ACORNS TO TREES

Research on Employer Behaviour Regarding Hiring People with Learning Disabilities

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a summary of findings from recent research conducted by Inclusive Recruiting on behalf of the Fraser of Allander Institute into better understanding employers' fears and concerns over hiring people with learning disabilities. Through interviews and an online survey, several key themes have emerged regarding barriers to hiring people with learning disabilities. These include lack of knowledge leading to prejudice, lack of accountability and organisational prioritisation, not understanding how to make recruitment accessible, not knowing where to start, and perceived cost barriers. Each theme is presented with detail, with options for improvement to address them.

BACKGROUND

People with a Learning Disability experience the largest employment gap in Scotland. The most recent data shows that of the 23,584 working-age adults with a learning disability known to local authorities across Scotland, 4.1% were known to be in employment. However, a very high proportion did not have their employment status recorded (51.5%) and when these individuals are removed, the employment rate rises to 8.4% [1]. This remains considerably lower than national employment for 16 - 64 year olds (74.7%) [2].

As outlined in The Fraser of Allander Institute's report: *Scotland's employment landscape for people with learning disabilities* [3], employers are identified as one of the barriers that someone with a learning disability might face when trying to enter the workplace. The report states that there is "consistent evidence of misplaced nervousness amongst employers about hiring disabled people, often due to fears over productivity or additional cost".

This research project aimed to understand how employer mindset is contributing to the barriers experienced by people with a learning disability.

[1] https://fraserofallander.org/publications/learning-disabilities-invisible-no-more/
[2] https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/labourmarketlocal/S12000026/
[3] https://fraserofallander.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Learning-disabilities-employment-report-final.pdf

RESEARCH AIMS

The research project aimed to answer three questions:

- What unknowns/knowns are holding employers back from hiring someone with a learning disability?
- The reasons for employers being hesitant to hire people with learning disabilities?
- How opinions vary across different employers, for example based on size or industry?

METHODOLOGY

To answer these questions, people from a variety of roles (in HR, Recruitment, Line Management and Hiring Managers, as well as Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) leads) were invited to participate through either a 1:1 interview or anonymous online survey. Participants from different sized organisations, sectors and geography were also invited.

The same question set was asked in both 1:1 interviews and through the online survey. This started with clarifying understanding of the definitions of disability, learning disability and learning difficulty, to ensure alignment across responses. Questions were a mixture of multiple option selection, Likert scale, yes/no and open text comments. Interview themes and questions were guided by multiple sessions with a lived experience panel. This panel was made up of members of The Assembly, a group of people with learning disabilities and autism in Scotland who meet weekly to engage in politics and discuss wider societal issues related to learning disabilities and autism.

Themes were then identified through Thematic Analysis [1], a method for identifying themes or patterns across qualitative data. Interview transcripts were read/ listened to, and codes were identified by the content of what was said. These were later cross-referenced with previous research findings. Codes were then grouped into themes and sub-themes. The survey results were then analysed, taking the same approach, noticing patterns and relationships between themes. Themes were then reviewed by different respondent groups defined by size and type of organisation and role.

[1] Braun and Clark, 2008. Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. Journal of Qualitative Research in Psychology, Volume 3, 2006.

PARTICIPANTS

The invitation to participate with research, either through interview or online survey, was shared widely with the Inclusive Recruiting and sister companies' networks, through social media and by direct contact. Participation was lower than anticipated, with 28 participants overall: 20 through the survey and eight in interviews. Participants self-selected to take part in the research. A small number already had experience of hiring people with learning disabilities (one participant with this experience from a previous organisation and one individual in their current role). These participants were included in the research as their experiences highlighted both valuable good examples and real life barriers.

Participants came from different sized organisations: 53% from Very Large organisations (1000+ employees), 11% Large (250+ employees), and 36% SME (50 – 250 employees).

Participants were well spread across sectors with 32% in the private sector, 29% public sector, 39% third sector, and 7% in higher education.

The majority operated across Scotland as part of a UK-wide operation (68%). Remaining participants were from global organisations, including operations across Scotland and the UK. The findings from this report are therefore relevant to both Scotland and the wider UK.

The roles of those who took part included a variety of HR, EDI and Talent Acquisition (TA) roles, as well as line managers and hiring managers.

