Exploring Learning and Development for Work of Individuals with Psychological Vulnerabilities: Perspectives of IPS Practitioners

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Abstract

Although Individual Placement and Support (IPS) is widely recognized as an effective approach for (re)integration into the workforce for individuals with psychological vulnerabilities, limited attention has been given to their learning and development (L&D) processes. This study addresses this gap by exploring IPS practitioners' perspectives on how IPS candidates engage in L&D processes for work. The primary objective is to gain an understanding of how IPS candidates learn and develop for work and to identify key factors that promote or hinder these processes. To gather qualitative data, 15 IPS practitioners from diverse regions in the Netherlands participated in focus group discussions. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns and themes related to the L&D processes of IPS candidates. The results indicate that although IPS candidates' motivation is not different from people without psychological vulnerabilities, their L&D processes are often overshadowed by the primary focus on successful (re)integration and the challenges that they encounter in this process. However, the findings show that IPS candidates frequently engage in learning by doing, often facilitated by buddy systems or mentorships. When candidates gain more work experience and self-confidence, they often learn specific skills through additional education or training provided by their employer. Additionally, the findings highlight that both practitioners and employers play a crucial role in maintaining key conditions that promote L&D processes for IPS candidates.

Introduction

As global economies continue to evolve and expand, a key challenge that many countries face is the ability to fill job vacancies with qualified employees. This issue, often called 'labour market tightness', has significant consequences for both economic growth and stability (Gomis et al., 2020). Exclusion and underemployment negatively affect the economy, causing stagnation in care, education, production, and services, particularly during growing labour market shortages (Maynard & Feldman, 2011). These market conditions necessitate innovative approaches to workforce development and employment practices (Autor, 2015).

Despite this growing pressure on the labour market, approximately fifteen million people in the European Union still experience difficulties in finding a job (Eurostat, 2022). One of the most affected groups is individuals with psychological vulnerabilities, who face profound barriers to securing stable employment (European Commission, 2024). This challenge is compounded by factors such as immigration background and low educational attainment, further limiting job opportunities. These individuals are often disadvantaged due to limited acces to training and personal guidance, making their integration into the workforce even more difficult (European Commission, 2024). Although there are comprehensive European and national policies aimed at facilitating employment of these groups, they remain significantly underrepresented in the workforce (Eurostat, 2022).

One way to tackle this issue is to utilize the largely untapped potential of these people more effectively. Often side-lined into the labour market, they represent a valuable source of talent that, if properly supported, could significantly benefit the workforce (Munoz-Murillo et al., 2018). However, (re)integrating people with psychological vulnerabilities into the labour market goes beyond solving economic problems–it is fundamentally a societal duty. For this group in society, employment provides a sense of structure, stability, and general well-being, not just financial security. Meaningful employment is an essential part of the health recovery process, as it promotes social inclusion and improves overall quality of life (Bond et al., 2008).

In line with these objectives, the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) approach is one of the key methods for facilitating the (re)integration of individuals with psychological vulnerabilities into the workforce. In the Netherlands, IPS is embedded into the wider system of labour market (re)integration for people with disabilities or vulnerabilities, serving as an essential tool for personal recovery and meeting labour market needs (de Winter et al., 2020). IPS assists individuals in matching their jobs with personal recovery objectives by offering

customized assistance and guidance, enabling them to find meaning in their work (Bond et al., 2008; Drake et al., 2012).

A key aspect of IPS is to connect people with suitable jobs that match their skills, interests, and capabilities while providing ongoing support to ensure long-term success in the workplace (de Winter et al., 2020). However, long-term success goes beyond job placement; it necessitates continuous learning of new skills to adapt to the evolving demands of jobs (Salas et al., 2012; Dachner et al., 2021). As individuals with psychological vulnerabilities engage in employment, they show significant improvement in cognitive skills, such as planning, problem-solving, and adaptability (van Ruitenbeek et al., 2023). This evidence demonstrates that people with psychological vulnerabilities not only learn and develop in the workplace but receive direct advantages from being employed. As such, learning and development is not just an extra part of the employment process; it is a fundamental part of (re)integration, allowing individuals to actively engage and succeed in the workforce (van Ruitenbeek et al., 2023).

