



Exploring the experiences of disabled people within the workplace

COUNT ME IN project

South Hams Lifestyles

October 2014

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One of the milestones for the Big Lottery funded **COUNT ME IN** project involves a piece of research exploring both the experiences of people with disabilities within the workplace in the South Hams area of Devon, and those of the employers of people with disabilities.

Methodology

It was decided to draw up 2 questionnaires to ascertain the experience of both local disabled employees, and those of their employers. The parameters of having been employed or employing people within the last 10 years were placed, to ensure that the issues were ones that were not being addressed by the Disability Discrimination Act (2004) or the Equality Act (2010). The brief was extended to include people who volunteer or have undertaken voluntary work within this period, as the same issues apply, whether being paid or not.

Employees

In order to find out the experiences of employees with disabilities, the questionnaire was sent out to people on South Hams Lifestyles mailing list. It was distributed and people given assistance in filling in the survey at our regular drop-in groups. Copies were also held and distributed by South Hams Council for Volunteer Services, the Disability Employment Advisor at jobcentre Plus, and Totnes Work Club. The survey was placed on our website, powered by survey monkey and advertised widely in our newsletter. Ivybridge Work Club was made aware of the website questionnaire, as were Dartmouth Work club. The questionnaire was discussed at local meetings and forums such as Living Options Devon Disability Network meeting and the South Hams Voluntary Voice Forum. Finally the survey was distributed at a Welfare Reform information day 20th March 2013, held at Follaton House.

Employers

The experience of employers employing people with disabilities across the South Hams area was sought in a slightly different way. The project was rolled out in 2 stages. The questionnaire was given initially to employers within the Totnes area. Local charity shops, supermarkets, council offices, charitable organisations, Job Centre Plus, housing associations and small businesses were approached personally, and given the questionnaire with an option to fill in the survey online. South Hams CVS (Council for Volunteer Services) were also approached for assistance and links with other organisations.

After the initial pilot in Totnes, the survey was opened up to the rest of the South Hams. The same model was used, personally visiting where possible, as this seemed to yield better responses than email or telephone contact. The Chamber of Commerce in each of the 4 main towns was contacted (Ivybridge, Kingsbridge, Dartmouth and Totnes) and a request made that the questionnaire circulated amongst the membership. Similar to Totnes, charity shops, supermarkets and local voluntary organisations were contacted, as were hotels, leisure centres, town councils and local community centres.

The survey was also placed on our website, powered by survey monkey and advertised widely in our newsletter.

Findings

Employees' experiences

Of the respondents, 15% were currently in work, and 85% were no longer able to work. 28% saw the most important benefit of work as financial, whilst 71% prioritised the social contact. One respondent felt that all aspects mattered, but the social side of work was slightly more important.

Most people found the attitudes of other people affected them in the work place. Some in retail based jobs had to contend with the negative attitudes of some customers, but this just added to the job satisfaction when the customer left happy. One respondent felt strongly that they do not allow the attitudes of other people to affect them.

66% of people felt that their most recent boss had been a good employer, with 44% finding their employer not supportive. However 100% of respondents stated their colleagues were helpful and supportive.

When asked about adaptations to the workspace, none of those questioned needed specialised equipment for work, but 75% required flexible working arrangements, such as a shorter working week, and 25% needed their workspace adapted in order to work.

75% of people felt they had needed to make practical adaptations themselves in order to remain in employment, and 25% had changed their attitude.

When asked about barriers faced, feelings ran high. Comments such as "I feel I wasn't given a chance" "I'm not appreciated" and "I wasn't given a fair chance to show what I am able to do" were reported. However, one respondent feels that "disabled people need to be firm and outgoing at work" to combat such barriers. 40% of people had experienced prejudice at work, and for 20% of people that had resulted in leaving the employment.

People felt the qualities of a good employer was "awareness of problem", "sensitive manner", "willingness to help", "contact after injury", "humour" and "I could always talk to him". There were also ideas given about how to improve the lot of disabled people within the workplace. "Mix disabled and non-disabled people" was one suggestion, "accepting people for who they are", "increase awareness of the employers of their disabled employees' disabilities", "allow them just to be workers" and "give and take and listen to what the person needs".

