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Professional role, training, and psychological well-being among individual placement and support employment specialists: an exploratory mixed-methods study

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Objectives: Research on Individual Placement and Support (IPS) has mainly focused on client employment outcomes. This exploratory mixed-methods study examined (1) the role of training in shaping employment specialists' (ESs') professional identity and competencies, (2) perceived training needs related to the practical, systemic, and relational complexity of IPS practice, and (3) associations between burnout, work engagement, supervisory support, economic recognition, and turnover intentions.
Methods: An online questionnaire was administered to IPS employment specialists in Emilia-Romagna (Italy) (N = 42). Qualitative and quantitative analyses were performed.
Results: Training supported the construction of professional roles and their alignment with IPS principles. Participants reported unmet needs related to practical and relational competencies and preferred ongoing training. Mental distance was positively associated with turnover intentions while work engagement, satisfaction with supervisory support and economic recognition were negatively associated.
Conclusion: This exploratory study has some limitations (sample size; single-item measures). Nevertheless, it provides readers with relevant insights: we may conclude that IPS sustainability is strongly associated with ES stability and supportive organizational conditions.

KEYWORDS
burnout, employment specialists, individual placement and support, mental health services, turnover intentions

Introduction

Supported employment represents a vocational rehabilitation approach designed for individuals with severe mental health conditions, with the central objective of enabling people to obtain jobs that provide at least minimum wage and are available within the competitive labor market, rather than positions specifically reserved for individuals experiencing mental ill-health.

Over the past 3 decades, Individual Placement and Support (IPS) has been established as a solid evidence-based model for helping individuals with severe mental illnesses obtain and maintain competitive employment [1–3]. Grounded in eight core principles, IPS adopts a person-centered framework that emphasizes identifying employment opportunities aligned with individual preferences, engaging with employers to facilitate appropriate job placements, and ensuring ongoing support for both employees and employers [1]. A core feature of IPS is the "place-then-support" approach, derived from supported employment practices in developmental disabilities [4], which emphasizes rapid job search followed by ongoing support. The original manual [5] has been revised over time, including adaptations for transition-age youth and greater attention to supported education. Subsequent developments have expanded guidance for job development and for populations with co-occurring substance use disorders [6, 7].

Higher fidelity to the IPS model has consistently been associated with better employment outcomes [8–10]. IPS is now implemented in at least 20 countries worldwide, including Italy [11, 12].

In Italy, the implementation of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) has developed within a well-established community-based mental health system shaped by the 1978 Mental Health Reform, which facilitated the transition from institutional to community care and created favorable conditions for innovative interventions such as IPS [13]. IPS was systematically expanded across Emilia-Romagna and has been implemented in all 41 community mental health centers in the region since 2010, involving approximately 1,000 service users per year [14]. IPS has subsequently expanded to other regions, including Veneto and Lombardy, and has been adapted to different target groups and services, while maintaining alignment with international fidelity standards. Training and dissemination activities in Italy are strongly supported by Ipsilon APS, a non-profit social promotion association founded by Italian professionals who apply the IPS model. Ipsilon APS promotes the correct implementation of IPS through research, cultural initiatives, conferences, and structured training courses for Employment Specialists (ESs), providing both organizational coordination and qualified trainers and supervisors. Training programs typically cover IPS principles, assessment and individualized planning, job development, benefit counseling, workplace disclosure issues, integration within multidisciplinary teams, supervision practices, and the use of the Fidelity Scale and IPS tools.

The IPS employment specialist

The IPS employment specialist (ES) is a central figure within the IPS model, and the relationship between the ES and clients is a core element of the intervention [15]. Working in close collaboration with mental health professionals, the ES coordinates the entire employment support process, assisting clients in finding, obtaining, and maintaining their preferred jobs. The role also includes providing counseling on benefits and engaging in community outreach activities aimed at job development and building relationships with employers [16]. Beyond these operational tasks, research indicates that employment specialists differ substantially in their effectiveness, suggesting that the role requires a wide range of professional competencies. These include interpersonal, interviewing, assessment, job development, negotiation, and problem-solving skills, with relational abilities and the quality of the working alliance emerging as particularly important components of professional effectiveness, e.g., [15, 17, 18].

More broadly, IPS employment specialists provide direct and ongoing support to people with severe mental illness throughout the processes of job search, job acquisition, and job retention [19]. To fulfill these responsibilities, ESs must operate across multiple systems and stakeholders. Close integration with clinical teams requires an understanding of mental health and mental health services, while interaction with employers demands the capacity to present the skills and potential of job seekers with severe mental illness in employment contexts [20]. Despite the complexity and variability of these demands, the role does not require a specific occupational background or formal qualification, and instead largely relies on experiential, on-the-job learning [21].

