

FreeWire

Double Issue 6: Autumn 2008



Access to Work Bumper Issue

Disabled People Working Together to Change Employment

break  through
Including disabled people



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Welcome to the sixth edition of our regular magazine on tackling employment barriers. This double issue contains true stories from disabled people about barriers that have come up for them in employment and how these have been dealt with. In particular it looks at the government's Access to Work (AtW) Scheme – how disabled people navigate it, common barriers and how to get the best from the system. Suggestions for improvements are also made.

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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 for the pictures in this edition.

What is Access to Work?

(some background information from Breakthrough)

The government's Access to Work (AtW) funding scheme is there to make sure disabled people can compete equally with non-disabled people in employment. For new disabled employees, the scheme meets all the additional costs associated with employing you. If you have been employed for more than 6 weeks when you apply, your employer may have to contribute. Here's what you need to know:

What does Access to Work cover?

- Travel to and from work
- Travel needs within work
- Support workers/communicators/readers
- Equipment
- Adaptations to the working environment

Who is eligible for help?

Any disabled person who:

- is in paid employment (full, part time or self employed)
- is unemployed and needing support with job interviews
- has a confirmed start date for a new job

The person must be a UK resident and the job must be in the UK. Note that employees of central government departments and employees of the Department for Work and Pensions cannot get funding through Access to Work, but can still request advice. In this case adjustments

should then be funded through your department's running costs.

How does it work?

The Disability Employment Adviser at your local Job Centre will be able to put you in touch with the Access to Work team. You can also contact the team directly at the details below. It is your responsibility to contact Access to Work, not your employer's.

New applications for Access to Work support and ongoing payments are now dealt with by the Glasgow office. They are on tel: 0141 950 5327, minicom 0845 602 5850, or email scotland.atw@jobcentreplus.gsi.gov.uk.

New applicants will need to contact Glasgow to start the process. You will then be sent a form to check through and return. You will be asked for details of your line manager or other appropriate person within the workplace. Once the form is received back at AtW, a local Access to Work Advisor will contact you to discuss it further.

If necessary, Access to Work will arrange for an assessment of your requirements. This will usually be from a specialist organisation which has a good understanding of the effects of your impairment. It will take account of your job roles and will usually involve a visit to your workplace. They may ask you if you already know specifically what you need – and if so to supply 3 quotes. In that case they will not do an assessment.

The required support is then costed and agreed. If you have had a full assessment you will be sent a report. It is up to you whether your employer sees this or just gets a summary of what is required. At this point the suggested equipment or support can be bought in by your employer and the costs claimed back from Access to Work.

People who have used Access to Work say that it is important to build up a good relationship with your Access to Work Advisor – more on this later in the issue! They may be able to suggest ways round obstacles such as getting taxi fares set up on account to avoid paying them up front before being refunded.

Don't delay or the employer might have to pay! - All additional costs are funded for new posts. Once you have been in the job for more than 6 weeks the rules change and your employer may have to pay something towards equipment and adaptations. Support workers and travel are always fully funded.

Start the ball rolling as soon as you agree a start date - some support and adjustments can take a bit of time to put in place so don't wait until you have started work.

Access to Work Tips

“ I would find it very difficult to work if I did not have the support I get from Access to Work. The programme has paid for equipment, computer software, a support worker and work related taxi costs. However, I have found that getting the support I need in place can be a very frustrating process. Often I have been the one in the middle trying to settle into a new job without the equipment and support I need and spending lots of time and effort trying to get everything sorted out. This is what I have learnt through trial and error:

Be pleasant but persistent

I used to get very upset and take my anger out on the Access to Work adviser on the other end of the phone. This did not have any positive effect in moving things forward. It also made my adviser ‘unsympathetic.’ I have found that a calmer approach works better. I try to get my adviser to understand all my difficulties and to get her ‘on my side.’ If there are delays I ring up every day and politely ask about progress. Don’t underestimate ‘Pester Power’!

Be prepared to educate your employer

It shouldn’t be this way but the reality is most employers don’t know anything about Access to Work. I got the leaflets and found out all about what is covered and how

the system works. All the organisations I have worked for have agreed to use the scheme once they knew about it.