Even though IPS is well known for its effectiveness in job placement and retention, and learning and development is acknowledged as a fundamental part of the (re)integration process of IPS candidates, there is still a significant gap in the literature at the intersection of these two areas (Vukadin et al., 2021). Specifically, there is limited research on how IPS candidates engage in learning and development for work. This lack of research presents an interesting opportunity to gain insights into how long-term development and success for these individuals can be promoted.

To address this gap in the literature, this study seeks to explore how IPS candidates learn and develop in the workplace by examining the perspectives of IPS practitioners. These practitioners are directly involved in supporting and guiding individuals with psychological vulnerabilities through their career paths. By gathering insights from practitioners, the research aims to offer a deeper understanding of their perspectives on the learning and development of IPS candidates for work. The study examines not only how IPS practitioners view the learning and development processes for these individuals but also how they believe such processes can be promoted. Therefore, the research question of the study is: ''What are the perspectives of IPS practitioners on learning and development for individuals with psychological vulnerabilities in the workplace, and how can their learning and development processes be promoted?''.

Before moving forward, this introduction will define the concept IPS, explore key theories related to learning and development for work, and review relevant literature on the intersection of IPS and L&D.

Individual Placement and Support (IPS)

Individual Placement and Support (IPS) is an evidence-based approach aimed at helping individuals with psychological vulnerabilities gain and maintain employment in competitive job markets (Bond et al., 1997). The core principles of IPS include: (1) prioritizing competitive employment, (2) starting rapid job searches without detailed assessments or training beforehand, (3) combining mental health services with employment support, (4) offering personalized job development based on individual preferences and strengths, (5) providing ongoing support from a dedicated employment specialist, and (6) offering individualized benefits counselling to address concerns about income and potential loss of benefits (Bond et al., 1997). IPS has been very successful in helping individuals secure and maintain employment through rapid job placement and offering ongoing support (Bond et al., 2008). For individuals with psychological vulnerabilities, IPS provides a meaningful path to employment that aligns with their rehabilitation goals and aspirations. IPS promotes social inclusion, self-determination, and empowerment by focusing on competitive employment within integrated settings (Hutchinson et al., 2018). Additionally, IPS outperforms traditional vocational programs, leading to better employment outcomes, longer job tenures, and higher levels of job satisfaction for individuals with psychological vulnerabilities (Vukadin et al., 2021).

Learning and Development for Work

Learning and Development (L&D) plays an important role in enhancing the success of individuals and organizations (Salas et al., 2012; Kraiger & Ford, 2021). Continuous learning processes foster employees' flexibility and resilience, helping them to adapt to future challenges. By giving employees opportunities to learn new skills, knowledge, and behaviours, L&D initiatives can improve job performance and help organizations stay competitive (Kraiger & Ford, 2021). As a result, these processes can positively affect employees' well-being and contribute to long-term organizational sustainability (Tannenbaum & Wolfson, 2022).

L&D for work can be implemented in various ways, all of which can contribute to the success of employees and organizations (Kraiger & Ford, 2021). Formal learning includes structured activities, such as training programs, workshops, and certifications. These activities are often designed by organizations and focus on learning specific skills or knowledge

necessary for performing certain tasks (Kraiger et al., 2014). However, research shows that the majority of workplace learning happens non-formally. Non-formal learning is described as any learning that occurs outside formally organized educational programs. It can be categorized into three types of learning: implicit, reactive, and deliberative (Tannenbaum & Wolfson, 2022; Eraut, 2000). Implicit learning occurs when someone acquires knowledge or skills without the intention or awareness of learning. In the workplace, this happens when employees engage in routine tasks, collaborate with colleagues, or adapt to changing situations (Kyndt & Baert, 2013). When individuals learn in response to unexpected circumstances or challenges, this is called reactive learning. This type of learning can enhance employees' adaptability and problem-solving skills (Eraut, 2000). Learning that is intentional and planned can be defined as deliberative learning. Deliberative learning occurs when individuals set aside time specifically to learn or solve a problem (Eraut, 2000). In the workplace, this might involve reflecting and receiving feedback on past performances, analysing situations, or engaging in activities with the explicit goal of gaining knowledge or improving skills (Eraut, 2000).