Recent qualitative research on IPS implementation highlights that this role is shaped by complex inter-organizational arrangements and the need to coordinate systems that may be unevenly prepared for IPS provision. In the early stages of implementation, supervisors report numerous practical challenges and have explicitly raised concerns about the risk of burnout and turnover among employment specialists when the work environment is insufficiently supportive [22]. In this sense, training is not viewed only as a vehicle for model competence, but also as a potential initial resource to lay the foundation for sustaining employment specialists' functioning and retention in the face of demanding working conditions. However, to date, the role of ES has received limited empirical attention, with most quantitative studies focusing primarily on identifying the competencies and characteristics of employment specialists associated with effective IPS implementation [21].

To gain a deeper understanding of ES perceptions of their roles and initial training, and to identify variables potentially associated with workers' turnover intentions, this exploratory study adopts a mixed-methods approach. Qualitatively, we aim to explore how IPS employment specialists describe their professional role and what meanings they attribute to training in supporting their capacity to manage the practical, systemic, and relational complexity of IPS practice. Quantitatively, we aim to provide a preliminary picture of their levels of burnout and work engagement, and to examine whether burnout dimensions, work engagement, supervision support, and satisfaction with economic recognition are associated with turnover intentions.

Accordingly, the study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ 1. What role does training play in the construction of IPS employment specialists' professional role and in providing the competencies needed to deal with the practical, systemic, and relational complexity of IPS practice?

RQ 2. What training needs do IPS employment specialists identify in relation to the practical, systemic, and relational demands of their work?

RQ 3. Are burnout dimensions, work engagement, supervision support, and economic recognition associated with turnover intentions among IPS employment specialists?

Methods

Data source and study design

Data was collected through an online questionnaire. A survey link was distributed via email to a target group of 70 individuals, including all IPS operators currently working in the Emilia-Romagna region and former regional IPS operators. The dissemination of the questionnaire was facilitated by an IPS supervisor, trainer, and practitioner, who also serves as Vice-President of the Ipsilon Association.

The questionnaire remained available online for approximately 1 month: during this period, two reminder emails were sent to encourage participation and to highlight the survey closing date.

In the first part of the questionnaire, participants were provided with information about the study, setting out its purpose and how the data would be processed. Socio-demographic details were deliberately not collected to ensure anonymity. Furthermore, it was reiterated that participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw at any time. All data were analyzed and reported in aggregated form.

Participants

Starting from an initial pool of 70 operators, the final sample comprises 42 IPS ES who were working or had previously worked in the Emilia-Romagna region (Italy). At the time of data collection, 32 participants were currently active in the role, while 10 had previously worked as IPS operators and were asked to respond with reference to the period in which they were employed in this position. 52.4% of participants were self-employed professionals (n = 22), whereas 47.6% were employed by an organization (n = 20).

Regarding experience within the IPS program, 42.9% of participants had more than 5 years, 26.2% had less than 1 year, 23.8% had between 1 and 3 years, and 7.1% had between 3 and 5 years.

Concerning contractual working hours as IPS operators, 28.6% reported working 30 h or more per week, 28.6% between 21 and 29 h, 26.2% between 15 and 20 h, and 16.7% fewer than 15 h per week.

With respect to educational and professional background, the majority of participants were psychologists (40.5%) or psychotherapists (28.6%). Other professional profiles included educators (16.7%), pedagogists (11.9%), and other backgrounds (2.4%).

Variables and measures

All variables were assessed through self-report measures, with measures validated in the international literature. Only two additional single-item measures were developed *ad hoc* for this study. Satisfaction with economic recognition was assessed on a 3-point scale ranging from 1 (not satisfied) to 3 (satisfied). Satisfaction with supervisory support was measured using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 5 (completely satisfied). As single-item measures, internal consistency was not applicable.

