

FreeWire

Issue 1: June/July 2007



Disabled People Working Together to Change Employment

break  through
Including disabled people



Supported by
The National Lottery®
through the Big Lottery Fund



Welcome to the first edition of our regular magazine on tackling employment barriers. In it you will find real life examples of barriers that have come up for disabled people in employment and tips on dealing with them. All of the articles are based on local disabled people's own experiences. Many thanks to all who contributed.

This magazine is produced by Breakthrough UK's Independent Employment Advocacy Centre, which is supported financially by the Big Lottery Fund. If you would like to get involved in the next edition, please get in touch. Our contact details are on the back page.

© **Breakthrough UK Ltd 2007**

Article	Page
RIP	3
Negotiation Skills	5
Attitudes to Dyslexia in the Workplace	7
What is Independent Advocacy?	10
Disabled People Share Advice on Dealing with Issues at Work	12
Stages	13
6 Tips on Advocating for Yourself in Work Situations	15
Getting Involved	16

Please note that the views expressed in this magazine are in people's own words and are not necessarily those of Breakthrough UK Ltd.

Thanks to Mick Kenny for doing the front cover design.

RIP



As a disabled employee I have experienced considerable barriers at work.

These barriers, though they seemed to present themselves in varying faces, in my opinion are based on what I call RIP: (Resistance to change, both attitudinal and structural, Ignorance and Prejudice). These three factors are used to rip disabled employees off of, above all things, their dignity, and a chance to lead independent lives as equal citizens.

RIP has drawn a lot of inspiration from the medical model of disability which focuses on what disabled people cannot do. Under this line of thinking, disabled people are repeatedly blamed for their “disabilities” and are constantly challenged to overcome their “disabilities” before they think of any equal treatment.

The attitude applied in policies and procedures has been that of “One size fits all”. As a disabled employee, I was expected to walk in the straight and narrow. Whenever some lines were bent or temporarily diverted to accommodate a single aspect of my needs as a disabled employee, it was expected of me to express heartfelt gratitude, make a permanent record of that favour in the “Book of Remembrance”, with reference being drawn from it all the time.

Ways to overcome barriers imposed by RIP would vary according to individual circumstances and resources available.

From my experience these are some of the ways I took towards overcoming the barriers:

- Remaining positive, whilst constructively challenging each issue.
- Networking with other disabled employees, sharing experiences and learning from one another.
- Refusing to believe that my impairment is the disabling factor.
- Keeping up to date with the legislation and any other relevant directives in relation to the DDA.
- Finding help from disabled people's organisations specifically Breakthrough UK Ltd (The Employment Advocacy Project).
- Refusing to be turned into a bitter and resentful person, because that would only reinforce their belief that disabled people are miserable people trapped in their conditions with no control.
- Avoiding confrontation and aggressiveness at any cost. These circumstances presented very often, but I rose above them by consciously saying "No!"

Keeping on the personal development move, I have proved that the more I moved on, the higher the ground I trod. Pastures are greener the further you are prepared to go. ”

Negotiation Skills

To change things for the better, many disabled people find they have to use negotiation skills. Our tips are:

- Ask for information in your preferred format.
- Know your facts, responsibilities and your rights in this situation. Find out all you can about the law relating to your particular circumstances. We can put you in touch with useful contacts.
- Be clear about the company policies you should be following at this stage.
- Put your case across again, remaining calm, using clear language and sticking to the facts.
- Be proactive in suggesting possible solutions. For example, can you think of adjustments that could be made that would be effective for you? Employers must then consider whether the suggested adjustment would help overcome the disadvantage, and whether it is reasonable.
- Work towards coming to an agreement that is acceptable to both yourself and the organisation.

Advice from employment self advocacy group participants when negotiating includes:

- “Use open body language.”
- “Practice techniques in advance, maybe with a friend.”

- “Know in advance what is going to be discussed at meetings. Follow discussions up with a letter.”
- “When going to supervision, write down what you think the problem is so you can be clear.”

If you are a disabled person in Greater Manchester and would like to attend one of our regular free workshops on speaking up in employment situations, please get in touch. Our contact details are on the back page.



Attitudes to Dyslexia in the Workplace

“ In the past I didn't tell anyone about my hidden impairment, dyslexia. Although I've got a physical impairment too, that was considered acceptable, but people still have a perception that having dyslexia means you are 'thick'. I was always made to feel stupid. So I struggled along and it took me twice as long as other people to do things.

