants from recovery and treatment centers indicated that they offer employment or life skills assistance alongside substance use services (Figure 7). These findings suggest that individuals in recovery receive greater employment support from employment service centers than from recovery and treatment providers.

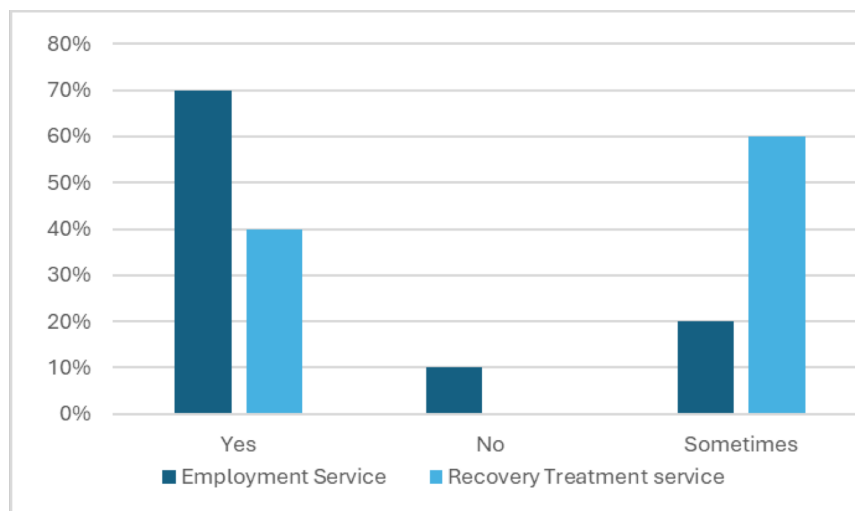


Figure 7: Employment support for recovery.

Source: Outcome from the survey analysis

Additionally, the survey asked whether employment service providers and recovery treatment service providers have staff who are well-trained to support individual in substance use recovery. The majority of employment service providers responded “Yes” (60%), whereas most recovery treatment services indicated “No” (50%) (Figure 8).

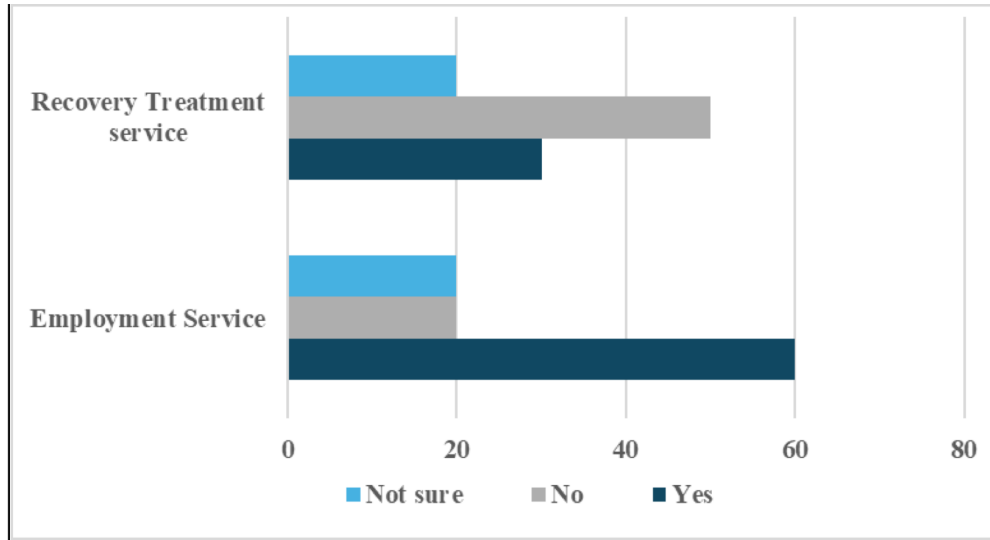


Figure 8: Trained staff that support employment for recovery

Source: Outcome from the survey analysis

These results suggest that individual in substance use recovery benefit from better-trained staff within employment service centers, which enhances their ability to support individuals recovering from substance use in achieving employment compared to recovery treatment services.

Since existing literature emphasizes the importance of employment support in the recovery process, the survey also inquired whether recovery treatment services track employment-related outcomes among their clients. The majority (70%) reported “No,” 20% were “Not sure,” and only 10% responded “Yes”.