Employers' experiences

Of the respondents, 70% were charity or voluntary organisations, 18% private businesses and 12% employers from the statutory sector. 47% of the organisations employed less than 10 employees, 12% between 10 and 50 employees, and 41% employed more than 50 people. 71% of the employers currently had a disabled employee or volunteer on their

books, and 29% have previously employed someone with a disability. None of the respondents had ever employed someone with a disability.

When asked what was offered to the disabled person in order to enable them to fulfil their role within the organisation, 18% had supplied specialist equipment, (such as hydraulic lifts, larger monitors, wrist supports) 14% had adapted the workspace, 45% had offered flexible working arrangements, and 23% found they did not have to alter their environment or arrangements at all. Several employers said that they always offered flexible working arrangements, and as long as the work was done, it was left to the employee to organise their own work time. One employee stressed the importance of having Health and Safety measures in place. Another stated that having a disabled volunteer required the full-time attention of a member of staff, which had an impact on the business.

Opinion was divided about the impact of the attitude of colleagues on the disabled employee – 56% felt that the attitude of others did not affect the employee, with comments received -such as the disabled employees are “fully integrated within the workplace, with no known issues” and “all volunteers are helpful and understanding”. However 44% of respondents believed that colleagues’ attitudes did impact on the work experience of the disabled employee, with one report of initial opposition to a volunteer placement for a person with a disability from a colleague being eventually overcome, and others stating concern about “fear within the team of how to treat the person with a disability”, disability awareness is “treated as a training issue within the team” and one employer noting that if a person with a disability receives a positive attitude from their colleagues, then “anxiety levels are reduced and this leads to greater confidence”. If colleagues have a good understanding of the individuals and their disabilities, then the experience will be a positive one all round”

The employers were next asked to think about the barriers to employing people with disabilities. Responses ranged from “none whatsoever” and “we always employ the most appropriate person, regardless of any modifications required”, to citing the physical limitations of the building (in particular many charity shops are housed in older buildings that do not meet the regulations for accessibility), cost implications of meeting

the adjustments necessary for the person to carry out the role and the time taken to support the disabled person in fulfilling their work. One respondent had experience of a disabled employee being off work sick for 3 months, with the rest of the workforce having to cover the work, and another noted the tendency of disabled applicants to explain their disability in the application form rather than spend the time "selling themselves and how they suit the role" The employer felt this put them at a disadvantage from the recruitment stage.

When asked if employers are aware of different schemes to provide practical or financial assistance in employing people with disabilities, 36% of respondents were not, whereas 64% knew of schemes; 'Access to Work'(Job Centre Plus) and ' Adding to Life' (Pluss) being quoted.

Respondents were asked if current legislation encourages or prevents employers from taking on a worker with a disability – 20% felt legislation encouraged employment, 40% felt it prevented it. 30% were unsure about the legislation and 10% felt it made no difference. Comments included "more could be done", "There is very little financial or emotional support for employers" and employers are "scared to take on disabled people in case they do things wrong".

The respondents had many suggestions about what could be done to improve the situation of the disabled person in the workplace. "Flexibility to take on responsibilities in a gradual way was offered by one employer with good results. Understanding and Communication" were felt to be key issues, between the employers, disabled employee and colleagues. It was felt that increased flexibility in the work place would improve the situation for disabled people, as would funding to provide specialist resources if needed. Training and awareness to staff about different sorts of disabilities was mentioned time and again. "Greater awareness of disability removes the sense of fear of offending the person". One employer felt that more incentive should be given from the government to support disabled workers, maybe with more training for staff. Several employers felt that more input from support workers would be beneficial.

The final question was asking employers what they needed to employ the person most suited to a role, regardless of disability. The answers

were varied, and included increased confidence in the support offered from the job centre or equivalent, extra trained staff, awareness of different conditions and funding to achieve this training, flexibility and additional support from other agencies, to enable the individual's needs to be met, with realistic expectations about what is achievable within the workplace.