THEMES

The research identified five key themes behind barriers and what is holding people back from hiring people with learning disabilities. These were universal and showed up across different firm sizes and sectors. No themes were identified relating to just one type/size of organisation. The themes are:

1. Lack of knowledge leading to prejudice
2. Lack of accountability for/prioritisation
3. Lack of intention and knowledge about how to recruit
4. Not knowing where to start/get help
5. Perceived cost barrier

Some of the themes have clear sub-themes. Each is described below in greater detail.

Theme One: Lack of knowledge leading to prejudice

This theme is broken down into three sub-themes:
- Lack of knowledge
- Prejudice and assumptions
- Fear of others' prejudice.

Lack of knowledge

Everyone who took part in the survey and interviews understood the definition of Disability as per the Equality Act 2010. However, there were lower levels of knowledge about the definition of learning disability versus learning difficulty. In several cases, participants expressed they understood what a learning disability was and then demonstrated confusion, often mixing up the two when speaking. This was also reflected in open-text responses to the survey, for example, referring to recruiting somebody with ADHD in response to whether they have hired somebody with a learning disability. Understanding of different types of learning difficulty was much higher than learning disability. Very few participants were aware of, for example, Williams Syndrome, Fragile X, and SYNGAP1.

This lower level of knowledge about learning disabilities, including the ways in which they present, were reflected in the ways that participants outlined what support they might offer to an individual. Whilst participants were able to highlight specific actions that an organisation could take for neurodiversity, they were not able to articulate this for employees with learning disabilities. 96% of survey and interview participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "There is a lack of understanding from employers as to what individuals with learning disabilities can do with the right support".

Prejudice and assumptions

Survey responses and interviews demonstrated that lack of knowledge could become prejudice, which can be a barrier for employing an individual with a learning disability. Prejudice is a preconceived opinion based on no or little actual experience, expressed both directly and indirectly. Examples of prejudice highlighted in this research included:

- Assumption of low levels of capabilities of an employee with a learning disability
- Assumption that an individual might need close supervision and support

- Assumptions around the type of roles that would be suitable
- Belief that some environments are too fast-paced or complex
- Hybrid working believed to be a barrier (because individuals require close supervision).

The above prejudices were expressed through various comments and survey questions. 35% of survey respondents said they personally held preconceived ideas or hesitations about hiring somebody with a learning disability. 40% of survey respondents expressed that employers believe it may be disruptive for other team members to hire somebody with a learning disability (also reflected across 1:1 interviews). This was often related specifically to line managers, who it was believed would need additional training to provide appropriate support. The ways in which this support was described indicated assumptions that people believe employees with learning disabilities would need closer supervision, in-person guidance, and could not work in a hybrid model.

46% of survey respondents and most interview participants said not all environments are suitable for an individual with a learning disability. The reasons for this described in interviews ranged from physical/manual jobs not being safe for somebody with a learning disability to examples of employers believing individuals with learning disabilities would be better placed in back office, non-customer facing roles. When asked about what roles would be suitable for people within their organisation, survey comments reflected a prejudiced view of learning disabilities. Some participants suggested cleaning and back-office, junior or entry level roles, and others mentioned customer-facing positions. Survey participants also reported a belief that their organisation was too fast-paced or complex, and highlighted hybrid working as a barrier to being able to provide the right support.

In one example, a candidate with a learning disability applied for a role through open recruitment. The candidate clearly communicated how they would fulfil each of the duties and responsibilities within the job description. The candidate talked knowledgeably about reasonable adjustments and their own processes that would enable them to meet the criteria. However, the interview panel were hesitant and ultimately decided to offer the role to another candidate. The research participant shared this story as an example of bias amongst panel members.

Fear of others' prejudice

Survey and interview participants also highlighted fear of others' discrimination and prejudice as a barrier to hiring people with learning disabilities. Participants worried that individuals might not be welcomed or could experience microaggressions. Bias within interview panels was also mentioned as a barrier to hiring individuals with learning disabilities.