Write things down and use the ‘escalator’

It’s difficult starting a new job and trying to get IT people and managers to cooperate in putting Access to Work support in place, because nobody wants to be a ‘pain’. If things are not happening and the delay is at the employer end, I now have a plan. I note down who I speak to, when and what I ask for. If phoning and talking face to face don’t work, I start reminding by e-mail or memo, keeping the written record. If nothing happens I list all the times I have tried to get things sorted out in writing to the individual and also copy in their manager. The next step is to complain to the manager, pointing out responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act. This gradual escalation usually pays off in the end – and if it doesn’t then I have a good case to take to a tribunal if necessary!

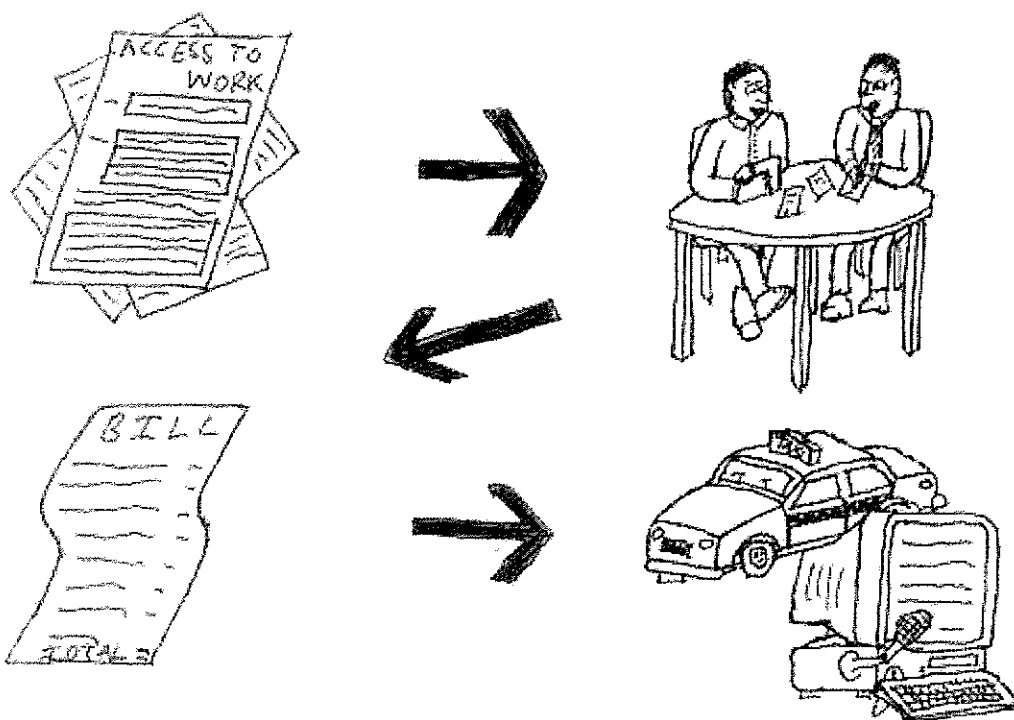
Negotiate

I used to think that Access to Work was very inflexible and that if they made a decision I could not challenge it. Now I see the agreement of support as more of a negotiation. For example, I asked for some support worker hours, which were agreed. However, the hourly rate was too low to recruit someone with the right skills so I asked for it to be increased. This was agreed. Advisers are under pressure to get ‘best value’. This means they always try to find the cheapest option or avoid costs. If their cost driven decision means you aren’t getting what you need

then go back to them and be firm! Advisers do have some discretion in their decision making and if you don't agree with their decision you can take it higher up the management chain.

Get expert support

Organisations like Breakthrough can work with you to sort out what you need to stay in work. Getting moral support and information can make all the difference. I know that expert organisations like Breakthrough understand how 'the system' works and can offer valuable support with Access to Work difficulties. ”



Did You Know?

If you are a local disabled person we can help with information about:

- Problems at work
- Bullying at work
- In-work benefits
- Finding the right help to get into work
- Understanding your rights at work



You can get free monthly updates from Breakthrough about employing disabled people by email.

You can come into our accessible office to look at useful resources and use our information point. Assistance is available if required.

