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Recruitment Industry
Disability Initiative

THE APPRENTICESHIP LEVY: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GREATER INCLUSION?

The government's Apprenticeship Levy, introduced in April 2017, requires all employers operating in the UK, with a pay bill over £3 million each year, to invest in apprenticeships.

The Recruitment Industry Disability Initiative (RIDI) hosted a round table in April 2017 to explore opportunities around harnessing the levy to address the diversity & inclusion agenda, specifically with regards to disability and the disability employment gap, the discussion and key recommendations are summarised below.

What is the disability employment gap?

There continues to be a significant gap between the employment rate of disabled people and the rest of the population. According to the Office for National Statistics, just **49 per cent** of disabled people of working age were in employment between January and March 2017.

To meet its pledge to halve the disability employment gap, the government would need to increase the employment rate among people with disabilities to **62.8 per cent by 2020**. This equates to **1.12 million** more people finding employment in the next three years.

At present, just nine per cent of apprentices in the UK have a disability, and while participation rates have increased steadily since 2013, the number of apprenticeship starters with a learning disability, for example, rising from **38,000** in 2013/2014 to **50,000** in 2015/2016, there is still a long way to go.

Barriers to engagement

Apprenticeships have traditionally focused on **16-18 year olds** and this narrow definition of the term was still being encouraged by the funding uplift of **20 percent** directed at this group.

Consequently, despite the fact that it is the government's stated aim to use levy funding to embrace all workers irrespective of age, gender, disability etc, there appears to be uncertainty as to how this would work in practice.

Access to Work funding is available at apprenticeship level, but it is not necessarily clear how it would dovetail with levy funding.

Roundtable

hosted by 

There is also some uncertainty regarding the funding uplift available for those with learning disabilities and exactly what it would or would not cover. The confusion was neatly summed up by one attendee who said:

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We've worked with a disabled apprentice who has been unemployed for 26 years, delivering training to him is significantly harder than a young person, but the additional financial support isn't there.

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Following debate around the practicalities of administering funding for disabled apprentices, the question of what more the government can be doing to assist disabled people was raised. **The Paul Maynard taskforce recommendations** were referenced, although it was noted that these focus on learning difficulties specifically. One attendee stressed that the policy is designed to create "opportunities for all", and questioned whether, "pots of money for specific groups is the right way to go".

There may also be unconscious fears around the costs associated with employing disabled apprentices. As one attendee said,

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Few employers admit it, but at the back of their mind is cost.

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However, as another at the table pointed out, according to ACAS **95 per cent** of reasonable adjustments cost nothing. The remaining **five per cent** cost an average of just **£200**.

It was noted that disabled candidates themselves often face barriers to application and those in the training sector are not generally experts on disability. As one training provider pointed out,

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The training sector is so heavily compliance-led, with so many balls to juggle, the reality is that it spends the majority of its time on what the law requires.

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Finally, the use of language around disability in the workplace is viewed as a barrier to disclosure and, consequently, limits engagement. The number of disabled people in work may not be accurate simply because many people choose not to disclose their disability. One attendee cited at a recent focus group with disabled employees she had attended:

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The 'reasonable' in reasonable adjustments jerked hard with disabled people as it suggests that if you are asking for support you are being unreasonable.

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Others agreed that use of language can be challenging, with another attendee pointing out that within her organisation the word 'disclosure' had been replaced with 'sharing'.



Key recommendations for leveraging the levy for greater inclusion

1. Raise awareness of apprenticeships among disabled talent. This can be achieved by “leveraging employee networks and other existing relationships,” as well as tapping into established networks. Employers should also reassess where they advertise apprenticeships. For example, the government’s Universal Jobmatch service is a platform which may be overlooked.
2. It is crucial that hirers ‘demystify’ the application process. Organisations should highlight their diversity policy on the landing page of their careers sites, rather than “burying D&I information”. Taking this approach increases the likelihood that disabled people will apply for a role by a third. It is also likely to encourage trust, which will have a positive impact on disclosure.
3. Beyond the application stage, organisations are advised to track where and when disabled people fall out of the recruitment process so that this can be addressed. Assessment should be role relevant and ascertain transferable skills, rather than focusing on past experience, if hiring practices are to be truly inclusive.
4. The Apprenticeship Diversity Champions Network promotes apprenticeships and diversity amongst employers but, there needs to be additional specialist support available for employers considering engaging with disabled people for apprenticeships.
5. We need a ‘one stop shop’ for guidance around apprenticeships for disabled individuals. Professional bodies are a rich source of insight which has been summarised and distilled for their members.
6. A stronger partnership between the government’s Disability Confident scheme and the Institute of Apprenticeships would be beneficial. Networks such as Purple Space could also play a role in reaching out to disabled candidates who may be a good fit for an apprenticeship.
7. Greater access to best practice examples, although, “the problem is, there isn’t enough” Case studies such as the widely acclaimed Barclays’ apprenticeship scheme for over 50s reinforce the idea in the public consciousness that apprenticeships are not just for young people.
8. Employers are a lot more confident regarding inclusive graduate schemes and could use best practices and learnings from them to implement better inclusive practices for their apprenticeships. Apprenticeships should be positioned as an alternative to graduates – not a much poorer substitute. Apprenticeships are about a learning journey not a qualification. Together recruiters, employers and training providers can develop a pathway to give everyone an equal opportunity to succeed.

Final thoughts

Given its commitment to halving the disability employment gap **by 2020**, it's somewhat unsurprising that many commentators are calling on the government to implement recommendations made by the Maynard taskforce to make apprenticeships even more accessible for disabled talent.

However, while there is no doubt that access to guidance needs to be improved, there are currently resources available for organisations which are passionate about the **inclusion of disabled talent** and the wider social mobility agenda - they just need to be pointed in the right direction.

Long-term, apprenticeship providers and staffing companies must work together to fill the knowledge gap to **boost wider inclusion**.

As one training provider said,

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Training providers are never going to be specialists in recruitment, and staffing companies are not experts in training. We need to work together.

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It is therefore imperative that all stakeholders pool their expertise to ensure that organisations have the opportunity to benefit from the apprenticeship levy from a diversity & inclusion perspective. **Success lies in collaboration – and RIDI is the obvious starting block.**



Visit our website to find out how you can get involved:

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