

4. Employers and digital inclusion

Employers have a key role to play in ensuring recruitment and on-boarding works for disabled applicants. To do inclusive recruitment well, employers must take digital inclusion seriously. In this section, we detail the ways organisations may, without realising, be preventing disabled people from successfully applying for work. We also look at the significant barriers employers themselves face on their accessibility journey.

4.1 Inaccessible digital recruitment practices

Increasing numbers of employers are actively seeking to hire more disabled staff⁶⁵. However, employers may inadvertently create barriers for disabled job seekers in the recruitment process, e.g. by wrongly assuming that disabled people can access 'standard' digital systems. These barriers can include^{66,67}:

- Job is advertised on an inaccessible website;
- Application documents are not properly formatted to work with assistive technologies;
- Online application systems (including forms, selection tests, and virtual interview platforms) are incompatible with assistive technologies;
- The use of AI-powered recruitment tools that are biased against disabled applicants⁶⁸ (e.g. AI-assessed video interviews may disadvantage those with non-standard speech, eye contact, or body movement).

Such practices can have the following effects on disabled job seekers⁶⁹:

- Job seeker has access to a limited range of job roles to apply to (compared to their non-disabled peers);
- Job seeker requires human support to find jobs to apply for;
- Applicant cannot demonstrate their true abilities (compared to their non-disabled peers);
- Applicant is forced to 'out' themselves as disabled to request adjustments and complete the recruitment process;
- Applicant ultimately does not receive a job offer.

⁶⁵ Open University (2019), 'Access to Apprenticeships', p 7. Available at: <https://www.open.ac.uk/business/access-to-apprenticeships>

⁶⁶ Cabinet Office (2018), 'Lord Holmes Review: Opening up public appointments to disabled people', p 26. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-lord-holmes-review>

⁶⁷ 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/>

⁶⁸ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/957259/Review_into_bias_in_algorithmic_decision-making.pdf

⁶⁹ Evidence session

4.2 Barriers to employer inclusive digital practices

Employers may struggle with inclusive digital practices as a result of a) low levels of disability and technological expertise internally within the organisation, and b) poor awareness of external support. There is a vast array of information on how employers can support disabled applicants through inclusive digital practices in the recruitment process. However, guidance on digital accessibility and assistive technology is complex, located in different areas, and challenging to navigate. This is especially true for medium and smaller organisations who may not be able to employ digital and disability specialists in-house⁷⁰. There are a number of free and paid-for communities to support employers to build their internal expertise, (e.g. Midlands Ability Network, Manchester Ability Network, Business Disability Forum, Disability Confident, PurpleSpace, British Assistive Technology Association, TechAbility), but these do not form a joined-up network: in effect the employers most likely to use them are the ones that already have expertise and experience. For the employer seeking to reach out to the disabled community for the first time, none of this support may be visible or easy to access.

INFO BOX

Disability Confident is the government scheme which, “aims to help employers make the most of the opportunities provided by employing and developing disabled people.”⁷¹ The scheme consists of 3 levels (Level 1- Committed, Level 2- Employer, and Level 3- Leader) which are designed to guide employers on their Disability Confident journey.

Many organisations that contributed evidence to this report are Disability Confident Employers or Leaders who feel the scheme has real value and potential for impact. However, even Disability Confident organisations often lack knowledge about digital accessibility and assistive technologies. For example, one Disability Confident organisation did not know that their internal systems were incompatible with screen readers until after they hired a visually-impaired employee⁷². There are also concerns that the Disability Confident scheme is not reaching those employers who need support the most - i.e. small and medium sized business. Large employers (250 or more employees) comprise 66% of Disability Confident organisations⁷³, but only employ 39% of the UK workforce⁷⁴.

