

Disability Discrimination Act and Work Based Learning



Final report from: Ann Reese

Name of project: Practical is Beautiful

Organisation: Rewards TRC

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The main criterion for including projects on this website is that they are all developmental or case study research projects undertaken as part of DDA: improving work-based learning for people with learning difficulties and/ or disabilities. The overall aim of this project was to support work-based learning providers to respond to the DDA. Project reports do not necessarily reflect good or best practice.

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LSDA DDA project, Practical is beautiful event

Project Manager Ann Reese, Rewards

The issue

Large companies and institutions have the infrastructure in place to ensure compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and to pro-actively promote changes to encourage learners, employees and customers across the whole spectrum of disabilities. Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) generally do not have the infrastructure or the impetus to consider their duties under the DDA or to introduce change (unless there is a carrot or stick applied e.g. a requirement of government funding or licensing). There are numerous issues surrounding responses to disability in general and the DDA in particular, including

- Commercial pressures; all SMEs are focussed on keeping their businesses going and paying their bills at the end of the month
- Ignorance; some are just unaware of the DDA
- Head in the sand; some are aware of the DDA but choose to ignore it and wait to be bitten when caught out
- Confused; some are aware of the DDA but don't know where to find help
- Frightened; some have a perception that it will cost ££££££s.
- Couldn't care less; some wilfully avoid even considering the issue.

The first thing to acknowledge is that SMEs are operating in a very difficult environment. They have to juggle priorities and roles every day covering Health & Safety, Employment responsibilities, Finance, marketing their businesses, developing new product lines, dealing with clients and customers. It is no surprise that additional legal responsibilities sometimes are not absorbed or just ignored. I work for an SME and can compare the constraints and pressures under which we operate compared to those of our College partners.

First hand experience from our client base over several years has confirmed that SME response to disability issues is mixed. That mixed reaction has a knock-on impact on the number of learners with disabilities being recruited onto and achieving apprenticeships. This is especially true of WBL providers like ourselves because our enrolment focus is on potential learners already in employment. Thus to increase the number of learners with disabilities involved in apprenticeships, we first need to tackle getting those potential learners into employment.

A further topic for consideration is the term "disability". Over the years this has widened from a narrower definition which covered physical or medical issues into one encompassing a wide spectrum of issues including learning difficulties. However, this change of definition has not been absorbed by the wider SME community. Disability is still often associated exclusively with wheelchair use.

Our ultimate goal is to increase the success of learners with disabilities on apprenticeship programmes. Taking it one step at a time, our immediate goal is to reduce the negative perceptions surrounding disability which some SMEs currently hold.

What we decided to do

We posed the question “how can we raise the positive profile of disability and reduce the misconceptions surrounding disability in the SME environment”?

As part of our project initiation meeting, Dr Chris Hewitson, LSDA, described a national event he attended where the speakers gave very positive, interesting and relevant talks on disability, and the impact this had on the audience. After discussing the idea further, we decided to build on that approach and organise an event to promote working positively with disability in the Brighton area; trying to replicate the national idea at a local level. The focus of the event would be the practical help available to SMEs to enable them to respond positively to disability for their customers and employees. By focussing the event on practical help rather than high level strategies and visions, it was anticipated that this would give the project the means to attract SMEs. Thus the “Practical is beautiful” event was born.

First steps

Before starting on the logistics of organising an event, there were two key decisions to be taken if the project was to get off the ground and prove feasible.

The first decision was how could we get our message heard in Brighton? The first step was to talk to one of our partners, City College Brighton and Hove, to see whether they would be interested in supporting the project. Having a firm commitment to disability awareness themselves, the college readily volunteered to support the event especially in marketing and by providing a venue. We were also keen that the event should be associated with training by locating it in a central, high profile educational venue.