Despite the definitions of formal and non-formal learning, in work settings, there can be a blurry border between all types of learning (Tannenbaum & Wolfson, 2022). Besides, the subtle nature of learning makes it challenging to capture or evaluate employees' learning processes (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). However, work-related learning, as a mix of formal and non-formal learning, can be measured through its outcomes for employees and organizations (Kyndt and Baert, 2013). Positive outcomes for organizations that promote learning opportunities are increased productivity and competitiveness. An organization with a learning culture supports innovation, employee satisfaction, and retention (Kyndt and Baert, 2013). For employees, workplace learning can enhance their competencies and employability by providing them with skills that support career development and adaptability (Kyndt and Baert, 2013).

In addition to professional development, workplace learning can contribute to employees' personal growth. Personal growth involves the development of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and adaptability (Dik et al., 2019). As employees engage in workplace learning, they become more aware of their strengths, interests, and areas for improvement (Dik et al., 2019). This self-awareness can foster self-confidence, enhance decision-making skills, and help employees set boundaries. Additionally, workplace learning promotes resilience and well-being, enabling employees to adapt to complex environments and pursue

meaningful careers. As a result, this contributes to employees' fulfilment and well-being (Dik et al., 2019).

Research on learning and development for work and IPS

Several studies on IPS have focused on its long-term outcomes. For example, Salyers et al. (2004) found in their ten-year follow-up study that IPS not only aided IPS candidates in securing employment but also played a crucial role in helping them maintain jobs in the long term (Salyers et al., 2004). The researchers consistently monitored the employment outcomes and mental health progress of IPS candidates, demonstrating that continuous employment support fostered greater stability in work and personal life, ultimately leading to improved mental health and recovery (Salyers et al., 2004). Similarly, Becker et al. (2007) found in their eight-to-twelve-year follow-up study that IPS candidates maintained their jobs for long periods while reporting improvements in social interactions and life satisfaction. This sustained employment was largely due to the strong support IPS provides, such as job coaching and workplace accommodations (Becket et al., 2007). Besides these two studies, the majority of the literature in this area comes from studies limited to a two or three-year follow-up. Thus, literature on the long-term employment outcomes of IPS candidates after many years remains scarce.

Although numerous studies have investigated employment outcomes of the IPS approach, there is little attention given to IPS candidates' long-term development and professional growth (Hutchinson et al., 2018). This was demonstrated in the empirical study by Hutchinson et al. (2018), where IPS programs, including case studies and evaluations, were analysed. While IPS proved highly effective in helping individuals secure employment, there remains a gap in the literature regarding how IPS candidates continue to develop their skills, advance in their careers, and achieve professional growth in the long term (Hutchinson et al., 2018).

In the study of Bond et al. (2016) the importance of L&D for IPS programs was explored. The longitudinal study of the IPS Learning Community found that continuous professional development and maintaining high fidelity to the IPS model were key factors in the long-term sustainment and success of IPS programs. The authors demonstrated that the L&D of IPS practitioners played a crucial role in maintaining program quality and improving employment outcomes for candidates (Bond et al., 2016). This highlights that L&D is important for practitioners as well as for the overall success of IPS programs.

The limited research on L&D for IPS candidates in post-employment suggests that there is room to explore factors that could support long-term professional development. In the literature, some studies provide useful insights into how to create the optimal conditions for IPS candidates' personal and professional growth. For example, Larson et al. (2014) examined a study with 67 IPS practitioners using an open-ended survey to gather feedback on IPS implementation. Their analysis identified key characteristics of IPS practitioners for effective IPS, such as a blend of technical skills, professional knowledge, and strong interpersonal abilities. These competencies helped IPS practitioners promote self-determination and balance the needs of both clients and employers, ultimately supporting IPS candidates' career development (Larson et al., 2014).