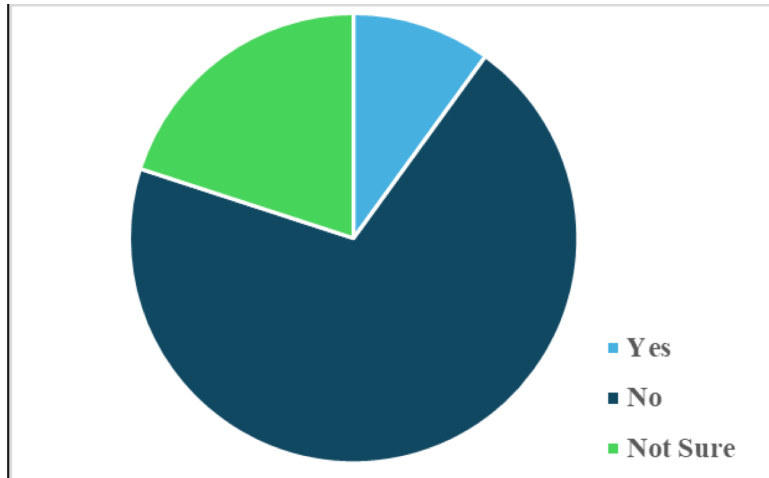


Figure 9: Recovery treatment services tracking employment-related outcomes among individuals in substance use recovery

Source: Outcome from the survey analysis

When recovery service representatives were asked whether their employment-related supports are effectively evaluated, most indicated that no structured evaluation process currently exists. Additionally, responses about staff perceptions of employment in relation to individuals' recovery revealed that employment is not consistently addressed within recovery treatment services. While some staff view employment as a positive component of recovery, others show limited understanding or prioritize different aspects of the recovery process. One participant even described employment support as “a distraction to recovery.”

In contrast, participants from employment agencies recognized employment as an essential component of long-term recovery. However, no universal threshold exists for determining when individual in substance use recovery should transition from treatment to employment support. As one participant noted, “Ideally, substance use treatment and employment supports go hand in hand.” However, most employment agency representatives acknowledged the absence of formal policies defining client readiness for employment during early recovery, with decisions typically made on a case-by-case basis. Furthermore, responses from employment agencies indicated that while many organizations provide some level of support for individuals in recovery, only a few offer explicitly tailored or specialized employment programs.

Although the findings suggest that recovery treatment services generally do not view employment support as an integral component of the recovery process, many respondents expressed a strong desire for targeted training and professional development to better assist individual in substance use recovery in achieving their employment goals. When asked about partnerships that could enhance support for individual in substance use recovery navigating both recovery and employment, participants highlighted the importance of strong cross-sector collaborations, particularly with public health, education, and employers. Such partnerships were viewed as essential for bridging service gaps and fostering inclusive, recovery-informed workplaces that promote sustainable transitions from recovery to employment.

Additionally, participants from the substance use recovery services and employment services emphasized the importance of capacity building, particularly through staff training, lived experience, and tailored programming that addresses individual in substance use recovery's unique recovery needs. Finally, the findings highlight the critical role of collaborative networks and cross-sector partnerships, underscoring that effective recovery-to-employment pathways rely on strong coordination between treatment providers, employment services, and community organizations. Together, these themes offer a comprehensive understanding of the current strengths, challenges, and opportunities for enhancing employment support for individuals in recovery.

Although employment agencies demonstrated stronger evidence of supporting individual in substance use recovery in obtaining and maintaining employment, respondents also identified both internal and external challenges. Participants described internal challenges as those stemming from individual in substance use recovery's personal circumstances, including inconsistent attendance, low self-esteem, and ongoing mental health struggles. External challenges, including workplace environments, stigma, limited employer support, discrimination, and societal bias, all of which hinder successful employment outcomes.

5. Implications and Future Directions

Individuals in substance use recovery are not always explicitly recognized among standard equity-deserving groups when it comes to employment. As a result, they often experience marginalization and limited access to well-deserved opportunities. The environmental scan of the past five years of research indicates that limited work has been conducted in both academic and grey literature on this topic. Existing studies primarily focus on the challenges employers face in hiring or retaining individuals in recovery, rather than on the systemic barriers or opportunities that could enhance their employability.