You can download factsheets and booklets on employment issues on our website at:
www.breakthrough-uk.com/factsheets.shtml

Get in touch with our friendly information team to find out more:

Tel: 0161 273 5412

Answerphone Minicom: 0161 273 5727

Email: advocacy@breakthrough-uk.co.uk

Employing PAs through Access to Work

“ Even though having a Personal Assistant (PA) at work can help to transform your working life and improve your job performance, finding, employing and managing can seem like a daunting prospect. And with good reason – organisations employ HR experts to deal with many of these steps. However, by following a few simple guidelines, you can make sure that you find a PA who is up to the job and you can get along with, and avoid some of the legal pitfalls that come with it.

Getting started

The first step is to make the case for needing a PA, and for you to truly understand which areas you would most benefit from support in. Audit your duties and decide which ones you may need PA support with. Also consider which general areas of your work you would benefit from PA support with – for example, when travelling to and attending events outside the office, using the telephone, handling conflict situations. A good way to do this is to keep a work diary for a week or two, and then spot trends.

This information will help you to find a PA that matches your personal requirements, and will help you to justify the need for PA support to your assessor and Access to Work.

Recruiting a PA

It is important to write a job description and person specification for the PA for a number of reasons: to ensure that candidates clearly understand the duties of the role they are applying for; to help you recruit someone who is capable of performing these duties and meets the person specification; to ensure transparency in the recruitment process and keep inside good employment practices. Your organisation's HR department or another manager should be able to help you with this.

The job description should describe the main duties that the PA will have, ideally using bullet points and short concise sentences. There are thousands of examples that you can look at on the internet – for example online recruitment agencies like www.monster.co.uk or www.adecco.co.uk. Refer to the work diary you may have kept and again, think about what support you need from a PA, such as 'accompanying *your job title* to external events' and 'writing reports, letters and emails'.

It is strongly advisable to include something like 'Other duties and administrative tasks as and when necessary' – this helps you to maintain flexibility, as it can be hard to know at the outset exactly what you will require your PA to do. For many people, it is also a good idea to include something like 'provide holistic support to *your job title*'; in many cases, the PA is not required only for administrative support, but may be required to provide mentoring, assist with mobility and so on. You can be more specific about this if you wish.

Think of the person specification as your PA 'wish list'. It should describe the skills and attributes of your ideal PA, which can be divided into 'essential' and 'desirable' categories. For example:

Essential

- Competent user of Microsoft Word and PowerPoint
- Friendly, positive, and professional manner
- Ability to write clear and correct English (e.g. in emails, reports, letters)
- Excellent organisational skills
- Minimum 2 years experience in an office environment
- Ability to take direction

Desirable

- Previous experience as a PA and/or in the manufacturing sector (put your sector here)
- Degree-level qualification
- Experience in a mentoring or coaching role
- Flexibility over hours worked
- Numeracy skills and competency with Microsoft Excel

Applying to Access to Work

Once you have prepared these documents, you're ready to approach Access to Work. It is strongly recommended that you prepare them before getting in touch with Access to Work, as it will show that you have thought carefully about why you need a PA, and will strengthen your case considerably.

Contact the Access to Work team on tel: 0141 950 5327 (voice), 0845 602 5850 (textphone). Tell them that you wish to be assessed for PA support, and about the paperwork that you have prepared. They will then arrange for, and cover the costs of, an assessment of needs conducted by an independent assessor who will report their findings to Access to Work.

If your application is successful, Access to Work will allocate an hourly rate for PA support. Do not be afraid to negotiate this. For example, as my PA accompanies me to high-level meetings and training events, I negotiated a higher rate to ensure that the remuneration offered would be attractive enough to the correct calibre of candidate.

Recruiting Your PA

There are many free opportunities to advertise the job vacancy. Websites such as GumTree (use google to find your local webpage) have job vacancy sections. Think of your own network, and all the places you could advertise it, such as university notice boards/career service, disability mailing lists, and so on. Informal networks work too, such as emailing the job advert to people you know, and asking them to forward it to their network too. Also speak to your HR department or manager. They may have places that they recruit candidates from, or CVs sent by prospecting employees who may be suitable.

Access to Work cover all recruitment costs, so if you have difficulties finding a candidate using these methods you

may be able to secure funding for advertising e.g. in mainstream media such as a newspaper. These “recruitment costs” can also extend to Access to Work covering any compliance-related costs that may be incurred in relation to a PA being on your workplace, for example, the cost of a Criminal Records Bureau check.