The role of interpersonal abilities possessed by IPS practitioners, such as active listening, empathy, and clear communication, was also highlighted in the study of Vukadin et al. (2021). In this research, in-depth interviews with IPS practitioners were conducted to determine factors that contribute to positive outcomes for IPS candidates. The study revealed that practitioners who build trust with candidates and employers and meet the needs of both, were more successful in helping IPS candidates achieve sustainable employment. This balancing act of building trust was seen as a critical factor in empowering candidates to take ownership of their career paths (Vukadin et al., 2021). According to this study, practitioners could help candidates set personalized career goals by focusing on their strengths and aspirations. When candidates are engaged in decision-making, this can foster their self-determination, and provide them with the skills and resources needed to navigate their career (Vukadin et al., 2021).

Besides the role of IPS practitioners, the study of Lexén et al. (2012) showed that employers and the work environment play a significant role in IPS candidates' (re)integration process. The qualitative study explored through interviews how candidates perceived work and how their work environment impacted their work performance. Results showed that candidates' development of collaborative relationships with employers and colleagues was vital for their (re)integration process. The employer's attitude and engagements were found to be a crucial factor in IPS candidates work experiences. Therefore, the match between the candidate and the demands of the work environment had to be optimized (Lexén et al., 2012). Similarly, in another qualitative study by Lexén et al. (2016), the objective was to explore the experiences of employers who participated in the IPS service user through conducting interviews. Results of the study suggested that the relationship between IPS candidates and

employers must be based on trust and professionalism and that employers must be provided with adequate support (Lexén et al., 2016).

While the long-term L&D of IPS candidates remains underexplored, its significance for both practitioners and the overall IPS approach is well acknowledged (Bond et al. 2016). Previous literature identifies factors such as practitioner competencies and employer-related elements that could potentially promote the L&D processes of candidates. However, further research is needed to fully explore these areas.

The present study

This qualitative research aims to fill the gap in the current literature by examining the perspectives of IPS practitioners on the L&D processes of IPS candidates. Through conducting focus groups, the study seeks to capture the experiences and insights of these practitioners, providing a thorough understanding of how IPS candidates engage in L&D within real workplace settings. Exploring the perspectives of IPS practitioners may offer insights into the challenges faced during (re)integration into the workforce, the L&D processes of candidates, and the factors that can potentially promote these processes.

Method

Participants

IPS practitioners responsible for supervising IPS candidates were invited to participate in one of the focus groups for this study. The invitations were facilitated with the support of Phrenos Center of Expertise, an organisation dedicated to training future IPS practitioners and advancing IPS trajectories in the Netherlands.

The study included 15 participants, consisting of 14 IPS practitioners and 1 IPS coordinator. All participants were women actively engaged in IPS services, either directly as IPS practitioners and/or in a coordination role. They were recruited from various regions across the Netherlands, including cities such as Amsterdam, Haarlem, and Almere, as well as smaller regions like Westelijk Noord-Brabant and Zuidwest-Friesland. The initial goal was to recruit 15 to 21 practitioners, evenly distributed across three focus groups, with approximately 5-7 participants per focus group. However, the first and the third focus group had each four participants, while the second focus group included seven participants.

Most participants had extensive experience in the mental health sector, with careers ranging from 12 to 39 years. Their professional backgrounds were diverse, encompassing

roles in psychiatric care, vocational rehabilitation, and training coordination. Additionally, some participants held leadership positions within their respective organisations.

The level of experience with the IPS approach varied significantly among the participants. While some had only recently started their roles, others had worked with the IPS approach for over two decades. Many participants had extensive experience supporting individuals with psychological vulnerabilities and assisting with their (re)integration into the workforce. However, not all had worked exclusively with the IPS approach throughout their careers. Some participants had successfully guided a large number of candidates through the IPS process, with a few having supported over a hundred individuals in their (re)integration into the workforce.

