



## Sharing your invisible disability with your employer

In my interview with Julie\*, we talked about disability discrimination in the workplace, asking for reasonable adjustments, and how employers can make workplaces more inclusive and more accessible to people with disabilities.

### Disability discrimination in the workplace

From Julie's experience of having an invisible disability, she tells me that people with invisible disabilities are often told 'you don't look disabled'.

Many disabled people have impairments that are not visible and 'so it's not immediately obvious to people who don't know them that they have a disability'.

Disability discrimination in the workplace can happen because 'there's this underlying bias that disabilities are visible and it can lead to assumptions that people with invisible disabilities are not really disabled'.

Sometimes disability discrimination can happen because of 'little comments that people don't even realize are very hurtful and put people with disabilities in a position where they often feel like they're disbelieved or it's just very challenging for them to exercise their rights to get adjustments or feel supported because they're constantly...having to push back just an underlying bias that they're not even disabled'.

### Its consequences

Julie tells me that the possibility of being discriminated against can make the decision to ask for reasonable adjustments harder. It can cause 'stress'. A disabled person may need to choose between taking the risk that they may face discrimination or pushback if they do ask for reasonable adjustments and the risk that they may not perform as well because they're not getting the support they need by not asking for reasonable adjustments.

An 'internal challenge' arises because some disabled people 'feel it's too much to even ask for what they are actually entitled to...because they don't want the backlash of it or they don't want little comments'.

### What should employers do?

What employers should do is tied to education and training.

Julie tells me that a good starting point would be for workplaces to understand disabilities 'in terms of a social model rather than a medical model'. The



'traditional view' is that the person's impairment is what 'causes their disadvantage or their exclusion'.

The 'lack of access that they get is then put on them as the person with the disability to resolve, it's their job to fix that if they want to be included'.

According to her, employers should adopt the 'social model of disability' through which 'you think of what barriers are inherent in the workplace and you try and remove them'.

By doing this, you stop 'focusing on the individual with the disability as someone who has a problem but rather the employment setting and society that has created a barrier for someone who without that barrier would function like anyone else'.

What is important is education and training to shift people's perspective. Especially by getting 'the support' of people with disabilities and charities. It's important to also include disabled people in the development of policies as well as to recognize how broad and wide-ranging the concept of disability is.

### **Making workplaces more inclusive**

To make workplaces more inclusive, Julie tells me that the entire staff needs to be given training and education as supposed to just the Human Resources department or recruiters.

'It's important that colleagues, supervisors, managers also have an awareness of disability in general, what reasonable adjustments might look like...etc'.

She tells me that colleagues or managers who don't know about reasonable adjustments may make (negative) assumptions about a disabled person and their performance if adjustments have been made for them. Those colleagues or managers don't understand that they have a disability and need adjustments in order for the workplace to be accessible to them.

If staff receive general training and have an awareness of what reasonable adjustments are or can be, 'you don't put someone in a position where they have to disclose their disability in like a public setting, which is completely inappropriate in a workplace'.

The inclusivity of a workplace can be seen in the recruitment and application process, before a person even starts work with a new employer. When employers explicitly mention the need for reasonable adjustments 'that makes having an open conversation easier because you already come into it feeling like they're going to be willing to listen to you and that there's some flexibility around that'.



## Searching and applying for jobs

When she was searching for graduate jobs, she was 'very selective' of where she was applying to because of her need for reasonable adjustments.

She looked for employers that were already recruiting people with disabilities and had policies on disabled recruitment (by looking at their website). She also looked at whether reasonable adjustments were available and mentioned in the recruitment process, and whether flexible arrangements were offered in the role. This, for her, showed 'a culture' which accepts the need to accommodate 'people's different circumstances'.

She also looked at employers that had connections with disability-focused charities or programs (for example My Plus Students' Club). When charities or programs like these give employers a 'checkmark' of some sort, 'it makes you feel more comfortable'.

'I'm very lucky that I can be so selective because not everyone can, so it's really important that workplaces can't get away with not accommodating just because they don't feel it's important for them'.

## Types of reasonable adjustments?

The types of reasonable adjustments that you may need 'completely depends on the disability'. Employers don't need to give you every adjustment you ask for, they have to give you what is 'reasonable'. What can be considered 'reasonable' also depends on the type of employment.

From her experience, reasonable adjustments can include:

- An ergonomic chair
- More time in the interview process
- Being able to use a computer instead of having to write by hand
- Earplugs or noise-cancelling headphones
- Remote working

It's also important to for the employer to consider 'subtle things'. For example, if you have Crohn's disease and you need to use the toilet a lot, do you need to cross in front of all of your colleagues each time you need to use the toilet? Can you have your desk closer to the toilet to avoid that from happening?

## Asking your employer for reasonable adjustments

The extent to which people feel comfortable asking for adjustments depends on how 'open' your employer is. For example, whether your employer has policies on this or not.



She tells me it's important to be aware that an employer may not have 'a complete understanding of what they're required to do'. And so, when a disabled person goes to talk to their employer about adjustments, they may need to 'put [their] metaphorical armour on because...not everyone is going to be completely accommodating'.

She says it's also 'unrealistic' to expect that it will always be an 'easy' conversation to have with your employer.

It's also important to realize that asking for reasonable adjustments isn't a 'one-off conversation' but rather 'an ongoing' one. In other words, it needs to be understood by your employer that you may need to 'revisit' the reasonable adjustments you ask for, as your needs may change over time.

Having this 'openness from the beginning...is also really helpful so you're not scared to ask for something you didn't ask for at the beginning'.

Her tips:

- Educate yourself about your rights and entitlements
- Prepare what you're going to say in advance if you're having a meeting
- Write some notes for yourself (including the main elements of your disability, what reasonable adjustments you've received in the past or that you've heard have worked for other people...)

She tells me that educating yourself and preparing can help you feel more confident 'that you're only advocating for yourself and you are asking for what you're entitled to'.

\*This name has been changed for anonymity purposes.



## Further information & resources

We have more resources on reasonable adjustments. Please see our resources here:

[https://www.toynbeehall.org.uk/know-your-rights/?\\_resource\\_category=employment](https://www.toynbeehall.org.uk/know-your-rights/?_resource_category=employment)

Resources and guides on reasonable adjustments by Scope

here: <https://www.scope.org.uk/advice-and-support/reasonable-adjustments-at-work/>

## Organisations

Disability Law Service provides legal advice and representation on disability rights: <https://dls.org.uk/>

Disability Rights UK provides advice and carries out policy campaigns: <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/about-us>

## Toynbee Hall's Free Legal Advice Centre

If you need free one-off legal advice, you can fill in this form by Free Legal Advice Centre (FLAC) of Toynbee

Hall: <https://www.toynbeehall.org.uk/free-advice/legal-advice/#online-flac-ia-form> or you can email FLAC here: [flac@toynbeehall.org.uk](mailto:flac@toynbeehall.org.uk)

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If you want to find other free legal clinics or you need representation, please look

at LawWorks here: <https://www.lawworks.org.uk/legal-advice-individuals>