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All-Party Parliamentary Group for assistivetechnology

TALENT AND TECHNOLOGY

BUILDING BRIDGES TO EMPLOYMENT FOR DISABLED PEOPLE

IAN KARTEN CHARITABLE TRUST

CITY BRIDGE TRUST

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Co-Chairs' Foreword

In an age when digital is 'no longer optional' for finding work, it is crucial that disabled people have full digital access, including access to assistive technologies (AT). The last 18 months have thrown into sharp relief that equality of opportunity depends on the extent to which we harness talent and technology. Both are essential, as never before, to building bridges to employment for disabled people.

The increasing use of digital tools in education, training, recruitment, and job roles, accelerated by Covid-19, is a mixed blessing for disabled people. These technologies represent unprecedented opportunities to remove barriers to employment, such as remote working for those who need to shield or who experience travel difficulties. However, inaccessible technologies and poor digital practices are actually preventing disabled people from finding and thriving in work.

As Co-Chairs of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Assistive Technology, we have seen the powerful benefits of AT and how innovative technologies can remove obstacles for disabled people entering employment. Examples include a visually-impaired person using a screen reader to access a recruiting site, or a person with Muscular Dystrophy using a mouth stick to navigate an application form, or an autistic person using a specialised app to help them travel to an interview.

Unfortunately, we have also seen disabled people struggle to get a job as a result of not having access – at the right points in their lives - to assistive technologies and the opportunities to learn to use them. Often these difficulties arise at key transition moments, resulting in 'cliff-edges' of support and 'battles' for provision.

Ultimately, inclusive digital practice benefits us all, whether we are classed as disabled or not. This was also a clear finding from Policy Connect's ***Arriving at Thriving*** inquiry into the experiences of disabled people at university – that learning from the experience of disabled students benefits all students.

The UK, already a world-leader in the development of assistive technologies, should harness the power of these tools and inclusive practices to make the world of work accessible to all.

We would like to thank all of the disabled people, employers, education providers, and technology and disability professionals who provided evidence to the commission. We would also like to thank the Ian Karten Charitable Trust and City Bridge Trust for their sponsorship of the inquiry, without which this work would not have been possible.

Lilian Greenwood MP
Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Assistive Technology

Lord Shinkwin
Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Assistive Technology

Key Findings & Recommendations

Finding 1:

Current systems of AT provision leave disabled people in digital 'black holes' at key transition points that affect their ability to find and secure employment. The government is not ambitious enough about ensuring equitable access to digital for disabled people in their efforts to close to the Disability Employment Gap.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

The Government should appoint and empower a National Assistive Technology Champion. The Champion will lead on developing and delivering, in collaboration with disabled people, a framework on disabled peoples' life transitions that guarantees access to digital which meets the needs of the individual at all stages of life. This would remove the transition 'black holes' we have identified and create good bridges across the different phases from classroom to employment. The framework should ensure that new assessments build on previous ones and that data is shared safely and efficiently between stakeholders to create a feeling of seamless transition for the disabled person. In order to achieve this, the Government should begin by undertaking a comprehensive assessment of users' access to digital assistive technology across the UK.

Finding 2:

Disabled students are leaving education without knowledge of work-based AT provision, without the skills to use AT in the workplace, and without the confidence to navigate these issues when starting a new job.

RECOMMENDATION 2A:

Education providers should ensure careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) and disability support and guidance is joined-up so that education leavers know how to access AT and support to enable their transition into employment. This should include providing on-going training to both disability support teams and careers guidance teams on AT.

RECOMMENDATION 2B:

The DfE should produce and promote guidance and resources for education providers on assistive technology and workplaces and preparing for employment. This should include information about Access to Work and other routes to securing access to AT.