Data collection

Data for this study were gathered through focus group discussions, a valuable method for understanding how individuals perceive tasks, situations, or phenomena. This approach encourages participants to interact by asking questions, discussing various viewpoints, and analysing the topic from multiple perspectives, potentially leading to a refinement of their opinions (van de Wiel, 2017). The focus groups were structured to encourage open and engaging dialogue. Discussions began with a general question to gather insights into IPS practitioners' general views on the L&D of IPS candidates. Following this, participants were asked to share their impressions on how IPS candidates learn and develop for work, also emphasizing their work motivation. Practitioners were then invited to provide examples of IPS candidates they had supervised where clear signs of L&D were observed. Additionally, they were asked to identify factors they believed were key to promoting candidates' L&D processes. Finally, the discussion focused on identifying the most critical elements for successfully coaching IPS candidates through their L&D processes for work.

Procedure

Participants were contacted via email and invited to take part in one of three focus groups aimed at exploring their perspectives on the L&D of IPS candidates. The email outlined the study's objectives and methodologies, guaranteed confidentiality, and anonymity, and respectfully invited their voluntary participation. Additionally, the email included links for anonymous sign-up via datumprikker.nl. Once registered, IPS practitioners received further details via e-mail, including a consent declaration form that they were required to sign

before taking part in the study. Each focus group was limited to a maximum of 90 minutes. The sessions were recorded and transcribed using the Teams platform.

Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti software. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns within the focus group data (van de Wiel, 2017). The process began by preparing the data, ensuring the accuracy and completeness of the focus group transcripts. Once verified, the transcripts were carefully reviewed, and relevant sections of the texts were assigned to descriptive codes. A coding scheme was developed based on the focus group questions and the topics that emerged in the data. This coding scheme was iteratively refined throughout the analysis, with adjustments made as new insights emerged. Related codes were then grouped into broader themes, each of which addressed (partially) one or more of the focus group questions. Through this process, seven key themes were identified: Learning and Development, Career Development, Role of IPS Candidates, Role of Employer, Role of IPS Practitioners, Success Factors, and Challenges. Finally, the identified themes were interpreted within the context of the research question. At this stage, some themes were merged to form a cohesive narrative, offering a clear explanation of IPS practitioners' perspectives on the L&D of individuals with psychological vulnerabilities in the workplace, and how these processes can be promoted.

Results

During the focus group discussions, it was challenging to bring the focus of the discussion specifically to the L&D processes of IPS candidates. General questioning regarding candidates' L&D often led to broader discussions about the (re)integration process and the challenges that both IPS candidates and IPS practitioners faced during this period. This focus on the numerous barriers encountered during labour market (re)integration seemed to dominate the conversation, which indicated that these obstacles demanded significant attention from both practitioners and candidates. Given the difficulty in obtaining direct responses on this topic, participants were asked to share success stories in which candidates demonstrated clear learning, development, or career progression. These real-life examples provided deeper insights into the L&D processes of IPS candidates. To guide the discussion toward promoting the L&D of IPS candidates, practitioners were asked to identify key factors they believed were essential in supporting these processes.

From the analysis of these discussions, three key themes emerged concerning the L&D of IPS candidates for work: (1) challenges in the workplace (re)integration, (2) learning and development processes for work, and (3) conditions for promoting learning and development. The results section was structured around these prominent themes and each theme was supported by quotes from the focus group participants (Focus group, Participant).

Theme 1: Challenges in the workplace (re)integration

According to IPS practitioners, IPS candidates often started their (re)integration into the labour market with volunteer work or participation jobs, typically involving low-responsibility tasks to help them ease into the work environment. Practitioners emphasized the importance of positive early experiences during this phase, as they lay the foundation for candidates to adjust to workplace routines and social interactions. As candidates gained experience and self-confidence in their roles, they could progressively take on more tasks, reflecting an increase in their skillset and working hours.