I used humour to disguise things. It wasn't until I started a new job and met a colleague who also had dyslexia that I decided it was okay. She was in her 20s with a degree and was very successful. It was seeing someone else in a responsible role that made me feel it was okay to 'come out' as having dyslexia.

This colleague, by the way, had her own barrier to deal with when she applied to work in Human Resources for a local authority. She had already done a lot of work to get to that point. Part of the recruitment process was an exam. She asked them for extra time to complete the test but they were horrible to her and said no. We decided to ring them back and said "we're not having that!" Eventually they made reasonable adjustments for her and agreed she could take longer to sit the test. This was only after we threatened them with legal action though.

Going back to me, even though the organisation I started working for is supposed to be disability friendly, when

I did declare it, someone in my team said: “I never thought anyone with dyslexia could do any kind of a job in an office!”

In my situation, once my employer was aware I had dyslexia I was able to apply for and get support from the Access to Work scheme. They provided software including Dragon Dictate (speech recognition software) and a grammar programme that identifies commonly misspelled words. You had to train it and I had to spend a lot of time doing this. In the end it was quicker just to ask someone else to check my work. Another problem was that I didn't have a private office, so using it was difficult in front of others. I didn't have the confidence to learn and use the programme but I believe the software is much better now.

Because I feel more confident now about letting people know that I have a problem spelling, I also feel more confident asking people for support. I still have concerns outside of work though, I wouldn't always let on depending on who I'm with.

You do need peer support from people in the same boat, especially for things like this that are stigmatised. People don't understand about how it can affect others things like your memory and coordination. People need to understand that you're not 'stupid', 'thick' or 'ignorant', especially people like me from generations who went to school before it was widely recognised. Younger people now get much more support, even from school. I wasn't diagnosed until I was 40.

To get support from Access to Work you have to be

diagnosed, which is a barrier in itself. You have to have the documentation, you have to go out and get proof.

I would say emphasise the positives – one of my assets is that because I have dyslexia I think differently: “thinking outside the box”. For example, when one of my team said that the shutter was broken, I immediately thought “what have we done in this room that’s different, I know we’ve unplugged something”. And it did turn out that the shutter was unplugged, so it was sorted. I can think of different solutions to problems that other people don’t consider. As long as I’ve got a way to put my ideas and thoughts across, although I might not write them down in a precise way, I can still express how I think something should be done. Others might be good at writing things down but not have the ideas in the first place. I also think in patterns e.g. when remembering how to type codes and pin numbers.

Have a look at the Adult Dyslexia Organisation’s Website, it has useful information on coping strategies and explains the different ways people can be affected. ”

Note, this can be found at:

www.futurenet.co.uk/charity/ado/index.html



What is Independent Advocacy?

Independent Advocacy is about supporting people to get their point of view across, get the right information and stay in control of situations.

Our outreach advocates support disabled people on a one to one basis to access any services and information necessary to find or maintain employment or training. Because we are independent, we can assure you that we will work with you confidentially and without bias to resolve issues in the best way for you.

If you are a disabled person in Greater Manchester who is interested in one to one support from an Outreach Advocate to deal with an employment issue, please get in touch for more details, tel: 0161 273 5412, email: advocacy@breakthrough-uk.co.uk. More contact details are on the back page.



I first became aware of Breakthrough UK Ltd Independent Employment Advocacy Service in December 2006. This was through my Disability Employment Advisor at the Stretford Jobcentre. At that time I was at an all time low, unwell and had employment issues with my former employer. Not having worked since September and struggling to get any due benefits entitlement I began to lose confidence in my ability to find suitable paid employment. It took some time for me to realise that I needed help with a number of issues. However, after an

introductory phone call an appointment was made for me to meet with one of Breakthrough's Advocacy Workers at the Ardwick site in Manchester.

After we had discussed the issues that I was faced with I felt that someone not only understood but was able to help and support me in considering what options were open to me. My advocacy support worker continued to keep in regular contact with me by phone and arranging regular meetings. She also e-mailed me the information I needed regarding Employment Tribunals and details of suitable job opportunities. As a direct result of her help and assistance I have now accepted a commercial settlement from my former employers. But the biggest bonus of all was that she clearly displayed her confidence in me to obtain alternative employment. She was also instrumental in me applying for an interview for a job working for 'Breakthrough UK Ltd'.

