
Supporting Transitions of Graduates with Disabilities to Employment

This article explores the background to barriers to employment for disabled graduates and how the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) programme has developed and lessons learned on the way to successful outcomes.

Context

In the last 20 years there have been changes across most western countries with regards to the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities in society. Governments have brought in incentives and laws compelling both universities persons with a disability (Gillies, 2012). Whereas physical barriers are continually being removed it is harder to address attitudinal barriers. Figures available from the CSO can give some insight into how people with disabilities fare. According to the latest CSO census figures 13% of the Irish population have a disability (CSO, 2011). Overall, people with disabilities have lower education and employment rates when compared to the rest of the population. In addition, 20% of over 15s with a disability were in employment compared to 50% of the overall population (CSO, 2011).



Although research on graduates with disabilities is lacking, AHEAD has been tracking the participation rates of students with disabilities in higher education for a number of years. In 1994 there were just under 1,000 students with disabilities across higher institutions within Ireland (AHEAD, 1994). This figure is now over 9,000, representing 4.6% of the total student population (AHEAD, 2013). But what happens to these students once they graduate? Literature from other countries highlights how making the transition from school/college to employment can be particularly difficult for students with disabilities (AGCAS, 2013) (Trainer et al, 2008) (Gillies. 2012) (Chen, 2013). Research from the UK on the first destination of graduates with disabilities highlighted how overall non-disabled graduates still fare better than disabled graduates but they did note that this also depended on the disability. For example, graduates with unseen disabilities, particularly dyslexia, fared best.

But what exactly is disability and what does it mean to employers?

Under the Employment Equality Act 1998, it is against the law for an employer to discriminate against an employee or a prospective employee who has a disability on areas of employment including:

- recruitment to employment.
- conditions of employment (other than remuneration or pension benefits).
- training or work experience.
- promotion or re-grading or classification of posts.
- advertising a job in such a way that the advertisement could reasonably be interpreted as indicating an intention to discriminate.

The Employment Equality Act, 1998 and the Equal Status Act, 2000 define disability as:

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1. the total or partial absence of a person's bodily or mental functions, including the absence of a part of a person's body
 2. the presence in the body of organisms causing, or likely to cause, chronic disease or illness
 3. the malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of a person's body
 4. a condition or malfunction which results in a person learning differently from a person without the condition or malfunction, or
 5. a condition, illness or disease which affects a person's thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgement, or which results in disturbed behaviour, and shall be taken to include a disability which exists at present, or which previously existed but no longer exists, or which may exist in the future or which is imputed to a person.

Rather than focusing on the disability and getting 'bogged down' on medical facts – it is perhaps more helpful to consider an alternative definition of disability: a disabled person is a person with an impairment who experiences disability – disability being the result of negative activities that take place in a situation between a person with an impairment and that situation. While the impairment is part of the negativity, it is not the reason for, nor does it justify, the loss of opportunities to take part in society on an equal level with others.

An NDA survey on employer attitudes towards disabilities found that 'negative attitudes resulting in discrimination in the workplace continues to be a significant problem for people with disabilities' (NDA, 2006). In fact only 6% of respondents knew a work colleague with a disability, highlighting how many people have little contact with disability in a work environment. A FAS survey (2007) of private sector employers attitudes found that only one in four claimed to have employed a person with a disability and the main reason cited as to why they have not done so was 'lack of disabled candidates applied'.

Insight into employers' perspectives gained from the WAM evaluation process indicated that employers often had preconceived perceptions and expectations of disability that often relied on stereotypes. One of these was the perceived extra cost of hiring a person with a disability. There also is a tendency to focus on the disability rather than the ability of the person and how they can do the job with the appropriate reasonable accommodations in place. As a consequence attitudinal barriers that affect the recruitment and selection process were formed, however unintentionally. Fear of some form of reprisal if they 'get it wrong' is very real. This fear and negative attitude can stem from a lack of knowledge of disability, and a lack of experience of disability at work – in particular in graduate entry level and professional positions. Other concerns included how to deal with performance issues that are not disability related, how to address health and safety concerns and how to ask the appropriate questions at interview.