Interviews allowed participants to expand on these question. Where participants had experience of employing, or living with, someone with a learning disability, they were more likely to describe the

added value of hiring someone with a learning disability, including how such individuals tend to be well informed and aware of their needs at work and the commitment an individual often demonstrates. These interviewees tended to hold less limited views of suitable jobs and environments, which suggests a lack of knowledge may be driving prejudicial attitudes. These interviews also discussed areas such as the importance of considering career development and an individual's ambition, and had experience of utilising apprenticeships, demonstrating greater understanding and belief in people with learning disabilities' capabilities.

Theme Two: Lack of accountability/prioritisation

This theme includes the following sub-themes:
- Gap between say and do
- Accountability gap
- Lack of organisational prioritisation of learning disabilities compared to other disabilities.

Gap between say and do

Survey data suggests a dissonance between verbal commitment, and organisations taking proactive steps to recruit people with a learning disability. Some participants described "good intentions", however went on to describe an absence of conscious discrimination rather than proactive inclusion. For example, 100% of respondents said they would hire an individual with a learning disability, but 50% had never discussed how to make this happen within their organisation. In addition, 45% had never changed a process to be more inclusive for people with learning disability and 25% had no experience of hiring or working with an employee with a learning disability. In several interviews, participants reflected that it was the first time they had really reflected about hiring people with learning disabilities.

Accountability gap

Closely linked to the sub-theme above is a lack of understanding of, or confusion about, whose responsibility it is in the organisation to focus on hiring people with learning disabilities. We heard the statement "not me personally" mentioned several times throughout interviews in reference to whether participants had employed somebody or had any suitable roles in their team. Whilst 100% of survey and interview participants said they believe an individual with learning disabilities can work in an organisation with the right support, 20% felt there were no appropriate roles in their organisation.

The reasons for this were pace and complexity (the same response came from different sizes and types of organisations). Those with no prior experience of working with or hiring somebody with a learning disability were more likely to answer that their organisation had no suitable roles.

Lack of organisational prioritisation

Of note, and linked to both sub-themes above, was a lack of mention throughout any survey and most interview responses regarding organisational strategy or leadership drive to recruit people with learning disabilities. Some EDI managers/leaders referred to other inclusive recruitment drives, such as focusing on race or gender representation. This could suggest that organisations do not see learning disabilities as a priority in their EDI plans. Most participants saw improving opportunities for people with learning disabilities as a responsibility of both employers and the government. Where organisations did have a focus on improving opportunities, policy, process, governance and working environment for people with disabilities, their focus was primarily on neurodiversity or physical disability. Through increased awareness of neurodiversity across society, workplaces have begun to prioritise additional tools and support for neurodiverse people, and continue holding themselves accountable with policies and adjustments for physical disability. Learning disabilities are rarely mentioned, considered or provided for in the multiple plans and strategies around disability. Individuals with learning disabilities have distinct needs and these do not seem to factor into overarching inclusion or disability strategies, policies, or processes across organisations. Many participants cited the importance of organisations being good corporate citizens and leading in this area.

Theme Three: Lack of intention and knowledge of how to recruit

Sub-themes:
- Recruitment processes need to be adapted
- Lack of knowledge about how to adapt processes
- Need for tailored onboarding

Recruitment processes need to be adapted

The participants who had experience of hiring individuals with learning disabilities shared that their standard organisation recruitment approach was not appropriate. Examples of successful recruitment of an individual with a learning disability demonstrated intention to recruit and a tailored approach.

For example, in one organisation a role had been created specifically as a two-year placement for somebody with a learning disability. The hiring manager met with candidates for an informal chat and felt the process was more about building confidence in the individual (and their family) that the employer would put the right adjustments in place. Incidentally, this was an organisation that has improving representation of people with learning disabilities as a clear aim of their EDI plans.

Lack of knowledge about how to adapt recruitment processes

The survey responses suggested a lack of awareness of the types of adjustment useful for candidates with learning disabilities. 75% of respondents to the survey said their recruitment approach was inclusive for somebody with a learning disability, potentially demonstrating lack of knowledge. 70% do not offer guaranteed interviews and 45% had never altered their interview format to make it more accessible for somebody with a learning disability. Where people had adapted interviews, the adaptations consisted mainly of providing questions in advance.

