

Briefing

Employment adjustments for people with upper limb disorders (repetitive strain injury)

Abridged content for sample purposes

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Contents

Introduction	4
What is RSI?	5
Reasonable adjustments and best practice	8
Employment and people with RSI	9
Knowledge and confidentiality	12
Recruitment and selection	14
Harassment	25
Regulatory framework	26
Further information	31
Business Disability Forum products and services	32
Further sources of reference	37
Contact us	48

Introduction

Employment adjustments for people with upper limb disorders (repetitive strain injury)

This is one of a series of briefings, published by Business Disability Forum, which provide practical guidance for employers on specific topics relating to the employment of disabled people. It will be particularly useful for personnel or human resources managers, occupational health advisers, line managers and employment agencies.

What is RSI?

Repetitive strain injury (RSI), upper limb disorders (ULDs), cumulative trauma disorder (CTD) and work-related upper limb disorders (WRULDs) are all umbrella terms that cover a wide variety of musculoskeletal conditions and related disabilities. The different terms basically cover the same group of injuries and are often used interchangeably.

They are predominantly soft tissue injuries affecting the tendons, nerves and muscles. Symptoms include muscle fatigue, pain, cramp, swelling, numbness, difficulty in movement and general discomfort. These can persist or become worse after work, not just when performing specific tasks. They can affect the neck, shoulders, arms, elbows, wrists, hands and fingers, and in some cases the lower limbs.

It is important for people to seek expert diagnosis. There are a variety of conditions involving injury to different parts of the musculoskeletal system and in some cases pain is deferred from the initial injury to another part of the body. Conditions may require different types of treatment, adjustments and management approaches.

The primary causes of these injuries are:

- Repetitive actions.
- Forceful exertion.
- Poor posture (including awkward movements).
- Vibration.
- Long periods of doing the same task.
- Cold working conditions.

Many other factors combine to cause RSI, including job design, equipment, the work environment, the intensity of work activities and stress.

Employment adjustments for people with upper limb disorders (repetitive strain injury)

People will be affected in different ways. The onset of an injury can be gradual, often with minor symptoms in the early stages, but these conditions are generally progressive and cumulative. They can also develop rapidly, especially where workload, pacing of work or other demands are suddenly increased or intensified. Any symptom should be regarded as significant as long-term disabilities can result if it is ignored.

RSI is not always recognised or correctly diagnosed. There is disagreement and confusion around terminology, often due to the confusion between an umbrella term (RSI, ULD) and a specific medical conditions. Generally, specific, localised conditions (e.g. 'tennis elbow') are easier to diagnose – and better understood medically – than the less localised or 'diffuse' conditions. Specific medical conditions include:

- Tenosynovitis.
- Tendinitis.
- Lateral epicondylitis ('tennis elbow').
- Medical epicondylitis ('golfer's elbow').
- De Quervain's disease.
- Trigger finger.
- Bursitis.
- Beat conditions.
- Rotator cuff syndrome.
- Carpal tunnel syndrome.
- Cubital tunnel syndrome.
- Reflex sympathetic dystrophy.

Employment adjustments for people with upper limb disorders (repetitive strain injury)

- Writer's cramp.
- Myalgia.
- Frozen shoulder.
- Vibration-induced white finger.

Although there is no clear diagnosis for 'diffuse RSI', there is an association between the tasks a person does and the symptoms they experience.

RSI can affect people's personal lives and their ability to travel to and from work, even by public transport. Normal everyday tasks at home as well as at work, and sleep patterns, can also be affected.

Reasonable adjustments and best practice

Many people who have RSI will be protected under the Equality Act 2010 but will not consider themselves to be disabled. Nevertheless employers have a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments and not discriminate against employees who might be facing barriers at work because of a disability or health condition – even if it has not been diagnosed as a disability or accepted as such by the individual.

The best practice approach is to make reasonable adjustments for anyone who needs them in order to work effectively and contribute fully to your organisation.

Most employers will want to know what is 'reasonable'. Doing what seems fair for the individual and others who work for you given the size and resources of your organisation is a good place to start.

This guidance will help you deliver best practice. In order to demonstrate best practice:

- You might need to treat people differently in order to treat them fairly.
- Don't make assumptions about what people can and can't do.
- Ensure that everyone knows who is responsible for doing what and when it must be done.
- Involve the individual in generating solutions and respect their right to confidentiality.

For more detail on reasonable adjustments see reasonable adjustments in the regulatory framework section on page 26.

Employment and people with RSI

One in 50 (half a million) of all workers in the UK have RSI. These injuries can affect people in many different sectors and jobs both office-based and manual, they are not, as is so often assumed, confined to computer operators.

Changes in work, working conditions and technology mean that the incidence of RSI is increasing in certain areas, particularly information technology and processing. Examples of at risk occupations include:

- Assembly work.
- Inspection and packing.
- Poultry and food processing.
- Laboratory technicians.
- Cleaning and catering.
- Armed forces.
- Textile and garments workers.
- Electronics and workers in the telecommunications industry.
- Sign language interpreters.
- Carpentry and construction work.
- Cashiers/check-out operators (research shows that over half of supermarket cashiers will report either back pain or neck/arm pain or both).

