

Employment of people with disabilities

12. Employment of People with Disabilities

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Introduction

This chapter will comment on existing and emerging employment policies and practices for disabled people, rather than examining needs *ab initio*. The implication of this approach is to concentrate, therefore, on the employment and training provision supplied and funded by central government and its off-shoots because this is where most relevant activity is concentrated. Employers and their organisations are beginning to become involved in disability, but in the main they are still reactive. Some reference will be made to voluntary organisations. However, while they are very active in the social welfare aspects of disability, only a few substantial services are provided in the employment field.

However, before concentrating on government-provided and -funded services I shall make one substantial and overarching comment on needs. The major emphasis of current services is on moulding/training disabled people to fit into mainstream training and employment settings. This is only half the story – or indeed, many disabled people would say, a small part of the story. The grossly underestimated element is the need for action to change the attitudinal, behavioural and physical environment in order to allow people with disabilities to live and work on the basis of their ability rather than be constrained by disability; put simply, what Vic Finkelstein calls identifying and removing ‘barriers’.

Given prevalent discriminatory attitudes and behaviour, I strongly support the introduction of broadly-based anti-discrimination legislation. The most logical model of anti-discrimination legislation to use would be that operating in the fields of race and sex. If one were looking narrowly at the field of employment, a less attractive compromise with those who would oppose anti-discrimination legislation in the round, would be some form of statutory code. This could be modelled on health and safety regulations and would need to allow the possibility of an individual taking up his or her own case in

a judicial or quasi-judicial setting. A clear majority of organisations of and for disabled people would favour anti-discrimination legislation capable of application in the field of employment; it is probably fair to say that the majority of employers and employer organisations would not favour legislation. However, I am sure they would accept it, given the political will.

In short, for the full contribution of people with disabilities to come through, we need to work actively against discrimination and establish certain rights, both in theory and in practice. The most important rights include:

- the right of access defined not simply as physical access, but also communication access, participation access, etc;
- the right of self-determination;
- the right to resources to cover the extra costs which disability brings;
- the right to be recognised as an individual.

Trends

The sections which follow will look in some detail at the various programmes designed to increase the recruitment of disabled people into employment. However, it is possible to discern some broadly-based trends and conclusions which overarch the various programmes.

Integration

There has been a strongly discernible trend of increasing integration of disabled people into mainstream training and employment services.

At the front end of information and advisory services, the majority of services always used to be provided by specialist disability workers. However, from 1983 onwards increasing numbers of disabled people have been dealt with by the mainstream employment services. Only those who need specialist occupational advice and counselling are referred on to specialists in disability.

From around that time, the government also put increasing stress on including disabled people in mainstream training programmes such as the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) and Employment Training (ET).

While the majority of disabled people have always been employed in integrated settings, a major plank of the service provided by the Employment Department has been separate sheltered workshops for

disabled people who it was believed could never be put with ordinary employers. However, since 1985 there has been a relatively rapid growth in the Sheltered Placement Scheme (SPS) under which severely disabled people are employed in integrated settings with ordinary employers, with the cost to the employer being subsidised in relation to the output of the worker.

The trend towards integration has been generally welcomed with one major and one minor qualification. The major qualification is a worry that the trend favours, and is easier to apply to, less disabled people rather than the most severely disabled. This qualification is particularly acute in the stages of assessment, rehabilitation and training. The lesser qualification, although important, is restricted to one long-standing area of provision, namely workshops. The transfer of resources from the relatively expensive workshops into cheaper Sheltered Placement Schemes (SPSs) has resulted in workshop closures. This has caused a great deal of distress to many disabled people who have effectively been dismissed from long-standing jobs into employment under SPSs in unfamiliar settings, or into unemployment.

De-institutionalisation

Separate from, but related to, integration, there has been a process of de-institutionalisation primarily at the assessment and rehabilitation stages. Up until the mid-1980s assessment and employment rehabilitation had been provided almost exclusively through getting on for 30 regional Employment Rehabilitation Centres (ERCs). However, in 1984 smaller and less institutionalised Asset Centres were set up to provide assessment and rehabilitation services in geographic areas not well served by the ERCs. This trend went even further when in 1987/8 there was the introduction of mobile Asset Teams. The Employment Department's 1990 Consultative Document *Employment and Training for People with Disabilities* envisages the trend continuing even further through a significant reduction in the number of ERCs with resources being switched into further outreach work.¹

Taking services outside large relatively inaccessible regional facilities into smaller localities has been generally welcomed. However, once again a similar proviso in relation to the most severely disabled people is valid. Less prevalent but complicated impairments are clearly much more difficult to address if the service workers are

covering a relatively small locality, simply because the professionals will not often come across people with less common impairments (such as blindness or severe psychiatric illnesses) and will thus be less experienced at helping.

