**Disability Inclusion at work**

Written by a wheelchair user employed by Living Options Devon

**Some Statistics**

Disabled people often have a wealth of lived experience in planning, understanding access needs and what has worked for them which can be a highly beneficial and transferable skill set. Anecdotally they are also often highly committed employees once in work.

According to the National Audit Office only 51.5% of disabled people are in work, compared with around 81.7% of non-disabled people. Some disabled people – including those with some mental health conditions and learning disabilities – are even less likely to be in work. There are a vast number of structural reasons for this including equitable access to education/qualifications, challenges in getting work experience and needing to fight disability discrimination/assumptions about what disabled people are able to do.

**My experience and reflections**

As a wheelchair user I would like to share some of the good and less good experiences I have had across my working life. I have a progressive neurological condition diagnosed in 2004 and a chronic metabolic condition which was a Lockdown discovery - both of which impact my levels of fatigue and my ability to mobilise.

Positive and inclusive employers have offered proactive opportunities to have open and solution focused discussions on accessibility and performance matters as needed. It can be hard, particularly as a new employee, to have the confidence to raise anything you may be struggling with as you do not know how negatively this will be dealt with.

As my condition didn’t become obvious until after my degree I was able to participate fully in education without any adjustments and changes in the expectations of what I was able to achieve. For those with congenital disabilities this may not always be the case. Equally I was able to gather a good set of work experience which then helped me to access better career options. Now that I am dealing with two conditions it is another process of acclimatising and understanding what needs to change to best accommodate this.

As a wheelchair user it is important that I have my employers support when needing to access different environments. As a Careers Adviser I had to visit lots of schools in Bristol and these were often inaccessible without detailed conversations with each staff team to ensure I could work and manoeuvre independently in each place. Equally I was once asked to run a multi venue event on a steep university campus. My then line manager did not once ask what I may need to help me manoeuvre around or any other additional support mechanisms I might need on the day or beforehand. I had to rely on the offer of other people pushing me which felt very uncomfortable and stressful. On reflection this was clearly, although perhaps unintentional, disability discrimination. The culture of this organisation was to not address anything related to disability and it felt too scary to individually raise any issues. This unsupportive and isolating culture meant I had to make constructive plans to leave ASAP to protect my mental health.

I then found an inclusive and positive employer and where we worked collaboratively to make the most of my skill set and to deal with any challenges together.

**Six tips to create disability inclusion at work**

How can you ensure your disabled colleagues are included and valued at work?

*Natalie Clegg, Technology Officer and Chair of Represent, Co-op’s network for disabled colleagues, shares her top tips for disability inclusion at work.*

In the last 24 months, much of the world has experienced isolation, loneliness, difficulty in accessing basic needs, and the complexity of navigating healthcare systems. Many people got a glimpse of what life can be like as a disabled person and disability inclusion is more important than ever.

**Leaders must champion disability inclusion**

Leaders have a crucial role in supporting and creating disability inclusion within their teams and more broadly, whether they have lived experiences of disability or are an ally.

**Tips for being a disability-inclusive organisation**

It is extremely important to be a disability-inclusive organisation. People with disabilities should feel supported at work and be themselves without fear of discrimination.

Many people may not want to disclose their disability, so it is critical that employers show respect and create safe spaces for all.

Here are six tips for becoming a disability-inclusive organisation:

**1. Culture and psychological safety at work**

Create safe spaces for disabled colleagues to be able to share how they’re feeling. Many people are afraid of disclosing disability or health conditions, for fear of being seen as inadequate or incapable (which is rooted within the Medical Model and the perceptions of disabled people).

Psychological safety enables people to ask for adjustments, without judgement. Safety can be created through a [colleague network](https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/talking-inclusion-with-podcast/podcasts-staff-networks-national-inclusion-week-edition-with-co-op/), listening circles, and education for managers in creating supportive environments.

Psychological safety isn’t easy to create. Leaders need to be committed to a cultural and mindset shift across an organisation – however, safety is highly rewarding and supports inclusion for all minority identities.

**2. Find the disabled people in your organisation**

Do you know who your disabled colleagues are? Depending on how safe colleagues feel, you may find that many disabled people are hidden within an organisation. Many disabled colleagues will ‘make do’ around the adjustments they need, concealing their disabilities along with their potential to thrive at work.

You’ll also find there are some passionate people who become role models in your organisation, who support others in feeling safe and heard. Without knowing who your disabled colleagues are, it’s very difficult to know how they’re feeling and where you are in your journey of disability inclusion.

**3. Allow disabled colleagues to define what they need**

Are disabled people making decisions about their community or is someone else doing it for them?

Disability can be a disempowering experience. Many people lose their independence through the way our society is designed (see the [Social Model of Disability](https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/the-social-model-of-disability/)). If [disabled colleagues](https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/why-do-we-have-a-disability-pay-gap/) aren’t making decisions about the things which impact them, this will add to the feeling of losing independence and reduce colleague satisfaction.

Use opportunities to listen, learn and gather feedback – and where possible enable disabled colleagues to define what they need. You’ll often find the assumptions non-disabled people make about disabled people’s needs don’t quite hit the mark.

As leaders, think about the impact of the things you do, not the intention you had. If you don’t include disabled voices and opinions, it’s unlikely the impact will be as positive as you’d intended.

**4. Does your organisation have disability role models?**

Is disability reflected in all layers of your organisation, so colleagues can see and/or hear role models at all levels?

I regularly stress that disabled colleagues can be some of the best leaders. Resilience, an understanding of inclusion and empathy are often some of the key attributes of disabled colleagues, because of the things that they have experienced.

The perception that disabled people aren’t high achievers is grounded in the Medical Model. Without adjustments, some people aren’t being supported to thrive in their role which perpetuates this assumption.

Having disabled role models in all layers of your organisation ensures that colleagues can see other people like them, and that being a leader is possible.

Many organisations don’t have this, therefore more junior roles are bursting with potential to be great leaders – and you’ll lose them eventually, to organisations who see them for the exceptional leaders they can be.

**5. Test and learn with open feedback loops**

It’s a [journey of change](https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/planning-your-inclusion-diversity-strategy/), and never assume one size fits all.

Be prepared to listen without judgement or prejudice. Disabled people, given the platform, will often be honest about what isn’t working. Sometimes this can be difficult to hear but it’s important to do so. Disability inclusion is an evolution of learning, change and development.

Equity is an appropriate way to think about disability inclusion, since one size does not fit all, and disabled people need different things to excel.

Identifying your leaders who are committed to listening and learning, whether they are a disabled or non-disabled person, is important. [Allies](https://www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk/why-your-organisation-needs-inclusion-allies/) for change and disability advocates are essential to organisational disability inclusion.

Test small, learn and evolve. Learning what’s working is part of a very exciting journey.

**6. Enable people to find peer-to-peer support**

Communities are essential in supporting people to feel connected to others, and peer-to-peer support is more important than I ever imagined. We talk about Represent as a community, not a network, for this reason.

At Represent, we’ve built a community mentoring initiative to support and unite people. Through this, I’ve learned that many disabled colleagues feel alone in their journeys, as I did.

Establishing mentoring schemes for disabled people to be mentored by others who understand disabled lived experiences ensures that navigating the organisation becomes easier, and challenges faced are better supported.

Disability inclusion isn’t easy, particularly as the language and perceptions in our society can be damaging to disabled lives. If Represent has taught me anything, it’s that although we may have different disabilities, our experiences at work are often so similar.