- Turnover intentions. Turnover intentions were assessed using the scale developed by MacIntosh and Doherty [23]. The instrument consists of two items evaluating participants' intention to leave, with responses provided on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (often). In the present study, the scale showed excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.97$).
- Burnout. Burnout was measured using the Italian version of the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT-12) [24]. For this study, the instrument's two core dimensions [25] were used: exhaustion (3 items) and mental distance (3 items). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (often). Internal consistency was excellent for exhaustion ($\alpha = 0.91$) and acceptable for mental distance ($\alpha = 0.65$).
- Work engagement. Work engagement was assessed using the short version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) [26], which measures the core dimensions of vigor, dedication, and absorption using 9 items. The Italian validation by Balducci et al. [27] was used. Items are rated on a 7-point scale from 0 (never) to 6 (often). The scale demonstrated excellent reliability in this sample ($\alpha = 0.96$).

Data analysis

Two complementary analytic strategies were used to examine different types of data collected in the study. Quantitative responses were analyzed using statistical methods, whereas open-ended responses were examined qualitatively.

Qualitative analysis

Open-ended responses were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis [28] to identify patterns of meaning across the dataset. All responses were read repeatedly to ensure familiarity, and meaningful units were coded inductively to capture key aspects of participants' experiences and perceptions of IPS training. Coding was conducted across the entire dataset, enabling the analysis of similar meanings from different questions together.

Codes were then organized into broader themes reflecting recurring patterns related to how training was experienced, perceived gaps, and ongoing needs. Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and clear distinctions. The final themes represent interpretative patterns across the dataset rather than summaries of individual questions.

The analysis aimed to provide a structured summary of participants' perspectives rather than an in-depth interpretative account. Themes were used to describe the main areas highlighted by participants, and illustrative examples were selected to support the description.

Quantitative analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows (Version 29.0). Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the variables. Specifically, means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum values were calculated for continuous variables, while categorical variables were described using absolute frequencies and percentages. Statistical tests were conducted using a two-tailed approach with a significance threshold set at $p < 0.05$.

Associations between variables were examined using bootstrapped Pearson correlation coefficients. Bootstrapping was applied to obtain more robust confidence interval estimates. In this context, statistical significance was determined using bootstrapped confidence intervals rather than p-values alone. Correlations were considered statistically significant when the bootstrapped confidence interval did not include zero. For significant associations, the magnitude and strength of the correlation were also reported. All tests were two-tailed, with the level of significance set at 0.05.

Results

Thematic analysis

The qualitative analysis identified five interconnected themes concerning the role of training in IPS practice. First of all, training emerged as a key foundation for professional positioning, supporting the development of a shared understanding of the IPS model and clarifying the operator's role and responsibilities. At the same time, the findings highlighted the need to translate theoretical and methodological principles into the complexity of everyday practice through more experiential and practice-oriented learning. Training needs extended beyond the IPS methodology itself to include knowledge of the institutional, regulatory, and welfare systems in which employment support is delivered, as well as relational competencies required to respond to diverse client needs and circumstances. Lastly, training was understood as an ongoing, evolving process that supports role consolidation, continued professional development, and adaptation to changing service and organizational contexts. Below, these five topics will be explored in greater depth, including some of the responses, or extracts from them, shared by the participants.

Theme 1. Training as a foundation for professional positioning within the IPS model

Participants described training as essential for developing a shared professional identity consistent with the IPS philosophy. It provided "all the concepts related to the methodology (P1)," clarified core principles, and strengthened understanding of "the theoretical foundations of the method (P3)."

Beyond knowledge acquisition, training helped redefine the professional role. It supported a shift away from "a more assistance-oriented perspective derived from previous experience (P16)". It helped participants establish clearer boundaries between clinical functions and the IPS operator role, enabling them "to draw a clear boundary between clinical activity and the role as an IPS operator (P17)". Training acted as a process of professional positioning, shaping how operators understood their responsibilities and guiding principles.

Theme 2. The need to operationalize IPS in the complexity of real-world practice

Participants valued the theoretical and methodological foundations of the training, particularly its "practical examples (P1)," "practical experiences on how to manage situations (P26)," and tools such as "documentation" and "work diaries (P5)," which helped make the IPS model more actionable.

At the same time, many perceived it as "very theoretical and less applicable in the real world (P24)," calling for "more case examples (P14)," discussion of "mistakes and good practices (P7)," and "experiential methods such as simulations (P2)", to better address everyday operational challenges. This reflects a tension between strong conceptual grounding and the need for greater practical translation into real-world IPS practice.

Theme 3. IPS works as system navigation: the missing institutional dimension

A recurring theme concerned the need for stronger preparation in navigating the institutional and regulatory employment context. Participants requested "more knowledge on labor regulations (P1; P15)" and training on "technical aspects related to benefits (P5)," as well as economic counseling to help users understand social and financial provisions. References to employment centers and trade unions underscore the systemic dimension of the IPS role. Ongoing needs included updates on contracts and active labor market policies, suggesting that methodological IPS training alone is insufficient to address the complexity of the welfare and labor system in which operators operate.

