

Disability and the Employment Gap



Kim Hoque, Professor of Human Resource Management at Warwick Business School, takes a look at how the disability employment gap in the UK has been left to widen and contends that pressure is building for companies to do something about it.

Related research:

Jones, M., Hoque, K., Wass, V. and Bacon, N. (2020) «Inequality and the economic cycle: disabled employees' experience of work during the great recession in Britain», *British Journal of Industrial Relations*. Hoque, K., Bacon, N., Wass, V. and Jones, M. (2018) «Are High Performance Work Practices (HPWPs) enabling or disabling? Exploring the relationship between selected HPWPs and work-related disability disadvantage», *Human Resource Management*, 57, 2, 499-513



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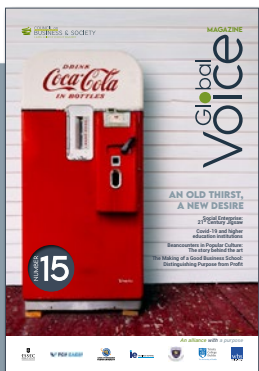




PERCEIVE

with a set of key takeaways

- Disabled people are over-represented in low-skilled and low-status jobs, are more likely to work in jobs for which they are overqualified, and have poorer access to career progression and training opportunities. They also suffer a 15.5 percent pay gap.
- The size of the disability employment gap is high in the UK: 29% points. Only 53% of UK working-age disabled employees are in work, compared to 82% of non-disabled. The EU rate is 20% and Finland, France, Latvia and Sweden have gaps of 10%.
- Disability equality is important for employers as part of their social responsibility. Employers have a duty of care towards their employees as they age, enabling those who develop disabilities to stay in work. But this requires significant investment in occupational health.
- UK Government policy focusing on supply-side labour market activation aimed at getting disabled people off benefits and into job-seeking activity has proved limited.
- UK Government attention is now turning to the role of employers in helping boost employment opportunities for disabled people. One example being the voluntary disability reporting framework.
- The Government believes this will help employers to workforce, better monitor internal progress in building a more inclusive environment, and enable them to access a wider pool of talent and skills, with consequent gains for performance and productivity.
- Disability employment reporting is, however, far from straightforward, and remarkably few employers collect accurate data on the number of disabled people they employ.
- A further Government focus on the role of employers relates to changes to the Public Services (Social Value) Act, where government departments must take social value into account within procurement decisions.
- As such, the ability of employers to win Government contracts may, in future, be dependent on the manner in which they treat disabled people.
- Brexit is an opportunity for the disabled: The Government is increasingly aware that a failure to solve labour supply problems in the post-Brexit era will have severe economic consequences and the large pool of disabled people who are willing to work but are currently not in employment will help to solve this.
- Many of the adjustments disabled people often need are, in reality, relatively low cost or cost-neutral (ex: time off for medical appointments, greater flexibility in working time and patterns, opportunities to work remotely).
- But research shows that only when equality is led from, and championed by, the boardroom does it turn into genuine action across the organisation.
- It is therefore incumbent on business leaders to develop a climate in which disabled people are viewed as an asset, and their contribution to organisational effectiveness is genuinely valued.
- This involves making the employment of disabled people the responsibility of a senior board member, placing disabled people in leadership positions, and incorporating disability goals into middle managers' performance plans.
- By developing a climate in which disabled people are able to thrive, businesses will also gain from greater employee retention, smaller skills gaps, a more motivated workforce and ultimately a more effective and profitable organisation.



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PERFORM

by putting it all into practice

CHECKLIST

- 1. **Given that most disabilities develop** in adulthood once individuals are already in employment, as leaders, check that there is sufficient investment in occupational health services for your disabled staff to ensure the requisite adjustments are made and to facilitate reintegration after the onset of long-term health problems or permanent disability.
- 2. **Carry out a Reporting exercise** on the percentage of individuals within your organisation who are disabled or have a long-term physical or mental health condition.
- 3. **Provide a narrative to outline activities** in the recruitment and retention of disabled people. Make the purpose of the data collection exercise clear in order to allay fears surrounding disclosure.
- 4. **Make workplaces more accommodating** to disabled people. Think of 3 ways you can immediately achieve this. Select a major initiative for the longer term and plan out the various milestones to achieve the end result.
- 5. **Build awareness** (for example, through information campaigns, workshops, presentations by local NGOs, pairing up able and disabled employees for micro projects).
- 6. **Invest in training** (ex: disability health and safety training, office ergonomics).
- 7. **Make use of assistive technology** in the workplace, make accessibility a priority with tangible goals and targets to reach over a timeframe, include time off for medical appointments, and ensure flexible hours and remote working.
- 8. **As leaders, develop a climate in which disabled people** are viewed as an asset, and their contribution to organisational effectiveness is genuinely valued (monitor and communicate on results achieved using facts, figures and timeframes). Include mixed able/disabled teams in strategic projects.
- 9. **Make the employment of disabled people** a clear priority of a senior board member, place disabled people in leadership positions when appropriate, and incorporate disability goals into middle managers' performance plans.



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