Conclusion

It is recognised that this has been a small project, with a small percentage of the target population responding. However it has been valuable in gaining a snapshot of the experiences of both the disabled employees and those of employers across the South Hams. However, some very clear themes emerged from the respondents.

Employees

It seems that disabled employees across the South Hams area have had a mixed experience of employment. All people contacted in the survey had had a good supportive relationship with their colleagues, although the same cannot be said for their boss. Communication seems to be vitally important to a successful work placement, and flexibility on both sides is key. Sadly, people still experience prejudice because of their disability, and some people are still finding that access issues to buildings are a barrier. People with disabilities value work and recognise the wider importance of social contact and relationships with colleagues as being more important, in some cases, than the wages.

Employers

The respondents on the whole had a positive attitude towards employment for people with disabilities, and a desire to make each situation work. A large range of different strategies are being applied to enable that success, with each resolution being specific to that individual employment circumstance.

The recurring themes that came up for employers about offering successful employment to people with disabilities were flexibility in approach and training and awareness for staff. Having a lateral,

problem-solving approach to difficulties faced, meant that hurdles could be overcome, either with changes to working hours, the work station or equipment. It was widely felt that employers and colleagues could enhance the work experience of a disabled employee by understanding the issues faced, and any help or assistance that can be offered to make life easier. Often there is a concern that the individual will be offended if help is offered, and by having a frank conversation about what is and is not acceptable to that person allows all staff to feel more confident.

Employers also highlighted a need to be made more aware of what help and support is available to them from other agencies. Some knew of certain schemes and programmes they could access, but many more said they did not. Employers felt that someone with knowledge of the person, their abilities and assistance that could be offered would be very beneficial. For employers offering volunteering opportunities, the back-up of a support worker would be appreciated.

The overall conclusion is that, in the South Hams, there are some very enthusiastic and willing employers, happy to employ the best person for the role, regardless of disability, but who would appreciate training and funding from government schemes to offer the most supportive work experience possible. The employees with disabilities in the South Hams have a mixed experience – some feeling well supported and valued, and others feeling they have had a battle to prove what they can do and to feel appreciated. Communication is a theme that both parties highlighted as necessary for success, talking about issues and trying to predict possible problems, and therefore avoid them. The other theme that came out from both employees and employers was the importance of education about disability and integration within the workplace. This openness about different disabilities and effect on the individual was felt to dispel awkwardness and ignorance from the rest of the work force, but also enabled the disabled employee to clearly explain what they need and how they like to be treated within the work environment. One of the respondents succinctly explained the thoughts of many: “The more diverse the workplace, the better for everyone”.

ACTION PLAN

We felt it would be useful to sum up our findings in a practical way, and to highlight possible sources of help and assistance. It will also be a chance to show what needs to happen next, according to our respondents.

EMPLOYEES identified the following as important to a positive work experience:

- Better relationships with supportive colleagues are needed
This is not specific to people with disabilities, as a happy team is a more productive one. There are numerous business resources available to promote this - team building sessions, training etc.
- Better communication networks need to be developed
This point was mentioned again and again. The employee is the expert in what they can do, what they can't do, and what they need support with. Ask them! And make sure that there is a clear communication channel for the employee to talk through any issues that might come up for them in the delivery of their work role.
- Disability awareness training needs to be delivered to all staff
Disability awareness training is offered by a number of agencies, including South Hams Lifestyles. Equality and Diversity training is offered, as standard, by a number of organisations, but local trainers in the specific area of disability area include St Loyes Foundation and Living Options Devon.
- Access issues need to be addressed
Many organisations, including South Hams Lifestyles and the Devon-wide Living Options, Devon, can provide access audits to ensure the buildings are accessible as possible to people with disabilities. The law states that an employer has to make "reasonable adjustments" within the workplace to ensure that the disabled employee is not at a disadvantage. This could mean changes to the working day or providing specific equipment. Putting "Access Audit" in to a search engine will provide you with many local companies offering this service.