Employment adjustments for people with upper limb disorders (repetitive strain injury)

RSI can be a huge drain on your company's productivity. Musculoskeletal problems, including RSI, are the biggest cause of ill health and sickness absence among staff in the UK [1], where they affect an estimated one million people [2].

Symptoms of RSI can be associated with specific requirements including those with repetitive finger, hand or arm movements, or movement involving twisting, squeezing, hammering, pounding, pushing, pulling, lifting or reaching.

Static, fixed postures can also be a problem as muscles, nerves and ligaments that are not moved or stretched during the working day can also tighten through lack of use. This in turn affects circulation which can lead to inflammation and pain, caused by sensory damage to the nerves.

It is vital to take a positive and proactive approach to managing RSI in the workplace, to minimise RSI-related absences and retain good members of staff. Address issues systematically and introduce changes and adjustments as part of a systematic review of work methods across the organisation.

Ask your staff what they find difficult, what problems they have, and review the days that have been lost due to RSI in your organisation. This will identify the extent of the problem and provide a starting point. This can be carried out through human resources or occupational health.

Job tasks, equipment, work environment and the duration and intensity of work activities will then need to be reassessed to minimise the incidence of RSI being caused by work. This should be done in consultation with specialist assessors, such as ergonomists and occupational health practitioners.

[1] Table THORGP02. Health and safety executive.

[2] Musculoskeletal disorders. Health and safety executive.

Employment adjustments for people with upper limb disorders (repetitive strain injury)

Employers should explain to employees that they want to help people recover and encourage early reporting of RSI symptoms. You may already have employees who are protected by the disability provisions of the Equality Act 2010 because of RSI. You may also have employees experiencing some discomfort, which if not addressed could lead to future problems and disability. Indeed, poor work practices and stress can lead to employees who have never had RSI developing difficulties.

By regularly talking to employees about their work, for example in appraisals, you may be able to identify difficulties that could be attributable to an employee having RSI. This will then give you an opportunity to talk about adjustments that may enable the employee to work more effectively.

Adjustments may well be simple and inexpensive and make good business sense. Without adjustments, good candidates may not apply for jobs and good employees could be lost. Precise requirements vary from one individual to another. Always ask the person what they need.

Knowledge and confidentiality

As a person's RSI may not be immediately obvious, the employer must rely on the employee to tell them about it. Employees are often reluctant to do this, because they fear discrimination, and feel it is not relevant to their ability to do the job.

If applicants know that you have a positive equal opportunity policy, and in particular that there is a willingness to make reasonable adjustments for all employees, they will be much more inclined to tell you about any disability, including RSI. Being open can be beneficial because:

- The stress of not divulging a disability can exacerbate the person's difficulties at work.
- The employee and their manager can then determine together what adjustments, if any, are required to maintain or improve performance.
- The support of fellow workers can be enlisted.

An employer's duties under the Equality Act 2010 may be triggered not only when an employee has formally told their employer that they have a disability, but also when there is evidence to reasonably indicate that this might be the case.

Employment adjustments for people with upper limb disorders (repetitive strain injury)

Under the Data Protection Act (DDA) you need to safeguard the confidentiality of an applicant or employee's personal and medical information. You should only reveal details about an individual's disability to someone else:

- If absolutely necessary, and then:
- With the explicit consent of the individual, and
- If it is necessary to facilitate the person's ability to do the job.

In some cases, a breach of confidentiality by an employer may be unlawful under the Equality Act 2010.

You should record medical and personal information in a way that does not render it vulnerable to accidental disclosure. Under the Data Protection Act, the applicant or employee should know who will have access to this information and have agreed to this in writing.

Remember that, for anyone with any disability, including someone who has RSI, if an adjustment is necessary, (e.g. time off work, or non-standard hours) the employee's line manager will need to know the adjustment is required but neither they nor colleagues need to be told the precise medical reasons.

Recruitment and selection

Candidates who have RSI may be prevented from demonstrating their abilities and potential by conventional recruitment processes.

You need to make sure that you do not discriminate against a disabled job applicant during the recruitment process. You may also have to make reasonable adjustments. It is important not to make assumptions about what the applicant can or cannot do. If you use external recruitment agencies, ask for evidence that they make reasonable adjustments for disabled applicants and work to the standards that underpin this guidance.

Remember it is unlawful to ask questions about health or a disability prior to job offer under the Equality Act 2010 unless the question relates directly to an intrinsic aspect of the role for which the person is applying, or is for the purpose of making reasonable adjustments to the application or interview process. Questions about disability can still be asked on equal opportunities monitoring forms.

In many cases the Access to Work (AtW) scheme (through Access to Work (AtW) Operational Support Units) can help to fund adjustments, for example adaptations to equipment and support workers.

For more information on recruitment see the 'managing recruitment' briefing.

