

## **Access to Work – enabling or disabling individuals with disabilities in employment: an autobiographical case study**

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### **Background**

‘Work Matters’, a Report commissioned by RNIB (RNIB 2002), highlights some of the issues raised by people with visual impairments in maintaining employment, particularly when changes occur in its nature and scope.

### **Objectives**

The intention is to provide autobiographical evidence to support the findings highlighted by RNIB within the context of academic employment. The intention is to draw attention to and provide illustrations of the flexibilities and inflexibilities of this Government support agency. A case for moving to a system of individualised payments rather than coping with the rigidity of centralised agency funding mechanisms is also explored (Lord and Hutchison, 2003).

### **What is Access to Work?**

Access to Work (AtW) is a service that,

“Provides practical support and advice to disabled people and their employers to help overcome work related obstacles resulting from disability.”

Department for Work and Pensions web-site (2003).

### **Relationship of the researcher to AtW**

As an individual with visual impairment, I have been in receipt of a number of support mechanisms from the service and its predecessors since 1982. I work as a Consultant Speech and Language Therapist with a national centre for epilepsy and full time lecturer leading programmes in profound learning disability at the University of Manchester. Services provided by AtW have included:-

- Aids and equipment for the workplace (computer, screen reader, large screen monitor, directed light sources)
- Support reader
- Support travelling to and from work.

### **Does this system of support work?**

**Did you have to obtain permission to choose how you travelled to work today?**

**Were you able to choose whether to call in to see a friend or stop at the supermarket on your way home? Would you consider taking on a job without any of the necessary equipment to enable you to carry out work related tasks?**

**A member of a Focus Group used by RNIB in their ‘Work Matters’ study described AtW as, “One of the most difficult elements of the workplace”. Yet this service has been designed to enable people with disabilities to access and maintain employment.**

### **Personal encounters of inflexibilities in AtW – travel**

- Generally the claimant must travel to the same work destination each day. Alternatives must be applied for in writing. No retrospective claims for alternative journeys may be made.
- If the cost is different from the original agreement then re-imburement is non-negotiable.
- Journeys within work must be claimed on a separate form.
- All claims must be accompanied by receipts, even though you may have a contractual arrangement with your taxi company.
- No claim may be sent electronically by fax or email.
- Regional disability services cannot send claims electronically for payment.
- Employer and employee must sign separate parts of each claim sent in.
- I had to obtain permission before I could make claims per calendar month instead of weekly.

### **Inflexibilities obtaining equipment purchase, support and adaptations**

- Equipment takes months to
  - a) be assessed for,
  - b) order,
  - c) arrive and have installed.
- Responsibility for repair and maintenance is unclear. Often the employer does not know how to repair complex or unusual equipment and the employee cannot afford to pay for equipment to be sent away to be mended.
- The perception is that such agencies' primary concern is to place individuals with disabilities in (often short term) employment without due regard for maintenance in post. From the employees' perspective there appears to be a paucity of evaluation of support systems and payment mechanisms, which may result in inability to gain or maintain employment on a long-term basis.

### **Flexibilities of AtW?**

- Arrangements for payment of a support worker may be made by the client and then re-claimed back from Jobcentreplus Regional Disability Service.
- Holidays may be taken without notifying AtW but any sick leave must be reported, as must any change in travel to work patterns.

### **Would you feel like striving to be a 'high achiever' if the following applied/happened to you?**

- **You had to visit a doctor and a psychologist before you were "awarded" the allowance**
- **Your "case" is reviewed every 12 months or less.**
- **Your employer has to fill in part of a form for every 4 weeks (or part) that you work.**

- **There was no facility for emergency local payment of claims for 10 weeks when the national payment centre went ‘off-line’ and no one was warned that this was happening.**
- **All claims are still sent by post so non-delivery of claims may go undetected for weeks.**
- **There is no detailed information about what services are available or how access to these services might affect claims to other state benefits such as DLA. e.g I never realised until I talked to a colleague at work that I could have a support worker to assist in the workplace as a campus guide, prepare large print materials, find/collect research materials from the University Library.**

What can be done to make support in work for people with disabilities an experience where the employee feels,

- In control of how to travel to work,
- What support is needed at work,
- Empowered to choose how to spend time when work is finished,
- Not worried that the job might be jeopardised by the system that claims to support both employee and employer?

A change of emphasis is needed from Government agencies deciding and providing the nature of funding, to an individualised form of funding. This will enable the flexibility to be put back into obtaining and maintaining the kind of work we want.

*“Individualised funding must be flexible and responsive to the culture, values and preferences of each person...with need defined through a collaborative process... designed so that service quality is not undermined by restricted accessibility.”*

Extract from Conference Proceedings, Foundations for Freedom, (2000)

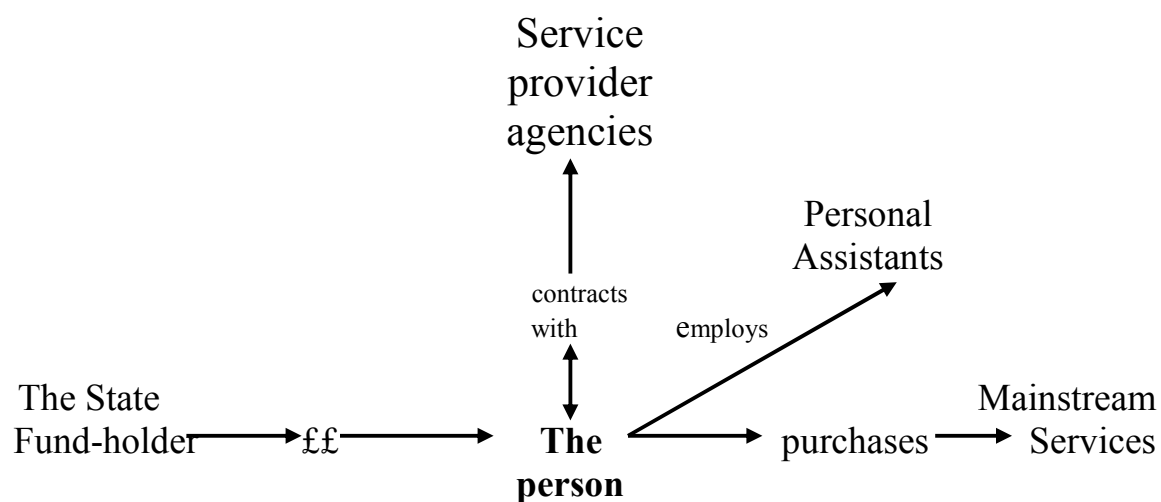
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## Basic Model of Individualised Funding



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