

FreeWire

Issue 4: March/April 2008



Taking Action on Bullying

**Disabled People Working
Together to Change Employment**

break  through
Including disabled people



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Welcome to the Fourth edition of our regular magazine on tackling employment barriers. It contains true stories from disabled people about barriers that have come up for them in employment and how these have been dealt with. The main focus in this issue is recognising and taking action on bullying.

Free Wire 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.

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Article	Page
A Barrier to Communication	3
Dealing with Bullying and Harassment	7
Not Blind Enough	9
Independent Advocacy and Information	10
A's Story	12
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 Mark Watts and Mick Kenny for the graphics.

A Barrier to Communication

Donna Bartholomew

“ I want to be free and not worry. I went to special school and it came from there. I always struggled in school. Maybe I didn't accept the problems I had.

I can sign and enjoy working with deaf people. I feel more confident in that environment. People are more understanding. What annoys me with non-disabled people is that they forget I can't hear.

I want to be able to enjoy my job and not be paranoid about not being able to hear people. It's a struggle to find a job that suits, e.g. that doesn't involve using the phone.

I'm in the middle of starting a new part time job now. The RNID have approved the telephone equipment which is funded through Access to Work. I'm waiting to see if it actually works. I won't know until I've tried it. I'm really losing my confidence.

I lost my confidence in my last job. They put me through a lot and I have withdrawn from things a bit. I was taking orders over the phone. I struggled to hear what people were saying and to work out what people were saying when they had strong accents. It was really hard to understand. I had to put people on hold and ask colleagues to take over but they didn't really want to. I could see the looks on their faces. My manager would be funny with me if I couldn't say who was calling "Did you catch who was on the phone?" he would say, and "always ask for a name".

They wouldn't put in any equipment to assist me to use the phone. My husband, who is an audiologist, suggested an amplified telephone system. I would have been able to use this and non-disabled staff could have used it easily too. My boss refused to do this. He just said to my husband that he wasn't interested and put the phone down.

My colleague was taking the m*** out of me saying "you're wasting the business money" because I had to keep putting people on hold. He was laughing and making fun. A lot of my colleagues would just refuse to take the calls. They would say things like: "Did you not hear the phone?" and, "we don't answer the phone". I got no support from anyone. That's why I've lost my confidence with phones, on my mobile I only speak to really close people I know.

I went to see my boss because I was being bullied and threatened. My boss didn't acknowledge this though. He then said to me that "if I'd known your hearing was that bad I wouldn't have employed you". I asked him if he knew he was discriminating against me but he wouldn't say anything.

I felt very hurt by this comment. I couldn't believe he had said it to me. I came out of the room and when I went back in I asked for permission to have the afternoon off as I was so upset by the bullying.

When I got home I broke down. It had a really bad effect on me. It's still really hard now thinking about what happened. My boss then claimed I'd walked out that afternoon to look for another job. He was trying to cover himself. I wasn't allowed back in.

I'd been threatened by someone and I wanted reassurance to go back in. I rang up to ask for another day off. This was so I could come to Breakthrough for some guidance. My boss rang the manageress to get a message to me saying that he did not want me to come back in on Monday.

I rang on Monday to check if it was true. The boss said that in his mind he assumed I was looking for another job and didn't want me on the premises.

I went to the Law Centre and they helped me to get statements together. I put in for a Tribunal because I wanted him to know that he shouldn't be treating people like that. There were two claims, one for disability discrimination and one for harassment.

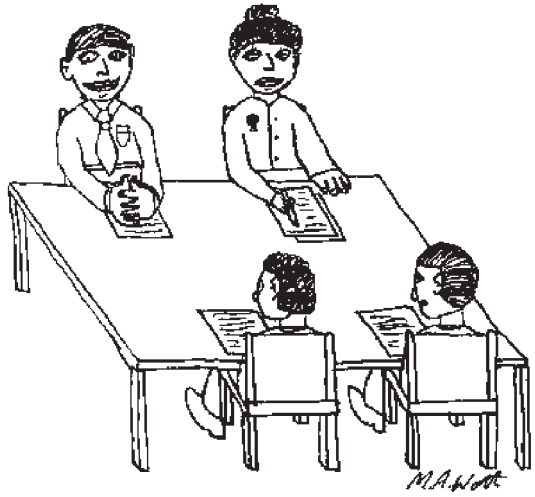
The main reason I did it was because it got me so much when he said that he wouldn't have employed me if he'd known. He also said he only noticed my hearing aid after 3 months – why would that make a difference? I was so upset about it.

