



**Business  
Disability  
Forum**

**Building  
disability-smart  
organisations**

# The Great Big Workplace Adjustments Survey 2023

**Recommendations for employers**

Sponsored by Microlink



This document brings together the concluding comments and recommendations for employers we have given in each chapter of The Great Big Workplace Adjustments survey. This is to help employers see all of the actions they can consider as a result of the survey findings.



## Contents

<b>Types of disabilities, being 'disabled', and the adjustments people live and work with .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The difference adjustments make to disabled employees: 'employer-employee experience gap' .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Managers' experience of having disability-related discussions and making adjustments.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The impact of disability passports on workplace adjustments and removing barriers at work.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The barriers that remain for disabled employees after adjustments have been made.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The use, effectiveness, and accessibility of occupational health when supporting employees and providing adjustments .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Working life during and since the COVID-19 pandemic .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>The role of assertiveness and self-confidence.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Work-related stress and managing a disability at work .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The inclusion and accessibility of employers' health and wellbeing initiatives .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Looking ahead: What disabled employees want in their current job and future career .....</b>	<b>9</b>

## Types of disabilities, being 'disabled', and the adjustments people live and work with

- Consider offering noise cancelling headphones to every employee as standard practice (where appropriate). Offer a range of different types for employees to choose from. Some people do not like to wear big headphones; common reasons cited were some people with autism not liking headphones covering or touching around their head and ears, and people with upper limb, neck and shoulder weakness or musculoskeletal conditions saying large headphones can be quite heavy. In-ear noise cancelling options are preferable to some. Choice is important. If employees are comfortable while they work, that is one less thing distracting them away from their tasks and productivity.
- Establish what clear communication means across the whole of your organisation. It should not be an adjustment to know what your job is, have clear explanations, or have decisions communicated clearly.
- In organisations where roles are agile and employees can self-define some or much of their role, there should still be a remit and definition of what the role is and what is expected of the employee and when. Not having this too easily leads to work-related stress and unclear expectations of the employees and their team colleagues around them.
- Know the difference between generic home working policies, and requests to work from home as a reasonable adjustment. For example, a reasonable workplace adjustment might be to allow changes to the home working policy to ensure an employee can work from home more than the policy defines to help them manage a disability or condition.
- Consider the terminology you use around disability and workplace adjustments. Language in documents, policies, guidance, and internal communications should be as inclusive as possible so that everyone who could benefit from adjustments can see 'someone like me' in the language that is used.

## The difference adjustments make to disabled employees: 'employer-employee experience gap'

- The key outcome employers need to achieve to is bring managers' experiences in line with disabled employees' experiences.
- Any efforts to measure managers and employees' views must be based on shared definitions of what is being measured.

In addition, another reason for the anomaly between managers' and disabled employees' experiences is likely to be due to managers typically responding with what is '**visible**' to

them – for example, employees changing job, employees laughing and being ‘positive in mood’, employees staying in their job – whereas employees are understandably likely to respond by how they **feel** about situations. The challenge is that how employees feel is not ‘visible’ to managers unless conversations happen. Until definitions and outcomes are consistent and good conversations about how employees are feeling take place, data will continue to report gaps in the views between managers and disabled employees.

## Managers’ experience of having disability-related discussions and making adjustments

- Much of the issues managers reported are created by multiple points of support and inside and outside of the organisation. One ‘single entry point’ into all of the employer-provided health, adjustments and wellbeing support available will make decisions and finding support quicker and easier for managers which will then be felt by staff. This may include bringing together much of what many employers already provide into one internal service, but it also needs employers to undertake a review of what is not currently working and provided and then ensure it sits within this single service offer. Within this single offer must come a single, overall workplace health and adjustment budget available to the whole organisation and communicated effectively to all.
- Senior leaders need to trust their managers to implement the flexibility in their teams that they are happy with, and which still delivers business critical results. Compromise may be needed and employees’ ‘first choice’ adjustments may not always be reasonable, but we saw evidence of reasonable flexibility that managers were keen to grant which was being disallowed by more senior leaders without, from managers’ perspective, an unidentifiable reason.

## The impact of disability passports on workplace adjustments and removing barriers at work

- **Ensure conversations and adjustments reviews happen every time something changes, not just annually.** The passport is a record of what has already been agreed; employees should not have to keep re-negotiating what has already been agreed, but there should be an adjustments-related conversation each time anything changes, and adjustments may need to be re-negotiated as a result. This includes when something changes for the employee or the employer. If adjustments need to be changed by the employer, the employer must discuss this kindly with the employee, give reasons for why this is the case, and discuss with the employee what different adjustments could be provided instead. It should never be a case of, in one employee’s words, **“adjustments have been taken away”**. It should be instead a case of ‘adjustments have been **updated**’.