*What I focus on a lot with my clients from a clinical perspective is helping them return to structure, such as showing up to work on time and developing a routine. They learn things like how to collaborate and how to arrive at work punctually. These are the first practical steps where they learn what returning to work will involve for them. It's essentially about learning how to handle work and how to balance it with life outside work. (**FG3, P3**)*

In the (re)integration process, IPS candidates gradually discovered their interests and strengths, which led to personal growth. In the initial phase of employment, they also learned about their work capacity, energy levels, and workplace boundaries. By gaining experience, candidates learned how much they could handle and adjusted their goals accordingly, which further contributed to their personal growth.

*I'm thinking about the aspect of setting boundaries. I find it a significant development when someone receives tasks they actually don't want to do, and they eventually dare to express that. Of course, it takes a lot of confidence to be able to do that. (**FG3, P4**)*

IPS practitioners highlighted numerous obstacles they encountered in guiding IPS candidates, which hindered their successful (re)integration into the workplace. One of the primary issues emphasized was the difficulty in finding suitable workplaces willing and able

to provide the necessary support. Despite the abundance of job vacancies due to the tight labour market, employers often lacked the resources–such as time, personnel, and finances–needed to offer adequate support. Employers had to be prepared to invest both time and financial resources to guide IPS candidates effectively through their (re)integration processes. Furthermore, employers were often hesitant to hire IPS candidates, even when the candidates were fully capable of performing their job roles. According to the practitioners, these challenges emerged as there were still stigmas and prejudices surrounding individuals with psychological vulnerabilities. Additionally, balancing work responsibilities with psychological treatment presented difficulties for candidates. Although combining work with the gradual reduction of medication could be beneficial for many candidates, this required careful management to avoid potential setbacks.

A young man with multiple conditions and living in supported housing went through a work-fit program and started working with an employer, where we provided coaching. Things were going so well that he thought he was fully recovered and reduced his medication too quickly, which led to a psychotic episode. It's important to find a balance–not just in learning workplace skills, but also in managing personal well-being. Stability helps people take on other challenges. The strength of IPS is in the collaboration across different areas of life, including the candidate's network and employer. Without that, this process wouldn't have been successful. (FG2, P2)

Theme 2: Learning and development processes for work

Despite the challenges that IPS candidates encountered in their (re)integration processes, their motivation to learn and develop for work was highlighted as not different from individuals without psychological vulnerabilities. Candidates who were determined to return to work, actively sought challenges, and were open about their psychological vulnerabilities, were described as candidates with higher potential of successful (re)integration and professional growth.

The most common approach to learning mentioned by IPS practitioners was 'learning by doing'. IPS candidates often began with specific tasks and gradually expanded their responsibilities through job carving, which allowed candidates to grow into a role while ensuring that the tasks assigned match their capacity. Practitioners noted that learning by doing helped candidates build confidence, and this process was often supported by workplace buddies or mentors. These buddies played a critical role in integrating IPS candidates into the

workplace, answering questions, and providing guidance on job tasks. As candidates became more self-sufficient, the intensity of the IPS practitioner involvement also decreased.

In practice, what I often see is that what's really important in the workplace is paring individuals with someone who already performs the job, creating a sort of buddy system on the work floor, which is very effective. This gives them a dedicated point of contact in addition to the IPS practitioner–Someone who guides them directly at work and with whom they can always turn to with questions, and with whom regular evaluation moments are scheduled. **(FG1, P3)**

Besides the practical, on-the-job-learning experiences, IPS practitioners shared experiences where IPS candidates acquired specific skills through formal education or training programs. In these cases, employees provided opportunities for further education or certification to help candidates fulfil their roles. One example involved an IPS candidate working as a sales employee at a health and wellness store. She was offered a training module to enhance her product knowledge, giving her the expertise needed to perform her job more effectively. Another example featured an IPS candidate who started working as a van driver, and his employer supported him in taking driving lessons to obtain a commercial license, enabling him to drive larger trucks. During discussion of the success stories, a practitioner shared a story of a woman who made a lot of progress in her employment journey, ultimately leading to learning specific skills for work. This example was illustrated by the following quote.

