3. Unemployed disabled people and access to AT

Digital skills are a 'near-universal requirement' for finding and gaining employment. For disabled jobseekers not in education or employment, there is a lack of provision to learn about and access assistive technologies prior to receiving a job offer.

3.1 Jobcentre Plus and identifying barriers

Jobcentre Plus (JCP) is the government's key support programme for job seekers. JCP Work Coaches are responsible for, among other things, identifying barriers an individual may face in securing work and referring job seekers to appropriate support. The point of contact between a job seeker and a Work Coach thus represents a significant opportunity to identify unemployed people who would benefit from AT. According to the DWP:

"All claimants attend an initial appointment to discuss and agree a Claimant Commitment. The requirements in a claimant commitment are set by Work Coaches in consultation with an individual claimant. During that discussion Work Coaches will determine skills and barriers to finding work and will [sic] reasonable actions, that may include referrals to other organisations, to find work.

In our Jobcentres there is a dedicated workstation for claimants to use who have accessibility needs. This includes an assistive keyboard with large keys and big font to support claimants"[35].

However, such support currently requires job seekers to be willing to disclose their disabilities - and potentially to have their struggles exposed to everyone visiting the Centre. This is inequitable. For example, one dyslexic job seeker, who was reticent to disclose her disability, described her struggles using technology in her local JobCentre:

> I was at the JobCentre Plus looking for work and this was at a point where I was against the barrier of my workplace adviser was saying get on the laptop and look for work. First of all, I would be very uncomfortable publicly going on the laptop because it was a bit awkward and I would have to ask people around me, how do I spell this? How do I do that? For me, I did not feel happy doing that. They were working with me for seven to eight months and I said to my Work Coach that I have dyslexia and it is difficult for me[36].

Had the Work Coach been able to identify this job seeker's "barriers to work" during their initial consultation, or had she been directed to accessibility options regardless of her disability status, valuable time and resources could have been saved. JCP Work Coaches themselves face significant challenges in determining the specific needs of each of their claimants. They have limited time with each job seeker, a pressure that has only increased due to the recent rise in Covid-related unemployment and Universal Credit claims[37,38].

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[35] DWP FOI request FOI2020/61963.
[36] Elizabeth Takyi of A2i Dyslexia, Commission evidence session
[37] ONS (2021), 'Labour market overview, UK: January 2021'. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/january2021
[38] DWP (2021), 'Universal Credit statistics, 29 April 2013 to 15 January 2021'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/universal-credit-statistics-29-april-2013-to-14-january-2021/universal-credit-statistics-29-april-2013-to-14-january-2021

There are also challenges to identifying the barriers for job seekers with 'invisible' disabilities such as some vision or hearing impairments, mental illnesses, and neurodivergences (such as dyslexia, autism, dyspraxia, and ADHD). This is especially true when systems of identification and support rely on the individual disclosing their impairment. It is well documented that rates of diagnoses vary considerably between groups of people: people from BAME and Roma backgrounds, women, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face unique barriers to diagnosis[39,40,41,42,43,44,45,46]. The dyslexic job seeker quoted above suggested that disability stigma within her West African community was a significant barrier to her seeking and receiving support. Simply being older also increases the chance that one's neurodivergence has not been identified due to the broadening of diagnostic criteria[47].

Ultimately, disabled adults can struggle to take advantage of assistive technologies through systems that rely on disclosure. This can be the result of:

• Not being aware of the cause of their difficulties (i.e. no diagnosis);

• Not self-identifying as 'disabled';

• Not being aware of reasonable adjustments and assistive technologies that can remove barriers (e.g. the individual cannot see a benefit to disclosure);

• Not wanting to 'out' themselves as being different for fear of stigma.

Technology-enabled inclusive practice can help remove barriers to identification and support. Inclusive practices are about shifting from a reactive system of providing special support for a minority of people to a proactive system of offering adjustments to anyone who would like to take it up. For example, all job seekers could be made aware of accessibility features available on JobCentre Plus computers. This type of inclusive practice would not only support disabled job seekers, but also those who may struggle for other reasons (e.g. not receiving high-quality education as a child; having English as an Additional Language). Technology can also support inclusive practice by assisting professionals with the identification of barriers and solutions. Examples of such technologies include digital screeners[48] and equality adjustment identification tools[49].

