







How disabled people manage in the workplace

Research on disabled people and employment has previously focused on the barriers to getting and keeping work, the connection between work and benefits, or policy analysis of rehabilitation, workplace disability management and retaining people in work. Little attention has been paid to how disabled people who are in employment manage to survive or indeed thrive in the workplace. This study by Alan Roulstone, Lorraine Gradwell, Jeni Price and Lesley Child explored the strategies used by disabled workers to get by in the workplace, and looked at the nature and role of support received by disabled workers. The research found that:

-  Disabled workers used a diverse and often complex range of strategies to thrive and survive in the workplace. There was no universally beneficial strategy that could be applied by all disabled workers. What worked for one disabled worker may be unhelpful or even risky in a different workplace.
-  Strategies used most often included being assertive but not aggressive in asking for support, and being open about impairment, disability and barriers. In addition, a wide range of supports were used, such as moral and financial support, empathy, 'give and take', and mutual support and advice.
-  A number of disabled workers felt that using strategies gradually was successful, because understanding the organisation first helped to develop suitable strategies.
-  Disabled workers needed gradual strategies in order to understand employment environments, management styles, personnel changes, corporate priorities and impairment changes.
-  Formal and informal support, both past and present and also both inside and outside work, was central to disabled workers' survival and their enjoyment of work. Informal or unwritten support within work was particularly important for disabled workers.
-  Major sources of support mentioned were colleagues, Jobcentre Plus 'Access to Work' provision, family and friends, employers and managers, organisations of and for disabled people, and trade unions.
-  The researchers conclude that much still needs to be done to understand and respond systematically to disabled workers' needs. Despite their existing strategies and support, disabled workers want access to more structured, formalised and appropriate support.

Introduction

Previous research has established that working-age disabled people are significantly more likely than non-disabled people to be unemployed or under-employed. Since 1997, the Labour Government has emphasised welfare through work and the idea of social inclusion as being achieved through paid work.

This study explored how working disabled people get by at work. It used a national survey plus interviews and focus groups to examine how working disabled people manage in the workplace, and how they survive or thrive at work. The study quickly established the importance of strategies and support.

Strategies were defined as those ideas, decisions and plans adopted by disabled people in order to get on better at work. They were seen as ways of getting more out of work by making it more accessible and inclusive, and thus more likely for work tasks to be completed.

Formal and informal support from both inside and outside the workplace was important. Support was defined as schemes, actions, financial benefits or work changes that did not stem from the individual disabled worker. These mechanisms provided emotional, moral, practical, financial, technical, environmental and organisational support.

Key strategies

The following were some of the most important strategies used by the participants in the study in order to get on better at work.

Being assertive

Asserting your needs as a disabled worker (without being too aggressive) was noted by a number of participants.

"There is a danger of the disabled person ... ending up the passive victim of other people's ... attitudes. I believe very strongly that part of what disabled people have to do is empower ourselves. Equality is never going to be given to us. We have to assert it in a way that is positive, to be assertive and not aggressive."

This assertiveness usually took the form of workers asking for what they needed, but sometimes was about resisting job changes or unwanted developments, including promotions.

"... at the time of my appraisals she [the manager] did actually ask me if I wanted to become a property manager and I said 'no', and the reason I said no was ... you had to go round and visit the properties, which was not a practical thing for me to do."

Being open

Another commonly used strategy was being open about impairment, disability and barriers at work. The need to be open was important, as it allowed a fuller understanding of workplace challenges.

"I couldn't work in a job where I wasn't accepted for what I am ... I don't always handle things 100% well, but I do have a mental health history that sometimes I need things that are not conventional."

Using information and communications technology

Information and communications technology was seen as improving working life for some disabled workers. This included new, computer-based technologies as well as established technologies such as telephones and faxes. A worker with a visual impairment commented on his use of the telephone:

"I use a telephone more than other people do ... maybe it actually puts me at a slight advantage. I don't always pick up on conversational cues and therefore I will leap in. But on the telephone we are very much working on audio cues and therefore that evens things out."

Taking things slowly

A small number of disabled workers felt it was better for them to adopt a gradual but planned strategy. They saw it as important not to be too precipitate in asking for workplace changes but to build up workplace relations before asking. This helped them understand employment environments, management styles, personnel changes, corporate priorities and impairment changes:

"Well if I was starting a new job I think I'd try to be as independent as I could for a start, however hard it was, then I think people would start offering to do things for you if they can see the things you are struggling with, or if you actually have to ask, would you mind doing this for me, then I think that would probably find its own level."

Supporting disabled workers

Support was vital to disabled workers. Some support came unprompted, over time and often at no cost. Support came from both inside and outside work, and could be formal or informal.

Moral and financial support

This type of support was usually provided by friends and family, sometimes before taking up the current employment. The following is what a worker with a learning difficulty said about the support provided by his father:

"He gives me a certain amount each month ... he's generously paid for a computer that I now use ... at home ... because it was clear I had to learn how to use a computer for the work that I do here, so it was to help me with work here and to gain confidence using a computer generally."