Finding 3:

In its current form, Access to Work does not put AT in place fast enough for disabled students on short-term work placements, and education professionals can be unaware of this DWP-sponsored support.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

The DfE and DWP should collaborate to ensure that disabled people on work placements/traineeships/apprenticeships are able to use assistive technology from Day One of their placements. This support could be developed as an enhanced Access to Work offer jointly sponsored by both departments, or as a fund available to education providers, or a combination of both elements. It may also be appropriate to pilot a number of different approaches.

Finding 4:

The government is not systematically and strategically identifying and removing digital barriers to employment for unemployed disabled people.

RECOMMENDATION 4A:

The government should take advantage of existing JobCentre Plus (JCP) structures to identify and remove digital barriers to employment for JCP customers. To achieve this, the DWP should commission a review of current JCP AT procurement practice, with a focus on the use of the Flexible Support Fund. This review should inform the training and guidance that Work Coaches and Disability Employment Advisors receive on AT. The DWP should stop relying on customers disclosing their digital barriers by adopting inclusive practices such as investing in equality adjustment screening tools and informing all job seekers about AT and Access to Work, regardless of disability status.

RECOMMENDATION 4B:

The DWP should recognise digital access as a key enabler of employment for all customers, including those who are disabled. As such all DWP contracts related to job support (including the Work & Health Programme) should include consideration of how clients will be supported to use technology as an enabler, including assistive technology.

Finding 5:

Employees and employers (particularly SMEs and self-employed people) do not have sufficient understanding of the importance of digital accessibility and how AT can remove barriers, nor of routes to provision of AT in the workplace.

RECOMMENDATION 5A:

The government should improve targeting of disability support schemes to employers and employees who need them most (e.g. boosting the number of SMEs in the Disability Confident scheme; increasing the proportion of self-employed people using Access to Work). In order to do this, the government should collect data on who is participating in these schemes, with consideration for:

- Employer size, industry, and region
- Employee age, ethnicity, educational background, and type of disability

Based on this data, the government should launch a targeted campaign to recruit currently underrepresented participants. The success of the campaign should be measured by how well Disability Confident and Access to Work participants represent the UK as a whole. To improve awareness raising, the government should take lessons from similar programmes, like Disabled Students' Allowances, where the disability support sector itself has played an important role alongside government communications.

RECOMMENDATION 5B:

The government should take advantage of existing networks, such as Disability Confident, to skill up employers on digital accessibility and inclusive recruitment practices. The government should commission Disability Confident Leaders (Level 3) with AT expertise to produce resources for their fellow employers on technology, disability, and best practice.

RECOMMENDATION 5C:

Employers should ensure their recruitment and on-boarding practices are digitally accessible and inclusive by following guidance produced by Disability Confident Leaders (see recommendation 5B). Staff, in particular managers and HR teams, should be provided with CPD on accessibility and assistive technology. Employers should consider investing in equality adjustment screening tools and training and consultancy that is led by disabled people.

Finding 6:

Access to Work customers and their employers often have poor experiences with the provision of AT, even when official success measures are met. This suggests that current success measures (e.g. Needs Assessment reports to be sent to advisers within 8 working days) do not reflect customers' own experience of the impact of the programme.

RECOMMENDATION 6:

The government should measure the success of Access to Work's grants according to the impact on customers. To enable this, government should collect data on:

- The length of time from when an Access to Work application is triggered to when all support is in place. It is key that this includes the time it takes for an employee to complete their training in any new AT;
- Whether the employee uses the AT that was recommended to them six months after support is in place;
- The percentage of AT recommendations that are found to be inappropriate and require amending;
- The satisfaction of employee and employer with the process.

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 amazing[1].**

In an age when digital skills are a 'near-universal requirement' for obtaining work[2], 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 skills[3], with Covid-19 ways of working accelerating the digital transformation of employer recruitment practices[4].