The second decision was which SMEs to target. There are thousands of small businesses in Brighton, across a wide spectrum of sectors. To try and reach all of them would have been unrealistic so we decided to concentrate on one sector because the format could be rolled out to other sectors at a later date. The Retail sector is a high priority in Sussex, and Brighton has a varied and very active retail environment. In addition, retail outlets deal with thousands of customers each day and employ a large workforce. Hence they are likely to have engaged with people with a wide range of disabilities so we concluded that the topic would be a real and immediate one for them.

Shaping the event

The original idea for the event centred on acquiring a speaker from a national organisation and Dr Hewitson volunteered to help with this aspect. Through the Employers Forum, he was able to put us in touch with an organisation called Direct Enquiries. The following is a direct quote from their website

“Direct Enquiries – is an online access register that gives businesses and service providers throughout the United Kingdom an opportunity to shout about what access and facilities they currently provide. Importantly it also provides details about what access and facilities they cannot provide today, but hope to provide in the future.”

“In association with two of the country’s leading charities, RADAR (The Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation) and the Employers’ Forum on Disability, the register provides details about everything from entrances, lifts, toilets, counter heights, lighting,

auxiliary aids such as Braille, large print, induction loops and lap trays, all the way through to staff assistance.”

They promote accessibility and bring compliant businesses to the attention of people with disabilities. Direct Enquiries promotes this aspect of its work as being in support of SMEs’ business objectives, hence its quote

“Direct Enquiries has been developed to assist businesses to attract more business and meet part of their legal obligation without spending huge amounts of money.”

Full details of Direct Enquiries can be found on its website, www.directenquiries.com. It was also important to give the event a local perspective as well as a national perspective. Through our contacts, we heard of a new Sussex based organisation called Disability Equals Business.

We made contact and met with one of their consultants, Diane Mulligan, who was extremely enthusiastic about the event and readily agreed to support it by providing a speaker and bringing several of the consultants along on the day. The attraction of working with Disability Equals Business was that they have a very practical outlook and are completely focussed on working with businesses to initiate change.

Disability Equals Business understand the realities of life for SMEs i.e. these are commercial organisations who need to be persuaded that an activity makes sound business sense and that effort cannot be expended by a business just for the feel good factor. Their website, www.disabilityequalsbusiness.org.uk , makes this point quite succinctly,

“Disability Equals Business encourages a wider range of work opportunities for disabled people by helping businesses to see the potential and business benefits of recruiting and retaining staff from a largely untapped pool of talent. Disability Equals Business work with businesses providing support, guidance and training on relevant issues, including policies and procedures, the Disability Discrimination Act and reasonable adjustments. The consultants provide in depth action plans tailored to the specific needs of individual businesses to their requirements.”

They are seeking to develop a win-win situation for all parties and this philosophy exactly matched the aims of our event.

Both organisations agreed to provide a presentation and handouts for the attendees.

Logistics

We sought guidance from our LSC contract manager, the Retail CoVE manager and the College’s marketing manager on the best date, day and time for the event. It had to fit between the busy times of the January Sales and the Easter rush. Tuesday to Thursday would be the better days as these avoided the busy weekend peak. Early mornings were unsuitable as shops were being prepared for opening; lunchtime is too busy; afternoon conflicts with end of day and would leave wasted time; early evening straight after closing was felt to offer the best time to attract an audience i.e. catch them as they went home. The event was set for Wednesday 8th February 2006, starting at 6.00pm.

There would need to be some added attraction especially on a cold, dark February night. The College agreed to provide refreshments and a buffet to revive the attendees and presenters.

The next step was to market the event. City College has links with several retail traders' organisations in the North Laines area and Churchill Square Shopping centre, two of the main retail areas in Brighton Both areas agreed to publicise the event in their trade magazines and at their retailer meetings. City College also persuaded the Evening Argus to include a small item in one of editions. These initial marketing tasks were the tip of the iceberg. We were advised by all our partners that the retail sector is notoriously difficult to engage and we would need to work on a ratio of 10 invites to 1 acceptance. Thus, to get an audience of 50, we would have to target 500 companies. In order to widen the net and encourage attendance, we offered 2 places per business so in theory our catchment had increased to 1000. The list of invitees was compiled using local business directories, our own company contacts and local knowledge. The selection was made on postcode and sector so that businesses closer to the city centre were chosen on the basis that their staff had less distance to travel to the location. The final count of invitations was 560 businesses. Most invitations were addressed to an individual rather than to "The Manager". A copy of the invitation is attached as an appendix.