In a couple of examples, candidates with learning disabilities had applied for a role through open recruitment processes. In one example, the candidate had proactively shared their learning disability and the reasonable adjustments required for the interview. The research participant described panel members' hesitancy, suggesting that even when individuals are clear about what they need, hiring managers continue to hold concerns.

Need for tailored onboarding

Participants with experience of recruiting people with learning disabilities also mentioned that standard organisational joining documents, such as contracts and staff handbooks, could act as a barrier. These individuals mentioned the need to provide information such as induction and training materials in accessible, easy read formats for new starters. Participants with experience working with people with learning disabilities shared a person-centred approach to planning out the first few months in a role, sometimes in collaboration with family members who may also have nervousness about aspects of employment such as travel to work.

Theme Four: Not knowing where to start/ get help

70% of survey respondents highlighted that a key barrier when it comes to hiring somebody with a

learning disability was not knowing where to start. 80% did not know where and how to advertise roles to attract candidates with a learning disability. 70% did not know where to go for guidance and support. Most respondents could not name or list what tools or support they would need. Line and hiring managers tended to respond that they would refer to HR. However, respondents in HR roles were not aware of where to start either. In addition, whilst participants had heard of some of the bigger name learning disability charities such as Mencap, they were less familiar or unfamiliar with organisations such as the British Institute of Learning Disabilities and Disability Law Service (only one participant had heard of the latter).

This finding was reflected in interviews too, with participants expressing uncertainty across issues, including whether it was OK to advertise roles specifically for people with a learning disability, who they could work with to learn about adjustments, and whether apprenticeships were a suitable route or not.

Interview participants elaborated on this theme by describing a need for better support around Access to Work applications. Several survey respondents demonstrated a lack of awareness of Access to Work's existence, as they cited the need for government funding to provide reasonable adjustments.

Theme Five: Perceived cost barrier

Throughout the survey and interviews, participants directly and indirectly cited cost as a barrier to employing somebody with a learning disability. Whilst many were not specific or clear about what costs might be incurred, reference was made to line manager training, additional support, and the cost of reasonable adjustments. Some of the anticipated costs appear to be related to prejudicial attitudes, for example that a colleague with a learning disability would require closer supervision, and even the perception that an individual with a learning disability would have lower productivity and reduce the capacity of the team.

This links to both lack of awareness of Access to Work, and long waiting times for Access to Work funding. Organisations often front costs: one participant highlighted an example where the employer paid for an employee's travel to work in a taxi for two months before Access to Work funding was received.

OPTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Based on the research findings above, and suggestions from participants, Inclusive Recruiting suggest the following options for improvement:

- **The creation of an obtainable and accessible Resource Bank** – employers would benefit from a resource bank of toolkits, guidance and fact sheets, including about different types of learning disabilities, examples of reasonable adjustments, guidance on how to recruit, examples of accessible job adverts, and ways to make the process more inclusive and accessible. This could be platform-based and it has been indicated that employers would be willing to pay for such a resource.
- **Sharing of case studies - live and online** – the research highlighted some good practice examples that could be developed into case studies to share with employers. These could be part of the Resource Bank, or shared in live working sessions with employers and individuals with a learning disability. There was an express interest shared widely for this.
- **Build a community of practice/network** – many participants expressed interest in continuing to build their understanding and commitment towards hiring people with a learning disability. Developing a community of practice/network where employers could work alongside individuals with lived experience to develop tools and inclusive processes would benefit employers and support those who have learning disabilities.
- **Create volunteering, job shadowing, and placement schemes** – this was referenced often by employers and The Assembly. It would introduce employers to working with people with learning disabilities, allow trialling of roles to find what works and what is accessible, and help to change self-identified attitudes and prejudice form hiring managers within the employer group.
- **Design and deliver masterclasses** – these could be offered to improve knowledge and attitudes around learning disabilities. Some mentioned a masterclass on Access to Work may be helpful.
- **Develop a central body for supporting and hiring individuals with learning disabilities** – Most employers had no idea where to get help or find out more. We found many small organisations who could help, but these were generally localised in regions. It would be of great benefit if one organisation/body/campaign was created that brought all of these groups together to support employers, develop tools and campaign for further support and funding to drive awareness of this. This was another recommendation where we noted employers would be willing to pay for access to such services and materials.

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