[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 work[5]. 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 work[6]. 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 from[7]:

- 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

2. AT and digital skills: from education to employment

The education system has a vital role to play in preparing disabled students with the digital and accessibility skills to enter and succeed in the workforce. Ensuring students have both 'access to learning' through technology and opportunities for 'learning to access' with technology is key and should be tackled at every stage of education[8]. This report focuses on the specific AT issues that occur directly before and during one's transition into employment. In this section we explore the challenges that arise at the cross-section of education, employment, and AT, with a focus on careers guidance, work placements, and transitioning from the Disabled Students' Allowance to Access to Work.

2.1 AT and careers guidance

Educational institutions, whether schools, colleges, or universities, are important sources of career advice. Having disability-inclusive careers guidance can help prepare students to navigate challenges such as deciding if and when to share details of their disability status with their prospective employer[9,10]. There are a variety of reasons why graduates might choose not to notify an employer of their disability such as "fear of discrimination, the belief that they are asking for something extra and not wanting to appear 'different'"[11]. The commission heard evidence that within many education settings there is a lack of joining-up between careers and disability support teams, leaving disabled students ill-prepared for their first steps into the workforce.

The siloing of careers guidance and disability support can lead to significant digital accessibility problems. For example, career services often do not offer disability-specific advice to students, such as making them aware of funding for assistive technology support post-education[12]. This would be overcome if all careers support included disability advice, with no prior presumption about whether the student does or does not have a disability.

There is another way in which support siloed: submitted evidence highlights that there are technology-specific differences between what is acceptable in education versus employment. For example, one employer reported: "graduates repeatedly come to us expecting to use and ask us for Grammarly[13], and it's a flat-out immediate 'no'" – often because this technology is cloud-based and does not meet the security standards of the business. Differences between the types of technology that are acceptable in the workplace compared to those used in the education system or at home, coupled with a failure to consider possible alternatives to education-specific solutions - can prevent students from being properly prepared to enter their chosen workplace.

[8] McLinden, M, Douglas, G, Cobb, R, Hewett, R & Ravenscroft, J (2016), ''Access to learning' and 'learning to access': Analysing the distinctive role of specialist teachers of children and young people with vision impairments in facilitating curriculum access through an ecological systems theory', British Journal of Visual Impairment, vol. 34, no. 2, p 177-195. Available at: https://research.birmingham.ac.uk/portal/files/27522171/Final_Manuscript_BJVI_March_13_2016.pdf
[9] Birkbeck, University of London: Written evidence
[10] University of Birmingham: Written evidence
[11] Birkbeck, University of London: Written evidence
[12] Commission evidence session
[13] Grammarly is an "AI-powered writing assistant". Available at: https://www.grammarly.com/

Good Practice

At Birkbeck, University of London, the careers team, Birkbeck Futures and the disability and dyslexia service work together to improve employment outcomes for their graduates by using a combination of specialist support and inclusive practices. Birkbeck's Ability Programme is a specialist course for students and recent graduates with a disability, neurodivergence or long-term health condition. Via the Ability Programme, students have access to a series of disability employment workshops, an e-learning programme, networking opportunities with Disability Confident employers, and funded work placements. Whilst the shift to remote teaching, learning, and working has caused difficulties for some disabled students, it has also had unexpected benefits for others. For example, offering the workshops online has resulted in a 46% increase in attendance compared to 2019/2020. Remote work placements have also proved very useful in removing barriers (e.g. a student with MS who would struggle to travel into the office each day).

Birkbeck recognises inclusive practices are key to supporting students' careers, whether they have declared a disability or not. As Head of Career Services Lucy Crittenden says:

> **"we know from experience that many disabled students don't have diagnoses, and some who do don't share that information with the university. That's why we try so hard to make everything we do inclusive. We want to ensure all of our students are set up for success post-graduation."**

Examples of inclusive careers practices at Birkbeck include providing captioning for all recorded content and highlighting disabled people and their career experiences to all students attending the annual Careers Fair.

2.2 Education-based work experience and AT

> My apprenticeship took me 18 months longer than everyone else just because of all the paperwork. If I had assistive technology it would've made it so much easier. These things should just be more available to people[14].