Despite this limited research attention, many substances use recovery service providers recognize the critical role employment plays in supporting recovery. Treatment providers view employment as an integral component of recovery, as it not only supports individuals during treatment but also helps them rebuild their lives after treatment. Employment provides structure and routine, assisting individuals to stay focused and reducing the likelihood of relapse. It also builds self-esteem and confidence by giving people a sense of purpose and accomplishment. Additionally, having a job supports financial independence, which in turn reduces stress and reliance on social assistance programs. Beyond financial stability, employment fosters social connection and reintegration, enabling individuals to form positive relationships and reestablish their place within the community. Together, these benefits make employment a powerful factor in sustaining long-term recovery and overall well-being.

However, translating this belief into practice remains challenging. In the case of British Columbia, Canada, the findings of this study indicate that the numerous barriers faced by recovery treatment centres and employment service providers often result in employment being viewed as a later-stage or secondary goal, rather than as a core component of the recovery process.

When individuals in substance use recovery are denied opportunities for meaningful work, it can delay recovery and increase the risk of relapse, as employment

plays a crucial role in rebuilding socioeconomic stability and a sense of purpose. Furthermore, while individuals in recovery often experience employment as a form of support that contributes to personal healing and stability, employers and policymakers may overlook the broader economic contributions of this population's participation in the labour market. Recognizing the reciprocal relationship between recovery and workforce participation highlights the broader social and economic value of inclusive recovery-to-employment pathways.

This study focused on the perspectives of recovery treatment centres and employment service providers to examine recovery-to-employment pathways at the system and organizational levels. Due to time constraints, the perspectives of employers and individuals in substance use recovery were not directly included. As a result, the findings primarily reflect service providers' insights into service delivery barriers and their perspectives on the challenges faced by their clients.

Building on this limitation, future research should examine whether discrepancies exist between the perspectives of recovery service providers and employment service providers, particularly with respect to the finding that individuals in recovery may face greater internal barriers than external ones. Future work could also advance learning by strengthening awareness and capacity building across multiple levels of the recovery-to-employment system, including the integration of employability-focused content into community service and recovery program curricula. Such efforts may help service providers and individuals in recovery better understand the role of employment in achieving long-term recovery outcomes.

Future projects should also explore strategies to support various stakeholder groups, including employers, individuals in substance use recovery, and the broader community, in fostering inclusive employment practices. For employers, this includes developing tools and guidelines to better accommodate and retain individuals in recovery. For individuals in substance use recovery, programs should focus on building confidence, job readiness, and sustained engagement in the workforce. For community service providers, efforts should emphasize enhancing collaboration with employers and equipping staff with the necessary training to integrate employment support into

recovery planning. Together, these efforts can lead to more robust, coordinated, and recovery-informed employment outcomes.

While this study provides important insights from service provider perspectives, future research would benefit from directly incorporating the voices of individuals with lived or living experience of substance use recovery. Although service providers offer valuable insights into service delivery and perceived client barriers, their perspectives cannot fully capture how employment supports are experienced at the individual level. Incorporating lived and living experience alongside service provider perspectives would deepen understanding of recovery-to-employment transitions and support the development of more inclusive, person-centred, and recovery-informed employment practices.

Recognizing this dual benefit is essential for shaping inclusive policies and sustainable employment pathways. The inclusion of individuals in substance use recovery should not only be viewed as a matter of equity and social justice, but also as an investment in economic resilience. Therefore, employers, recovery centres, communities, and policymakers must collaborate to develop sustainable strategies that promote workplace inclusion and long-term employment support for individuals in recovery.

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7. Appendices

7.1. Appendix 1



Substance Use & Employability Dialogue Pacifica Treatment Centre, August 7 and 8, 2025

Participant Consent Form

Title of Study: Substance Use and Employability Study

Lead Organization: Pacifica Treatment Centre

Partner: Adler University

Funded by: Future Skills Centre

Introduction

You are invited to take part in a focus group as part of a study on how employment and recovery programs support people with substance use needs. This consent form explains what's involved. Please read it and ask questions if anything is unclear.

Purpose of the Study

We are conducting focus groups with frontline and leadership staff who work in employment and/or recovery programs. Your input will help us identify strengths, gaps, and opportunities in current services, as well as inform future training and systems improvements.

