

# **The Integrative Unit Model and the COVID-19 pandemic**

## **Vocational Rehabilitation of People with Psycho-Social & Mental Disabilities-Turning a Crisis into Opportunity**

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### **ShekuloTov Group**

ShekuloTov Group was founded in 2005 with the vision of helping people with mental and other disabilities to be included in society, pursue their journeys, reach their functional goals and live independently in the community. ShekuloTov seeks to remove social and institutional barriers, increase participation in the workforce, and decrease unemployment among people with these difficulties, in both public and private sector.

ShekuloTov provides person-oriented community-based vocational rehabilitation, supported employment, leisure and recreational services to over 6,000 people with mental and other disabilities. 29% of 3500 service users in our vocational rehabilitation services found a job in the open job market and are empowered by our ongoing supported employment services. ShekuloTov is a service provider to the Israeli Ministries of Health, Social Affairs and Social Services, and Defense as well as to the Israeli Prison Service.

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### **The Integrative Unit Model**

ShekuloTov's vision is that anyone, including people who were diagnosed as 'non suitable to work', should have the opportunity to have a safe place for training alongside meaningful opportunities to find a job in the first market, when they are ready for it. With that spirit ShekuloTovs' rehabilitation professionals, along with The Israeli Ministry of Health's support, developed the Integrative Unit Model (IUM) and implemented it in all Shekulo Tovs' training units. ShekuloTovs' IUM represents an essential change of perception of sheltered and supported employment. It is a formative shift from the two sequential approaches of "train, then place" or "place then train" to a simultaneous approach of "train and place".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Shekulo Tov's Integrative model was awarded in 2017 by the [UN Zero Project](#) as the Innovative Practice on Employment, Work and Vocational Education and Training and In 2020, the IUM won the 'Design For All' Award.



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The IUM has 5 top principles – Zero Exclusion (anyone can integrate in the first job market); Personal Choice (no pre-determined order); a wide range of on-going options & possibilities; Team of specialists (recovery, work, business); Affiliation- one “home base” unit.

The IUM encourages interactions between society and individuals coping with mental and other disabilities. These individuals, who are our service users, benefit through reinforced self-confidence and gain rehabilitation tools and practices that significantly improve their chances of a successful long-term placement in the first market. Along ongoing support, service users are offered 5 different options of activities (see Figure A), they can choose to participate in simultaneously:

1. **Training** – Learning by doing. Creating a safe space that allows useful training of a variety of jobs and tasks relevant to the job market, alongside meaningful interactions with the community and the general population. The training process can be in our training business units or in their extensions, in the community.
2. **Skills development** – Learning by learning. Acquiring and developing hard and soft skills using individual and group activities. The learning process divides into two main types:
  - a. Learning as a mean – learning general job skills that a service user can use in any place he will chose to integrate, such as: Cognitive Skills for Work (CSW), Self-Advocacy and Communication Skills.
  - b. Learning as an aim- learning specific jobs and tasks that a service user can implement in specific jobs in the first job market, such as: professional certification courses that are relevant to the first job market (e.g. – sales and marketing, professional Barista, Microsoft Office), scholarships for higher education and so on.

Our **supported employment model - P3**, is an inherent part of the IUM and consists of three main options:

3. **Preparation (P1)** – Building and encouraging services users' motivation, confidence and skills while exploring the job market and themselves.
4. **Placement (P2)**- Enabling a smooth transition to a job in the open market and bridging the gap between sheltered and supported employment.
5. **Progress (P3)** - Support career development and advancement before and after a successful placement.

## How does the IUM works?

Supported employment services are not detached from the earlier stages of the vocational training process. From the beginning, service users meet supported employment specialist as one of the unit's staff members, together they explore relevant occupations. Throughout the process, emphasis is placed on honing skills needed for the desired open labor market job. When a service user indicates interest in filling a position in the open job market, the staff assists him with job seeking and continues providing the service user with support after he/she has taken up the job. Service users who leave or are dismissed from a job in the open job market, are invited to re-enter the training program, receiving intensive support by the same staff until they feel ready to rejoin the job market. This process gives service users a safety net and a rehabilitation sequence along training and mentoring and reduces feelings of failure.