Generic approach

Linked with the process of de-institutionalisation has been a trend away from specialist disability workers towards a more generic approach. For example, the establishment of Blind Persons' Resettlement Officers has been gradually absorbed into the establishment of Disablement Resettlement Officers (DROs). Again, as mentioned above, front-desk officers in job centres have been given a little training in order to be able to serve not only able-bodied clients but a full range of disabled people, referring on to DROs only those clients who require specialist help.

Increased resources

Over the last few years there has been an increase in resources devoted to Employment Department services to disabled people. To a great extent this resource increase has been via increasing numbers of disabled people handled by mainstream workers in job centres, and increasing numbers of disabled people going through YT and ET (a 46 per cent real increase in funds applied in the three years to 1988/89).

This has been accompanied by a relatively static or slightly declining staff complement of DROs and members of the Disablement Advisory Service (DAS), and a relatively static overall resource situation with regard to Specialist Disability Services funded by the Department (a real increase of 2.5 per cent in the three years to 1988/89).

During this period all Employment and Training Programme expenditure increased in real terms by 3.7 per cent, according to the National Advisory Council on the Employment of Disabled People.

Devolution

Employment Services have long been devolved to the local level, albeit as part of a centrally run bureaucracy. However, as noted above, assessment and rehabilitation have been regional but are now (see ED Consultative Document) likely to be increasingly localised and increasingly run on an agency basis.

Training is also becoming more localised through Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), which will have more freedom and independence than ED Area Offices.

Absent trends!

People familiar with the evolution of trends in social work in particular, and social services in general, will find a familiar ring to the trends outlined above. What is interesting to note, however, is that certain other trends observed in the wider social welfare field are not evident in the disability employment field.

Lack of training and absence of professionalisation

Whereas increasing genericism in the field of personal social services has resulted in training courses lengthening for both professional and ancillary workers, this trend has not been evident in the disability employment field. Indeed, training for mainstream staff in job centres, DROs and DAS team members is either non-existent or very short (weeks rather than months). There is no career structure let alone professional career structure, and status and pay are relatively low. Turnover in the specialist services is also high.

While it is difficult to produce concrete evidence, this background suggests that the quality of service provision is not high. Indeed, the National Advisory Council on the Employment of Disabled People which advises the Secretary of State has called for higher standards, as have the chairmen of Local Councils for the Employment of Disabled People.

Lack of disabled people working in the service

While some voluntary organisations (for example, the RNIB) have as a matter of policy actively recruited disabled people into employment service posts, there has been an absence of any such policy in the Employment Department. Once again this is in contrast to developing policies in the social welfare field, where there have been active attempts at recruiting, for example, black social workers working within black areas, and the recruitment of disabled workers working in the field of disability.

Lack of preventive work

In the health and social services, the idea of preventive work is long established. Not so in the employment field with disabled people. All the programmes aimed at helping disabled people into work can only be triggered when the disabled person is unemployed. The Training Agency has stated quite clearly that its training and enterprise programmes no longer include provision aimed specifically at assisting individual disabled people in employment at the individual level. The Consultative Document makes few improvements.

This policy is difficult to understand. All the evidence suggests that it is far easier and more cost-effective to support an individual and for his/her employer to keep the disabled person in their original company, than it is to try and find work for a disabled employee who has left (either through dismissal or for health reasons). Not only is it more costly, it is much less likely that the disabled person will get into a new job quickly, or indeed into a new job at all.

Lack of concentration on attitudinal, behavioural and physical changes in the environment (identifying and removing barriers)

The major emphasis in current programmes is on disabled people adapting to the majority environment. This is clearly not enough. The smaller elements of present programmes (e.g. DAS, special schemes such as employment aids, adaptation of premises) need expanding. Also more creative applications of this barrier-removal approach are needed, which I believe should include anti-discrimination legislation and all the support services that such an approach requires.