One week before the event, we rang around to check who planned to attend. Two days before the event, we visited businesses in the streets closest to the College for face-to-face follow ups.

The invitation and follow up part of the project were very time consuming and probably took at least 5 days of full time effort.

The event

City College further proved its support for the event when the college Principal agreed to welcome the speakers and attendees, and to open the event.

Both sets of speakers emphasised certain key points of information which SMEs need to appreciate

- people with disabilities have an estimated £80+ billion per year spending power
- most people with disabilities acquire those disabilities later in life so with an aging population, more of your customers and employees will be affected
- there is help out there for you
- the emphasis is on reasonable adjustment.

Henry Brind of Direct Enquiries was the first to present. He explained the background to his organisation and demonstrated the Direct Enquiries web-site. The purpose of the website is to bring together service providers and their potential customers. The website has over 100,000 hits every week. It enables the customer to search by postcode or location for a business type which can provide the facilities that the individual customer needs. In the example below, the search will identify Art & Craft shops in Brighton with Accessible toilets.

Art & Craft Shops

You are searching for "Art & Craft Shops".

Located Where?

Prioritise your search results by:



Henry explained that many of the first companies to register with Direct Enquiries were the larger retailers but that the next phase of activity is to encourage more SMEs to take up registration. As the annual cost is only £35 per year this is a very effective spend to market a business so widely.

The second facility which Direct Enquiries is able to offer is an on-line assessment;

“Completing our FREE Access Assessment will help you to understand what access and facilities you currently have and give you helpful tips on areas that you may wish to improve. The Assessment has been developed in conjunction with RADAR (Royal Association of Disability and Rehabilitation).

Direct Enquiries is offering this FREE access assessment to help businesses understand that opening their business to more customers is not as daunting or as expensive as they may have believed, and at the same time assisting them in taking steps to meet part of their legal obligation under the Disability Discrimination Act part III.”

Henry pointed out that some of the most effective changes don't always have a cost, they just need some lateral thinking e.g. stacking shelves vertically instead of horizontally will allow customers in a wheelchair to independently select goods which might have previously been out of reach.

In summary, Direct Enquiries exists to help businesses improve their accessibility and to bring them together with potential customers.

Our second speaker was Teresa Fowler from Disability Equals Business. The organisation has a very positive agenda to help SMEs and this is stated clearly on their website;

Let us give you a helping hand to:

- Understand how diversity can benefit your business
- Develop tailor-made business action plans, to your agenda
- Gain access to a wide range of support services and funding
- Understand how easy adjustments in the workplace can be
- Clarify disability and equality legislation
- Provide FREE training on equality and disability issues

Disability Equals Business is focussed on disabled people and employment. It has developed an employer's toolkit to provide practical support for employers. The emphasis of their presentation was – let us help you to help yourself. They encourage a wider range of work opportunities for disabled people by helping businesses to see the potential and business benefits of recruiting and retaining staff from a largely untapped pool of talent. To do this, Disability Equals Business offers

- Free confidential review of company's existing practices
- Tailored advice on disability issues including:
 - Policies and procedures
 - Demystifying the DDA
 - Recruitment and retention
 - Awareness-raising and training
 - Action planning
- Online Diversity Toolkit for employers

Teresa pointed out that some of the most effective changes cost very little money. Some simple examples are

- have a pen and paper handy to help communicate with profoundly deaf customers
- make sure some signs are slightly larger
- put some signs on non-white paper

In summary, Disability Equals Business exists to help businesses achieve success through diversity.

