

Invisible disabilities: Removing barriers to participation at work

Thursday 2 December 2021, 1.00 – 2.00 pm GMT

How are organisations approaching the definition of 'disability'? What should be the approach?

We have a legal definition of what a disability is from the Equality Act 2010 ("a physical or a mental condition which has a substantial and long-term impact on your ability to do normal day to day activities"). It is this definition that many employers use at the top of their inclusion policies.

However, life doesn't always fit neatly into legal definitions and prescribed categories, and the above definition will not always reflect the realities of all people with disabilities or conditions. The term 'disabled' is one some wear with pride, signalling to others they are part of a movement who have won rights for their community and are empowered as a result, but others may not wish to adopt this approach.

Employers need to proactively ask their workforce how 'disability' should be defined i.e. what resonates with them, and it will and should, therefore, look different from employer to employer. Ultimately, if an employer is using language about its employees that they do not value or relate to, then immediately the disability conversation will be misaligned within the organisation's culture and its community. Employers must resist the urge to have a neatly defined definition of 'disability' for the sake of its policies.

What are the main immediate barriers to accessibility?

- 1. Fear factor on the part of employers.** This tends to be driven by a lack of understanding, or a misconception, about the level of investment – both in terms of time and money – that may be required in making a workplace fully accessible both physically and in terms of technology. This is often unfounded in practice (as there are some very effective yet inexpensive things employers can do), but it is not until an employer is willing to 'open the door' to accessibility that it will realise this. This often drives a general hesitancy to have any meaningful accessibility conversations in the first place yet is based on assumptions not fact.
- 2. Fear factor on the part of people with disabilities.** If individuals themselves do not feel confident enough to disclose their disabilities to employers, this can be a huge barrier to ensuring equal opportunity. Conversations within schools would go a long way to building confidence within individuals at a younger age so they can realise what their disability can bring to the workplace and for them to feel more confident as a result. Employers have a role to play here too; they need to be doing more than saying 'we are an equal opportunities employer' on their website, but proactively engaging with the community, attending roadshows, and generally being present when important conversations are being had.
- 3. Lack of understanding of what 'access' means.** It can be too easy automatically to associate 'access' with wheelchairs and other physical access requirements. We need to think more broadly than that (e.g. safe spaces at work, hearing loops etc.) but also remember that accessibility will look different for different people and therefore the end user should always be the priority when any of these conversations are had. For this reason it's really important that organisations embed a culture of freedom of conversation and being a safe place to share so that end users and organisations can work together on fixing issues as and when they may occur.

The key point that we need to have the forefront of our minds is what it means for someone if accessibility isn't there. This can have a huge physical and emotional impact on a person and this should not be understated. As one of our speakers said, we always talk about wanting to level the playing field, but if something is not accessible, a person may never even get on to the playing field.

What challenges or opportunities does the hybrid world of working bring in terms of accessibility?

The world of hybrid working can bring significant advantages to those with a disability and in many cases can help level the playing field. An obvious key advantage is that hybrid working enables people to work in their home environments, which are often set up specifically to support that person's individual needs, whereas office spaces will, inevitably, rarely have that level of personalisation. This home working enables the employee to feel comfortable and confident as a result.

As we all know though, home-working lacks the physical interaction which is so important for us as humans. People therefore need a choice, and the key challenge is therefore ensuring that all people are supported across both environments, whether they choose to work at home or from the office. In each case we need to think about the end user and ensure there is equity across both environments for everyone.

Is technology the answer to accessibility?

It's not the whole answer, but certainly does have a huge role to play. Attitudes, and a willingness to be supportive and take time to listen and understand, is also fundamental, as is top-down leadership commitment and proactivity.

Technology can benefit the whole workforce, not just those with disabilities or conditions. However, for technology to work to its full potential (particularly assistive tech such as speech to word, or word to speech tools) it's not just about an employer making it available to someone and then leaving them to get on with it. It's also about others in the workforce knowing about the tech, how it works, and what they can do differently in terms of their behaviours to ensure it is effective. For example, if someone is using the tech, do others need to speak up or more clearly, or does it work better if the individual is in a quiet room, or, for confidentiality reasons, is it better if the person uses the technology at home? In which case should this be actively permitted and encouraged?

What are some practical tips for organisations starting to tackle accessibility opportunities?

- 1. Be prepared to invest.** Whilst there are things employers can do to enhance accessibility which are relatively inexpensive, if an employer is serious about tackling accessibility it must be prepared to put budget aside and be willing to invest where needed.
- 2. Develop an understanding of what is required.** Talk - and really listen - to lots of people within the organisation and gain different insights and perspectives as to what is needed, and how change can be implemented most successfully.
- 3. Bring in the experts.** There are people that consult on best practice for accessibility for a living, and so organisations should use their expertise. Always remember that accessibility looks different depending what lens you are looking through - e.g. physical accessibility, technology, other types of IT support – so consult a variety of different experts.
- 4. Training.** Training need not be formal; it can come in the guise of awareness raising or increased dissemination of information. An increase in awareness will naturally encourage better, normalised, conversations and – most importantly – a collaborative culture where people come together to solve a challenge rather than fear it.

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