

Summary

Legally Disabled? The Career Experiences of Disabled People in the Legal Profession in England & Wales: Developing Future Strategies

About the DRILL Programme

DRILL (Disability Research on Independent Living and Learning) was an innovative 5 year, UK wide programme led by disabled people, for disabled people and funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

Launched in 2015, the programme was managed by a partnership of Disability Action Northern Ireland, Disability Rights UK, Disability Wales and Inclusion Scotland.

The aim of the programme was to build better evidence about approaches which enable disabled people to achieve independent living. The findings from the projects it funded can be used to inform future provision across a wide range of policy areas, and give a greater voice to disabled people in decisions which affect them.

This is one of a series of summaries of the projects supported by DRILL. Final reports, toolkits and summaries of all the projects are available from the DRILL website at www.drilluk.org.uk.

Overview of the project

The project explored the barriers encountered by disabled people in gaining professional employment and career advancement in the legal profession.

As well as exposing existing barriers, it aimed to highlight good practice and strategies for future inclusion.

Approach

The ‘Legally Disabled?’ project began with a series of eight focus groups with disabled people in the profession to ensure the views of the researchers did not dominate the research agenda.

From this, a range of recurring themes were identified, forming the basis of a semi-structured interview schedule.

Fifty five interviews were conducted with people from a range of different occupations and specialisms in law. These interviews formed the basis of two surveys: one distributed to paralegals and solicitors, the other to barristers.

The research draws on both qualitative and quantitative data, taking direct quotes from interviews to reflect lived experiences of those in the profession, as well as the data from the surveys.

Findings

The ‘Legally Disabled?’ findings identified an array of barriers faced by disabled people in the legal profession. 66% of barristers, and 59% of solicitors and paralegals surveyed, said that they were disabled when they started their training. However, only 1 barrister, and 8.5% of solicitors and paralegals, disclosed this in their application.

Other barriers included ‘misplaced paternalism’ where senior colleagues make assumptions that underestimate disabled people’s skills and experience. This includes a reluctance to accommodate flexible working, which disadvantages many disabled people.

It was often suggested that HR served the interests of employers, ensuring that organisations were only minimally legally compliant. With 60% of solicitors and paralegals experiencing some form of ill-treatment, bullying or discrimination and 80% believing it was related to their disability, this creates a huge barrier, especially for those with more than one protected characteristic.

Findings (continued)

The use of the medical model of disability, and reasonable adjustments focusing on individuals, acts to individualise the experience of disability rather than shifting the narrative to the shared experiences of disabled people within the legal profession.

Recommendations

The project outlined many recommendations, some of which are listed below. All recommendations are included in the full report which is linked below.

- Better engagement and outreach work with Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs)
- An increase in work placements and work experience opportunities for disabled people
- Improved recruitment practices, including regular discussions on reasonable adjustments
- Any outsourcing to take place only with agencies which have undertaken appropriate disability equality training.
- Redesigning jobs to accommodate for common reasonable adjustments
- The introduction of disability pay gap reporting
- Company wide equality training
- A designated company role, and central funding, to facilitate reasonable adjustments
- A zero tolerance policy towards disability related bullying, clear disciplinary and grievance procedures and improved mental health initiatives
- Reviews of retention, exit and promotions policies within organisations and the profession, to ensure reasonable adjustments are appropriately applied
- Sufficient representation of disabled people's voices in policy-making within the profession when developing new practices
- Establishment of virtual communities which would make networking more accessible.

Final report

Legally Disabled? The Career Experiences of Disabled People Working in the Legal Profession

Please click on report name to read the full report.

Project partners

Cardiff Business School



Lawyers with Disabilities