More detailed consideration of individual Employment Department-backed programmes

The following summarised programmes are described in more detail in the Department's 1990 Consultative Document *Employment and Training for People with Disabilities*.

Assessment

There have been significant improvements in the structure and content of assessment programmes over the past decade, but employment assessment is still narrow in its focus in comparison to vocational assessment in the United States (see the chapter in this volume by Michael Floyd).

This narrowness is, in part, because the funding comes from one part of government, namely the Employment Department. Nevertheless, it should be possible to improve the links between vocational assessment and the social assessment provided primarily through social services departments. The increasing localisation of assessment services will provide the potential for better co-operation.

As mentioned above, however, the increasing localisation of assessment will increase the penetration of the services, but may well reduce the quality of service for the more severely disabled people.

Employment rehabilitation

Some disabled people would reject the term, if not the concept, of employment rehabilitation. They regard it as ‘ghettoisation’ and would prefer to opt for ‘training’ as a descriptor (see *Employment and Training for People with Disabilities - A Critical Response by NOG**, October 1990). Once again, the content and structure of employment rehabilitation have been re-designed for the better over the last few years, but they are still crude. The re-design was precipitated by an adverse National Audit Office report (National Audit Office, 1987) drawing attention to the high per capita cost of traditional employment rehabilitation. Thus, the re-design and evolution of services have had a strong cost-saving imperative.

The evolution of structure has been briefly described earlier. However, the ED Consultative Document proposes further radical restructuring of employment rehabilitation. It proposes that the majority of employment rehabilitation services should be contracted out to other agencies such as voluntary organisations, health authorities, and presumably through ‘management buy-outs’ (Consultative Document, 3.12b). Although the Department claims that this will be an evolutionary approach, it seems ill thought through, and is probably unrealistic unless there are large numbers of management buy-outs by existing employment rehabilitation service staff. It is difficult to see how the voluntary sector, which is primarily organised around separate impairment groups (eg. blind, deaf, physically handicapped, etc.) can take on these services without undermining its own traditional structures and funding sources. It may be, as with SPSs, that new voluntary organisations will be created virtually as quangos, operating exclusively as agents in this one field.

If this proposal comes to fruition it will be an interesting reversal of the accepted wisdom about the relative roles of the voluntary and statutory sectors, i.e. we shall see the statutory sector, having pioneered employment rehabilitation, and having established it, passing it on to the voluntary sector.

Training

Education system provision

Whereas in most areas discussed in this chapter the Employment Department is the major provider, in the field of training the education system is also crucial.

To my knowledge there is no systematic collection of data about students with disabilities, and this makes the field much more difficult to discuss. Thus, it is impossible to say whether provision is growing or declining. However, it is possible to identify countervailing forces.

My own experience would suggest that direct and indirect provision of specialist training for disabled people by the education system is declining because of its high costs and the squeeze which local education authority budgets are experiencing. However, the involvement of disabled people in mainstream education programmes of a vocational orientation, especially in the ages 16 to 19, is probably growing. Even though there are additional costs, they are not onerous. Thus, the new marketing imperative in education, combined with declining numbers of post-sixteen year olds, means that college principals are looking for new customer groups. Disabled people are benefiting from this. Also, in the field of higher education, the recent significant increases in special grants available to disabled students is likely to prove a great help.

Employment Training (ET) and Youth Training (YT)

YT is a programme of integrated on- and off-the-job training and work experience over one or two years for sixteen and seventeen year old school/college leavers. People with disabilities are eligible up to the age of 21, if they are still in schooling.

ET provides long-term unemployed people with up to 12 months training and practical placements based on an agreed personal action plan. Both ET and YT have additional funding/resourcing for trainees with disabilities.

In 1989/90 11 per cent (47,000) of all ET starts and 3 per cent (11,500) of all YT starts comprised people with disabilities. Completion rates between disabled and non-disabled people were roughly comparable.

However, the different rates of achievement of what are called 'positive outcomes' are extremely worrying. 'Positive outcomes' are roughly defined as going into work, education or more training, as opposed to staying unemployed. On ET only 32 per cent of people with disabilities, as compared with 41 per cent of the non-disabled

population, had positive outcomes. On YT the results are even more worrying, with figures of 58 per cent compared with 82 per cent.

Absence of in-service training

As mentioned above, the Employment Department programmes are notable because they do not include provision or support for the training of disabled people who are in work either to help with progression or, more importantly, to prevent the loss of jobs.

