



Encouraging employees to be open about their disability

Summary of research findings

- How you ask makes a difference
- Present the benefits of being open
- Address the fear of discrimination
- Specific messages work better than general ones
- Likelihood of being open varies according to the impairment.
- People are sensitive to overall workplace climate
- Relationship with supervisors and line managers is key

What does this mean to you?

Have you got examples you can share about what works well in your organisation?

What can be done to prepare the ground in the run up to the launch of the Academy programme?

How you ask makes a difference

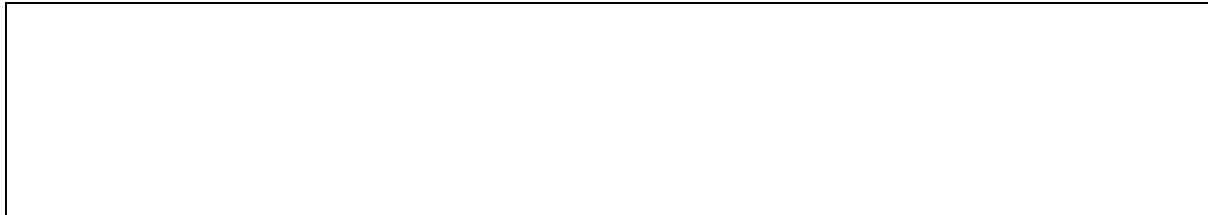
The way in which people are asked influences how likely they are to tell. Partly this is a question of language. They may have different perception of what is meant by 'disability', particularly if examples are not provided, and may not consider that they are 'disabled' if they have dyslexia, epilepsy or a mental health difficulty.

People don't like a 'tick box approach' to identifying their impairment. A narrow labelling approach reflects the medical model of disability and reinforces the idea that there is something 'wrong' with the individual and that the problems they face are a direct result of their own impairment or health condition.

Research participants commonly recommend that processes focus on strengths - not just needs. A good question to ask is 'How can we make the most of your talents and abilities?' The Equality Act prohibition on health checks before conditional a job offer is an opportunity to create a cultural shift. Health checks can become 'Is there any help you need now you are an employee' rather than 'List all your health problems and I will decide what you can do as an employee'.

Present the benefits of being open

People make their decision (consciously or subconsciously) by weighing up the potential gain against the perceived risk. Make clear that the reason people are asked to 'disclose' is so the employer can become aware of the barriers, develop solutions, make adjustments and provide support. This will result in fewer misunderstandings or anxieties. This also reflects the social model in that it puts more emphasis on the barriers and responsibilities of the employer and less on the disabled person.



Address the fear of discrimination

Research shows awareness of the right to request reasonable adjustments is far from universal. In any case, employees' interpretation of the term can lead them to decide not to take action e.g. some people feel it is not 'reasonable' to ask for something that will cost extra money or inconvenience the organisation in any way.

Fundamentally, for many disabled employees, the personal risk of being open at work is perceived as too large. This is driven by fear of discrimination (even more than discrimination actually experienced). They commonly fear that articulating a need outside the mainstream will lead to them being viewed as 'causing problems' or being 'unable to cope' which in turn will affect their career progression, especially into management positions. People also worry that asking for adjustments will open them up to accusations of 'special treatment' and/or that they will be unfairly scrutinised and talked about.

Fear of discrimination is always likely to be the biggest challenge. Applying all the findings presented here will give the best chance of creating a workplace climate which facilitates openness at work. Nevertheless, employers who are aware of their legal responsibilities and promote the rights of their employees are more likely to instil confidence among disabled people to articulate their needs.



Specific messages work better than general ones

Related to the above balancing of benefit versus risk, specific proactive messages are more effective in promoting openness at work e.g. 'we will make reasonable adjustments', 'we will support you to make the most of your abilities' and 'Access to Work can pay towards extra costs' are more effective than general statements such as 'positive about disability'. Specific examples of adjustments that employers have made can be persuasive, especially simple common fixes such as maintaining contact during absences and examples of flexible working arrangements. Employees may not be aware of the potential for change in the organisation, particularly during implementation of new systems, routines or work spaces.



Likelihood of being open varies according to the impairment.