The graduates with disabilities' experience

Making the transition from college into the workplace can be difficult for any graduate, but a graduate with a disability will face additional challenges that must be navigated and overcome for successful integration. This includes issues around disclosure, grants/accommodations for the workplace, benefits and dealing with negative attitudes and discrimination. In addition, fear of loss of social welfare entitlements can be of major concern for a person with a disability and can provide a disincentive to work.

WAM was set up in 2005 in response to growing evidence that graduates with disabilities were experiencing difficulties in making the transition into the workplace. This was evident at an AHEAD conference whereby the

students and graduates expressed their frustrations at not being able to access graduate entry level jobs in spite of having graduated with first and second class honours. Employers, on the other hand, stated that they were unaware of this population of potential employees seeking access to the labour market.

AHEAD explored this further and anecdotal evidence suggested that while graduates with disabilities wanted to work and organisations stated they were committed to hiring people with disabilities, the transition to employment was not as successful for graduates with disabilities as their peers.

The WAM programme has been in operation for over 10 years now, promoting access to the labour market for graduates with disabilities while simultaneously building the capacity of employers around disability in the workplace. WAM has over the years become the 'go-to' place for employers who want to engage in a proactive way with disability in the workplace.

For many of the graduates with disabilities placed on the WAM programme, it is their first job and they often lack the work experience that non-disabled graduates gain from working in part-time or summer jobs in college. In addition, the college environment is completely different to the world of work, and where disability supports and services are now the norm for college campuses, no such services are available in the workplace. These means that a graduate with a disability is on their own when it comes to advocating for what they need, as often employers lack the knowledge of how to manage disability in the workplace. Graduates must decide when and how to disclose their disability, how to ask for a reasonable accommodation and how to manage their disability on a day to day basis usually without any support.

One of the main objectives of the programme was to identify the potential barriers that prevented the inclusion of graduates into the Irish labour market and to find effective ways as to how these barriers could be overcome. WAM was developed in partnership with employers whereby a number of structured mentored work placements that brought graduates with disabilities and employers together in the mainstream workplace were established.

What we have learnt and continue to learn

WAM's learning comes from engaging with over 1500 graduates with disabilities and facilitating 240 work placements with over 20 employers over the last ten years. All WAM placements have been evaluated over the years. Through this process WAM explored what worked for graduates making the transition into employment, not just from the graduate's perspective but also the employer perspective.

We know that graduates and employees with disabilities may need some support, so do employers and hiring managers!

WAM's dynamic network of employers provides a safe place to have open conversations about disability in the workplace. Annual events, training days, publications and online resources support employers. Employers choose the agenda for the events and 'an organisational memory' and culture is thus created and sustained.

Employers are supported in the first six months of a placement in what we term a 'walk the line' approach. This involves addressing any fears and concerns pre-placement through disability awareness and pre-interview training. By upskilling staff on legislation and how to put in place reasonable accommodations employers can have

confidence that once supports are put in place, disability essentially should disappear. WAM supports managers and mentors for the duration of the placements, checking in on them regularly, meaning that there is always someone on hand if issues arise on placement. Knowing that there was an external support they could call and rely on was of significant benefit for employers and acted as an incentive to participate in the programme.

Attitudes and assumptions will always be a problem; but the more we know the job, the better we can deal with it!

In order to facilitate the transition of graduates with disabilities into the mainstream workplace, WAM's continues to explore the original issue: employers did not receive applications from graduates with disabilities, and graduates with disabilities were frustrated at their lack of success in job-hunting. Sometimes depending on the job and other factors, this can continue to be an issue.