Work undertaken as part of formal education offers valuable opportunities for disabled students to:

- Discover which AT works best for them and gain confidence in their AT skills;
- Practice communicating with employers and colleagues about their AT;
- Demonstrate their skills and true abilities to prospective employers.

Education-based work experience can take a variety of forms, including apprenticeships, traineeships, supported internships, and T-level industry placements. Although there are significant differences between these routes, the one thing they have in common is that they are all more difficult for disabled students. This is because of barriers to the provision of suitable assistive technology for the workplace, including a low awareness of AT and AT funding for work placements and difficulties getting AT in place in a timely manner.

2.2.1 AT, funding, and expertise

At the intersection of education and employment there is significant confusion regarding the use of AT for the workplace and the routes to AT provision. In schools and colleges, these issues are due in part to a shortage of specialist-trained staff to assess and teach pupils to use the technology[15]. Education professionals also report that reductions in funding due to declining local authority budgets have prevented schools from providing pupils with the specialist equipment they need in recent years[16].

Both education providers and employers describe guidance on AT and funding to be difficult to find and navigate[17]. Many rely on external services to offer specialist support to disabled students. This means they are dependent on the availability of such services in their local area and their knowledge of national offerings. We repeatedly heard that there is very low awareness of Access to Work funding for students on work placements, in part because education professionals turn to DfE for support and may be unaware or wary of DWP-led provision[18]. There is also evidence that many do not apply to the Additional Learning Support funding stream due to a combination of uncertainty about the eligibility criteria and the complexity of requirements around reporting the spending of funds[19].

2.2.2 Timely AT and Access to Work

There is a significant mismatch between how long a student is on a work placement and how long it takes for Access to Work-funded assistive technology and training to be provided.

[14] Anonymous: Written evidence
[15] Policy Connect (2020), 'Outcomes briefing: UK EdTech at home and abroad'. Available at: https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/research/outcomes-briefing-uk-edtech-home-and-abroad
[16] University of Birmingham: Written evidence
[17] Commission evidence session
[18] Commission evidence session
[19] DfE (2018), 'Exploring the funding and support for apprentices with additional support needs', p 9. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/697649/Exploring_the_funding_and_support_for_apprentices_with_additional_support_needs.pdf

INFO BOX

Access to Work is "a grant to de-risk the recruitment and retention of disabled people for employers. The grant contributes to the disability related extra costs of working faced by disabled people and those with a health condition that are beyond reasonable adjustment, but it does not replace an employer's duty under the Equality Act to make reasonable adjustments"[20].

Access to Work can be used to provide workplace assessments and assistive technology and training, amongst other types of support, worth up to £62,900 per year[21]. Once a support package has been agreed and approved by Access to Work, the employer purchases the products and services and claims back the cost from Access to Work.

The key milestones in the Access to Work timeline (with respect to technology) are:

1. Making an application;
2. Receiving notice that it has been successful;
3. Undergoing a needs assessment;
4. Receiving a needs assessment report (that recommends technology and training);
5. Ordering technology and training;
6. Receiving the technology and booking the training;
7. Installing the technology and receiving the training.

Government has full control over steps 1 and 2; the organisations which hold government contracts to conduct needs assessments have control over 3 and 4; the subsequent steps are undertaken by employers, employees and technology and training providers.

To support employees during the Covid-19 pandemic, the government recently made changes to Access to Work, including:

- Funding for remote support services, such as video remote interpreting or British Sign Language interpreting;
- Remote workplace assessments;
- Digitized paperwork;
- Support to work from more than one location;
- Prioritising Access to Work applications from disabled people in the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable Group[22].

[20] Answer to written question 143075. Available at: https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-01-20/140735
[21] DWP (2021), 'Access to Work: factsheet for customers'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/access-to-work-factsheet/access-to-work-factsheet-for-customers
[22] Ibid.