Theme 4. The relational and client-specific complexity of IPS practice

Participants emphasized that IPS work requires advanced relational and client-specific competencies. Requests for training on "interview conduction techniques (P4)" and "human resources techniques (P4)" indicate that operators perceive their role as involving evaluative and communication skills similar to recruitment contexts. Respondents also referred to the need for more preparation in working with "young people (P42)" and "substance use issues, autism, and specific pathologies (P3)," highlighting the heterogeneity of service users. Training was seen as necessary to "better understand the IPS approach toward the person (P37)" and to position oneself appropriately in relation to "the individual's personal history (P37)." This theme reflects the perception of IPS practice as relationally complex and requiring adaptation to diverse clinical and social profiles.

Theme 5. Training is an ongoing and evolving professional process

Training was not viewed as a one-time event but as an ongoing professional need. Participants suggested a more distributed structure to allow "more time to absorb the content (P40)." There were calls for regular refresher courses, with some suggesting training "2/3 times per year (P22)." Requests for specialized modules such as "IPS Young (P13; P24)" and deeper exploration of specific principles (e.g., time-unlimited support; P16) indicate that IPS practice is experienced as evolving. Training was also linked to role consolidation within services, helping to "further develop the IPS operator figure in terms of tasks and role (P31)." This theme highlights training as a continuous process

TABLE 1 Min-max, mean and standard deviation (Emilia-Romagna, Italy, 2025).

Variable	Min	Max	M	SD
Exhaustion	1	4	2.29	0.79
Mental distance	1	4	1.78	0.64
Perceived support	3	5	4.40	0.59
Work engagement	2.11	6	4.59	1.00
Turnover intention	1	6	2.86	1.54
Satisfaction with supervisor	2	5	3.98	1.05
Economic recognition	1	3	1.95	0.73

M, mean; SD, standard deviation.

that supports adaptation to change, professional development, and integration within organizational contexts.

Quantitative analysis

Descriptive statistics for the main study variables are presented in Table 1.

Regarding the two dimensions of burnout, participants reported low levels of exhaustion (M = 2.29, SD = 0.79) and comparatively lower levels of mental distance (M = 1.78, SD = 0.64). Work engagement was generally high in the sample (M = 4.59, SD = 1.00). Turnover intentions were at a moderate level (M = 2.86, SD = 1.54), indicating greater variability than the other variables. Participants reported positive perceptions of supervision support, with satisfaction scores near the upper end of the scale (M = 3.98, SD = 1.05). In contrast, satisfaction with economic recognition was lower (M = 1.95, SD = 0.73).

Bootstrapped Pearson correlation

Bootstrapped Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine associations among burnout dimensions, work engagement, turnover intentions, and perceptions of supervision and economic recognition (M, mean; SD, standard deviation.).

Exhaustion was positively associated with mental distance (r = 0.53, 95% CI [0.23, 0.73]), while showing no statistically reliable associations with the other variables considered. Mental distance was negatively associated with work engagement (r = −0.63, 95% CI [−0.81, −0.36]). Mental distance was also positively associated with turnover intentions (r = 0.46, 95% CI [0.19, 0.68]) and negatively associated with satisfaction with supervision support (r = −0.35, 95% CI [−0.61, −0.10]). The association between mental distance and economic recognition did not reach statistical significance. Work engagement showed a strong negative association with turnover intentions (r = −0.56, 95% CI [−0.73, −0.32]) and a positive association with supervision

TABLE 2 Bootstrapped Pearson correlation coefficients with 95% confidence intervals (N = 42) (Emilia-Romagna, Italy, 2025).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Exhaustion	—					
2. Mental distance	0.530**	—				
	p < 0.001					
	[0.231, 0.729]					
3. Perceived support	−0.298	−0.455**	—			
	p = 0.056	p = 0.002				
	[−0.565, 0.010]	[−0.636, −0.175]				
4. Work engagement	−0.322*	−0.627**	0.269	—		
	p = 0.037	p < 0.001	p = 0.085			
	[−.665, 0.108]	[0.812, −0.359]	[−0.088, 0.560]			
5. Turnover intention	0.280	0.456**	−0.191	−0.563**	—	
	p = 0.072	p = 0.002	p = 0.225	p < 0.001		
	[−0.044, 0.563]	[0.192, 0.683]	[−0.487, 0.153]	[−0.734, −0.318]		
6. Satisfaction with supervisor	−0.316*	−0.345*	0.224	0.409**	−0.450**	—
	p = 0.042	p = 0.025	p = 0.153	p = 0.007	p = 0.003	
	[−0.577, 0.016]	[−0.612, −0.101]	[−0.114, 0.534]	[0.145, 0.645]	[−0.694, −0.122]	
7. Economic recognition	0.025	−0.265	0.046	0.181	−0.408**	0.540**
	p = 0.876	p = 0.090	p = 0.772	p = 0.251	p = 0.007	p < 0.001
	[−0.260, 0.319]	[−0.540, 0.008]	[−0.279, 0.339]	[−0.107, 0.465]	[−0.624, −0.141]	[0.325, 0.712]