Similarly, if you have difficulties securing an appropriate candidate, using a recruitment agency may be an option. Agencies will advertise the job, and find, screen and test candidates then send suitable ones to you for interview. They will also legally be your PA’s employer (see below), deal with paying your PA on a weekly basis - and can dismiss the PA on your behalf if for any reason you’re not happy with them.

If you can demonstrate that you’ve tried other recruitment methods but have run into difficulties, Access to Work may agree to pay agency fees on top of the allocated hourly rate.

Finally, if you do decide to employ a PA directly (i.e. through your organisation), you may incur employer liability. This area of employment law is too complicated to go into here, but it is very important to get your HR department, or an outside expert, to help you with this (e.g. drawing up a contract, including a probationary period, providing for possibilities such as poor performance).

I would advise against employing a PA personally (i.e. paying them from your own pocket and reclaiming it

through Access to Work), given the sums of money involved, and the personal liability that you may incur in relation to national insurance and tax – although for some people this is unavoidable.

Managing your PA

For many people, having a PA may be the first time that they have been someone's boss. Although much depends on the inter-personal relationship that develops, here are some key pointers:

- Decide in advance what kind of working relationship you wish to have with your PA – will you require mentoring and emotional support, or will the PA strictly be performing administrative tasks.
- Make clear to your PA what your needs and expectations are. Take time to discuss this when they first begin, and revisit it at regular intervals.
- Don't be afraid to praise! It is very motivating to your PA, and also means that you can give feedback about areas that may need improving.
- Most bookshops have a good selection of management books. Find one that appeals to you on 'managing people'
- Remember, your PA is there to support you. Don't be afraid to make the most of them. ””

Key Points – What Disabled People Have Said To Us:

- **Be informed:** analyse your work duties, do your research on what could be useful whether equipment or support. Build up your case.
- **Develop a good relationship** with your Access to Work advisor and try to see things from their perspective
- **Use your negotiation skills** – there is usually more than one way to do things
- **Be persistent**, don't give up.
- **Consider all the alternatives** – e.g. employing a PA via an agency, directly or through your employer. Be aware of your legal responsibilities if directly employing a PA.
- **Get support** if things don't go to plan, don't struggle on your own, organisations like Breakthrough can offer support and guidance. Many of us have been there!

My Experiences of the Access to Work Process

John Wood

“ It is a good scheme on the whole. When it does work it is a very positive thing!

The beginning

In the beginning the process was difficult in the way in which the funding had been organised for my personal assistant. The way in which the payments were worked out caused unnecessary problems too.

The delays in payment caused severe finance issues for my personal assistant and although it was not my responsibility I did feel the process caused problems that I could not control.

After a while, it got so bad I was thinking about giving up work which was difficult because I too would have been in debt but it was the lesser of two evils.

What is the process really like?

The process is long winded, time consuming and complex. Payment forms have to go to Glasgow, processed at Cardiff and then money is paid into the bank account of my Personal Assistant.

There needs to be more time spent on helping people to deal with overpayments, underpayments and late payments. The answer should not always fall at the door of a disabled person.

Asking for help

I approached my MP who contacted Access to Work (AtW). AtW sent a letter to me saying it wasn't their fault and "it's just the system". I felt no-one was listening and everything fell back to me when it definitely wasn't my fault.

My job and the company where I work

Luckily Human Resources supported me. They provide a payroll service and invoice me every quarter when the money comes in from Access to Work and Direct payments. Of course I am still the employer but the payroll team sort out the national insurance and tax. This means I can stay at work, ensure my PA is paid for the work they do and I am therefore more relaxed.

My PA is paid on the 15th of every month so they are not left waiting for money or being out of pocket. My solution is right for me, it does not mean it will work for everyone but it's another idea that may help others like me to stay in work.

Resources

If the Government is serious about enabling disabled people to access paid employment then resources need to be available for them to achieve it.

Support for us is not one offs either. As our confidence and skills grow so at times do our needs. We may need help with other types of support or equipment or we may need help or advice different to before.

