

Real voices, real insights

Attracting new people to mental health and addictions work

Expanding the mental health and addictions workforce will require us to both attract newcomers, and remove the barriers that stand in the way of their employment. To discover how we might go about this, we reviewed more than 50 mental health and addiction job ads across a number of channels, and interviewed current practitioners about their own experiences and observations of the job-seeking process. Based on what we learned, here are six recommendations for attracting new people to the sector.

Keep things easy to understand

Many of the job advertisements we found (including those for entry-level roles) used sector-specific language and jargon. People we spoke with described how difficult it was getting started in mental health and addictions work without an understanding of how the sector works.

It all boils down to my lack of knowledge of the workforce – I didn't know what I needed to do. I didn't know how it operated.



Recommendation

Craft recruitment resources that recognise candidates may be totally new to the sector. Signal a warm invitation by avoiding acronyms and jargon. Simple, friendly, relatable language communicates an openness to candidates from a variety of backgrounds – not just those with sector experience.

Join the dots for people

Almost all the job ads we reviewed were listed under a sector role title. These headings may not hold much meaning for those new to addictions and mental health work. Some of the people we spoke to had come to mental health and addictions work only after others had pointed out they were a great fit.



Someone said to me, 'You do realise you've literally been peer supporting your entire recovery?'

Recommendation

Enable newcomers to see how they could fit into mental health and addictions work. Consider headlining your ads with something more meaningful than a job title. Try igniting people's imaginations and sense of possibility by highlighting the qualities needed in the role, its opportunities, or impact.

3 Focus on what's essential

We found that roles with similar titles are being listed with very different requirements around qualifications and/or experience. Some ads bury the opportunity to work towards certification deep in the copy – rather than clearly highlighting the chance to get started without qualifications. None of the ads we reviewed specifically encouraged applications from people who have been using similar skills in other sectors or capacities – for example community care or volunteer work.

Recommendation

When writing recruitment materials that aim to attract newcomers, consider what is essential. Do candidates for this role really need to have qualifications or sector experience? Might specifying these things unnecessarily dissuade great folks from applying? Think about what development could be offered on the job – and demonstrate those opportunities upfront. Show potential candidates that their personal qualities, lived experiences, and transferable skills will all count in their favour.

There's a lot of Māori that are doing amazing volunteer work out in the community, not realising the kind of support they are actually giving.

5 Make diversity visible

Only one of the ads we reviewed specifically encouraged Māori or Pasifika people to apply. While there are wonderful examples of Māori and Pasifika-led, culturally-relevant approaches to addiction and mental health – the visibility of this work beyond the sector may be limited.

Recommendation

Help Māori and Pasifika candidates see a place for themselves in mental health and addictions work by creating recruitment resources which reflect their identities. Speak directly to the skills, values, knowledge, and experiences that their cultural background may allow them to bring to this work. Showcase the sector's Māori and Pasifika practitioners and increase the visibility of culturally-grounded approaches to mental health and addictions work.

If you're wanting to increase the proportion of Māori people in the workforce, we need to see them – we need to see our Māori leaders.

4 Celebrate lived experience

Of the ads we reviewed, only a couple encouraged people with lived experience of mental health challenges or addiction to apply. However, people we spoke with felt they were uniquely qualified to support others because of what they had navigated in their own lives.

Who would've thought the chaos of my background would be so valued?

Recommendation

Make sure your job ads invite people with lived experience to apply. Articulate why these experiences are valuable and welcomed. Remember these folks might have a limited sense of what they are capable of, so think about how you might spark their self-belief. Remind them of the skills they have built on their journey, and describe how they will be supported to grow into the role.

6 Highlight the chance to make a difference

Everyone we spoke to talked about being drawn to the sector because of the desire to help others and contribute to something bigger than themselves. The idea of serving their communities resonated particularly strongly with Māori and Pasifika practitioners.

I wanted to be there for people.

Recommendation

The chance to do genuinely meaningful work which makes a difference in people's lives is likely to be a huge drawcard for potential newcomers. Make sure recruitment materials highlight that these opportunities lie at the heart of mental health and addictions work.