

1. Introduction

This report examines the role of assistive technologies (AT) and digital accessibility in disabled people's transitions into employment, with a focus on how the UK can use technology to support disabled people to achieve their maximum personal and economic potential. Training opportunities, recruitment practices and job roles are increasingly incorporating digital tools or moving online entirely. Unless this is accompanied by the use of tools and practices that allow everyone to access the digital world, disabled people risk being further locked out of employment opportunities. Assistive technologies and inclusive practices represent a key piece of the puzzle for closing both the Digital Divide and the Disability Employment Gap.

Assistive technologies are powerful tools to remove digital barriers and open opportunities for education, training, and work for disabled people. For example, screen readers remove text-based barriers for people with visual impairment and dyslexia. Unfortunately, our research has found that current systems of AT provision may be unintentionally creating barriers, especially at key transition points. This report examines the transitions from education and from unemployment into employment, as well as the realities of starting a new job, in relation to disability and digital accessibility.

The report begins with an overview of our key findings and recommendations for government, educational institutions, and employers. Chapter 2 examines AT and the transition from education into employment while Chapter 3 explores the experiences of unemployed disabled people who are not in education and their access to assistive technologies and training. Chapter 4 focuses on employer practices and experiences regarding digital inclusion and hiring disabled staff, followed by a discussion of AT and Access to Work (Chapter 5).

1.1 The necessity of digital skills and accessibility for securing employment

“ What brought my anxiety out even more going for jobs was, ‘what if they ask me to read that or do something on a computer?’...It was on my mind constantly. I just didn't know anything about assistive technology. I've had my disability my whole life and if I'd known the computer could help me that would have been amazing¹. ”

In an age when digital skills are a 'near-universal requirement' for obtaining work², it needs to be universally understood that 'standard' software and applications are not currently accessible to many disabled people. Building accessibility in at the start should be a goal for technology developers, but until that happens disabled people will need access to assistive technology and skills training, and this should be before they enter the job market. At least 82% of all online advertised roles in the UK require applicants to have some level of digital skills³, with Covid-19 ways of working accelerating the digital transformation of employer recruitment practices⁴.

¹ Anonymous JobCentre Plus customer: Interviewee

² DCMS (2019), 'No longer optional: employer demand for digital skills', p 7. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807830/No_Longer_Optional_Employer_Demand_for_Digital_Skills.pdf

³ APPG on Digital Skills (2020), 'The impact of COVID-19 and lessons learned for improving digital skills in the future', p 5. Available at: <https://connectpa.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Digital-Skills-APPG-report-2020.pdf>

⁴ Twilio (2020), 'Covid-19 digital engagement report', p 7. Available at: https://pages.twilio.com/rs/294-TKB-300/images/UPDATE_Aug_Twilio_COVID-19_Digital_Engagement_Report.pdf

The government recognises accessibility skills as a prerequisite to acquiring the higher-level digital skills needed for work⁵. However, many disabled people trying to enter the job market do not have sufficient access to assistive technologies and the training to use them. Currently, only 38% of people with a physical impairment have the digital skills needed for work⁶. Even with sufficient technology and skills, job seekers may be disabled by inaccessible digital practices. For example, a job seeker may be required to fill out an online application form that is incompatible with their assistive technologies.

Disabled job seekers who are unable to use accessibility tools and assistive technologies, or who try to use these tools with inaccessible services, may be prevented from⁷:

- Accessing the internet to find jobs and training opportunities;
- Completing online application forms and tests;
- Participating in virtual interviews;
- Engaging with disability and/or employment support services (many of which have moved online as a result of Covid-19);
- Accessing onboarding training modules;
- Working to the best of their ability during crucial initial months of employment.

Without digital accessibility, disabled job seekers may be unable to demonstrate their true abilities and skills levels during the recruitment and onboarding processes. These barriers can result in poor outcomes for disabled people such as having a limited range of job roles to apply for, being forced to 'out' oneself as disabled before one is ready to share that information, being under-employed in relation to one's skills levels and ability to contribute, or ultimately not receiving a job offer at all.

⁵ DfE (2019), 'Essential digital skills framework'. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/essential-digital-skills-framework/essential-digital-skills-framework#digital-foundation-skills>

⁶ Lloyds Bank (2020), 'UK Consumer Digital Index 2020', p 54.

⁷ Commission evidence session