Furthermore, integrative units operate as productive work environments that enable the service users to acquire essential vocational skills and function as rehabilitation accelerators. Integrative units in the ShekuloTov are: manufacture plants (chocolate, candles, soap, paper products), book stores (the largest Israeli brand for second hand books and the third largest Israeli book chain), coffee-shops, second hand clothing stores etc. These provide a wide variety of training activities and are unique brands of ShekuloTov, who have an additional value for the consumer. Today we have more than 100 training centers, located in the heart of the community while maximizing interactions between service users and the general public.

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## How all of this was affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic?

As with many organizations, COVID-19 crisis had a major impact on daily routines in ShekuloTov. As mentioned above, our vocational rehabilitation processes are based on face-to-face meetings with service users at our training centers. When the first lockdown in Israel began, ShekuloTov suffered a multi-dimensional crisis. In terms of rehabilitation, we had to close all our training units, so there were no interactions between service users and the general public, nor was there any possibility of having face-to-face meetings. In terms of financing, our income is based on both providing services to the Israeli Ministry of Health and on our B2C sales, which were severely affected.

People with mental and other disabilities are one of the most vulnerable groups in society for the implications that such a pandemic can cause.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the implication of

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<sup>2</sup> Sternik, I., Solomon, Z., Ginzburg, K., & Enoch, D. (1999). Psychiatric patients in war: A study of anxiety, distress and world assumptions. *Anxiety, stress, and coping*, 12(3), 235-246.



## Turning Crisis into Opportunity

When the quarantine and the lockdown began, we understood that we need to keep providing rehabilitation services by the same philosophy and professional principles/models that guide us, but by adjusting them to different mediums. Accordingly, we created a Hybrid Model – a model that integrates off-line and on-line activities, in order to achieve continuity in rehabilitation processes of service users, even during quarantine.

The Hybrid Model of Off-line & On-line Rehabilitation Activities offers a variety of group and individual activities. A service user can integrate between different types of activities in different mediums, according to his needs and wishes. Hence, the rehabilitation process is specifically 'tailored' to the service user with assistance and guidance of professional teams.

## Off-line activities

The off-line medium, offers two main types of activities:

**A. At home (quarantine)** - During quarantine, we offer service users to join activities from home. The activities have social or vocational orientation and offer meaningful activities that enrich and develop vocational abilities and skills.

1. Collaborating and empowering Professionals in community housing- Together with the Israeli Ministry of Health, we contacted over 150 housing providers all over Israel. We created leisure and recreational packages for the service users in these group-homes, with different activities, such as games they can play together, ornaments they can hang in their hostels and so on. This activity created meaningful activities and contents for service users.
2. Vocational activity from home – We offered service users opportunity to keep on working from home during the quarantine. For example, we offered service users in 'Rebooks' to upload book reviews to the website, while being at home. This helped service users create a daily routine and keep develop their abilities and skills.

**B. In the unit (restrictions/normal pandemic routine)** – While being in the unit, during restrictions/normal pandemic routine, we created a safe and approved working environment for service users. We divided them into capsules, provided them with protection equipment (e.g., masks, gloves, disinfection materials, protective equipment, etc.) and had daily updates about restrictions and their impact on activity in the unit. We had daily update conversation with our service users, during working time and after it. In addition, we continue to provide meaningful employment for all service users at all times.

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example, if the "Rebooks" store a service user trains in is closed for customer due to restrictions/quarantine, service users will operate the on-line site. We also developed a new service- "Good-Delivery", which offers training in a desired occupation, by operating our delivery lines from all of our businesses.

## On-line activities

We successfully transformed our activities into an agile service, combining rehabilitation and mental crisis risk assessment, online tools, regulative dialogue and HR challenges. Due to existing digital divide, many of our service users did not know how to use either ZOOM or WhatsApp and had to learn to do so quickly with the help of our staff. The on-line medium, offered two main types of activities:

A. **General activities** - Daily broadcasts on our new website- We created a new official website containing daily live broadcasts of lectures and professional contents via Zoom, streaming them live on Facebook as well as on our new website. During the live broadcasts, service users were able to take an active part by asking questions or using online chat options. This activity helped service users feel part of a bigger collective sharing a reality and in taking an active part in the design of their daily routine. Today, the live broadcasting continues on a daily basis, 5 days a week, from 9:00-16:00.