If a person wants to work then there needs to be the support and advice there to enable them to do so. The worst thing for a disabled person is to have a bad experience which instantly knocks a person's confidence and self esteem. In life these things do happen but with a Government service that is there to "enable" surely that is what they should be doing and not as they are now, making things more difficult than it should be.

Support

People need support when they require it and some may need more than others. It's not a one size fits all approach.

What AtW could do better?

AtW need to listen more to the people they help. We are after all their customers. It is hard enough being a disabled person and working but putting unnecessary barriers in our way only makes such a brilliant idea take more time and be difficult to access.

As things stand the power is in the hands of AtW. The recipients can feel powerless and something of an afterthought.

How they could change the way they do things?

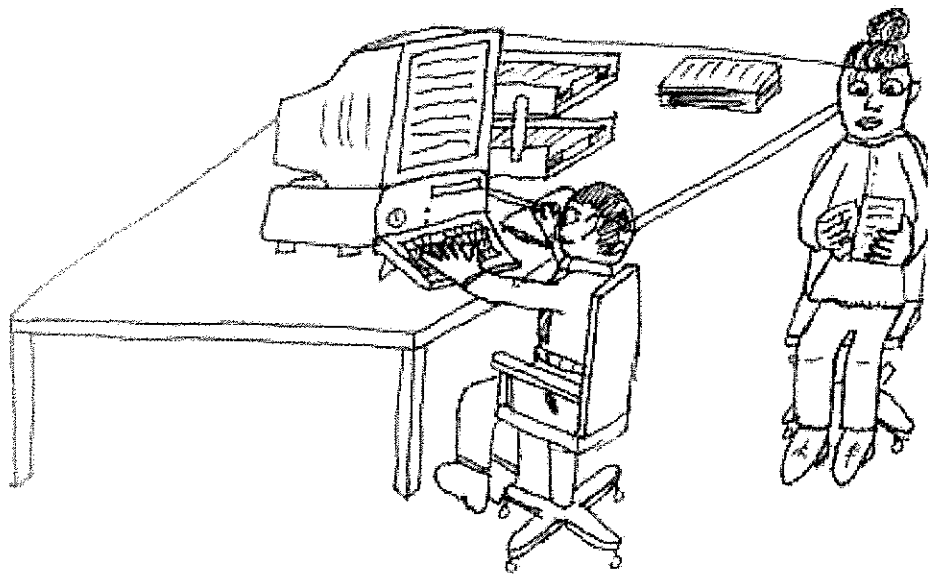
- Access to Work need to develop a three way partnership with both the AtW Claimant, AtW team and the employer. It is after all a three way partnership, one does not work without the other.
- A named contact per individual that knows your issues so you do not need to share the information time and time again.
- Get Disability Employment Advisers (DEA) to offer help as well through the process rather than just in the beginning.
- Have more resources available to support the process.
- Make the process easier to understand, less time consuming and organise payments better.
- Learn how to be more open and approachable.
- Trained staff who know what they are talking about
- Think about providing an ongoing support service, this will ensure equipment is being used effectively, people are being supported and people to feel there is someone there if things go wrong.

What are the options for a disabled person experiencing problems?

- Doing it yourself with a supportive employer
- Ask Breakthrough for help
- Ask local MP to assist you

Advertising

Access to Work need to publicise themselves more so that people know the service is available. However they need to get their service better first so that when people do contact them they all get the same GOOD service. ”



In Your Area

The Advocacy Centre holds regular sessions in local community venues where you can come to us for employment information or support. Contact us for details or visit our Outreach page online at:

www.breakthrough-uk.com/outreach.shtml

What Helps?

“ 1. It helps if you know what you want – what you think you will need. Do your research first. For example, with me I knew I wanted some kind of software to help with spelling. I downloaded a trial version of Penfriend to try and I also knew about Read & Write Gold. The AbilityNet website has lots of useful information on Assistive Technology: www.abilitynet.co.uk. I also looked at what I wanted in a laptop and costed it up.

You won't get everything in your wish list, but it's best to get an idea. Think about what could really help you. Be proactive. Some people won't know what they need but try to do some preparation if you can so you know what might be an option.

2. On the first call you make to AtW try and build up a relationship with the person you speak with. They will send you a form but try and have a chat with them anyway and **get a name**.