[39] Ratto, A, et al. (2018), 'What About the Girls? Sex-based Differences in Autistic Traits and Adaptive Skills', Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, vol. 48, p 1698-1711. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5925757/

[40] Bargiela, S, Steward, R & Mandy, W (2016), 'The Experiences of Late-diagnosed Women with Autism Spectrum Conditions: An Investigation of the Female Autism Phenotype', Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, vol. 46, p 3281-3294. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5040731/

[41] Slobodin, O & Masalha, R (2020), 'Challenges in ADHD care for ethnic minority children: A review of the current literature', Transcultural Psychiatry, vol. 57(3), p 468-483. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1363461520902885

[42] National Autistic Society (2014), 'Diverse perspectives: the challenges for families affected by autism from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities'. Available at: https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism/autism-and-bame-people

[43] Roman-Urrestarazu, A, et al. (2021), 'Association of Race/Ethnicity and Social Disadvantage With Autism Prevalence in 7 Million School Children in England', JAMA Pediatrics, vol. 175(6). Available at: https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2777821

[44] Scase, M & Johnson, M (2005), 'Visual impairment in ethnic minorities in the UK', International Congress Series, vol 1282, p 438-442. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/223903501_Visual_impairment_in_ethnic_minorities_in_the_UK

[45] Taylor, H, Shryane, N, Kapadia, D, Dawes, P & Normal P (2020), 'Understanding ethnic inequalities in hearing health in the UK: a cross-sectional study of the link between language proficiency and performance on the Digit Triplet Test', BMJ Open, vol. 10. Available at: https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/10/12/e042571

[46] Race Equality Foundation (2020), 'Racial disparities in mental health: Literature and evidence review'. Available at: https://raceequalityfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/mental-health-report-v5-2.pdf

[47] Hull, L, Petrides, K.V. & Mandy, W (2020), 'The Female Autism Phenotype and Camouflaging: a Narrative Review', Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, vol. 7, p 306-317. Available at: https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40489-020-00197-9

[48] E.g. Do-It Profiler. Available at: https://www.doitprofiler.com/

[49] E.g. Clear Talents. Available at: https://cleartalentsondemand.com/

3.2 Jobcentre Plus and removing barriers with technology

> " I did childminding for 17 years but was forced to give it up when Ofsted came in with all the paperwork, as I couldn't keep up with the writing and the spellings. I just went for cleaning jobs because I thought I couldn't do anything else. If people knew about assistive technology they wouldn't have to give up careers they love and they could go for jobs they really want to do, instead of being worried all the time[50]. "

Identifying barriers is a necessary step, but only the first one - barriers then need to be overcome with proper support, training, and adjustments. Even when Work Coaches are aware of a claimant's impairment, they may not have sufficient understanding of its associated barriers or the ways technology can help remove such barriers. As Clare Gray of Shaw Trust explains, "The difficulty is that job coaches don't have that specialist knowledge [of assistive technology] and don't know what is available and possible." For example, there are reports of young people with vision impairments who are NEET being categorised as unfit for work by Jobcentres. As a result, they were not signposted to specialist support or provided with opportunities to gain these essential digital skills[51]. This is deeply concerning as they would be able to work with the right assistive technologies and digital skills[52]. The Department has stated that Work Coaches are made aware of assistive technology during foundation learning on Access to Work, and that they "routinely share up to date information on Accessible Technology with Work Coaches and all other staff in customer-facing roles"[53]. However, our evidence suggests that these efforts may not be translating into improved digital access and AT provision for disabled job seekers[54,55].

3.2.1 Flexible Support Fund – to better support people into a job

INFO BOX

The Flexible Support Fund is a discretionary grant that JobCentre Plus advisers can award to help anyone who is on benefits find a job. The fund is designed to provide tailored support based on the needs of individuals and the local area. It can be used to purchase a range of products and services that an individual needs to move closer to the workplace such as assistive technology, transport and relevant training.

[50] Anonymous JobCenter Plus Customer: Interviewee
[51] University of Birmingham: Written evidence
[52] University of Birmingham: Written evidence
[53] Newton, S (2018), 'Assistive Technology: Government response to the Committee's Tenth Report', p 5. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmworpen/1538/1538.pdf
[54] Commission evidence sessions
[55] Scope (2019), 'Our Lives, Our Journey: Starting a new job'. Available at:

At present there is no clear bridge of assistive technology and training to help an unemployed disabled person get the job offer their talents deserve. Instead, they are left dangling in a black hole, increasingly shut out of digital opportunities. We repeatedly heard frustrations that disabled adults without job offers[56] are not eligible for AT through Access to Work, as disabled people need access to technology and digital skills in order to find work. We heard examples of individuals with many years of experience who gained impairments and wanted to learn how to use accessibility tools before starting a new job, but were told by their local JCP that there was no funding for AT training available.

