



The job challenge

Laura Wardrop argues that people with so-called ‘challenging’ behaviour can find employment, as long as they get the right help

Anyone old enough to remember will recall the programme, *Boys from the Blackstuff*. The most memorable character was Yosser Hughes and his continual plea of ‘Gizza job’ and ‘I can do that’, as he desperately tried to find work following redundancy.

The phrases became synonymous with the mass unemployment of the 80s and the determination to try and find work. It highlighted the loss suffered by people who cannot get a job as being significantly more than monetary. Viewers witnessed Yosser lose his sense of identity and self-worth in

a painful and excruciating downwards spiral.

But, as Martin Luther King put it so memorably,

“In our glorious fight for civil rights we must guard against being fooled by false slogans, (such) as (the) ‘right to work’. It provides no rights and no work.”



“I can do that!”
 People with complex needs
 can work too

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Key points

- The right to work, in itself, equates to very little
- A label of ‘severe’ doesn’t mean people don’t want to work
- Real work is what’s right for the person
- Success comes from person-centred planning and carving out the right job
- Work is not about ticking a box and considering it done, it’s an ongoing journey

really finding their way in the world of work. However, this is not so much the case for people with ‘severe’ learning disabilities, particularly if they have a reputation for being ‘challenging’. Yet, people want and need the same things for themselves regardless of how they express themselves.

Professor Jim Mansell states in the Mansell 2 report: “People whose behaviour challenges, have the same needs as anyone else.... They do not surrender their needs for personal relationships, growth and development or anything else because their behaviour presents a challenge to services. They have the same human and civil rights as anyone else.”

The Go For It research, undertaken in 2005 for the Scottish Executive, looked at the state of play around supporting people with learning disabilities and autistic spectrum disorder into employment. It found that supported employment agencies, set up for people with ‘severe’ disabilities to access employment, were often in practice not available to people with a ‘severe’ learning disability.

At Partners for Inclusion we support many people with a ‘severe’ learning disability who have a reputation for challenging services and who wish to work. Accessing any supported employment agency has been difficult as none of the people we support fit the criteria to get on the books. The message is ‘Do not pass go’.

Agencies set up to assist people with disabilities into work often have to meet stringent targets laid down by their funders. That might be the person needs to be able to work 16 hours or more and able to work without support straight away, or after a very short time, or needs to be able to read and write, or use words to communicate (which is ironic to say the least).

Many of the people we support have been in institutions for much of their life and adapting to the changes of moving out to their own home and the challenges and responsibilities that go with that, has been

The right to work is in itself worth nothing. It certainly didn’t help Yosser and isn’t in itself helping people with learning disabilities get jobs.

Legislation has helped move people with disabilities out of institutions, and consequently society’s view of their place in the world is changing. Whilst this is great, we know a mere change of address doesn’t automatically lead to a life with friends, relationships and ‘real’ work. However, the

stage is set as the Valuing People Now report and The Same as You, its Scottish counterpart, both speak of equal rights and opportunities in all of the aforementioned areas. So what can we do to support people to exercise this equal right to work?

There is a lot of good work being done to support people with physical disabilities and ‘moderate’ learning disabilities into work. Success stories abound and some are truly remarkable examples of people

Photo: titaniumdoughnut, istock

Some people need a gradual start



a massive struggle and a huge achievement. The point is, anyone who can survive years of institutional living and then cope with moving out, is more than able to work, regardless of the level of disability. For some people though, what is needed is a slow and gradual start in a job that is carved out specifically for them, matching their unique gifts and talents.

Three years ago, Partners for Inclusion appointed an Employment Development Co-ordinator with a background in business and employment. It was evident that a background in social care got us hung up on things other than making links with employers, and then we wondered why people we supported didn't have jobs! Our Employment Development Co-ordinator didn't have the same baggage so has made robust links with the business community, but she still faces hurdles.

The benefits system is geared towards

people working 16 hours or more a week; 16 is the golden number, when people stop receiving income support and move onto tax credits.

In the Go For It research, this 16 hours was used to define 'real work'. It does not look at or consider work under 16 hours a week as real. So this definition says to someone with a 'severe' learning disability that they haven't really been working all the time, they've been progressing from working 30 minutes to four hours a week, which is disheartening to say the least.

Furthermore, the benefits system makes it difficult for people to feel any real financial gain for working even if it's only a few hours a week, as earnings over £20 a week are taken pound for pound from income support.

However, it may be argued that to dwell on this point is a red herring and diverts from the issues at the heart of this

matter, that being culture. The right may well be there but if the belief and support systems aren't, the right is worthless. Everyone says the right things but now we need to do much more than talk the talk, we need to walk the walk. Perhaps it is us who should have the reputation for challenging, not those in receipt of the services. When we strip it all back, is it us, the professionals and providers of the services who present the main challenge for people with learning disabilities and their quest for work. We can see this and are working hard to not to do it. ■

Rory, 42, has autism and lived in an institution until he was 39. He had a reputation for physical aggression. The move from hospital was terrifying for him but slowly and painfully he made his way forward supported by a dedicated team.

Rory and his team met with the Employment Development Co-ordinator to talk about what employment could mean for Rory and how to start carving out the right job.

Rory's person-centred plan had identified a desire for routine in his days and for work within that routine. Rory likes order and neatness, so when he was ready to start thinking about work this was described by his team as one of his biggest talents, particularly tidying and organising shelves.

He is a regular customer in his corner shop and his team spotted an opportunity to help the owners keep their shelves in better order. So, Rory began shelf filling twice a week, for an hour at a time. He doesn't use words to communicate but knows the words to a wide repertoire of songs and loves to sing. So he fills the shelves and sings.

He is not getting paid at the moment but he is finding his feet, doing something he enjoys, meeting people and contributing to his community. The trick is not to see this as 'the box ticked for employment'. The employment development co-ordinator is working with the team to work out the plan for the future to make sure Rory keeps working and builds on what he can do.

Resources

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