As WAM placements are real jobs, in-house standard recruitment procedures are followed. WAM has over the past 10 years worked with its employers on the importance of well thought out job advertisements and detailed job specifications. Often the language used in a job description can act as a deterrent to a person with a disability. Therefore, disability-proofing job descriptions and making employers aware of the language used was and still is a key part of not just attracting candidates to certain roles, but also addressing barriers that may arise at the early stage of the recruitment process.

The importance of a well-defined job description is key to creating a smooth transition into the workplace and can help prevent problems arising later on. By identifying the core competencies of a job and being aware of the physical and social environment the work tasks take place in, the best job/person match can be found.

A clear, well-defined job description is also paramount when looking at what supports may be required. Every graduate who is placed on the WAM programme undergoes a needs assessment. This process identifies what, if any, supports or reasonable accommodations the candidate requires to do their particular job. For employers, the needs assessment provides reassurance that any supports required will be identified. For graduates with a disability the needs assessment also gives confidence that supports will be identified and put in place if required. This can take away some of the worry and fear around how to ask for supports and deal with disclosure.

More often there is a lack of expertise and knowledge on how to accommodate disability in the workplace. WAM provides assistance and advice, where required, seeking to upskill employers involved and increase their capacity to manage disability in the workplace. The needs assessment is a significant part of this process as it allows a safe place for a graduate to discuss his/her needs and an employer to learn how someone can and will work best. It seeks to take the focus away from the disability and instead focus on what is needed in order to include.

The ongoing challenge is to maintain the focus on 'how' someone can do their work best and have faith in this process.

For a graduate with a disability, as with any employee with no work experience the first couple of weeks in a new job can be a daunting experience – they do not feel work ready! And their colleagues and managers offer do not feel ready either! Having a mentor available who will help with the settling in phase is of enormous value to both the graduate and to the organisation as a whole.

Mentoring is a process through which an experienced person provides support, guidance and encouragement to a less experienced person. Each graduate who is placed on the programme is allocated an in-house mentor who works with them over the six month placement. The mentor fundamentally acts as a sounding board for the mentee and also helps with social integration into the workplace. The mentor can assist the mentee with gaining insight into the organisation and can give advice on any issues that may arise during the settling in period.

During its evaluation process WAM consistently found that the mentoring model was one of its major successes, with the majority of managers, mentors and participants stating that they found the process beneficial and that it had something to offer the workplace.

Learning in the future

It is our experience having worked with students with disabilities for over 25 years and graduates with disabilities for over 10 years now, that employers should not ignore the increasing pool of talent - that for one reason or another – continue to face barriers accessing the workplace. As workplaces and work changes so too do the barriers; the numbers of students graduating with honours professional degrees continue to increase and employers face new challenges and demands in how work can be done and needs to be done. Employers and graduate advisers can adapt the steps we describe for their own recruitment and selection programmes, to the benefit of all employees. What's good for disabled graduates is good for all graduates. Of course, further learning is needed as we look to the future.

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Mary Quirke, R.G.N. R.M. D.C.G. M.A. MICGI

AHEAD

Mary Quirke is Assistant Director of AHEAD, and is currently managing the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) project - a work placement programme which aims to promote access to the labour market for graduates with disabilities. Mary also has responsibility for the GET AHEAD project, which focuses on building the capacity of graduates with disabilities, enabling them to make positive transitions to work. Mary is a qualified career guidance counsellor with a keen interest in mentoring and empowering people seeking to attain their personal goals. Mary has worked in the area of disability, education and guidance for over 20 years and past roles have included working with the HSE, the National Learning Network, FETAC and the Institute of Guidance Counsellors.



Fiona Ring

AHEAD

Fiona Ring is an Occupational Therapist who has worked with AHEAD for eight years as both a researcher and project worker on the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) programme. Fiona was primarily responsible for conducting work place needs assessment for graduates with disabilities and has been involved in a number of publications for AHEAD including Demystifying Disabilities in the Workplace and the Good Practice Guidelines.