Confidence intervals are based on bootstrapped samples. Pairwise exclusion of missing values. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01. Statistical significance was determined by bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals not including zero.

satisfaction (r = 0.41, 95% CI [0.15, 0.65]). No significant association was observed between work engagement and economic recognition. Turnover intentions were negatively associated with both supervision satisfaction (r = −0.45, 95% CI [−0.69, −0.12]) and economic recognition (r = −0.41, 95% CI [−0.62, −0.14]). Finally, satisfaction with supervision was positively associated with economic recognition (r = 0.54, 95% CI [0.33, 0.71]).

Discussion

The Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model is the most extensively studied supported employment approach [1] and, over 3 decades, has become a robust evidence-based model helping people with severe mental illnesses obtain and maintain competitive employment [3]. The employment specialist (ES) is central to IPS, with the ES–client relationship identified as a core element of the intervention [15]. Collaborating with mental health professionals, the ES helps clients find, obtain, and maintain preferred jobs.

Despite complex, variable demands, the role requires no specific background or formal qualification and relies largely on on-the-job learning [21]. Initial training is crucial, as it should provide methodological, relational, and operational resources to manage interactions with users, institutional actors, and mental health professionals and achieve sustainable job placements.

This exploratory study addressed the professional and wellbeing dimensions of the ES role, including role and training perceptions, training needs, and factors associated with turnover intentions. Qualitatively, training emerged as fundamental to understanding IPS principles and "entering the role," especially for specialists with diverse backgrounds, although participants reported unmet practical, operational, and relational needs and the limits of one-off training.

Regarding RQ1, participants described training as central to shaping their professional identity, aligning their role with the IPS rationale and clarifying "the theoretical foundations of the method." This supported a shift from assistance-oriented or clinically driven perspectives toward clearer professional positioning, consistent with Harkko et al. [29], who identified acceptance of the IPS rationale, alignment with professional norms, and ongoing training and support as key facilitators of implementation and sustainability.

Regarding RQ2, participants valued training's methodological grounding but reported needing more practical guidance on managing situations and bureaucratic demands; Patel et al. [30] likewise identified real-world examples as a key improvement in IPS training. Participants also requested stronger preparation on the welfare and labor systems shaping users' employment opportunities, including labor regulations, benefits, and economic counseling. Knowledge of benefits and disclosure has been linked to job retention [31], and Kinn et al.'s [32] "iceberg metaphor" portrays ESs as knowledgeable "navigators" supporting clients through uncertain labor markets. Relational complexity also emerged, including understanding the person and their history and preparing for specific groups, supporting the view that relational and non-specific competencies must be explicitly developed through structured training and supervision [33]. Finally, training was perceived as "too short" and as contributing to consolidating the IPS role within services.

For RQ3, preliminary bootstrapped correlations showed intention to quit was positively associated with mental distance (i.e., psychological withdrawal from work and the people involved in one's role) [33] and negatively associated with work engagement, but not with exhaustion. While exhaustion may reflect strain without undermining motivational and relational investment, mental distance signals emotional detachment and reduced identification with work, suggesting an erosion of the value-based connection with the service and, above all, with clients. ESs are described as committed professionals sustained by what Tilson and Simonsen [34] termed principled optimism, a value-based involvement mirroring work engagement, whose protective role our findings confirm. When it gives way to psychological distancing, leaving becomes more likely; mental distance may thus represent a more advanced stage of burnout, reflecting a breakdown in the relational and meaning-based foundations of IPS work.