What to Expect

You'll take part in a two-hour group discussion with other staff. A facilitator will guide the conversation and a note-taker will be present. We will ask about your program, what's helped or hindered client progress, and your ideas for improving support. The group will not be recorded.

Your Privacy & Voluntary Participation

We won't use your name or anything that identifies you in any reports or summaries. Please also avoid sharing identifying details about others during the discussion.

Taking part is voluntary. You can choose not to answer any question and can leave the focus group at any time without consequences.

Risks and Benefits

This is not a clinical or evaluative session. The goal is to understand your experiences and learn from your insights. While we don't anticipate any risks, if you feel uncomfortable at any point, you are free to pause or step out.

Contact

If you have questions, please contact Tegan Breker at:
Tegan.breker@pacificatreatment.ca

By signing below, you agree to participate in the focus group and understand your rights.

Name (printed): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

7.2. Appendix 2



Substance Use & Employability Dialogue Pacifica Treatment Centre, August 7 and 8, 2025

Title of Study: Substance Use and Employability Study

Lead Organization: Pacifica Treatment Centre

Partner: Adler University

Funded by: Future Skills Centre

Round 1: Barriers to Employment for Individuals in Recovery

1. What are the most common barriers your clients face when trying to enter or return to the workforce?
2. What challenges do your staff or caseworkers face when trying to support employment as part of recovery?
3. How does employer stigma or discrimination impact your ability to support clients into employment? Have you seen effective ways to address this?
4. Do you ever notice a conflict between a client's recovery needs and their employment goals? How do you deal with that?

Round 2: System Gaps and Service Coordination

1. How do recovery and employment services coordinate? (What's working, what's not?)
2. How do time-sensitive recovery needs (e.g., relapse risk, medical appointments, treatment schedules) affect employment planning? How do you balance those realities with job placement goals?
3. If you could improve one part of the service landscape to support recovery-to-employment transitions, what would it be?

Round 3: Solutions and Capacity Building

1. What kinds of partnerships or innovations would you like to see in bridging recovery and employment?
2. Do you feel your organization has the right tools, training, or policies to help clients navigate both recovery and employment? If not, what's missing?
3. What role can peer support or lived experience play in helping individuals transition from recovery into employment?

4. What kinds of funding or policy changes would help your organization build stronger recovery-to-employment pathways?

7.3. Appendix 3



Participant Consent Form

Title of Study: Substance Use and Employability Study

Lead Organization: Pacifica Treatment Centre

Partner: Adler University

Funded by: Future Skills Centre

Introduction

You are invited to take part in an online survey as part of a study on how employment and recovery programs support people with substance use needs. This consent form explains what's involved. Please read it and ask questions if anything is unclear.

Purpose of the Study

The online survey distributed to frontline and leadership staff who work in employment and/or recovery programs. Your input will help us identify strengths, gaps, and opportunities in current services, as well as inform future training and systems improvements.

What to Expect

We are requesting 20–30 minutes of your time to complete a voluntary and anonymous online survey about your insights on the employment-to-recovery pathway.

Your Privacy & Voluntary Participation

The study is anonymous. We will not use your name or any identifying information in any reports or summaries. We also ask that you avoid sharing identifying details about others when responding to the open-ended questions. Taking part is voluntary. You can choose not to answer any question and may exit the survey at any time for any reason.

Risks and Benefits

This is not a clinical or evaluative session. The goal is simply to understand your experiences and learn from your insights. While we do not anticipate any risks, if you feel uncomfortable at any point, you are free to exit.

Contact

If you have questions, please contact Tegan Breker at: Tegan.breker@pacificatreatment.ca

By completing the section below you agree to participate in the survey and understand your rights.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Email Address: _____

7.4. Appendix 4

Substance Use & Employability

Survey Questions: Substance Use Recovery Service Providers

This short, anonymous survey is part of a project led by Pacifica Treatment Centre and Adler University. We're exploring how people in recovery are supported to find and keep work. Your input will help us improve programs, training, and policies across BC.

This survey is intended for staff working in substance use recovery or treatment settings.

Section 1: About You

What is your role?

