



What's in an adjustment?

Supporting disabled employees in higher education post Covid-19

Diane Lightfoot, CEO, Business Disability Forum

Disability Colloquium 15 June 2021

Today's session

1. Quick intro to Business Disability Forum
2. The landscape of work and adjustments during and post COVID-19, drawing on our research
3. Working and leading remotely or in a hybrid model – what good looks like
4. A whole organisation approach – senior leadership, people manager confidence and using tools like the Disability Smart assessment to track progress and prioritise action.
5. Q&A

Who are we?

- Business Disability Forum is a not-for-profit membership body that supports organisations to get better at employing disabled people and serving disabled customers.
- We want to transform the life chances of disabled people as employees and consumers through equality of opportunity
- We have 30 years' experience and our 400 members employ c. 20% of the UK population and 8 million + people worldwide.

What do we do?



- Membership and Partnership
 - Advice service
 - Learning & Development
 - Resources and toolkits
 - (Virtual!) events
 - Consultancy
- Networks and taskforces including HEI specific network
- Policy and Research

What's in an adjustment?

What do I mean by adjustments?

- “Reasonable adjustments” under the Equality Act 2010
- Workplace adjustments – focus on barrier/s that are being experienced – how can an adjustments remove these?
 - “Soft” adjustments include flexible working, different hours, a quiet space, lighting or amended duties
 - “Kit” adjustments include speech to text software, AI, sit-stand desks or a fixed desk in a hot desk environment
 - Human adjustments – BSL interpreter, job coach
- **At the heart of workplace disability inclusion - often the difference between person thriving or surviving at work.**

BUT...

...In our Great Big Workplace Adjustments Survey 34 per cent of those without adjustments said they **did not make requests because they were worried** their employer might treat them differently

Why might people not tell you?

- Identity is very personal and complex – e.g. Deaf vs deaf
- Disability, as an ‘identity’, is not ‘static’ – and people may not identify as disabled but still need adjustments
- Visible vs non-visible – choice vs having to “come out”
- Time since diagnosis – grief curve and denial/acceptance
- When are you asking? How are you asking?
- What’s in for me? Do perceived benefits outweigh risks?
- **Will it change how you or the team view me?**

Why does it matter anyway?

- Surviving or thriving?
- Where is people's energy going?
- Covering, coping, work around?
- Mental health pre crisis
- Managing fluctuating conditions
- Maximum productivity – and happiness!
- And duty for HEIs to report staff and student figures

Reframing adjustments

- “Productivity tools” – “what do you need to do your job well?”
- Self-service e.g. Barclays – trust and empowerment
- Assistive tech accessed with mainstream tech
- **Inclusive design of policies, processes, premises**
 - Much cheaper than retro fitting
 - User involvement throughout = bake in accessibility and design out barriers from the start
 - **fewer individual adjustments – and reduced need to ask***

* NB caveat on numbers!

Supporting, developing, retaining

- Not just about recruitment: 83% of disabilities are acquired – so it's about retention too
- What support is there for someone who acquires a disability? Make it clear that adjustments are available for anyone - accessible processes = reduced need to ask
- Redeployment as a reasonable adjustment
- Great back to work process
- Accessible or dedicated development programmes

Work and adjustments during COVID-19

Main focuses for employers 2020

- Managing employee's anxieties about impact Covid-19 on lives/work
- Reviewing routine working hours to enable effective working from home
- Supporting colleagues with assistive technology
- Ensuring managers were briefed about how to effectively manage staff remotely and answer queries
- Helping colleagues install video conferencing applications
- Informing colleagues about Covid-19 and the likely impact on their job
- Considering way in which adjustments such as assistive technology, specialist chairs or other equipment could be transported to the homes of employees

And the challenges!

1. **Mental health and wellbeing** including providing mental health advice and coping strategies and enabling office working where home working is difficult or providing more stress. Supporting staff with existing disabilities and long-term conditions which were exacerbated by the crisis.
2. **The provision of adjustments** including provision and portability, tracking, and set up of equipment, and ensuring effectiveness of adjustments.
3. **Managing communication** in terms of effective working and ensuring all communications are inclusive.
4. **Co-ordinating a consistent approach to supporting staff**

A lasting legacy?

- Nine in ten (90 per cent) agreed that responses to Covid-19 will result in a long lasting change in attitudes about flexible and home working
- Over six in ten respondents recognised the increased demand in adjustments for all staff to enable them to work in a new way (63 per cent) and over two fifths (44 per cent) said they had provided adjustments to staff with disabilities and conditions that did not previously need them:

Working and leading remotely or in a hybrid model – what good looks like

Moving to a hybrid model of work

- Disability inclusion vital as we “build back better”
- Retain the positive - less travel, wfh, flexible working patterns a
- But also lose the negative – isolation, impact on mental health
- Meeting needs of students – balance need for in person tutoring with need of e.g. lecturers who are vulnerable
- Disability does not equal vulnerability - make it safe to share
- Different levels of confidence – greyhounds and bassets!

Best of both not worst of both

- **Move back mindfully** rather than slipping back
 - Adjustments at home **and** “workplace”
 - We have proven home working can work for many roles
 - Conversely, not a panacea – not all disabled people want to wfh!
 - Not an excuse not to make workplace accessible
 - Not two tier workforce e.g. academic vs admin roles
 - Digital offers different ways to engage, reduce travel and fatigue and can improve accessibility and reach of larger meetings
 - “walk and talk” meetings or in the pub can be very inaccessible
- Needs to be led and **role modelled** from the top

What businesses are asking now

- Queries to our Advice Service
 - What to consider when developing hybrid working policies and practices.
 - Re-establishing etiquette and behaviours for hybrid working and hybrid meetings.
 - Downsizing offices in an inclusive way
 - Who gets priority and how far should the organisation buy/rent space with the needs of **current** disabled staff in mind?

A whole organisation approach

The Disability Smart Framework

1. Commitment



2. Know-how



3. Adjustments



4. Recruitment



5. Retention



6. Product and services



7. Suppliers and partners



8. Communication



9. Premises



10. Information and communication (ICT)



Getting the culture right

- Leaders set the tone – disproportionate impact
 - For good or for bad!
 - Personal stories – ad hoc or planned programmes
 - Role modelling working differently (i.e. adjustments)
 - Remember privilege – and give permission
- Keeping that kinder leadership – again don't slip back
- Language: “tell” or “share” not “disclose” or “declare”?
- Wider language – does it support or undermine?
 - Culture in higher education - how does it feel to share a “weakness” or even just a difference?

• What managers worry about:

- Not being an expert – is there something else going on?
- Saying the wrong thing – what do you need to do your job well? What are the barriers? How can we remove them?
- Performance and attendance management
- Cost of adjustments – and how will the team react?
 - Many adjustments are low cost – and lots are free
 - Average cost of adjustments only 14% of cost of rehiring – and that's without the knowledge and talent loss
 - Access to Work can help – as can central pot for funding
 - Agreeing communication to wider team

Getting it right – a starter for three



Senior leadership
and culture

People manager
confidence

Practical support
– workplace
adjustments

Any questions?



Contact us

Business Disability Forum

businessdisabilityforum.org.uk

E: Dianel@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk

T: 020 7089 2495