Likely impact of Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) on the provision of training for disabled people

From now on TECs (LECs in Scotland) will provide an increasingly directive influence on the training aimed at disabled people. In essence, what was the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) and became the Training Agency has all but disappeared and its training responsibilities have been contracted out to what will become around 80 TECs. These TECs will have annual contracts with the Employment Department to provide all training and enterprise services in their areas (roughly covering one or two counties or metropolitan authorities). Apart from structural differences from the past, there are two important policy differences which should be mentioned here.

The overall ethos of previous programmes was of services developed under the advice of a tripartite structure of representatives of employers, trade unions and independents. TECs, however, are 'employer-led' and their Boards consist predominantly of employer representatives (at chief executive level). Secondly, much play is being made of the fact that the TECs will have a degree of local independence and flexibility on the ways they achieve their generalised, but quantifiable, contractual targets.

In addition to the different policy background, there is also a distinctly different resource setting. Overall, the Employment Department expects to spend £3.5 billion in 1990/91, falling in real terms to £3 billion in 1991/2 and £2.8 billion in the following two years. That is for all ED services. However, within this figure the budget for ET will drop by 30 per cent on a figure of £1.2 billion. Similar cuts in the following two years will reduce the budget to almost zero in spite of economic forecasts of rising unemployment. Given the proportionately (11 per cent) and absolutely (47,000) large numbers of disabled people participating in ET, this is catastrophic for the medium-term future.

While the reduction in resources is being generally opposed by the TECs, reallocation is not. For example, *The Guardian* (9 November, 1990) quotes David Dickinson, a leading member of the TEC movement and Chairman of the East London Council, as saying that training for the 80 per cent of the year 2000 workforce already in jobs was 'tremendously important for the prosperity of the country', adding that 'the government is beginning to move down the road TECs want. It has been excessively concerned with the long-term unemployed. These are an important group, but not the only important group'. A philosophy seems to be emerging of concentration on 'training of the fittest' and whether disabled people will be attractive in that context is debatable.

The 22 per cent unemployment rate among economically active disabled people is an average and almost certainly rises to 40 to 50 per cent among the more severely disabled such as blind, psychiatrically ill, and tetraplegic people. The new philosophical background would not seem to be a helpful one for these groups. Not only are they likely to be unemployed (and therefore of lower priority than before), they are also certainly going to be much more costly to train. Thirdly, their geographic distribution around the country, because of small numbers, will be very uneven, and thus their training costs could play havoc with 'averaged out' budgets.

Even when the training service was run as a national service, the costs of specialised residential training for disabled people were not devolved down to the areas but were held in a central national budget. In the new set-up, responsibility for these specialist training costs, which might reach £15,000 to £20,000 per annum per individual, are already being piloted down to local TEC level.

Against this background, it is understandable that the Secretary of State's National Advisory Committee on the Employment of Disabled People is very concerned about the impact TECs will have. Organisations of and for disabled people are extremely alarmed.

Disablement Resettlement Officers Service (DROs) and Disablement Advisory Service (DAS)

DROs work in job centres and provide help to disabled people who require specialist occupational counselling and advice and those who have special needs arising from their disability – in particular those recently disabled and those whose disability impedes job search. They place around 20,500 people per annum.

The DAS operates throughout the country in local teams. Their role is chiefly to encourage and help employers to improve their policies and practices in employing people with disabilities. They can also advise on recruitment, integration, career development, retention and so on of disabled employees.

In 1989 the combined cost of these two services was £19m with 490 staff units dedicated to DRO services and 195 staff units to the DAS.

As was outlined earlier, this service is not only vital, it is also under-resourced and its workers under-paid and under-trained, with no career structure. These problems are alluded to in the Consultative Document, albeit in less strong terms. The document announces plans to improve the training of these workers, but the National Advisory Council on the Employment of Disabled People, among others, put heavy emphasis on the wider range of improvements needed.

I would argue that it is also vital that more disabled people are recruited into these two services.

Special schemes

The Employment Department has a range of special assistance schemes designed to overcome some of the problems which people with disabilities may encounter in getting, or keeping, work. They include such things as special technical equipment (eg. talking wordprocessors for blind people, etc.); adaptations to premises; assistance with additional costs of fares to work, etc.