- Frontline staff (e.g., counsellor, support worker, case manager, employment advisor)
- Leadership/Management (e.g., director, program manager, coordinator)
- Other (please specify)

Section 2: Current Practice

1. Does your organization offer employment or life skills support alongside substance use services?

- Yes
- Sometimes
- No
- Not sure

2. Who delivers those supports? (select all that apply)

- In-house counsellors or case managers
- Peer support workers
- Partner organizations
- Staff with lived/living experience
- Career development or employment specialists
- Other (please specify)

3. Are staff delivering employment-related support trained in career development or employment services?

- Yes

- No
- Not sure

4. Are you tracking employment-related outcomes (e.g., job placements, training enrolment)?

- Yes
- No
- In development
- Not sure

5. How do you evaluate whether your employment-related supports are effective? (open text)

Section 3: Perspectives and Beliefs

1. In your experience, how do staff at your organization typically talk about employment with clients in recovery? (open text)

2. Are there unspoken rules or beliefs that shape when and how employment is introduced in recovery? (e.g., “They need to be stable first,” or “Work can interfere with healing”)

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

If yes, please describe: _____
(open text)

3. What challenges do clients face when trying to engage with employment or training while in recovery?

(open text)

Section 4: Needs and Gaps

1. What kinds of training or resources would help you feel more confident supporting clients' employment goals?

(open text)

2. What partnerships would better support clients navigating recovery and employment together?

(open text)

3. Anything else you'd like to share?

(open text)

Survey Questions: Employment Services

This short, anonymous survey is part of a project led by Pacifica Treatment Centre and Adler University. We're exploring how employment services engage with individuals in recovery—and when and how referrals to substance use services happen. Your input will help improve cross-sector collaboration across BC.

This survey is intended for staff working in employment services or career development settings.

Section 1: About You

1. What is your role?

- Frontline staff (e.g., employment counsellor, support worker, job coach)
- Leadership/Management (e.g., director, program manager, coordinator)
- Other (please specify)

Section 2: Working with Clients in Recovery

1. Do you work with clients who are in recovery from substance use?

- Yes
- Sometimes
- No
- Not sure

2. At what point do you recommend or require clients to seek substance use treatment before continuing with employment supports?

(open text)

3. Does your organization have internal policies (formal or informal) about client “readiness” for employment if they are using or early in recovery?

(open text)

4. Do you offer any tailored programming for individuals in recovery?

Yes

No

Not sure

If yes, please describe: _____
(open text)

5. Do any staff on your team have specialized training to support clients in recovery?

Yes

No

Not sure

6. Do any staff have lived/living experience with substance use or recovery?

Yes

No

Prefer not to say

Not sure

Section 3: Perspectives and Support Needs

1. What challenges come up when working with clients who are actively using or early in recovery?

(open text)

2. How does your team decide whether employment support is the right fit for a client in recovery?

(open text)

3. What additional support or partnerships would help you better serve clients navigating both recovery and employment?

(open text)

4. Anything else you'd like to share?

(open text)

8. Biographies

First Author: N. Renuga Nagarajan, Ph.D., Adler University



Dr. Nagarajan specializes in labour economics and workforce inclusion. Her research explores the challenges faced by underprivileged employee groups, including ageing workers, women, and individuals in substance use recovery, in accessing and sustaining meaningful employment. She has published extensively on workforce participation, demographic change, and equity-focused labour policies in journals such as *Ageing International* and *Population Research and Policy Review*. Dr. Nagarajan's work integrates economic analysis with social policy perspectives to identify structural barriers and propose inclusive labour market strategies. Her ongoing scholarship seeks to advance equitable employment systems that foster social and economic resilience among diverse populations.

Second Author: Kirsty Peterson, Pacifica Treatment Centre



Kirsty Peterson, CCDP, is the Executive Director of Pacifica Treatment Centre. She has 20 years of experience as a Career Development Practitioner, specializing in supporting clients most removed from labour market attachment. Kirsty is nationally certified as a CCDP and currently serves on the board of ASPECT BC. She spent five years working with the World YMCA's Community of Impact on Youth Employment, during which she contributed to Deloitte's Advisory Committee on Meaningful Work through that collaboration. Her work focuses on championing inclusive recovery solutions that recognize the intersectionality of substance use and employment experiences. Kirsty understands that individuals' employment histories, barriers, and identities bring unique perspectives to the workforce. Her commitment to empowerment is demonstrated through engaging persons with lived experience in the development of meaningful supports and opportunities.