EMPLOYERS identified the following as important to a positive work experience:

- There needs to be a flexibility in approach

This was mentioned as important by both employees and employers. The government launched the Disability Confident campaign in July 2013 to support employers to employ staff with disabilities. The link to the campaign can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/disability-confident-campaign>

A little bit of flexibility goes a long way in terms of an employee feeling valued within the workplace and a motivated, valued employee will repay you in work rate!

- There is a need for training and awareness for all staff – education about disability and integration

It is illegal for anyone to experience discrimination because of their disability, and this can feel like a minefield for an employer to negotiate. Disabilities include physical disabilities, mental health issues, sensory difficulties, such as visual or hearing impairment, as well as unseen disabilities like Autistic Spectrum Conditions, dyslexia and learning disabilities. There are specific support organisations for nearly every type of disability, so find out more about the condition, and see how your organisation can support your colleague. Often, just understanding the day to day issues can be a really good start.

- Communication networks to be developed (again!)

As in the notes for issues raised by employees, communication is vital to successful employment. If there are clear channels of communication both to and from the employee, where any possible issues can be raised as soon as possible, and practical solutions sought. This aspect of management, along with honesty and flexibility can really make a difference to the experience of the disabled employee.

- The need for a named individual as a contact for additional support

A nominated person with knowledge of the employee, should the person with disabilities need additional support, (particularly

within the field of volunteering), has been identified as helpful to the employer. This is important to set up from the beginning, perhaps through the job centre or through the organisation arranging the volunteer placement. This was identified as particularly useful for people with Learning Disabilities, and once in place, problems could either be avoided or easily solved with the input of a person who knew the individual well.

- There is a need for openness and honesty

Some employers are fearful of discussing the topic of disability with the individual concerned, often preferring to go through Occupational Health or other department more used to working with people with disabilities. Some are worried about the Equality Act 2010, and being seen as discriminatory, either positively or negatively. It can be difficult to talk about the subject of disability with a disabled person, particularly if you are not used to it. Your employee is the expert in their own condition, and will appreciate you asking how things are, and if there is anything else that can be done to make the workplace more comfortable. Similarly, if there are problems arising, the earlier these are dealt with, in a sensitive and honest manner, the more likely there will be a happy conclusion.

- An increased awareness of support is available is necessary

Many employers highlighted the fact that they did not know what help was available to them. The Access to Work Scheme can provide funds to help where an individual employee requires help with special aids and equipment, adaptations to equipment, travel to and from work, communication support at interview and a wide variety of support workers. The Disability Employment Advisor, based in the Job Centre Plus will also be able to access practical help and advice for employers wishing to or currently employing people with disabilities.

There are many organisations that can help support employers with issues that might arise when employing staff with disabilities, including:

The Business Disability Forum, which is an employer organisation that offers information, support and advice on disability as it affects business. It particularly looks at the accessibility of the recruitment process.

The Clear Company offers a free online toolkit, called Clear Kit, which can help, employers understand what they to know when employing people with disabilities, from the recruitment process onwards.

Clear Talents can help organisations identify and manage reasonable adjustments for job applicants, employees and students. It is free to use.

The British Association for Supported Employment (BASE) is the national trade association involved in securing employment for disabled people. Their website offers advice for employers about disabled employees.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

We hope that by distributing this information to employers within the South Hams, awareness about the barriers that disabled people face in the work place, will be raised. We believe the government could do more to publicise the help and benefits available to employers looking to provide good support for their disabled employees.

A clear code of good practice would be a useful thing, highlighting the relevant legal aspects, such as the Equality Act and the Disability Discrimination Act, clearly signposting employers to relevant support. Demystifying the taboos of talking openly with people about their disabilities and finding a mutually acceptable solution to any problems that might be faced would be a step in the right direction in ensuring the clear communication channels that both employees and employers rated as important.

And you can always contact us at South Hams Lifestyles, to answer any queries you might have. If we don't know, we know how to find out!