A recently published research paper assessing Christchurch youth employment outcomes highlights some good news for young people with experience of mental illness.

The Queensland Centre for Mental Health Research study, published in the Journal of Early Intervention in Psychiatry, shows some outstanding results achieved by Workwise Christchurch. The study compares Workwise Christchurch’s outcomes with international best practice…and gives the service a big tick!

Workwise – a leading New Zealand support employment agency
Workwise supports people with experience of mental illness to choose, get and keep jobs – jobs they really want with employers who see and value their skills and potential.

Using a model known as Individual Placement and Support (IPS), Workwise works alongside people as they search to find employment and enjoy all the benefits that come from working; financial and personal independence, social inclusion, fun, a sense of achievement and purpose.

Individual Placement and Support (IPS) – an evidence-based approach that works!
Workwise utilises IPS principles throughout its national network of employment services. The approach, designed specifically for people with serious mental illness, is characterised by seven core principles. The approach:

1. aims to get people into competitive employment
2. is open to all those who want to work
3. finds jobs consistent with people’s preferences
4. works quickly
5. brings employment specialists into clinical teams
6. provides time unlimited, individualised support for the person and their employer
7. includes financial benefits counselling

International best practice supports the idea that, for young people with mental illness, the outcome goals of the approach need to be extended to also include support for achieving formal education and training.

Employment outcomes – Workwise achieved excellent results with young people
In comparing the work of the Christchurch team against international best practice, the research confirms the effectiveness of Workwise’s organisation-wide commitment to IPS and its ability to adapt the model to the specific needs of young people with mental illnesses.

Data was collected for a group of 49 young people (age 16-25), who came to Workwise either through a Work and Income referral or via self-referral. The highlights of the Christchurch team’s performance against international benchmarks included the following.
The service was very effective for Maori youth – with 83.3% of the Maori youth using the service attaining competitive employment.

- More clients commencing competitive employment – 69.4% compared to 61% internationally.
- Shorter time to people’s commencement of their first job – 80 days against 138 days internationally.
- Number of clients accumulating 26 weeks or more of competitive employment – 36.7% compared to 34% in Australia.

While the integration of employment and mental health services is a key principle of IPS, this was not a component of the programme at the time of the study. Despite this, the research shows segregated services can still be highly effective, with the researchers suggesting that “good implementation of the other IPS practices explains the high performance”.

Workwise chief executive Warren Elwin says it’s important that a supported employment service’s practice does not employ a ‘one size fits all’ approach, but uses best practice as a model to adapt for the specific needs of the people using its services. “Moving into adulthood can be challenging for young people who have a mental illness or substance use disorder. Early employment interventions that help youth integrate into their communities and find and live their dreams are important. For some people it is critical to their ability to achieve and thrive in the long term.”

Workwise believes the research could help supported employment and mental health services work together to further tailor high-performing, evidence-based employment services for the specific needs of young people with experience of mental illness. “This research signals opportunities for ongoing investment in the young people of New Zealand and demonstrates how other employment services could employ the methods used by Workwise.”