

Access to Work⁸⁵

5.1 Employee experience

Once a disabled person has secured a job offer, they begin the process of onboarding or transitioning into their new role. Only at this point can the Access to Work process be triggered⁸⁶. Access to Work can provide a range of ‘elements’ such as support workers and mental health support services, and has been transformative for many disabled people. The most common element provided through Access to Work is ‘Special Aids and Equipment,’ which includes assistive technologies. In our research, however, the most positive onboarding experiences came from those whose employers chose to bypass Access to Work and resource assistive technologies themselves. Our research highlighted a number of issues disabled employees face as they navigate the Access to Work process.

5.1.1 Starting work without technological adjustments in place

As discussed in Section 2.2.2, current provision of AT through Access to Work can take many months, and it is important to understand the barriers this can cause, even for employees who are not on short-term work placements. The process of making an application, being assessed, and receiving the appropriate technology and training can take many months⁸⁷. Recent research by Scope highlighted how it often takes up to three months **after starting a job** for equipment purchased through Access to Work to arrive⁸⁸. Even after the technology has arrived, some employees will need additional time to be trained on using the technology. This can result in multiple barriers, including:

- The employee attempts to start their new job without the technology in place, causing distress and poorer performance;
- Employees pay for adjustments themselves so as not to ‘burden’ their employer⁸⁹;
- Employees with the most significant needs may be unable to complete any work.

Disabled employees who have overcome the initial barriers of finding and securing work deserve systems of support that do not simply create more barriers themselves.

⁸⁵ For more information on Access to Work, see Information Box in Section 2.2.2

⁸⁶ Disabled people with a job interview are eligible for Access to Work-funded communication support, but only for employing an interpreter or communicator, not assistive technology that removes barriers to communication

⁸⁷ Commission evidence sessions

⁸⁸ Scope (2019), ‘Our Lives, Our Journey: Starting a new job’. Available at: <https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/research-policy/our-lives-our-journey/starting-a-new-job/>

⁸⁹ Ibid

5.1.2 Inappropriate assistive technology recommendations

As an employer of blind and partially sighted people, we always seem to have to battle with assessors to put in place the right technology...we have never spoken to an assessor with specialist knowledge of the support blind and partially-impaired people need in the workplace⁹⁰.

A recurring theme in the research was the difficulty employees face in getting the right assistive technology for their specific needs through Access to Work, with the process regularly described as a “fight”⁹¹ or a “battle”⁹². Access to Work-recommended assistive technologies may be inappropriate for a variety of reasons including:

- Out of date, old versions of software and hardware;
- Incompatibility with an employer’s internal system;
- Not meeting employer data and IT security standards;
- Being inaccessible for an employee with multiple disabilities (e.g. a screen reader for a hearing-impaired dyslexic employee);
- Not fit-for-purpose for the employee’s work environment (e.g. a laptop and computer-based screen reader recommended for a gas engineer who needs mobile technology for reading support during visits to people’s homes);
- Recommended as a cheaper alternative to more appropriate human support.

Assistive Technology suppliers report months-long wait times to get inappropriate AT orders amended, significantly lengthening the time it takes for an employee to get their support in place^{93,94}. The funding of poor-quality assessments and inappropriate assistive technologies is not only harmful to employees and employers, it also represents a waste of taxpayer money.

5.1.3 Administrative burden

The Access to Work process requires that the employee personally manage the administrative tasks involved. The burden this represents for disabled employees should not be underestimated, and there are reports of people not completing the process as “it was just not worth it”⁹⁵. Some employees reported that they ended up having to use the administrative support provided by Access to Work to complete Access to Work admin, rather than its intended purpose supporting the employee to do their actual job role.

Applicants may face additional barriers to the Access to Work process specific to their impairment. For example, those with certain learning disabilities may need human support to understand and complete the application⁹⁶. D/deaf employees have reported Access to Work staff continuing to try to telephone them in spite of having explained that they cannot use the phone and need to communicate via email. In general, the lack of a single point of contact/case manager for applications was identified as the cause of administrative and communicative difficulties^{97,98}.

⁹⁰ Martin Sigworth of Thomas Pocklington Trust, Commission evidence session

⁹¹ Business Disability Forum: Submitted evidence

⁹² Commission evidence session

⁹³ Hands Free Technology: Submitted evidence

⁹⁴ Commission evidence session

⁹⁵ Business Disability Forum: Submitted evidence

⁹⁶ Commission evidence session

⁹⁷ Commission Evidence Session

⁹⁸ Scope (2019), ‘Our Lives, Our Journey: Starting a new job’. Available at: <https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/research-policy/our-lives-our-journey/starting-a-new-job/>

5.2 Access to Work - employer experience

Employers with experience of Access to Work report difficulties with the process in relation to the provision of assistive technologies. First and foremost, the lack of direct communication between Access to Work needs assessors and employers is the source of a range of problems including the recommendation of technologies that are incompatible with employers' internal systems or that do not meet data protection and security standards⁹⁹. Because employers have no means to resolve these issues with Access to Work directly, some report their employee needing to go through the entire Access to Work application again to get the issue sorted. Managers also report significant concerns about the stress the process causes for their disabled staff, and frustration that employee requests for direct communication between employer and Access to Work staff are repeatedly turned down¹⁰⁰.