A volunteer recently started working at a care home and she initially struggled with shame from her past addiction and illness. Over time, she developed ways to manage this, supported by positive feedback from colleagues. Their compliments helped her realize they saw her as a new capable person, not just her past. Now, she's in a learning trajectory, starting as a volunteer, with the possibility of enrolling in a formal training program in three months. **(FG3, P3)**

Theme 3: Conditions for promoting learning and development

IPS practitioners emphasized that certain conditions were essential for promoting IPS candidates' learning and development processes. Meeting these conditions fostered a supportive learning environment, where candidates felt comfortable making mistakes and

learning from them. Practitioners highlighted their role in creating these safe and supportive learning environments. They explained that they guided candidates through positive work experiences, acted as translators between candidates and employers, and ensured that communication remained clear and effective. This guidance helped establish an atmosphere where candidates felt encouraged to grow and take on new responsibilities. Regular evaluations and communication between all involved parties were mentioned to be important tools for addressing any issues and contributed to a supportive work environment.

As an IPS practitioner I believe that open communication is very important–not just within the teams but also with the IPS candidates and the employers. It's crucial that the agreements you make are followed through, and that any doubts or concerns are discussed. This helps to build trust among all the different parties involved. **(FG3, P4)**

The role of the employer was also emphasized as an important factor. IPS practitioners described how a work environment, where IPS candidates felt accepted, valued, and treated like any other employee, was crucial. Employers who allowed candidates to learn from mistakes, provided constructive feedback, and offered flexible working conditions significantly contributed to the candidates' successful (re)integration and professional growth.

When it comes to learning and development, I feel like it depends very much on the employer and how they provide growth opportunities. For example, one of my clients has been offered various online courses to gain product knowledge. Despite not having a diploma, he's now become the lead salesperson because the employer gave him the chance to develop himself in that area. **(FG1, P1)**

Discussion

This study explores the perspectives of IPS practitioners on the learning and development processes of individuals with psychological vulnerabilities for work, and how these processes can be promoted. The main findings showed that within the IPS approach, L&D processes are often overshadowed by the immediate focus on job placement and retention. These findings align with the core objectives of the IPS approach, which emphasize helping candidates to obtain and sustain employment in competitive job markets (Bond et al. 1997). The (re)integration of candidates requires significant attention from both practitioners

and candidates, leaving limited focus on how these individuals learn and develop in their roles, and how job specific competences can be promoted. In other words, there is not only a gap in the literature regarding IPS candidates' L&D (Hutchinson et al., 2018), but this crucial aspect of sustainable employment (Salas et al., 2012: Kraiger & Ford, 2021) is also underemphasized within the IPS approach itself.

Moreover, the results of the study reveal that even though IPS candidates face numerous challenges while (re)entering the labour market, their motivation to learn and develop for work is not any different from individuals without psychological vulnerabilities. The (re)integration into the workforce, typically begins with candidates taking on low-responsibility roles. Barriers, such as insufficient workplace support, stigma, and the challenge of balancing work with psychological treatment suggest that IPS candidates need a specific set of skills to successfully (re)enter the workforce. As candidates progress, they gradually develop a broader range of skills and a deeper sense of self-awareness, contributing to their overall personal growth. This, in turn, enhances their self-confidence, improves their decision-making abilities, and helps them establish personal boundaries (Dik et al., 2019). Early positive work experiences during this phase are found to be crucial, as they help candidates acclimate to workplace routines and social interactions.

The findings indicate that candidates primarily learn and develop for work through learning by doing, which can be classified as non-formal learning. (Tannenbaum & Wolfson, 2022; Eraut, 2000). This learning process is often supported by strategies such as job carving and buddy systems, where candidates receive support in performing their roles. As a result, candidates become less reliant on IPS practitioners. In addition to these non-formal learning processes, IPS candidates frequently acquire new knowledge and skills through formal learning. As described by Kraiger et al. (2014), this type of learning includes structured activities, such as training programs, workshops, and certifications. As candidates gain confidence in their roles, employers often provide opportunities for further education or certification, helping them to expand their knowledge and skill set.

