

Let's talk about ... Disability and the workplace

According to the Family Resources Survey 2018/19, there are 14.1 million disabled people in the UK. There are seven million people of working age with a disability or long term health condition in the UK, only half of them are in work. This represents a huge pool of talent that businesses are potentially missing out on.

What does disability mean?

Disability is defined differently for different purposes. For employment purposes in the UK, the definition is contained in the Equality Act 2010: a person is 'disabled' if they have a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

'Long-term' means that the condition must last, or be likely to last, for more than 12 months, or is likely to last for the rest of the life of the person affected.

Many disabled people (as well as those with long-term health conditions who are already in employment) either face prejudice or a lack of provision when it comes to the support they need to help them reach their potential or, sometimes, to even remain in work. Too many people working with a disability choose not to disclose it to their employer for fear of negative consequences (in terms of their career or job security) CIPD (2020)

It has never been so important to raise disability awareness, as it is today. Having a physical or hidden disability should not impact on what anyone can achieve; people need to be defined by their ability, and not their disability.

Stephen Hawking, one of the greatest ever scientists, and role model was quoted:

"Concentrate on things your disability doesn't prevent you doing well, and don't regret the things it interferes with. Don't be disabled in spirit, as well as physically." Stephen Hawking (interview in the New York Times, 2011)

Disability discrimination may arise in many ways including:

- direct discrimination (being treated unfairly because of a disability)
- indirect discrimination (a policy, practice, or rule which applies to everyone in the same way but it has a worse effect on some than others)
- harassment (subjecting another person to prejudice remarks or actions)
- victimisation (treating someone badly)
- failure to make reasonable adjustments

What can I do as an Employer?

1. Develop a diversity and inclusion policy detailing required training, reasonable adjustments and support available. A policy also demonstrates the organisation takes its legal and moral obligations towards being a diverse and inclusive employer seriously. It can also encourage employees to treat others equally.
2. Reasonable adjustments must be considered with a specific individual and their specific role in mind. Adjustments can include:
 - Altering premises – such as automated doors, providing ramps, quiet spaces, alternative formats of signage or directions around the building.

- Altering assessment procedures – such as giving extra time, providing assistive technology or ergonomic equipment.
- Training or mentoring – to support an employee to use new adjustments (such as speech to text software), or coping strategies (common with, for example, dyslexia or mental health conditions).
- Modified or specialist equipment – such as supportive chairs, height-adjustable or standing desks.
- Communication – providing an interpreter (for people who are, for example, deaf or who have a speech impairment).
- Time off during working hours – for example, for hospital appointments, physiotherapy, counselling, or treatment.
- Introduce flexible working or adjusted hours.

A line manager along with the employee and, for example, occupational health, may come up with a range of adjustments that might remove the barrier the employee with a disability or condition is experiencing but the employer needs to make an evidence-based decision if these adjustments are 'reasonable'.

What can I do as an employee with a disability?

- If comfortable, talk to your co-workers, that way they can understand your disability, and will not make assumptions on your behalf.
- If you are comfortable to do so, discuss your feelings. Let people know what you would find most helpful.
- If the workplace needs adjustments that will assist you, bring it to the attention of management.
- If a situation makes you feel uncomfortable or excluded, and you feel comfortable to do so, speak out, and tell your co workers how the situation, excludes you being involved.

How can we all help reduce disability discrimination?

- Challenge stereotypical behaviour and thinking – unconscious bias can lead to bad decision making.
- Promote a supportive and inclusive workplace.
- Be open and talk about any issues as they may arise.
- Ensure everyone receives the appropriate diversity and inclusion training provided by employers.
- Relative related existing policies and practices which may have an impact on employees with a disability or long-term condition – for example, recruitment and selection, sickness and attendance, performance, grievance, bullying and harassment, and diversity and inclusion.