Another area of difficulty for employers is Access to Work's funding model. First, the model does not support ongoing software upgrades or IT repairs. Access to Work's assessment model is to provision for a year's worth of support and then contact the recipient 12 weeks prior to the end of that year. This is a significant concern as new versions of software may be released within that first year, and using out of date software can compromise the data protection and security systems of employers. Also, the use of out of date software can prevent AT from working properly with internal systems, which one employer described as "the gradual degradation of the user experience"¹⁰¹. Finally, the Access to Work funding model requires employers to pay for equipment and then claim the costs back from the government. Smaller organisations and SMEs in particular may struggle with the initial costs of technologies and delays with reimbursement via Access to Work payments¹⁰².

Some organisations report that they no longer use Access to Work as a direct result of these issues¹⁰³. However, many self-employed people and smaller organisations will not have the resources and internal expertise to bypass Access to Work. Poor employer experiences with onboarding disabled staff can not only be costly, but can reinforce the misconception that hiring disabled people is more expensive and difficult than hiring non-disabled people¹⁰⁴.

⁹⁹ Business Disability Forum: Submitted evidence

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Commission evidence session

¹⁰³ Commission evidence session

¹⁰⁴ The Open University (2019), 'Access to Apprenticeships'. Available at: <https://www.open.ac.uk/business/access-to-apprenticeships>

5.3 Access to Work barriers to successful AT provision

The following points were identified as barriers to Access to Work providing suitable and timely assistive technologies.

5.3.1 Access to Work advisors and assessors don't know enough about assistive technologies

The rapid pace of technology development represents a significant challenge to Access to Work assessors. These professionals are responsible for recommending AT that is best for the specific needs of an individual and their workplace and that meet the government's standards for value for money, all within a short time-frame¹⁰⁵. Our findings indicate that there is low awareness of specialist technologies for specific impairments amongst Access to Work assessors. This is especially frustrating for employees who know what they need but have little recourse to access AT that is not specifically recommended by their assessor¹⁰⁶. It is particularly counter-productive given that many AT users report that assessors have a poor understanding of how AT can support employees working in non-office environments, or how to ensure AT can support working in multiple locations (e.g. home and office).

5.3.2 Guidance vs reality: Access to Work communicating with employers

Poor communication with employers can result in the provision of AT that is incompatible with an employer's internal systems or that does not meet security standards. The government's Access to Work factsheet for employers sets clear expectations for this communication:

"After your employee makes an application for Access to Work, an adviser will contact you [the employer] and your employee to discuss what help might be available. Your employee may need an assessment of the workplace to assess their needs.

If your employee knows what support is needed, they do not need to have an assessment. An Access to Work adviser will discuss the award with you and your employee to develop a tailored package of support"¹⁰⁷.

The Access to Work Assessor Provider Guidance similarly describes how assessors should communicate with employers as part of their holistic assessment process, with specific mention of technological compatibility:

"Employer Section – the assessment must detail the capacity and knowledge of the organisation to highlight any areas of awareness or training to be addressed. It must address the compatibility of solutions with employers IT"¹⁰⁸.

However, many employers report limited or no communication to ensure assistive technology provision is tailored to the needs and constraints of the work environment. This in turn results in lengthy, frustrating delays in procuring usable technology.

¹⁰⁵ BDWP (2021), 'Access to Work holistic assessments provider guidance'. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-work-holistic-assessments-provider-guidance>

¹⁰⁶ Commission evidence session

¹⁰⁷ DWP (2021), 'Access to Work factsheet for employers'. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-work-guide-for-employers/access-to-work-factsheet-for-employers>

¹⁰⁸ DWP (2021), 'Access to Work holistic assessments provider guidance'. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-work-holistic-assessments-provider-guidance>

5.3.3 The Government and Access to Work assessors don't know if AT recommendations are successful

When inappropriate AT is recommended, employers and employees report significant difficulties fixing the situation. Access to Work advisers are required to follow up with recipients to check the quality of provision:

- “19. As each element is delivered or implemented, you must check with the customer that it meets their assessed needs.
20. If the customer's needs are not adequately met, record this as part of the case history. An updated business case will then be required to secure any additional funding required for alternative solutions”¹⁰⁹.

However, this has not matched the experiences of employers and employees, who report being unable to communicate ongoing difficulties with a 'case manager', resulting in needing to start the application process from the beginning. This is also problematic because there is no mechanism for assessors to follow up with Access to Work recipients. This means assessors cannot learn from past successes and failures to improve their recommendations in future.

These issues are compounded by a general lack of data on the efficacy of Access to Work elements including AT. The government sets standards for some related aspects including the speed and quality of the assessments¹¹⁰. However, these standards do not include any measure of the success of recommendations for removing barriers to work, and therefore the government is essentially unable to assess the value for money from both the taxpayer's and recipient's perspective.

¹⁰⁹ DWP (2021), 'Access to Work: staff guide'. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-work-staff-guide/access-to-work-staff-guide>

¹¹⁰ DWP (2021), 'Access to Work holistic assessments provider guidance'. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-work-holistic-assessments-provider-guidance>