3. When you send the form back also include photocopies of specs and photos of things you think might be useful. You could say “This is what I've seen which may help me, will discuss with the assessor.” Don't make any demands!

4. Once you do get an assessment let them know what you have found but pander to their ego – say something like: “you're the expert – what can you suggest?”. They

will then be friendlier and tell you what could help. At the end of the day it's compromise.

No one piece of software fits all and what one person with the same impairment needs could be very different from what works for you.

You need to build up a rapport. Put effort into it. You only get one hour with them and they make a judgment on what you need. Make them a cup of tea, make them feel comfy.

5. Make sure you have a named person. Give them a fortnight then contact them and ask how things are going.

AtW will still look for the cheapest option on the quotes. In my case the cheapest option was not available, the next one up was a higher spec. As I had a rapport I could negotiate to upgrade it to the next level.

“Does it help to be polite?”

They will want to help you if you build up the right relationship. They may not understand what your requirements are at the outset.

Be prepared to go through the Job Description and Person Specification. Look at everything involved and think laterally – what do I do day to day e.g. carrying files from one end of the office to another. What would make it easier? ””

Accessing Access to Work

Michelle Dutton

“ Starting your first job since becoming disabled is stressful in itself. I was starting a new job, setting up a project from scratch and did not have any software or equipment in place to enable me to do this effectively for the first few months. I used a job broker and they didn't tell me about alternatives to getting equipment from AtW in the early days. For example, Action for Blind People could have loaned me equipment whilst waiting for my ATW assessment and equipment:

www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk, tel: 0800 915 4666.

The system for assessment and getting the equipment is far too slow. You obviously need to be in the job to fully assess your needs, but more information needs to be available before you start work. AtW could be providing this, e.g. info on other organisations that can assist you in the short term. It would be useful to have parallel support to ATW. For example something that explains how the process should work and pitfalls. To get other peoples experience of AtW, I would have liked the opportunity to visit other people with my impairment to see what works for them.

The technical assessment from AtW was excellent, really good. They gave me very expensive equipment, which has been extremely helpful. Cost didn't seem to be an

issue but I don't think that has been everyone's experience.

The other big thing for me was ordering. I was lucky because work gave me time to do it, but this would not always be the case. It's the burden of ordering everything on the assessment form, especially as a visually impaired person as there was a lot of different technological stuff to order. It all has a big impact on my working hours.

AtW can be difficult to navigate. My main issue with AtW has been the claim forms, especially for travel within work. I'm quite bright but I found them very complicated as well as difficult to read. The forms were not in an accessible format and the email versions they sent did not take all the digits of my bank account number...kind of defeats the object really!

Five months of struggling to fill out forms that were not in an accessible format led to a crisis. I was paying out half my wages to the taxi firm and this was causing me a lot of stress. I couldn't carry on worse off than on incapacity benefit. It was affecting my work. Individuals were very nice but could not leave the building nor could I visit them for assistance.

I was so distraught the only thing I could do was to ring them and say I would have to either get help with my forms or resign. That day things changed dramatically. They actually started taking some action to sort things out with my travel claims. They sent an advisor to my home and we sat and worked things out. We decided I needed support to fill the forms out and some other things at work

which were taking up lots of my time. I was given permission to employ a support worker. It's still not perfect. I have a great relationship with my advisor and feel really supported.

Organisations need to work together to ensure that disabled people are aware of all the options open to them. The 'Find Out' guide in Stockport is a good example of this. Information is the key, it is the first point in the 7 principles of independent living that disabled people have drawn up for a reason. Information needs to be publicised correctly as well as just existing. People need to know where to go and they need to know that the information is available. It's no good hiding information away where people can't get at it, it needs to be out there in places where disabled people go – pubs, doctors surgeries, chemists, libraries.

We need to feedback disabled people's real experiences to AtW. It would also be useful if people going through the process could link in with others with similar experiences (Michelle says people are welcome to talk / visit her at Disability Stockport to find out how she managed). Everything is very individualised with AtW so it's useful to talk with other people in a similar situation to break down the isolation.