Lower satisfaction with economic recognition and supervisory support was also associated with turnover intentions, consistent with evidence of high ES turnover [21], linked to poor pay and limited supervision [35]. Perceived economic inequity relative to other mental health professionals has also been reported as a driver of job search and turnover. Supervision is crucial for effective adoption and maintenance of IPS [36]. Overall, turnover intentions may be associated with motivational factors and organizational conditions.

Strengths and limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The small sample permitted only exploratory analyses, and former IPS practitioners were included to avoid further reducing it. Quantitative data came from self-report measures, potentially subject to response bias, and two measures were study-specific, using single items to avoid participants' cognitive overload. No objective or longitudinal data on actual turnover were collected, and no national reference data on turnover among Italian IPS employment specialists exist, limiting the contextualization of findings within a wider workforce framework. Nevertheless, the topic remains highly relevant to IPS research, where growing attention to employment specialists may further improve this internationally recognized approach. Future studies will aim to involve employment specialists across Italy and other countries to compare training programs and practitioners' wellbeing.

The study also has strengths. Despite the small sample, it includes a substantial proportion of IPS employment specialists in Northern Italy, offering a snapshot of this group within a specific implementation context. Moreover, the mixed-methods approach allowed us to explore specialists' views and training needs and to examine factors potentially linked to their high turnover. This matters, as IPS research has mainly addressed client outcomes and implementation fidelity, leaving specialists' professional experience and wellbeing largely underexplored.

Practical implications and future research

The findings have several implications for IPS services. First, our exploratory results suggest that training should be an ongoing,

practice-oriented process rather than a one-off theoretical course. Initial training appears to convey IPS philosophy and principles effectively but should better prepare specialists for the complexities of daily practice, incorporating case-based learning, simulations, structured reflection on complex or unsuccessful cases, and modules on system navigation (labor regulations, welfare benefits, administrative procedures). Since IPS work is experienced as deeply relational and client-specific, relational competencies, such as communication, role positioning, and working with diverse clinical and social profiles, should be treated as core skills, systematically assessed, taught, and reinforced through supervision rather than assumed as pre-existing. Training should also support professional identity: participants' perception that it was "too short" suggests the need for distributed formats, refresher sessions, and continuous learning, which may foster skill acquisition, role clarity, and integration within multidisciplinary teams. Developing a European and international ES training curriculum would also support the exchange of best practice.

Staff wellbeing should be considered a structural component of IPS implementation. Mental distance, rather than exhaustion alone, seems associated with turnover intentions, suggesting that services should monitor early signs of disengagement. Supervision spaces for emotional processing, discussion of difficult cases, and reinforcement of the meaning and goals of IPS work may help prevent progression from strain to detachment. Organizational conditions might also be key: satisfaction with supervisory support and economic recognition was associated with lower turnover intentions. Services should therefore invest in stable supervision, clear leadership, and adequate recognition of the ES role, including career progression. At policy and planning levels, workforce conditions could be considered alongside fidelity and client outcomes when deciding on IPS service organization and continuity. These are also implementation issues, as supervision quality is associated with IPS model sustainability [29]. This study thus highlights workforce sustainability as an additional dimension of IPS service continuity, not simply to reduce staff drop-out, which is very high in some countries, but to consider sustainability from a wellbeing perspective, giving workers everything they need to work effectively and with satisfaction over the long term.

Conclusion

This exploratory study examined the professional and wellbeing dimensions of the employment specialist (ES) role in IPS and their possible interconnections. Participants described training as key to building professional identity, but reported gaps in practical and relational competencies and preferred continuous over one-off training. Mental distance, but not exhaustion, was associated with greater turnover intentions, as was lower satisfaction with economic recognition and supervisory support; higher work engagement was associated with lower turnover intentions. IPS sustainability may also depend on ESs' working conditions, including practice-oriented training, ongoing supervision, and adequate recognition. Given the small sample, findings should be interpreted cautiously.

Data availability statement

Data will be available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because this study was conducted in full compliance with relevant ethical guidelines for research involving human participants, including the principles set forth in the Declaration of Helsinki. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. To ensure complete anonymity, no personally identifiable or demographic data, including age and gender, were collected at any point during the study. Prior to data collection, all participants received detailed information about the study's purpose and procedures and provided written informed consent. Collected data were used solely for the purposes outlined in this study, and no form of coercion or undue influence was employed in securing participation. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: LL, GM, ND'A, and DM; Methodology: AF and LL; Data curation: GP; Formal analysis: GP; Writing – original draft preparation: GP; Writing – review and editing: GP, AF, ND'A, GM, DG, DM, and LL; Supervision: AF, GM, and DG. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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