It's really affected me when I apply for jobs, I want to back off. I feel I can't complete the job if it involves phone work. Where I am working now they know that I don't answer the phone. It's hard with customers and other people who aren't aware of my hearing loss though.

My advice to other disabled people would be – don't put up with it, get some help.

At the time I didn't know who to turn to. I went on the internet. In the end my Disability Employment Advisor told me about Breakthrough. My advocate has been a lot of help and really supportive.

I accepted his fifth offer to settle out of court. I would rather have gone to Tribunal to get the principle across – I'm not sure if he's taken it on board. However I felt I had to accept the offer because I really couldn't face going in to court, it wasn't for me. I don't want another person to walk in there and get treated the same way. ”

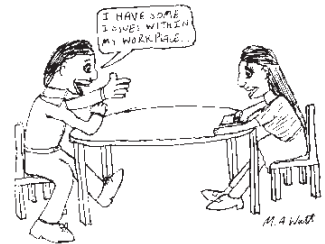


Dealing with Bullying and Harassment

At the Independent Employment Advocacy Centre we regularly speak with disabled people who have been bullied. For example, our advocates estimate that three quarters of the disabled people they have worked with would say that they have experienced some form of bullying or harassment in work situations.

Examples of bullying behaviour that disabled people have reported to us include:

- Sustained personal attacks from line managers
- Verbal abuse and shouting
- Putting someone down in front of others
- Making fun of someone's individual attributes – this is often about someone's impairment or the effects of their impairment.
- Constant challenging about health or impairment
- Belittling remarks.
- Resentful behaviour from colleagues about different treatment
- Managers trying to make people feel bad about requesting adjustments.
- Withholding important information that is required to do the job effectively.



- Being set up to fail.
- Being the butt of impairment related jokes.
- Overloading with work and unrealistic deadlines.
- Exclusion from social activities.

We have now produced a brief booklet which explains what forms bullying and harassment can take and the steps you can take as a disabled person if you are subjected to this in paid or voluntary work. Bullying is never acceptable and there are different options open to you if you find yourself in this difficult position. At the end of the booklet there is a list of organisations that can offer further information and/or support. You can also contact our Centre for guidance on your options.

The responsibility for stopping this behaviour lies squarely with the individual bullies and the organisations they are working for. Details of organisations that can work to help employers put an end to bullying are also given in the booklet.

You can contact us for a free copy of our booklet in your preferred format or download it from our website at:

www.breakthrough-uk.com/gmeap_factsheets.shtml

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.

Not Blind Enough

“ I travel to work every day by train. There is a particular ticket checker at the barrier who has examined my free travel pass regularly for several years. She finds various ways of indicating her disgust that I travel for free but has never directly challenged my entitlement. As this is a regular route I am confident with, I do not feel the need to use my short symbol cane which indicates to people that I have a visual impairment. It's a small thing, you may think – impatient gestures and tutting on a daily basis. Perhaps I should just always show my cane and that would be the end of it?



I regularly attend conferences and events as part of my job. I am in unfamiliar environments and may require assistance. I also want to indicate my impairment to fellow delegates to avoid misunderstandings if I fail to recognise people whom I've spoken to before. I always use my symbol cane in these settings. Yet not so long ago someone standing behind me at a large event at the Bridgewater Hall said very loudly that he hated it when people pretended to be blind when they were not.

Apparently, I don't fit people's expectations. I don't look or behave in a way they can easily label and so I am to be suspected. It may sound trivial but many disabled people feel under constant pressure to explain and justify themselves every day. Others are just judged.

I sometimes have dealings with the media in the course of my work. When it comes to disability, they want to photograph and film the people who are ‘obviously disabled.’ Stereotyping is reinforced daily by lazy journalism. It reinforces the notion that disabled people look disabled and fit into neat categories. ”

What do you think? Please get in touch with your views and comments. Our contact details are on the back page.

Independent Advocacy and Information

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.

We also offer a free information service for disabled people, employers and organisations across Greater

Manchester on good practice in the employment of disabled people. Whether it is a quick query to find out the contact details of a useful organisation or an in-depth query requiring lots of research, you are welcome to contact us in confidence.

Our information centre is open to visitors by appointment. We have resources on employment and employment rights in different formats that you can browse through or take away. We also run regular outreach sessions in different accessible venues across Greater Manchester where you can pop in to see us.

You can also sign up for our regular free bulletins and magazines online, or by getting in touch with us directly. Let us know your preferred format.

Breakthrough UK is controlled by disabled people and over 60% of our staff are disabled people. Our mission is:

‘To promote the **rights, responsibilities** and **respect** of disabled people.’