Finally, the results emphasize the significant roles of IPS practitioners and employers in promoting IPS candidate's L&D processes. The findings highlight that practitioners play a key role in creating safe and supportive learning environments by guiding candidates through positive work experiences, facilitating communication between candidates and employers, and ensuring clear, effective communication with the candidates. These insights align with the research by Larson et al. (2014), which identified strong interpersonal skills among IPS practitioners as a key characteristic of effective IPS. Similarly, Vukadin et al. (2021)

emphasized the importance of IPS practitioners' interpersonal abilities, noting that building trust with both IPS candidates and employers is essential for empowering candidates to take ownership of their career paths. While previous studies have primarily focused on general employment outcomes, the current study demonstrates that practitioners' interpersonal abilities also contribute to promoting the L&D processes of IPS candidates.

Additionally, employers play a crucial role by fostering a supportive work environment where candidates feel accepted, receive constructive feedback, are given space to learn from mistakes, and are provided opportunities for professional development. This aligns with findings from Lexén et al. (2012), which emphasized the importance of strong collaborative relationships between IPS candidates and employers in ensuring successful (re)integrations into the workforce. Further support comes from Lexén et al. (2016), which found that relationships between IPS candidates and employers must be built on trust and professionalism. However, these studies primarily focused on (re)integration outcomes rather than L&D outcomes, making the current study's insights into how IPS candidates' L&D processes can be promoted by IPS practitioners and employers a valuable contribution to the literature.

This qualitative study offers unique insights into IPS candidates' (re)integration into the workforce, the challenges they face during this process, how they learn and develop for work, and the critical conditions that promote their L&D processes. The focus group discussions facilitated rich, in-depth dialogues among experienced IPS practitioners, uncovering valuable insights that may not have emerged through other research methods. The inclusion of a diverse group of IPS practitioners, each with extensive experience in mental health and vocational rehabilitation across different regions in the Netherlands, further enhanced the study by bringing a variety of perspectives. The findings provide a strong foundation for future research and practice in this area, offering practical insights that could lead to improvements in the IPS approach..

Limitations and future research

Although this study contributes to the, until now, unexplored literature on L&D and IPS, it has some limitations that should be addressed in future research. As the insights in this study were derived solely from IPS practitioners, future investigations could benefit from including perspectives from a broader range of stakeholders, such as IPS candidates, employers, mental health professionals, and family members. These additional viewpoints would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the L&D processes of IPS candidates

and how these processes can be better supported. Moreover, future research could employ a variety of methods, such as observational studies, surveys, or database analyses, to complement qualitative insights and offer a more comprehensive overview of the findings. Another limitation is the relatively small and homogeneous sample, consisting only of female participants. Therefore, future studies should include a more diverse sample, particularly by incorporating participants of different genders, to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Implications for practice

From a practical perspective, raising awareness about the importance of IPS candidates' L&D for work is essential. Although IPS candidates may encounter more challenges during their (re)integration into the workforce, their motivation to learn and develop for work is not any different from individuals without psychological vulnerabilities. Moreover, when provided with a supportive learning environment by their IPS practitioner and employer, candidates can learn and develop for work in various meaningful ways. However, the current IPS approach tends to prioritize job retention and sustainment over addressing the long-term needs and aspirations of IPS candidates. To better meet these needs, there should be a greater focus on creating environments that actively promote candidates' L&D processes within the IPS approach. This starts with raising awareness about the importance of L&D for IPS candidates, as well as the factors that could promote these processes. Educating practitioners and employers about the different forms of L&D and their contributions to sustainable employment is a key step in this process. Additionally, the training curriculum of IPS practitioners should incorporate modules on L&D, equipping practitioners with the tools to integrate candidates' professional development into their practice.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the student Iris van Galen used ChatGPT and Grammarly in order to refine English phrasing. After using this tool/service, the student reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the master thesis.

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