- **Make sure you are not creating more work for employees just because they have a disability.** Not only does this create additional unnecessary processes but, according to many of our survey respondents (both employees and managers), it also increases the stigma of both having a disability and having a passport. Employers should consider how the passport **enhances** the adjustments experience for employees. If employers have the communication and inclusive mechanisms to support employees already, the passport sometimes can add additional anxiety for employees who are being asked to give information, data implications, and create clunkier processes. If employers' workplace adjustments process is not working as well as it could, the answer is rarely to add more document or process stages; efforts should first be made to make existing processes work better for everyone.
- **Ensure passports are not implemented to avoid conversations.** If employers are considering the introduction of passports to, **in one manager's words, "get away from having a difficult conversation"**, employers are trying to fix the wrong thing. Employers must ensure conversations between employees and manager happen, whether difficult, emotional, or uncomfortable. The part that needs employers' attention here is how to improve colleagues' comfort and confidence levels with such conversations. The passport should facilitate a conversation, not replace it.
- **Ensure passports are kept in a safe, secure way.** Passports contain sensitive, personal information. It is not enough to accept that managers and employees will keep them in personal cloud drives. Whether the information is kept on an HR system or in another digitally secure way, IT security and data protection policies must apply. Where and how these are stored, as well as who can access the information, must be communicated clearly to employees and managers.
- **Provide more guidance and training for managers on how to use passports.** This includes guidance on what the passport is, how to discuss disability and adjustments with employees, and how to ongoingly review agreed adjustments, too. The latter must also include identifying how to agree what an appropriate review period is for individuals and must not rely on a 'one size fits all' annual review of passports and adjustments. Training must also not be something that happens 'once' or 'ad hoc'. It must be designed into induction, onboarding, and continuing professional development for managers.
- **Where employers do use passports, consider providing passports (or equivalent) for everyone, not just disabled employees.** We all need different things to be at our best and a document which sets this out for everyone could both remove the stigma of having "a special document" and enable all employees to thrive.

## The barriers that remain for disabled employees after adjustments have been made

- Each area of a working environment should be reviewed whether or not adjustments have been requested to alter or adapt it. Otherwise, when someone cannot use a space or an area they need to access, they have to ask to be included rather than the employer having proactively ensured premises or policies are designed with inclusion in mind. Ensure shared spaces are reviewed by disabled users, ideally actual users of the building. Accessibility audits can be helpful, but employers must ensure that usability of all spaces and areas is reaching way beyond a legal compliance standard of build accessibility. Disability networks in organisations and employees themselves in organisations are often invited to give this feedback. Employers should ensure they do this proactively: before it needs to be done because someone has asked for it.
- Whenever managers are aware of cross-team working or socialising, adjustments or alterations to communication among colleagues should be arranged in advance. Teams organising events, training or meetings should be equipped to proactively ask if anyone attending or taking part would be able to do so better if things were done differently and adjustments were made. This should be standard practice for every team in every organisation as an embedded inclusive behaviour. When it is not termed as ‘reasonable adjustments for disabled colleagues’, organisations have found that people have asked for, for example, different food or said that they want non-alcoholic drinks or that they may need to adapt their attendance due to family or care situations. In effect, asking if anything needs to be done differently to make taking part easier allows **anyone** to say what would make taking part easier for them, whatever their situation.
- Ensure intranets meet the same inclusion and usability standards as your consumer websites. This is not just about the technicality of the website and the intranet itself; it is also about how content is organised and ensuring that content is accessible.

## The use, effectiveness, and accessibility of occupational health when supporting employees and providing adjustments

There are two key sets of recommendations for employers to improve the experience of OH from both employers and employees’ perspectives: when designing OH tenders and contract specifications, and what managers should know about OH.

When looking for an OH provider, part of an employer’s **tendering questions and contract requirements** should include the following:

- Providers must adhere to an employer's diversity and disability inclusion policies or guidance where appropriate language and 'etiquette' is adhered to.
- Any e-platform used by the provider must be accessible. This means websites, portals, and web applications must be compatible with accessible technologies and have considered the experience of users with a wide range of disabilities, conditions, and symptoms. At the very least, any tests, questions, or ways of accessing a referral must be accompanied with a statement which acknowledges that not everyone communicates and understands information in the same way and, therefore, if information, assessments, or questions are needed in a different format, that will be provided by the potential OH provider. Providers should expect that different formats and ways of doing assessments will be requested; they should not be 'shocked' or not know what to do if a client requests this.
- Providers must have a process in place to provide access to a British Sign Language interpreter for managers and employees when needed.
- Reports should be accessible as written. In addition, requests for reports in different formats should be provided.
- Any 'contact us' information must include at least three ways for people to get in touch. Providing a phone number only is not accessible, and this will not reflect the values of inclusive employers.
- Ensure there is a way for the employer to regularly provide feedback from managers and employees so that the service can be improved for their workforce.

In addition, employers should also **equip managers** to know the following about OH:

- How to write an effective OH referral.
- How to help ensure the assessment and report is accessible and inclusive to the employee.
- What to do on receiving the OH report (such as contact HR, book a meeting with the employee, for example).
- What decisions they can make about the report independently and which elements of a report should be escalated (and to whom).