A key problem with timelines is that an Access to Work application can only be started once a student has a work placement offer from a specific employer. While the government has set a clear target for workplace assessments to be completed within 8 days of receiving a referral from an Access to Work advisor[23], there are no such targets or data collection on how long it takes to actually provide assistive technology and complete training. (There is a similar lack of data on how many people use Access to Work for short term work placements)[24]. However, employees, employers, and assistive technology and training providers report that this process can take many months[25,26]. The length of time it takes to get AT and training sorted is much longer than the actual duration of short-term education-based work placements. For example, traineeships can be a minimum of 70 hours (approx. 9 working days) and T-level work placements a minimum of 315 hours (approx. 42 working days)[27,28]. This means that in practice Access to Work-provisioned AT is useless for such work placements.

Disabled students who start work placements without their assistive technology in place are significantly disadvantaged compared to their non-disabled peers, even to the point of losing out on the opportunity altogether. We heard of one young person with visual impairment on an apprenticeship who "faced increasing pressure from her employer because of how slowly she was working while waiting for her equipment to be delivered, and eventually she lost the job"[29]. Work experiences can be powerful tools for disabled students to build confidence and gain the skills they need to be competitive job applicants. Unfortunately, for some students who are not given the tools and support they need in a timely fashion, the experience can have the opposite effect - engendering self-doubt and lack of confidence in their ability to succeed in the workplace[30].

2.3 From the Disabled Students' Allowance to Access to Work

For many disabled people, the transition from higher education to the job market coincides with the withdrawal of much of the adjustments and AT they had during university, meaning they are left unsupported at the very moment they need AT the most – to help persuade an employer to take them on. This loss of support is due to the lack of a formal pathway from the Disabled Students' Allowance to the Access to Work programme.

[23] DWP (2021), 'Access to Work holistic Assessment Provider Guidance,' p 25. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/962930/access-to-work-holistic-assessment-provider-guidance-version-9.pdf
[24] DWP FOI request FOI2020/61963.
[25] Commission evidence sessions
[26] Hands Free Technology: Written evidence
[27] DfE (2021), 'Traineeships: Supporting young people to develop the skills for apprenticeships, sustainable employment, and further learning', p 16. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-young-people-to-develop-the-skills-for-apprenticeships-and-sustainable-employment-framework-for-delivery
[28] DfE (2021), 'T Level industry placements: delivery guidance', p 9. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/t-level-industry-placements-delivery-guidance
[29] University of Birmingham: Written evidence
[30] Commission evidence sessions

INFO BOX

Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs)[31] are grants available to higher education students to cover extra costs they might incur during their studies due to a disability, learning difficulty or mental health condition. The grant can help with the costs of non-medical helpers, travel support, assistive technology and more. Unlike other support, if a DSA assessor recommends a new computer, the student must contribute £200 to purchasing this. See our report *Disabled Students' Allowances: giving students the technology they need to succeed*[32] for more on this topic.

The Disabled Students' Allowance funding ceases when the recipient graduates and Access to Work is only available once a person has been offered a job or internship. For this reason, recent disabled graduates can find themselves at a significant disadvantage in the job market. For example, licenses for Disabled Students Allowance-funded software expire and IT help desk and repair support ends after graduation - leaving disabled graduates without use of the assistive technology they need in order to find, apply for and secure employment.

Even those graduates who have a job offer before graduating, and go directly into work, will experience a transition period of securing funding through Access to Work. Some assistive technology developers who use a subscription model of funding report choosing to continue providing access to their product during this time in an effort to support the needs of the disabled person. Sarah Todd from assistive technology provider Brain in Hand told the commission: "One of the biggest discrepancies we see is where a student comes from a background where Brain in Hand has been fully funded and they go into an employment setting where it is not fully funded and there is a contribution to be made either by the employee or employer"[33]. Even though this student knew what technology they needed, were aware of Access to Work, and had started the application process once they received a job offer, they were faced with a period of months during which there was no funding for their assistive technology or related support. Our research also indicates that past assessments, in particular DSA assessments, are not being used to speed up the process of identifying appropriate AT for the workplace. This is true despite the fact that guidance states that advisors should take into account previous relevant assessments, and that further assessments are not always necessary[34].

