

CMHDARN RESEARCH FORUM November 19 2013

Joanne Matheson- Consumer Research Project Assistant - Break Thru People Solutions

Thank you for allowing me to speak today.

I am both nervous and proud to be in front of you talking about being part of Break Thru's Managing Personal Information (MPI) project. I was employed by Break Thru as a Consumer Research Project Assistant (CPA).

This was my first job since being hit by a drunk driver back in 2005. I never thought I would ever be able to work again or even be given a chance. So when I applied for the job of CPA, to be honest, I wasn't even aware of what this job as a CPA really meant, or what I was getting myself into. There's nothing like jumping in feet first.

A CPA on the Managing Personal Information project (we called it the MPI project) was a researching position. I was involved in working with Janice to plan how we would do the project, what questions we would ask participants, how we would recruit the participants; I did the client participant interviews, help in writing the research report and also in sharing our research findings.

The project was trialling a new disclosure tool for job seekers with mental health and drug and alcohol problems. It was hoped that tool might help jobseekers with mental health problems to get work and have access to the support they would need to keep the job. But I had never done researching before and so when I started interviewing potential participants to join the research project I wasn't completely 100% sure of what I was getting them to sign up to. It was all new to me and I was learning as I went along. However, since all participants were unemployed, and they had not been able to get any work themselves, the majority said they would be happy to participate. Although they said that they were happy to do this, I found that some were still very "standoffish" towards me and pretty reluctant to answer questions with more than a yes or no answer. So I decided if I was willing to open up about my own mental health issues and my physical disabilities then maybe they would feel more comfortable about opening up to me. Well, it made a big difference once they knew that I was a consumer too and not Break Thru staff, and let me tell you, it worked so good that I had 2 clients in particular that were telling me so much that it was hard to end the interview and get them to leave so I could move onto my next interview.

The best feeling was when I had 1 client tell me that, in her opinion, it was thanks to the MPI tool which we were trialling, that she got a volunteering job and was willing to socialise with the public again. Through the MPI tool she saw that she had strengths not just disabilities and she reckoned that being part of the MPI project had been an important step in her life.

And I'd been part of that process.... Changing lives! With comments like that how could you not love this job?

Sadly the staff didn't seem as enthusiastic about the research and the new tool as the clients were about it, but I'm putting that down to the changes that were happening in the office at the time. There was a level of uncertainty around the program the staff were in and they seemed to have a big workload. Our research project was seen by staff as adding to their work and so they saw this new tool as more of a hindrance that help at the time. But having said that, even though they were all so

busy themselves, the staff were all still willing to drop everything to help me and to accommodate my needs. I've never had that happen in any job I worked in before.

To be honest, I never thought I would get such a positive result from the clients form 1 little tool. It changed the lives of some of the Break Thru clients and being part of the research has changed my life too. Even in my own life, I used the idea of this strengths based tool in my own home, with my son, who also has mental health issues. I've used the idea of the Managing Personal Information tool to break down the communication barriers and to try to open up a better and calmer communication with him. And it has worked. It was fantastic to finally have a peaceful discussion and to try to put our own family goals in place and to plan things to strive for.