

Valued qualities of an ATOD worker: Findings from a service users' survey

Authors:

Elisabeth Yar^{1,2}, Anke van der Sterren^{1,3}, Chris Gough^{4,5}, Natasha Nikolic^{4,5}, Dean Wang^{4,5}, Karen Gorst^{4,5}, Taylor Munday^{4,5}, Amanda Bell⁵, Elzbieta Kuc⁵, James Poole⁵, Jordan D'Silva⁵, Nathan Guymer⁵, Simone Politch⁵, Ella Dilkes-Frayne^{5,6}, Sarah Robertson^{5,7}, Anita Mills¹

¹ Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Association (ATODA), Canberra, Australia, ² College of Arts and Social Sciences, ANU, Canberra, Australia, ³ School of Population Health, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia, ⁴ Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy (CAHMA), ⁵ SUSOSE Project Advisory Group, Canberra, Australia, ⁶ ACT Health Directorate, ACT Government, Canberra, Australia, ⁷ Ted Noffs Foundation, Canberra, Australia.

Presenter's email: elisabeth@atoda.org.au

Introduction: The development and maintenance of a high-quality alcohol, tobacco and other drug (ATOD) workforce remains an imperative across the sector. However, what constitutes quality within the workforce is often driven, foremost, by the interests of governments and of service providers. As such, there is a strong emphasis on education, workplace experience and professional development as markers of quality. What service users value within the workforce is often unknown, overlooked or, at best, considered an 'added bonus'.

Method: The Service Users' Survey of Outcomes, Satisfaction and Experience (SUSOSE) 2023, asked 302 service users, accessing a range treatment and harm reduction services across the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), to articulate what they considered to be the single most important quality in an ATOD worker. Qualitative data from the surveys was analytically mapped in a collaborative process involving researchers and service users to understand what is valued about the ATOD workforce by those accessing services.

Key Findings: Qualities that service users valued were clustered, with some overlap, into five broad categories: interpersonal qualities; communicative qualities; experiential qualities; workplace qualities; and individual qualities. Of these, service users placed greatest value on interpersonal qualities such as being 'compassionate' and being 'respectful', followed by experiential qualities, including having 'lived experience'.

Discussions and Conclusions: Understanding what service users value in the ATOD workforce and recognising the ways in which these indicators of value may diverge from traditional markers of quality, is important in ensuring that the workforce develops in ways that continue to be responsive to the needs of service users. The relative weight that service users give to interpersonal and experiential qualities, indicates that there are things that may make a 'good' ATOD worker that cannot necessarily be obtained via the usual pedagogical methods.

Implications for Practice: As ATOD services look to better integrate into practice the lived experience expertise of the ATOD workforce, this research provides evidence of the values that services should consider foregrounding in the service setting.

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