The above illustrates the significant difficulties faced by disabled students who need assistive technologies as they progress from one stage of life to the next. The lack of a joined-up system of support and provision between education and employment settings, with public service professionals looking in different directions to different government Departments, creates additional barriers for disabled students during the already-challenging transition into work.

[31] SLC (2021), 'Help if you're a student with a learning difficulty, health problem or disability'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowance-dsa
[32] Policy Connect (2019), 'Disabled Students' Allowances: giving students the technology they need to succeed.' Available at: https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/research/disabled-students-allowances-giving-students-technology-they-need-succeed
[33] Commission evidence session
[34] 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

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].

[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.

[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

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 staff[65]. 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 applicants[68] (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 seekers[69]:

- 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-house[70]. 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 employee[72]. 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 organisations[73], but only employ 39% of the UK workforce[74].

[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 available[75].

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 employment[82], but only 4% of those in receipt of Access to Work[83]. 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 apprenticeships[84].

[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."**

Access to Work[85]

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 triggered[86]. 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 months[87]. 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 arrive[88]. 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 employer[89];
- 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 workplace[90].**

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 application[96]. 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 standards[99]. 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 down[100].

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 payments[102].

Some organisations report that they no longer use Access to Work as a direct result of these issues[103]. 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 people[104].

[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-frame[105]. 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 assessor[106]. 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 assessments[110]. 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

6. Methodology and Contributors

6.1 Methodology

To gather evidence for this inquiry, we held three roundtable evidence sessions with a variety of stakeholders including disabled people, disability employment specialists, inclusive education professionals, and assistive technology providers. We also analysed written submissions to our call for evidence and online survey, and supplemented our findings with in-depth interviews with disabled people, employers, and disability support service providers. This evidence highlighted issues that disabled people face transitioning into employment, but also unearthed examples of best practice and strategies for how the UK can use technology to close the disability employment gap and allow disabled people to contribute their talents to an inclusive economic recovery. The views in this report are those of the author and Policy Connect. They were informed by the listed contributors, but do not necessarily reflect the opinions of these organisations.

6.2 Contributors

Commission Evidence Sessions

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6.2 Contributors (cont)

Written submissions to the call for evidence

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Centre for Social Justice
Diversity and Ability
Good Things Foundation
Hands Free Technology
Housing LIN
IPSE
Keytools (Hypertec Ltd)
Microlink
Rohan Slaughter
Scanning Pens
Unity Works
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Interviews

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Shaw Trust
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About this report

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Assistive Technology

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Assistive Technology (APPGAT) aims to disseminate knowledge, generate debate and facilitate engagement on assistive technology amongst Members of both Houses of Parliament. The APPGAT is currently Co-Chaired by Lord Shinkwin and Lilian Greenwood MP.

The Health and Accessibility Team

Policy Connect's Health & Accessibility team provides the secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Groups for Health; Assistive Technology; and Carbon Monoxide Safety. The team focusses on improved life outcomes for everyone, achieved through integrated services and a cross-government approach that prioritises public health, innovation, and inclusion.

Policy Connect

Policy Connect is a cross-party think tank with four main policy pillars which are: Education & Skills; Industry, Technology & Innovation; Sustainability; and Health & Accessibility.

We specialise in supporting parliamentary groups, forums and commissions for which Policy Connect provides the secretariat and delivers impactful policy research and event programmes. Our collaboration with parliamentarians through these groups allows us to influence public policy in Westminster and Whitehall. We are a social enterprise and are funded by a combination of regular annual membership subscriptions and time-limited sponsorships.

We are proud to be a Disability Confident and London Living Wage employer, and a member of Social Enterprise UK.

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