A's Story

“ The main thing for me is getting my words out. People take the p*** out of me. I've struggled since I was a kid.

At my first job the manager was taking the p*** out of my hearing. I have lost my hearing in one ear. When they said something, I'd say "What?". Then they would be making gestures behind my back which was very annoying.

When people at work were making jokes I couldn't think of anything to say. It sticks in your mind. It's physical and mental. I took to drink and stress tablets as a result just trying to cope with the anger.

I was a lot stronger in my next job biting back. That's the way I've dealt with it.

One woman took the p*** about the deafness in my left ear. I think she said I was thick or something like that. Being deaf I couldn't hear. I went to the manager. The manager went over and told her to say sorry to me. I was happy with that.

I have tried to adapt to it and find different ways to deal with it. In the past I have been suicidal. When I worked at M I was off for a fair bit of time with very bad depression.

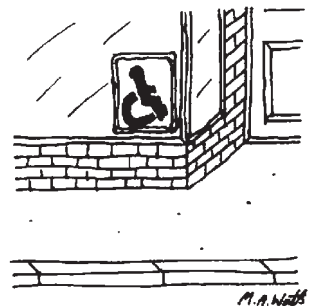
I have also let people get away with it, but not every day. Otherwise you lose your sanity. I won't ever get over it but I want to move on and not be defeatist.

At college I stopped doing carpentry and joinery through people messing around, stirring things and throwing things around. I got a couple of people expelled after I told the college teachers. Also the reading and writing was hard and I wasn't sure if it was the right thing for me. I didn't seek the right help at first because I didn't know you could get support, but when I did get support it was a lot better.

I've done a lot of things I never thought I would in my life like having a girlfriend and a baby. I've had a few jobs. I've worked hard. My work has always been to standard. I've worked hard but my timekeeping has let me down. I've always tried to deal with it in different ways, like using an alarm clock.

I had a very good manager at T. They were sad to see me leave. Someone there was getting smacked over the head with newspapers. The bloke was getting irritated. No-one did anything about that, not even the managers. They thought it was funny, like comedians, but it was basically wrong.

It's annoying when you see a Disability Symbol and they go against it. You see a lot of shops with Disability Symbols just for show. The other side the public don't see like warehouses is a cesspit.



I got stabbed in the leg at a shop by a colleague. That company are not good at employing disabled people. He pulled out a little pointed sharp knife like a serrated steak

knife, aimed it like a dart and threw it at my leg which I wasn't expecting. It was sticking out of my leg, not far from the main artery. I did report it but the police were not interested and made me feel I was wasting their time. There was no first aid person there. I can't believe they let that happen. Everyone stole things as well. The company should have been done. I should have taken it further but couldn't. I was advised that it would have been too much stress and would not have resolved that problem.

My advice to other disabled people being bullied would be:

1. Speak to your manager. The main thing is not to worry about speaking to a manager about what's happening. They are there to make sure you can work. Go to another manager if yours isn't on the right wavelength. Some know more about disability. Some are better listeners than others.
2. Not to use drink. Try to deal with it without using drugs.
3. Try not to be friends with people at the bottom. Be careful who you make friends with, some people pretend.
4. Speak to someone you can trust or go somewhere else if you don't get anywhere.
5. Don't let the bullies get the better of you. They must have a problem. Think 'I'm a better person than them. I'm doing everything I can.' It's sad that they have

nothing better to do with their life. I've had so many compliments about my work. Get on with your work and don't let people distract you.

6. Try and find a place to work where it's more relaxed so you can fit in and people are not taking the p***. Make sure you're in the right job that you feel at home. Bide your time to find the right job.
7. I think it's best to work days rather than nights. You get more support on days. There are managers around and people with First Aid training. On nights you're more on your own. On days you're less likely to get bullied from colleagues. "When the cats away the mice will play".
8. The money isn't worth it if bullying is having a bad effect on you. Go for a job which you know you can stay in.
9. If you go to a meeting always have a representative. If anything is said that shouldn't have been said they can support you. They know what's right and wrong and can step in if need be. Choose a different one if they are not supporting you in the right way.
10. Stand up for yourself! ”

Getting Involved:

We are looking for disabled people who would like to volunteer to contribute to or help produce this magazine. We are especially keen to hear from disabled people who would like to join an editorial committee responsible for its direction and content. Out of pocket expenses can be paid if you get involved.

Do you have an example of good practice in the employment of disabled people?
Do you have artistic skills? If so, please also get in touch.

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

Telephone: 0161 273 5412

Fax: 0161 274 4053

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Email: **advocacy@breakthrough-uk.co.uk**

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