⁷⁰ Evidence session

⁷¹ DWP (2020), ‘Disability Confident and CIPD: guide for line managers on employing people with a disability or health condition’. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/disability-confident-and-cipd-guide-for-line-managers-on-employing-people-with-a-disability-or-health-condition>

⁷² Commission evidence session

⁷³ Statistic compiled by the Federation for Small Businesses and presented at a commission evidence session

⁷⁴ Ward, M (2021), ‘Business Statistics’, House of Commons Briefing Paper Number 06142. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06152/>

Low awareness of external disability support, such as the Access to Work scheme, was repeatedly identified as a key barrier for employers, especially SMEs and self-employed people. In a 2019 survey by the Open University of 711 employers, 56% of SMEs and 28% of large employers reported not accessing external support because they were unaware support was available⁷⁵.

Differing levels of awareness may be a factor in the patchy use of Access to Work. For example, the private sector represents 82.9% of all UK employment,⁷⁶ but private sector employees only account for 31% of those in receipt of Access to Work^{77,78}. Just as with Disability Confident, large employers are also overrepresented in Access to Work statistics:

Employer Size	UK employment 2019 ⁷⁹	UK employment 2020 ⁸⁰	Access to Work recipients 2019/20 ⁸¹
0-49 (micro-small)	47.8%	48.0%	28.2%
50-259 (medium)	12.6%	12.7%	5.5%
250+ (large)	39.5%	39.3%	65.1%

Additionally, self-employment represents 15.3% of all employment⁸², but only 4% of those in receipt of Access to Work⁸³. The government does not collect data on the number of people in receipt of Access to Work who are in unpaid work placements such as traineeships, internships, or apprenticeships⁸⁴.

⁷⁵ The Open University (2019), 'Access to Apprenticeships'. Available at: <https://www.open.ac.uk/business/access-to-apprenticeships>

⁷⁶ ONS, 'Private Sector Employment as a % of Total Employment; UK;HC;SA;Percentage', Accessed 14 June 2021. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/timeseries/g9c2/lms>

⁷⁷ DWP FOI request FOI2020/61963.

⁷⁸ 21% of Access to Work recipients' employer type counted as "not recorded".

⁷⁹ BEIS (2019), 'Business population estimates for the UK and regions 2019: Statistical Release'. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/business-population-estimates-2019>

⁸⁰ BEIS (2020), 'Business population estimates for the UK and regions 2020: Statistical Release'. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/business-population-estimates-2020>

⁸¹ Answer to written question 119975. Available at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-11-24/119975>

⁸² ONS (2020), 'Coronavirus and self-employment in the UK'. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/coronavirusandselfemploymentintheuk/2020-04-24>

⁸³ DWP FOI request FOI2020/61963.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Good Practice

At iansyst, an SME and Disability Confident Leader, inclusive practices are built into their processes, not bolted on. If an individual is struggling with a disability or long term health condition that the employer is not aware of, they are going to face additional challenges at work. At iansyst, they strive to pro-actively change that by using a range of cost-effective workplace adjustments such as assistive technology, flexible working, training, and support. They have found these types of tools to be very beneficial as they can easily be adapted for the needs of each individual and the individual themselves is part of defining the workplace solution that works for them. **Importantly, all of these elements work together and benefit everyone right across the business, contributing towards creating an inclusive culture where everyone feels they can be their true selves at work.**

One challenge for organisations is how to create a consistent process to implement workplace adjustments for everyone, especially when resources and time are in short supply. iansyst uses a system called Clear Talents, which is an online portal that enables individuals to create their own workplace profiles. They can use these profiles to request a range of workplace adjustments and access well-being information and sign-posting to support services. The system has the work-flow processes in place – a great help in ensuring that the support provided is underpinned with a consistent way of measuring and evaluating what’s needed and what’s effective.

Janine King, CEO of iansyst (and Founder of iDiversity), explains,

“I would encourage all SMEs to become Disability Confident as a key part of developing an inclusive culture. At iansyst we have been operating disability friendly working practices for many years now and it definitely makes a difference to the performance of the organisation. It has helped us to attract disabled individuals with a range of talent and expertise and we find that people stay with us for many years.”