I now help two days a week to site manage the 'Innovation Centre' in Northenden. With over 11 years in Housing Management working with a variety of clients and agencies, I am now enjoying using my transferable skills in a constructive and meaningful way. All in all my experience of 'Breakthrough UK Ltd' has been a very positive one. As a Client I was shown respect and all my issues were dealt with very efficiently in complete confidentiality. As a prospective employee I experienced at first hand Breakthrough's equal opportunity policy and commitment to people with hidden impairments and disabilities. ”

Disabled People Share Advice on Dealing with Issues at Work:

These are tips from self advocacy skills workshop participants on strategies that have worked for them when dealing with issues in paid or voluntary work:

- “Politely explain to your employer what to do, communicate the issue to them (e.g. need for adjustments).”
- “Write a letter explaining the situation and how you are feeling, don’t keep it to yourself.”
- “If something winds you up, put it in your diary. That can be good evidence in the future.”
- “If bullied, keep a record, sometimes it’s hard to recognise what’s happening at first.”
- “Talk to someone outside the situation.”
- “Make sure you build a good relationship with your Access to Work supervisor. Make sure you know who they are and make it your business to know all the people approving your claims. Access to Work have been very supportive (despite all their bureaucracy) and I’m sure it’s because I’ve spent time chatting with my case worker etc...In my experience, they don’t make it clear who’s dealing with what so it’s good to teach yourself their system.”

Stages

“ Over the last 20 years I have faced increasing barriers in work as my impairment has progressed. Thinking about it, I can fit my attitudes and tactics into four stages.

Stage 1 – Hide it!

I put all my energy into finding ways of getting the job done without declaring my impairment. My approach included volunteering for tasks which weren't a problem and then being 'too busy' to take on other things which were more tricky. I took work home to spend extra time on it. I also confided my situation to one colleague who was very supportive in unofficially trading and sharing tasks. This stage was extremely stressful and became impossible to sustain.

Stage 2 – Playing it down

I got equipment through Access to Work, which made it impossible for me to hide. In fact, it drew attention to me and I had to deal with the curiosity, sympathy, ignorance and humorous comments of colleagues. I did not know how to handle this so did not challenge the attitudes and assumptions of others. I just wanted to get on with the job as well as I could without any fuss. I absorbed all the hurt and did not ask for other adjustments because I did not want to be 'difficult'. This stage was awkward, painful and embarrassing.

Stage 3 – Up front and angry

I found out that I was not the ‘problem’. I learnt about the social model of disability, about my legal rights as a disabled person and about good practice in supporting disabled employees. I was no longer embarrassed about my impairment or about being different. I saw every barrier as a challenge which I had to tackle. All the years of frustration gave me lots of energy – and anger. I found that I could not control my emotional reaction when dealing with my own barriers at work. This gave my employers an advantage as they could dismiss my efforts as emotional outbursts. I did win some friends and bring about positive changes though.

Stage 4 – Confident and calculating

This is the stage I feel I’m approaching at the moment. I have a supportive working environment and I can negotiate any adjustments necessary. I am trying to target my energies at selected barriers I face when out at events and external training – and I’m trying to be assertive without getting angry or upset. I spend quite a lot of time calmly explaining and educating. I do a good line in letters of complaint too! ”

Tips on Advocating for Yourself in Work Situations:

1. Find out as much as you can about your employment rights, especially under the Disability Discrimination Act. We can help you with this.
2. Familiarise yourself with company policies and procedures.
3. Express any concerns clearly, at an appropriate time, and listen carefully to the response. You may wish to refer to notes and record answers given.
4. If you feel you are being bullied or treated unfairly, keep a record of incidents and retain copies of any correspondence. This may prove invaluable in the future.
5. Find out if there is a Trade Union at work and consider joining. Some unions also have a disabled members group.
6. If an employer is unaware of their obligations or is unclear about how to support disabled people at work, you can tell them about Breakthrough UK's free, confidential information service for employers.

Getting Involved:

Are you a disabled person with a story related to employment that you would like to share in this magazine? Contributions can be anonymous if preferred.

Would you like to get involved in the planning or production of future issues? Out of pocket expenses & training can be provided to local disabled people.

Do you have examples of good practice in the employment of disabled people that others should know about?

To comment or get involved in future editions, please contact us on:

Telephone: 0161 273 5412

Fax: 0161 274 4053

Minicom: 0161 273 5727

Email: advocacy@breakthrough-uk.co.uk

Independent Employment Advocacy Centre
Breakthrough UK Ltd. BEVC, Aked Close, Ardwick
Manchester M12 4AN

www.breakthrough-uk.com/gmeap.shtml

Please let us know if you require this publication in an alternative format.