

Unprepared Businesses

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BMRB survey shows that many businesses are unprepared for new exemptions

The 1995 Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) was a landmark piece of legislation, making discrimination against disabled people unlawful in both employment and the provision of goods and services. The Act contained some exemptions for small businesses in terms of service provision. However in October 2004 these exemptions are being phased out, introducing the need for these businesses to make `reasonable adjustments` where barriers exist to accessing goods and services.

As part of an ongoing programme of monitoring, the DWP commissioned BMRB Social Research, in partnership with Loughborough University's Centre for Research in Social Policy, to investigate business response to the existing legislation and preparations for the impending changes. The research took the form of a large quantitative survey of businesses, and 38 qualitative case studies of employers and service providers, conducted during 2003.

The findings reveal a great deal of goodwill among many employers, but also widespread misconceptions about disability and uncertainty over the implications of the legislation.

Over one third of businesses were unaware of the legislation. Only 10% were able to name the Act, and the proportion aware of the impending removal of exemptions for small businesses was even lower.

Two fifths of the survey respondents said that they employed disabled people currently or had done so previously. These workplaces tended to be better informed and more positive across a range of related issues. In general though, significant proportions had concerns about employing disabled people. One third regarded it as a major risk to the business - a view more commonly held in smaller businesses and those with no experience of employing disabled people.

It would seem that the initial interpretation of `disability` often focuses on physical and visible impairment. Views in relation to mental illness were prone to misconceptions, particularly regarding schizophrenia, which most respondents felt was difficult or impossible to accommodate in their workplace.

The case studies indicated that relatively little consideration had been given to potential adjustments that could be made to help disabled people through the job application process. However the survey showed that most businesses responded positively when asked to consider the practicality of a number of suggested measures.

Many businesses were concerned about the potential cost of compliance, and there was much uncertainty over what might constitute a `reasonable adjustment` under the Act. Encouragingly however, the great majority of those who had made adjustments already reported that they had been easy to implement, with only 14% reporting difficulties.

The report was published by DWP earlier this year, and concludes that knowledge of the legislation is lacking, particularly in smaller businesses, the private sector and among those who have never had a disabled employee. It particularly notes the narrow conception of disability which is commonly held, with mental illness and `invisible` conditions such as epilepsy and diabetes tending to be excluded. The report concludes that there is a need to better inform the business community in this respect.

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