There is a sense across the research that hidden impairments are taken less seriously than more visible ones. Employees with dyslexia or a medical condition may also have their own impairment-specific reasons for not telling their employer. Employees with mental health difficulties are much less likely to 'disclose'. The perception is that employers trivialise conditions like depression and anxiety and don't appreciate how common mental health conditions are among the general population. A lack of open discussion about conditions such as depression or anxiety creates an environment where mental health conditions remain largely taboo and misunderstood.



People are sensitive to overall workplace climate

Research participants commonly recommend that – as far as possible – policies on accessibility and flexibility are not just designed to focus on disabled people. In fact they suggest that adjustments to the workplaces can be used to improve experiences for employees as a whole. The key barriers raised in relation to workplace culture include ignorance about impairments and health conditions, a related tendency to make negative assumptions about the capabilities of disabled people, a perception that disabled people don't fit the image of the organisation and resentment by colleagues of perceived 'special treatment'. An important factor is employers being prepared to open a dialogue with staff about their needs.

'Proactive approaches by employers which make no overt assumptions about which employees would or would not need any adjustments' was a firm prerequisite for some participants feeling comfortable with disclosure.

Tackling attitudinal barriers and creating a better workplace culture – so that employers do not make assumptions about disability or underestimate the capabilities and contribution of disabled people and people with long-term health conditions - would remove some barriers at recruitment and in promotion opportunities.



Relationship with supervisors and line managers makes a difference

Raising awareness of the prevalence (in the workplace and more generally) of impairments and health conditions.

Providing disability awareness training.

Raising awareness of the likely prevalence of 'hidden' impairments or long-term health conditions in workplaces – help employers to understand that a failure to provide adjustments may mean that some staff are restricted in operating to their full potential.

The role of line managers

An effective line manager who is able to adapt their approach to an individual's needs was seen as crucial in opening up work opportunities and ensuring people can stay in employment if the impact of their impairment or health condition changes.

Disabled people felt that the ideal manager should:

- Make sure they are aware of the needs of their team by making clear to staff that they can approach them with challenges they are facing in the workplace.
- Use discretionary powers to allow people flexibility in their working day.
- Think creatively about how people's skills and experience can be best used, perhaps by changing their job role.

Line managers were also felt to be key to ensuring that any perceived performance-related issues were discussed and addressed early before being escalated through

more formal (and intimidating) disciplinary processes. Some participants had experienced managers who had not discussed any concerns with them until the point where their ongoing employment was in question. They felt that earlier open discussion could have led to a climate of greater trust where individuals might have been willing to discuss the challenges that the workplace was presenting them with and possible adjustments that would enable them to perform better.

Participants felt that a lack of awareness and understanding can lead to anxiety among employers about discussing impairments and mental health conditions with employees. They felt this was because employers are worried about causing offence, 'saying the wrong thing' or invading the person's privacy, but individuals stressed that this can be detrimental to maximising the contribution of disabled employees. Where employers are not open to a dialogue with a staff member regarding their impairment and the adjustments they may need at work, it is often the case that people struggle on, trying to hide any difficulties they are facing and becoming less effective members of the workforce.

There are a number of ways in which disabled people felt that employers could work to create a more open and supportive workplace culture. These can be summarised as:

- Raising awareness of the prevalence of impairments and long-term health conditions.
- Providing formal disability awareness training.
- Ensuring that – as far as possible – policies about workplace flexibilities are not focused exclusively on disabled people but are designed to accommodate a wide range of needs.

Most participants thought that arranging disability-awareness training for staff within the organisation would be an effective way of countering attitudinal barriers. Many participants felt that training that helped people understand more about different impairments and empathise with specific challenges that people might face in a similar work environment would be most effective. Awareness training should act to promote inclusion, and counter the fear of approaching the issue of disability and of 'saying the wrong thing'.

Increasing support at line management level – key in ensuring workloads and tasks are managed effectively, and in fostering an environment where an employee's needs can be identified and communicated.

