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REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS : COLLECTING USER EXPERIENCES FOR A 'SOLUTIONS DATABASE'

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The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) states that employers must make 'reasonable adjustments' to the workplace for employees with disabilities. To help provide advice on this subject a project was undertaken to build a database of work related 'solutions' that would supply information to those that support people with disabilities about their potential work related needs. This paper presents one of a series of studies designed to determine the information requirements that would assist people with disabilities to join or rejoin the workforce.

Introduction

As employers become more aware of the need to make reasonable adjustments for employees with disabilities, more initiatives are being introduced to encourage this process. Many papers have been published declaring the need for improved employment outcomes for disabled people but few have made any practical suggestions on how to improve them (Thompson, 2005; Department for Work and Pensions, 2006; Strategy Unit, 2005).

The overall purpose of this project was to develop a better system of information delivery on the work related needs of people with disabilities, referred to in this paper as a 'solutions database'. To accomplish this, several studies were undertaken and this paper presents the first study which assessed the current situation for people with disabilities, in relation to employment. The data collected from the interviews is being used to contribute to several aspects of the solutions database. However due to the space limitations of this paper only the data that relate to the content of the solutions database will be presented.

Methodology

This study explored the experiences and level of knowledge on disability and employment related topics through interviews of working age people with disabilities. A total of 33 participants took part in the study, all were of working age with some currently working (n=23) and some not currently working (n=10). Analysed variables included gender, age, education level, work experience, type and onset of disability.

Results

Each of the interviews was broken down into sections, an outline of these sections along with a short summary of the results is outlined below:

History of interventions

The majority of each interview entailed the participant giving an account of the professionals with whom they had come into contact from the onset of their disability. The purpose of this was to a) identify who are the stakeholders in the journey from diagnosis to working and b) to determine what information they supplied to the participants. Table 1 outlines the groups of stake holders along with a summary of the type of information they passed on to participants.

Table 1. Stakeholder groups and advice

Stakeholders	Guidance/ information
Medical professionals - general practitioners - hospital doctors - company doctors - consultant physicians - surgeons	- physical restrictions - information on medical procedure - recommended time off work - information on support organisations - information on social services - advice on condition and exercise - advice on diet and medication
Allied medical professionals - physiotherapists - occupational therapists - nurses - rehabilitation consultants - psychologists - acupuncturists	- exercise advice - told to retrain for desk job - suggested seeing a DEA - told had to give up licence - information on condition - recommended looking for jobs with low stress - gave advice on changes to lifestyle - recommended a light weight wheelchair - gave number to get some equipment - information on access to work - information on ways to cope and strategies - DFS claims
Employer	- gave information on DDA - arranged for assessments and adjustments
Employment Intermediaries - Job Centre Plus advisors - disability employment advisors - employment programmes (NDDP, Y2W, etc.) - Department for Work and Pensions - Access to Work	- gave info on benefits - recommended retraining - information on courses - info on right to stop working - told about access to work - educated on disability issues

Attitude toward the employment process

Three questions were asked to determine what the participants felt about the following: a) what factors were most instrumental in their getting or keeping employment? b) what

information did they find hard to obtain? and c) what recommendations they would make to improve the employment situation for people with disabilities? Table 2 summarises the responses that are pertinent to the content of the database:

Table 2. Attitudes toward the employment process

Q: Who or what would you say has been the most instrumental in your getting into work and why?	Support from employment intermediaries
	Encouragement and assistance from their employer
	Because their disability didn't affect their ability to do their job
	Knowing their rights
Q: Is there anything that you can think of that you wish you had known earlier or information that could have helped you but you were not made aware of it when you needed it?	More medical information on condition and/or treatments for own knowledge
	More information on Access to Work
	Information from Job Centre Plus on; courses, jobs, tax credits, housing grants, DEA services
	Information on support groups
	Information on Health and Safety Regulations (i.e. right to refuse and audits)
	Information on mobility schemes
	Information on DDA and related legislation
	Information on counselling services available
	For others to be more aware of condition and what to do in an emergency
Q: If you could make any recommendations on how to help people with disabilities concerning employment, what would they be??	A fuller explanation of access to work
	Better awareness training for able bodied people, so they can understand the needs of people with disabilities
	Better guidance and support for people who are job seeking
	More advice from medical professionals
	Better accessibility

Knowledge of disability provisions

Participants were asked about their knowledge or understanding of important disability related terms concerning Government legislation and support, the terms were: Disability Discrimination Act, Disability Employment Advisor, Access to Work, local support organisations, and reasonable adjustments. Each answer was rated according to the participant having knowledge of the term that was; good, some or none. Overall the results showed that the employed group had at least 200% more 'good' knowledge in all categories except for knowledge of Disability Employment Advisors, where both groups were approximately equal.

Use of adjustments

Participants were asked if they have made, or would need to make, any changes to their job or workplace in order for them to work. There was a great deal of information acquired from this question, therefore it is only possible to present, in Table 3, a few of the responses to serve as an illustration of the type of data collected.