Outcomes & conclusions

Was the event successful? Only in part. The presenters were excellent and the contacts made between the presenters, the College and the other attendees will develop well in the future. However, in spite of all the hard work, only 2 retailers attended. This was extremely disappointing but we had begun to suspect this might be the case in the days leading up to the event. Marion Ward, CEO of Rewards, spent an afternoon visiting retailers and inviting them personally. Marion was taken aback by the lack of interest. As soon as the topic of disability was raised, barriers came down and Marion could see a physical change in the body language of the individual she was talking to.

Immediately after the event, our initial reaction was to question whether we had picked the wrong date, time, venue or used the wrong means of communication i.e. to examine all the aspects we had under our direct control. We kept coming back to the same conclusion; there is still a vast lack of interest in addressing disability issues in the SME sector. Effective support for learners with disabilities will not be forthcoming until SMEs show an increased awareness of disability issues and a commitment to making the necessary changes.

So the final conclusion is that there is more work to be done with SMEs if the number of learners with a disability on apprenticeships is to increase.

Appendix A, some further useful information

So what will we do next?

Change our Employer handbook to include reference to Disability Equals Business and Direct Enquiries

Change our Initial Assessment to better identify learner disability needs and re-train our Sales and Training staff.

Develop more effective support for learners with disabilities.

Work with the Retail Cove to produce a Disabilities folder.

Work with Central Sussex College to deliver another event in north Sussex.

The statistics

560 SMEs were invited by post.

400 follow-ups by telephone.

Half a day spent making face-to-face invitations.

2 retailers attended the event.

Lessons

Ratio of 20:1 invitations to attendees in retail.

Face-to-face invitation works best but is time consuming

Tell them, tell them and tell them again.

Retail is difficult to crack

Company background

Rewards was established in 1989. We are a training provider delivering Frameworks and NVQs in the workplace through WBL and learndirect. Our main programme areas are Customer Service, Business Administration, Management, Retail, Hospitality, Warehousing & Distribution, ITQ. In addition to Frameworks and NVQs, we deliver Skills for Life, IT and business courses both commercially and through learndirect. Rewards is based in Haywards Heath, Brighton, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

‘Practical is beautiful’

**Wednesday 8th February, 6.00pm to 7.30 pm.
City College Brighton and Hove, Pelham Street.**



‘Practical is beautiful - how to think positively about disability’ is an exciting, **free** event which aims to demonstrate how small, low-cost, practical measures can be put in place to support employees and customers. Organised by Rewards Training and City College Brighton and Hove, the event aims to dispel the myth that dealing with disability means high costs.

National and local speakers will show you how implementing small measures can result in improved support and service to your customers. Consultants from ‘Disability Equals Business’ will be on hand to offer free advice and attendees can book further free consultations.

There are 10 million disabled adults in the UK with a spending power of £80 billion per year. Businesses across Sussex are waking up to the fact that employing people with disabilities can have a beneficial impact on their business. Nick Boyd, Manager, Gochers Laundry says "Adapting our way of working for staff has not cost us a penny and we have all learnt a great deal. I now look at my staff’s abilities, not their disabilities".

Make some small changes to improve accessibility, show your willingness to help and the potential for your business is impressive.

To find out how to make your business more attractive to employees and customers with disabilities reserve your place now!

To book, please return the tear-off slip below or telephone Sacha on 01273 739028 or e-mail sacha.millis@brighton.rewards-trc.co.uk.

Guests can enjoy a free buffet and refreshments.

Please reserve places for the “Practical is beautiful” event.

Attendee name/1
Attendee name/2
Contact name
Company name

Post your reply to
Sacha Millis,
Rewards Training,
First Floor, Mitre House,
149 Western Road,
Brighton BN1 2DD

I am unable to attend but would be interested in (please tick the box)

- further information from Disability Equals Business on how they can help my business
- further information from City College and Rewards on how training can help my business
- an appointment to discuss my requirements