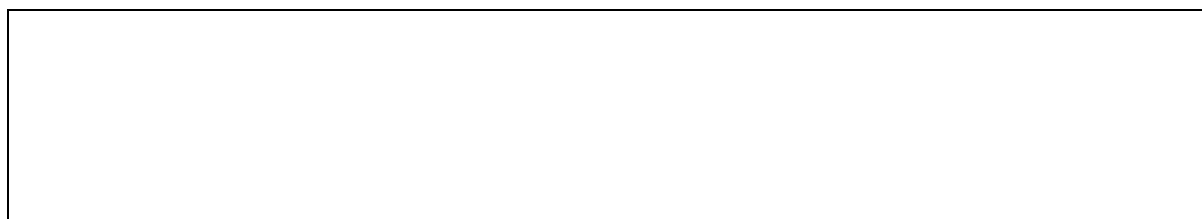
- Raise the awareness of staff and management of the prevalence of impairments and long-term health conditions.
- Arrange disability-awareness training and development for staff at all levels.
- Implement effective policies and disciplinary procedures to prevent prejudicial attitudes impacting on employees.

Professional interviewees said that employers unfamiliar about working with disabled people worried about what they could achieve and therefore underestimated ability,.

Most commonly people are open with colleagues rather than those they perceive as having power in the organisation.

Recommendation from report is to create organisational cultures and support for managers that enabled open, powerful conversations.

Support, praise and rewards managers who are proactive in developing disabled employees' talents.



Other notes, based on:

Opening up work: The views of disabled people and people with long-term health conditions
EHRC (2012)

The research was designed to understand how the world of work could be opened up to enable more disabled people to participate fully and more employers to realise the potential of their disabled employees. It sought to look beyond the barriers and to identify how workplaces could become more inclusive.

Suggestions made for the ways in which disclosure could be encouraged included:

- New starter forms for all staff in which any adjustments could be requested.
- Incorporation of requests for adjustments or identification of barriers into staff surveys.
- Staged disclosure whereby line managers make an initial approach but then allow staff to explain more in their own time.

Disabled people felt that ideally employers would allow employees to signal adjustments that they might need from the start of their employment. They felt that this process should focus on specific needs rather than asking for details of impairments or health conditions. Several felt that this would be easier to do in writing rather than orally.

Proactively ask all staff what reasonable adjustments might be required (and have safeguards in place to prevent any repercussions from voicing a need).

Give staff a form or questionnaire, possibly with a welcome or new starter pack, asking if there are any adjustments that they need in order to fully participate. This would also make clear the organisation's recognition that people may develop impairments or health issues, and have different needs during their working life: it would show that the organisation is open to working with people to accommodate these.

Ask more than once.

In many cases, what individuals need in order to make workplaces more accessible to them is a degree of flexibility in how they work. Many saw this as relatively smallscale adjustments of the sort that would also benefit staff for a whole range of reasons such as childcare requirements or if they were combining work and study. Discussions about reasonable adjustments should thus take place within the wider context of employees' needs more generally.

Some participants already had access to flexible working arrangements. Others felt that greater flexibility would greatly increase their ability to find and remain in work:

Start and finish times – allowing individuals to accommodate particular sleeping patterns or avoid public transport at very crowded times.

The distribution of working hours across days of the week – perhaps enabling people to work a set number of hours over six days rather than five, making shorter working days a possibility or allowing for longer working on 'good days' and shorter hours on 'bad days'.

Accommodating absence – understanding a requirement to take time off at short notice either because of medical appointments or simply on 'bad days'. Also considering gradual returns to work after longer periods of absence to enable people to make the physical and mental transition back into work.

Opportunities to work from home – for some the option to work from home on days where transport to work would be a struggle would maximise productivity. Most were keen to stress that they would like the option to work from home occasionally but would not want to be permanently based at home as this runs against the desire to be part of the mainstream workforce.

Adapting job roles if an individual became disabled while at work – in most cases where individuals had been forced to leave employment after developing an impairment or health condition, they felt that there were many aspects of their job that they could have continued to perform effectively.

Among those who had acquired an impairment during their working lives, the focus was typically on managing their condition and holding down a job, and career aspirations were much less likely to be a priority. Many were primarily concerned

with holding down their current employment, felt relieved to have a job, and would have been very reluctant to 'push for more' or rock the boat for fear of losing their employment altogether. There was, in addition, a very low awareness of the concept of reasonable adjustments and extremely low confidence that asking for such adjustments would be received positively.