In addition, employers should also:

- Regularly ask for feedback from employees and managers on the OH process, and feed this back to the OH provider for their action and continuous improvement.
- Ensure there is a process in place for raising inaccessibility, inappropriate comments, or poor quality of assessments and reports with providers.

## Working life during and since the COVID-19 pandemic

- Action needed to be fast as the UK moved to home working wherever possible. For many workforces this was unprecedented and there were therefore no protocols in place for such a quick response to moving adjustments and arranging new adjustments at short notice. Employers (if they have not already) should undertake a review of what worked well and what would need improving in case such a crisis were to happen again. Inclusive employers capture learnings even from isolated or unique circumstances and feed them back into workplace policy and process design.
- Employers should ensure managers know the difference between a home working policy and home working as a reasonable workplace adjustment. Sometimes this will mean making an adjustment to an organisation's home-working policy, and sometimes homeworking will be requested or discussed as part of a workplace adjustments conversation outside of the home working policy. Either way managers should be equipped to know how to make these decisions and consider the wider implications of different working arrangements long term. They should also ensure they are observing where changes are difficult, emotional, and stressful for employees so that they can have supportive discussions and put the right arrangements in place wherever necessary to make transitions as easy as possible for employees to go through.

## The role of assertiveness and self-confidence

- The single most important thing employers can do as a result of the findings in this chapter is to undertake a bullying and harassment review in their organisation. Many surveys undertaken in the workplace collect protected characteristics data at the beginning of the survey. However, surveys often do not ask the respondent if they feel the treatment they have experienced was **because** of this protected characteristic. This is what employers need to understand from employees. When employers have this data and information, they can target interventions appropriately and more specifically.
- Employers must be confident that the threshold of what bullying and harassment constitutes in their policies is appropriate for the culture and behaviours they want to see achieved in their workforce. A lot of the time, employees reported experiencing this time after time and it still going unreported or unaddressed. In other circumstances employees raising it end up experiencing repercussions for doing so.
- There is still work to do on ensuring managers speak and act appropriately in response to disabled employees' concerns, difficulties, and requests for adjustments. Every manager should be able to have discussions with any employee about any life situation. This does not mean they need to be experts in every life situation, but that they need to be able to have a conversation when an employee needs it. This includes disability and adjustments related conversations as well as menopause, caring responsibilities, or just wanting to discuss career progression.



## Work-related stress and managing a disability at work

- Consciously and intentionally giving praise may seem like a small action, but disabled employees said they want more recognition and to feel like they belong and are contributing.
- Encouraging team cultures of giving good feedback which is both truthful and which also aims to make each other feel good goes a long way, particularly for disabled employees' wellbeing at work.

## The inclusion and accessibility of employers' health and wellbeing initiatives

Employers should consider that, overall, employees experience a lack of recognition that 'health and wellbeing' interventions must be appropriate for individuals, particularly when someone has a disability or condition. When workplaces health and wellbeing narratives position everybody as being the same and infer that everyone moves, thinks, and eats in the same way, it compounds the message that there is a 'normal, healthy body type'. Some employees pointed out that this is not just non-inclusive, it is also outdated as a 'medical' health concept and that added to the frustration and patronisation disabled employees felt.

Many employees said similarly – that it was assumed they could do everything, the information and advice was poor, the narrative was dated and not inclusive, and the materials were predominantly inaccessible. Many workplace health and wellbeing initiatives are reinforcing this, and disabled employees are feeling the tensions between what disability inclusive values employers **say** they are committed to and the messages they are endorsing in their health and wellbeing initiatives. Disabled employees have long said that health and wellbeing services, advice, and apps are predominantly ableist, but it appears employers have been slow to influence the accessibility and inclusiveness of what their health and wellbeing services are providing.

## Looking ahead: What disabled employees want in their current job and future career

Employers should consider that employees often felt 'stuck' in their current work situation because of their disability, and others referred to how they felt they should be further on in their career than they are now. Sometimes this was because of a continued and ongoing lack of support and, other times, it was directly because of an employee's disability. When employers have not intervened, this has added to the feeling of overwhelm and the overall feeling that mental health and wellbeing has suffered.

Employees said the following key conditions or circumstances at work helped them feel satisfied with their current work situation:

- Working from home and/or flexibly.
- Having a good work-life balance.
- Good communication with decisions communicated clearly.
- A team and manager who are supportive and who get on together.
- Senior managers being 'visible' in resolving disability inclusion-related issues.

Business Disability Forum is committed to ensuring that all its products and services are as accessible as possible to everyone. If you would like to have this report in different way that would be easier for you, please contact us.

Business Disability Forum  
Nutmeg House  
60 Gainsford Street  
London SE1 2NY

Tel: +44-(0)20-7403-3020

Email: [policy@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk](mailto:policy@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk)

Web: [www.businessdisabilityforum.org.uk](http://www.businessdisabilityforum.org.uk)

**Business Disability Forum is a company limited by guarantee with charitable objects.**

**Registered charity number:** 1018463.

**Registered Office:** Nutmeg House, 60 Gainsford Street, London SE1 2NY.

**Registered in England under Company Number:** 2603700