B. **Individual activities** – Our professional staff continued providing individual support to service users using ZOOM, WhatsApp and phone calls throughout a lockdown in order to ensure the continuity of rehabilitation process. It is safe to say that the digital proficiency of service users advanced dramatically during this period with the help of families and staff. In addition to ongoing technical support, our professional staff also had to adjust contents to the platform, and be very efficient with the time they dedicated to each service user while maintaining connection with them.

## C. **Groups Activities**

1.1 **Supported Online Employment Activities** – In order to help service users, continue their journey towards integration into the first job market, we created a training and professional certifications center. We designed two new online Supported Employment courses, each consisting of six meetings via Zoom. The first course ("Finding a job") focused on preparation for job searching including practical tools and adjustments to the Covid-19 situation. The second course ("First 150 days") focused on vocational and social integration into a new workplace. Weekly online meetings in small groups for

service users who had temporarily lost their jobs to discuss topics such as adjusting to change, future plans, using the time at home to improve required skills, re-thinking career goals, etc.

- 1.2 Ongoing Direct Communication during the lockdown between employers and service users in order to increase chances that large number of them would be asked to return to their jobs when the situation improves. This communication provided important information and continuous online support pertaining to rights during the lockdown: benefits from the state, legal status vis-à-vis employers, etc.

The on-line medium served us also to train professional staff how to use different on-line platforms in rehabilitation processes of service users, how to work with their teams using on-line platforms and how to use all of the different platforms. In addition, we had to learn how to transform all our services into the on-line medium. In addition, we kept in touch with all the employers by involving them in the creation of different content for our new website (e.g. –a video clip of short interviews with them in which they sent their greetings to service users). All this was done in order to strengthen the employers' sense of partnership with us.

### **Integrating the off-line and on-line mediums – The Hybrid Model of the IUM**

The personal combination of activities that the hybrid model offers, helped service users to stay focused on their journey of rehabilitation, continue their professional and personal development, even during a lockdown/quarantine.

For example, we manage to put together special packages enabling service users to work from home during the lockdown by providing tasks into a hybrid format. ShekuloTov production units assembled a package with all materials needed to build a memo-board, which was after sold. Service users could create the board using on-line guidance and send it back to the production units with the help of ShekuloTovs' delivery line. Another example is activity created by Rebooks - a package asking service users to write online reviews of books and prepare them for cataloging on the Rebook site.

These kind of activity used offline and online platforms of rehabilitation to create a new form of activity – by taking the offline activity (like producing a memo-board) and guiding service users to use online platforms (e.g. ZOOM / WhatsApp), we were able to create online rehabilitation with both on-line &offline tools.



## The Near Future

Israel has a long history of dealing with trauma. The transition from 'normal' to 'emergency' state is, unfortunately, a part of our cultural DNA. COVID-19 crisis imposed on our organization, allowed us to practice the concept of 'disruptive innovation'. We had to re-examine our basic rehabilitation principles and adjust them to a new kind of reality.

Our current actions:

- We will continue developing new on-line support services that will allow service users continue their rehabilitation process even during a quarantine, while reducing work-load of our professional teams.
- We are helping our service users acquire digital proficiency, so they will be able to independently consume any on-line service they would like. It is also very important that in times of 'emergency' we help service user feel they share mutual reality with a bigger collective - this may help create a sense support and encouragement. Accordingly, we are now in the process of implementing a digital proficiency-training program for every service user in ShekuloTov.
- We launched an on-line vocational training center, in which service users will be able to take part in professional training, which will provide them essential skills and certifications essential to the first job market.
- We are also examining whether all the innovative solutions we provided service users and professional teams during the COVID-10 crisis, are relevant to 'normal' state. It is possible that these solutions will reduce the workload of the professional teams on a daily base, create continuity in the rehabilitation process, and help both professional and service user become more flexible and customize the rehabilitation process for each service user.

Finally, we are now examining whether the on-line support platforms created during the COVID-19 crises, may be relevant to service users that our services may not be otherwise accessible to them due to some barrier. Whether these barriers are physical, mental or due to a national crisis, we hope that our new online tools will help reach out to more people with disabilities that currently do not participate in vocational rehabilitation programs, and to convince them to join us for a journey of rehabilitation and employment.