Job descriptions

When drawing up job descriptions and candidate specifications:

- Be specific about the skills that are needed and what the job involves.
- Be flexible. Very often minor changes can make a significant difference, e.g. an inessential task that is difficult for a particular candidate could be reallocated in the team.
- Do not needlessly exclude a candidate with RSI. Concentrate on what is to be achieved in a job rather than how it is achieved, e.g. stating that an applicant must touch type may exclude a capable candidate with RSI who could demonstrate their ability using voice-activated software. Instead you might state, "you will need to produce accurate reports using a word processing package at regular intervals and at short notice".

Advertising and attracting applicants

When advertising a job:

- Use positive wording like “we welcome disabled applicants” or “being part of Business Disability Forum’s membership, highlights our commitment to becoming a disability-smart organisation”.
- Provide a point of contact for people who are concerned about the recruitment process, using a range of contact methods, e.g. email and telephone.
- Display or mention the ‘two ticks’ disability symbol if you are a symbol holder.
- Consult your local Jobcentre Plus.

Application forms

Adjustments may need to be made to the short listing process, because an applicant may:

- Apply for a job for which they are over qualified because they need to regain confidence.
- Have gaps in their CV due to their disability.
- Have gained experience outside of paid employment, e.g. work experience and voluntary work.

Interviews and tests

As you want to recruit the best person for the job, you need to ensure that all candidates are able to demonstrate their capacity to do the job. Focus on the person’s abilities, not on the person’s RSI. Remember that an applicant may previously have had RSI and told you about this, but have no difficulties now.

If you have any doubts about a person’s ability to do an intrinsic function of the job simply ask how they would do it.

Employment adjustments for people with upper limb disorders (repetitive strain injury)

When you invite applicants for an interview, make sure you ask all candidates if they require any adjustments to be made for the interview. With adjustments, the interview allows you to assess the ability of candidates with RSI:

- Ensure that reception and security staff know how to welcome and assist disabled visitors.
- Build in regular breaks to avoid the applicant spending a long time in a static posture.

If selection normally involves a test, be sure that it does not discriminate against someone who has RSI:

- Make sure adjustments that are already used by the candidate or that can be used in the job, e.g. voice recognition software, are available for the test.
- Discuss the test with the test publisher and seek guidance on possible adjustments.
- Consult the candidate in advance so that necessary adjustments can be made.
- Consider allowing extra time if required.
- Be prepared to waive the test. There are often other equally satisfactory ways of getting the information.

Retention

Once someone has been offered a job, you may need to put in adjustments to ensure they can perform to their highest capability. Start getting the adjustments in place as soon as practicable after you have made an appointment – it may take time. Consult the individual and make sure that the employee's manager or supervisor understands the agreed adjustments. Disability awareness training, that includes RSI, may be especially useful for the candidate's team.

Build in regular reviews of adjustments, for example at the end of the probationary period, in supervision sessions and appraisals to ensure that the adjustments are still effective. A tailored adjustment agreement is a useful way of recording and reviewing adjustments. A tailored adjustment agreement template can be downloaded from the Business Disability Forum website at www.businessdisabilityforum.org.uk. Ensure that you take the same approach to adjustments when an employee with an RSI applies for promotion, again not making assumptions about what the employee can or cannot do.

Induction and training

Disability and the need to make adjustments should be embedded in all policies, for example, policies on sickness, training, and appraisals. New recruits should be made aware of these policies during the induction procedure.

It is important that your standard induction and training programme is accessible, so that an employee with RSI has the same information about, for example, the company profile and office procedures:

- Allow more time and greater flexibility for induction and training.
- Build in regular breaks to avoid the applicant spending a long time in a static posture.
- Provide equipment, e.g. a Dictaphone or digital voice recorder if the applicant has difficulties taking notes.

Employment adjustments for people with upper limb disorders (repetitive strain injury)

- Ensure that all employees are trained on working methods and posture, how to use furniture, tools and equipment correctly, and the importance of rest breaks.
- Ensure that all employees are trained on workplace risks and how to report them, by a designated health and safety officer.

Inform course tutors or trainers when they have participants who have RSI on a programme, and ensure that they know how to make their training accessible.

Ensure that employees who have RSI also have equal access to further in-house and external training, meetings and career development opportunities.

Working arrangements to retain employees

Many adjustments you will need to consider for someone with RSI will be good practice for every employee. They will help reduce the incidence of RSI, enabling you to keep employees' skills and experiences, improve morale, and help make work safer, healthier and more productive.

These good management practices can also mean you avoid serious injury to workers, reduce sickness absence and medical retirement rates and save the cost of recruiting and training replacements. Failure to act can lead to possible costly legal proceedings and personal injury claims against employers.

A sedentary lifestyle and poor posture increases the possibility of RSI. You should encourage employees to remain active – to take their break at lunchtime and, if possible, to go for a walk and to take regular exercise. You should also encourage employees to take regular breaks from work, move around during these breaks and do regular stretching exercises.

In making reasonable adjustments for people with RSI, flexibility is the key and can often produce more options for both employee and employer.

As a first step to reducing RSI, consult employees about what problems they are experiencing and consider:

- Removing hazards in manual tasks.
- Reducing repetition and varying, alternating or rotating tasks or jobs (e.g. in a team or department).

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19 to 46 are available in
the full booklet.**

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