Empathy

Empathy was most commonly found among other disabled people, particularly colleagues. Empathy and acceptance of difference were seen as very important. A worker with a learning difficulty provided an example of this:

"Everybody said that the Forum [an organisation of disabled people] was definitely needed and the reason is for solidarity. Basically as individuals it's very easy for society to put us down, and it's only when we are together working collectively that we get the strength to say 'no'."

'Give and take'

This approach to support was used most often with colleagues. Mutual support and advice are important for all workers, but disabled workers felt that it was crucial in their daily work. One worker noted that he was given leeway about completing some tasks, and made up for it when he felt able to:

"If they pick up on that I'm not feeling 100% they'll say 'take your time, do what you want to, you don't have to knock yourself out'."

'Access to Work'

A key type of formal support reported by disabled workers was the 'Access to Work' scheme operated by Jobcentre Plus. There were problems in the speed

and consistency of provision, but nevertheless the scheme played a key role in workplace support.

"For example, the office that I have at the moment had sash windows in it, which I can't use, and the university has replaced them with a window which opens and closes by turning a little handle. It collaborates with the 'Access to Work' people ... they've provided me with a computer that I use at home."

Support outside work

As well as support at work, some disabled workers looked outside for help or advice. This assistance ranged from drawing on the moral support of friends and family to seeking ergonomic, technological, medical and psychological support.

"I have always needed to have ... not exactly deaf support ... I have always managed to find a group of people or it might be at home, partners, friends who actually nourish me as a whole person and that has been quite an important strategy."

Conclusion

These brief insights into the strategies and support mechanisms which allow disabled people to survive and thrive at work could help to inform and improve employment practice and support services. Some key practice and policy lessons also came out of the study.

Disabled workers adopted a sometimes complex range of strategies. Although there was no single strategy that all disabled people could identify, some recurring messages came from the research. The work context and culture, length of time in the workplace and the presence of other disabled workers were all important factors in deciding on how to make the most of work.

Disabled workers used a very wide range of gradual and non-predictable support. This makes such support difficult to formalise or reproduce. Much support was the result of unwritten 'custom and practice' which sat between formal and informal support. However, it was clear from the study that there is scope for greater and more systematic support.

It was felt that policy-makers, particularly the Department for Work and Pensions along with the Jobcentre Plus agency, should be aware of the pivotal

role of the 'Access to Work' scheme for disabled workers. However, despite its key importance, most users noted weaknesses in this scheme. These included delays in assessment and provision, lack of knowledge and skills concerning a range of impairments and barriers, difficulties in establishing funding partnerships, and the limits of personal assistance provision.

The researchers conclude that the study has implications for employers, employers' forums and trade unions. Employers should be aware that, despite strategies and support, disabled workers want access to more structured and formalised support. There is still a long way to go in understanding and responding systematically to disabled workers' needs. Trade unions, although mentioned by a small number of workers in the study, were seen as the final rather than the first option in seeking support.

Messages

For disabled workers:

- be assertive not aggressive;
- accept yourself for who you are;
- be confident in asking for support;
- be informed about your rights;
- be open and up front.

For colleagues of disabled workers:

- do not make assumptions about disabled workers;
- be supportive but not overbearing;
- attend disability equality training.

For employers and managers:

- disabled people are not a 'special case';
- ask disabled workers if their needs are being met;
- be aware of and allow flexible working;
- encourage mutual respect among workers;
- be well informed about support options.

For Jobcentre Plus:

- be better informed about the range of disabled workers' needs;
- be consistent and equitable in provision;
- be responsive and flexible;
- share the experiences of the users of 'Access to Work';
- look at more impartial means of support.

About the project

The research was undertaken through Breakthrough UK Ltd and completed in October 2002 by a commissioned project team of four disabled people: Alan Roulstone (University of Sunderland), Lorraine Gradwell (Breakthrough UK, Manchester), Jeni Price (Equality Associates, Brighton) and Lesley Child (freelance).

The study used a national screening survey of strategies and support, which included workers with physical and sensory impairments and also people with mental health problems and learning difficulties. This was followed by interviews and focus groups with 33 disabled workers. Access issues were discussed at all key stages of the research, and different ways of working were offered to facilitate full participation in the study. The study aimed to place the voices of disabled workers at the heart of the research findings.

How to get further information

Breakthrough UK Ltd can be contacted at Aked Close, Ardwick, Manchester, M12 4AN, tel: 0161 273 5412, fax: 0161 274 4053, minicom: 0161 273 5727 (+ answerphone).

The full report, **Thriving and surviving at work: Disabled people's employment strategies** by Alan Roulstone, Lorraine Gradwell, Jeni Price and Lesley Child, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 522 4, price £13.95).