Table 3. Impairment and adjustments

Impairment	Adjustments/Aids
Mobility – Total body	
Rheumatoid arthritis in all joints, restricted movement	- equipment for computer: free standing arms, Posturite desk – surrounding (all within arms reach), ergo seat (body forming), speech operated computer, is able to control own hours
Neurological / Muscular Conditions	
Hyper-mobility syndrome. This limits ability to walk and stand, high levels of pain when mobile	- In the conference room employer put a roll-up foam mattress to rest back. - Access to work got an especially supportive chair, a writing slope, a grabber to get things off the floor and they suggested a lift but they haven't got it.
Vision	
Visual impairment – Aniridia (no iris in eyes) sporadic condition, has no central vision and has some cataracts. Strong light can affect vision	- When started work – company did an assessment, recommended a 17" flat screen monitor, to enlarge text and decrease glare on the screen, the phones are controlled by a touch screen monitor too, uses a laptop for taking notes. - Is fine using public transport and has a disabled person's rail card. Shift work can be difficult because of bus times. - Got a magnifier and monocular (to see distances i.e. bus numbers and signs) - can get Access to Work to pay for taxis when doing home visits
Learning Disability	
Dyslexia	- Access to Work did an assessment, recommended a computer to do work, tried to use speech to text software but it didn't work because of office environment. - Does find typing reports easier to do than writing reports - recommended to get someone to do the filing - uses text to speech software to help with reading emails this works well - was given a hand held Dictaphone to use for home visits, but can't use it because was only given the manual to learn how to use it but can't read the booklet to learn how to use it

Analysis

All of the collected data was used to build a picture of what type of information the end user (i.e. person with a disability) would find useful when trying to find suitable employment. As can be seen from the results this information varies widely from universal information that all users should know such as details on benefits, rights and legislation, funding for adjustments etc, to detailed information that would only apply to a small number of people with a specific disability e.g. use of a helper dog for people with mobility impairments. For the solutions database to contain all of this information but still be user friendly, a taxonomy was created. This system of classification organises the information from general to specific, with the first section separating the most basic types of information, including:

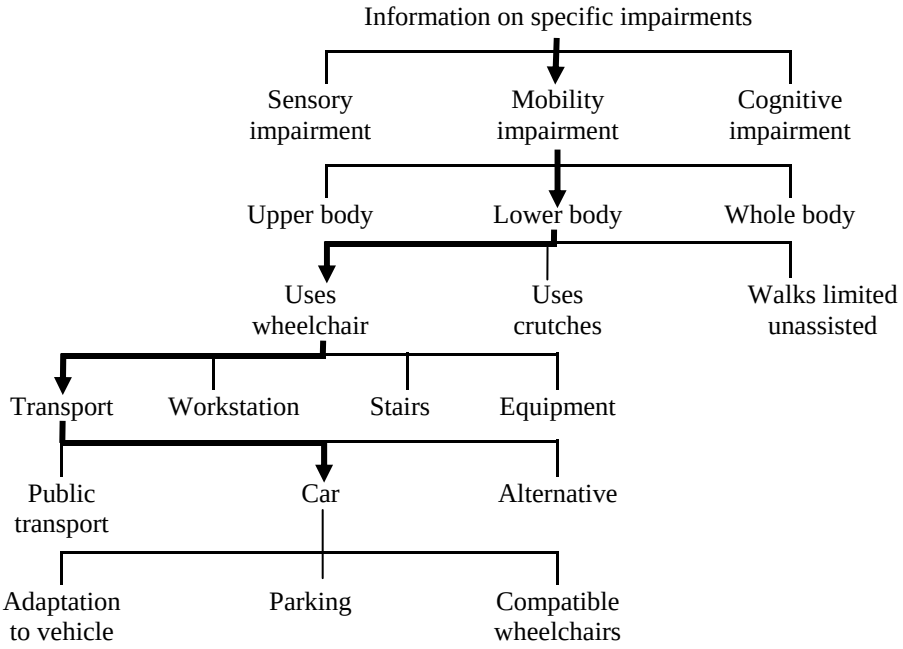
Rights and Laws

Government programmes

Support organisations
General information on making adjustments
Information on specific impairments

Each of these sections would have sub-categories and so on. To illustrate this, the diagram in Figure 1 shows an example of a person who uses a wheelchair looking for information on using a car as part of their work.

Figure 1. Functionality of 'solutions database'



Conclusions

As the purpose of the wider project is to design a database of information on work related solutions for people with disabilities, it is necessary to learn from disabled people themselves what information they have found useful or difficult to obtain and incorporate this into the database. This study illustrated that the information needs of a person with a disability relating to work can vary widely from person to person, and in order for a 'solutions database' to be effective the content must reflect this by including many levels of information, going from general to more specific. This will allow the user to identify appropriate solutions at every stage of the person's journey from onset of disability to full integration at work.

References

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