A Consultative Document *Evaluation of Special Schemes for People with Disabilities* was issued by the Department in November 1990 inviting comments on special schemes. It is not clear why this was issued some four months after the wider Consultative Document on the whole employment and training programme for people with disabilities. However, the tenor of this 'neutral' document is fairly clear.

A significant line of questioning is whether or not employers can take on some of the cost of the special schemes, thus reducing the burden on the Exchequer. The Consultative Document reports on research carried out primarily among employers of disabled people, asking them, among other things, whether they would have been prepared to pay for some of the costs of special schemes. In one sense the answers are heartening, with significant percentages saying that they would.

This answer is heartening because it shows the value employers set on their disabled employees. However, it is doubtful if this is a real indication as to whether, prior to employing a disabled person, an employer would have willingly accepted the responsibility of additional costs which he would not incur in the case of an able-bodied employee. Also, the fieldwork for the research was undertaken at the height of the economic boom; in the present recession answers would surely be more pessimistic especially where extra costs are involved.

Sheltered employment

This programme provides employment under sheltered conditions for people with severe disabilities who are unable to obtain or retain jobs in open employment. It does this through Remploy, Sheltered Workshops (where the majority of employees are disabled), Sheltered Placement Schemes (where disabled people are integrated into ordinary work settings), and the Blind Homeworkers Scheme (where blind people are self-employed working from home, e.g. as piano tuners). In 1989/90, approaching 21,000 people were employed in this way at a cost of £1.1m.

Once again, as outlined earlier, there has been a shift of emphasis away from separate employment categories as per Sheltered Workshops and Remploy towards integrated work placements (SPSs).

Employment service mainstream programmes

In the job centres, mainstream service workers help people who in general are less severely disabled. In 1989/90 they helped place 17,800 disabled people. Job Clubs are another mainstream service of great help to disabled people. They help long-term unemployed people get jobs by providing coaching in job-hunting techniques, and support and motivation, including the use of free support facilities such as telephones, newspapers, stationery, etc. In 1989/90 approaching 10,500 Job Club participants had disabilities.

Conclusions

A profound policy change is being introduced into the state-supported training field, which has a milder reflection in the state-supported and -run employment services. This is a shift away from seeing the role of state-supported activities as being properly concentrated on unemployed people, with provision for employed people resting with employers. Rather, massive statutory resources are now being shifted from government to employers (in TECs) who

are likely to want to concentrate resources on training the employed and the most employable of the unemployed.

This might be the right direction to go in recognising the long-established criticisms of the UK as having an under-trained workforce. However, it should be recognised that this is a shift in favour of providing training, and to a lesser extent employment services, on the basis of a market economy (i.e. concentrating resources on those individuals who can make best use of them). Given the reduced application of government resources to this whole area and society's limited perception of what disabled people can contribute to the economy, it should be recognised that employment and training services for people with disabilities will decline, unless they are given policy, resource and service protection or ring fencing.

A concomitant of any such protection will be the need for specific data collection in relation to resources and services for disabled people in the employment and vocational setting and, where appropriate, contractual target setting for people in these groups.

A further major conclusion is the necessity for initiatives to train and employ disabled people to concentrate to a much greater extent on 'barrier removal'. These barriers exist in the attitudinal, behavioural and physical environment which surrounds disabled people; a crucial requisite to achieve significant progress in this area is anti-discrimination legislation combined with the resources and services positively to support this approach.

Reference

National Audit Office (1987) *Department of Employment and Manpower Services Commission: Employment Assistance to Disabled Adults*, London, HMSO.

Note

1. Since writing this chapter the Department of Employment have begun a series of announcements as to how they intend to reorganise services for people with disabilities in the light of the consultative document. It is clear that these continue the trends mentioned in this chapter. In particular a letter from M. Fogden, Chief Executive of the government's Employment Service on April 16, 1991 announces the intention

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to form integrated teams which will take on all the present functions of Disablement Resettlement Officers (DROs), the Disablement Advisory Service (DAS) and the Employment Rehabilitation Service (ERS) assessment teams.

A ministerial statement of the same date said that the new local teams will offer individuals specialist advice, assessment and help in funding and *keeping jobs*, and to employers encouragement and help in applying good practice. *Staff training will be strengthened.*

The italics are mine and suggest that some of the criticisms referred to in this chapter are beginning to be recognised.