The Government's 2018 response to the Work and Pensions Select Committee report on Assistive Technology does state the Flexible Support Fund (FSF) can be used to "fill gaps in provision"[57]. The availability of this discretionary fund is welcome, as is the fact that as a result of Covid-19 there has been increased use of FSF to provide laptops and tablets to JobCentre customers[58]. However, it's rather hit and miss as to whether individual JobCentre Work Coaches and District Managers know to deploy the FSF on Assistive Technology. A more systematic approach, as set out below, could help achieve overall value for money for the taxpayer.

When JCP staff are made aware of the power of AT, the FSF can be used to great effect. For example, JCP staff in Manchester referred customers with suspected dyslexia to an FSF-funded supplier for assessments and diagnoses. The supplier chose to offer an additional workshop where Joeley Roberts of Dyslexia First demonstrated some assistive technologies. As Joeley explains:

> " We asked for feedback on the workshop, and everybody said, "We love the tech. We wish we had this technology." But they have absolutely no money, not even for smart phones. In the past, I've helped individual Work Coaches make the business case to use the FSF to fund assistive technology as a one-off here and there, but this information should be easily accessible to all JCP staff. This time, I worked with a contract manager at DWP to get Scanning Pens[59] for 64 customers. "

Stephen Lawlor, the Contract Manager with DWP Manchester Middleton who worked with Joeley, explained his decision-making process:

> " After looking at the cost of this technology compared to potential monthly outgoings for DWP associated with sustaining a claim to benefit, it seemed apparent to me that this would be a worthwhile investment which could allow claimants to cut their dependence on Universal Credit while providing high value for money on our part. To me, the best part of this is assisting those who are more vulnerable in our community in a way which is a gentle focus on the barrier as opposed to the application process itself. By removing that initial barrier, the goal is for claimants to have their confidence restored, allowing them to overcome this process more comfortably. "

These examples highlight the power and value of assistive technology, but also the gap in provision that is creating significant obstacles for disabled adults across the UK, and failing to deliver best value for money for the taxpayers' contribution.

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[56] (or Education Health and Care Plans for adults up to 25 years old)
[57] Newton, S (2018), 'Assistive Technology: Government response to the Committee's Tenth Report', p 5. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmworpen/1538/1538.pdf
[58] Stephen Lawlor: Interviewee
[58] A hand-held tool to have printed text read aloud. Available at: https://www.scanningpens.co.uk/

3.2.2 Work and Health Programme

INFO BOX

The Work and Health Programme is a voluntary scheme[60] in which disabled job seekers are provided with personalised support. This support includes identifying needs and providing skills training to remove barriers to employment[61]. The programme operates on a regional basis, with specialist employment providers contracted by the government to deliver the scheme across the country.

JCP Work Coaches can also refer disabled claimants to the Work and Health Programme. With the massive increase in Universal Credit claimants, there is significant concern that disabled people may be deemed 'too difficult' to help and be de-prioritised by Work Coaches. The Work and Health Programme represents a significant opportunity to support the individual needs of disabled job seekers, including digital accessibility skills.

However, these services were commissioned in a pre-Covid era and are largely based on a face-to-face model. Covid-19 has forced many of these providers to stop in-person services and instead provide support online or via telephone[62]. (This is also true of many not-for-profit organisations that provide disability, employment, and/or assistive technology support)[63,64]. Unemployed disabled people without digital skills and access to the right technology may be completely unable to engage with 'remote' support services, and risk being left behind in the push to get employment rates back to pre-Covid levels. Consideration needs to be given to what the service should look like post-Covid to ensure groups of claimants are not left out.

[60] The programme is voluntary unless an individual has been claiming unemployment benefits for 24 months.
[61] DWP (2021), 'Work and Health Programme'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/work-health-programme
[62] Shaw Trust: Interviewee
[63] Commission evidence session
[64] Good Things Foundation: Written evidence