My advice for other disabled people would be to network with others who have been through the process. Find ways – maybe through impairment specific groups - to seek people out who may have similar requirements to yourself. This really helped me. It can help you not to lose

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heart. It can be despairing at times because not only do you have to do your actual job and prove yourself, but compared to a non-disabled new starter you're also going to have to do all this for the first 7 weeks without the equipment you need.

AtW could have a template on their website that you could use to see how to fill out the forms correctly and maybe some training sessions on how to put the forms in. This could be part of the assessment. It would be a good subject for a skills workshop looking at filling out the forms, who is in their team, how the system works etc. You should also be able to attend courses beforehand so you can find out how to use the technology you might need. I would have felt much more confident if I had done my course before going back to work.

In employment related training they could also add in some training on using access technology and equipment. They also always seem to go for the most expensive equipment suppliers. It would be good if people could research the options available before starting a job, e.g. attending Independent Living Centres, going to supplier's events, so you have a clear idea of what could be useful to you.

I have to say that each team member has been fantastic. It's the system, the forms. I've built up a good relationship over the years so they know what I need, but I haven't seen any changes to the bureaucracy - in fact only today I received a letter saying that all forms should now be posted to Glasgow, so here we go again!!!

I am also worried about proposals in the recent government consultation to ask employers to make more of a contribution to AtW funded support. I think this will be a disincentive to employers taking on disabled people if this happens, because of the cost implications. Being visually impaired, my equipment cost put me over the £10,000 barrier. Had this not been so my employers would have had to contribute to my travel within work payments. If I was up against another candidate for the job and my costs of travel to and from clients would have meant a cost to my employers much greater than mileage allowance, would the car driver have been chosen? The government has to invest money into Access to Work, as well as the support to get people off benefits.

Looking at retention

When you first get diagnosed, you're likely to be thinking in a medical model way about your new impairment and going through a grieving cycle of loss and adjustment. It's hard then to immediately adjust to someone from AtW saying "you can use this equipment", especially if you're in the mindset about being unable to do everything yourself and you're resisting adjusting to the change. "e.g. there's no way I can use that, if I can't do the job the way I used to, I can't do it at all" People need time to adjust when they have a new impairment and employers need to allow for that. Employers tend to think "Get your adaptations and get sorted or get out".

Mothers can have maternity leave for up to five years and go back to their old job. Disabled people do not have this grace to readjust.

I worked as a nurse. The NHS gives you quite a good length of time off sick if you need it. I was off work because I couldn't do my particular job. There was plenty I could have done but it wasn't offered. Instead I was at home isolated and became depressed. A familiar cycle to many of us. This could be prevented so easily by redeployment. The NHS lost my skills, I lost my self esteem...not a good thing for either of us.

If we could have job protection for the length of time we need to readjust it would greatly assist retention. This could be offered as an option we can choose if we wish.

AtW sell themselves in a very glossy way. They need to be realistic about the barriers disabled people face when going through the process and acknowledge that it is not straightforward.

I suppose what I am trying to say is Access to Work can be excellent, but, like everything it has good and not so good points. We need as disabled people to feed this back and they need to understand where it fails and address it. We recently had someone talk at a conference about access to work. They knew it would be a Q&A session but appeared stunned when asked about its failings. The speaker was unprepared and shocked. Wake up Access to Work, we are not prepared to be amazed by what you offer, we want access not just to work but also access to YOU. ””

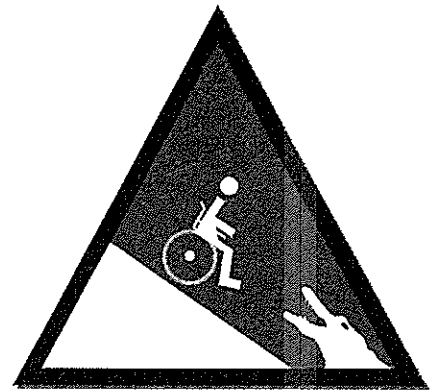
Getting Involved:

Would you like to see your ideas in print?

Do you want to share your views on employment with other disabled people?

You can contribute to Free Wire by:

- Being interviewed
- Writing an article
- Commenting on articles
- Drawing pictures
- Editing the magazine



Out of pocket expenses can be paid.

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Fax: 0161 274 4053

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Email: advocacy@breakthrough-uk.co.uk

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www.breakthrough-uk.com/gmeap.shtml

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