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# AHEAD WAM case study illustrating how arranging more complex employment supports for disabled graduates can be achieved

## Introduction

There are a number of funding methods available under the Reasonable Accommodation Fund (RAF) available through the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) designed to assist employers in the private sector to take appropriate measures to enable a person with a disability to access employment. For most graduates on a WAM placement these are easily identified and simple to put in place. For some though, further assessment of the job role and the supports needed can be more complex.

Christina McCarthy is a graduate with an honours degree in French and Spanish from Trinity College Dublin and is blind. She joined the AHEAD WAM programme and was recruited into a graduate level position as a Management Trainee with Enterprise Rent-A-Car in January 2017. Assistive Technology (AT) has enabled her to lead a full life, go to mainstream school, get a degree and to work successfully as a graduate. Enterprise Rent-A-Car embraced Assistive Technology (AT) and made their systems compatible when Christina joined them, however it was not an easy journey! This article aims not only to show her successful journey, but also highlight the range and complexity of employment supports for disabled people in Ireland.

## The Recruitment Process

Enterprise Rent-a-Car were looking for a graduate with an interest in doing business, who was ambitious, open, friendly and flexible, a decision maker and who was motivated to become a Management Trainee. Through the WAM Programme, a unique job specification was developed and advertised on AHEAD's website.

The recruitment process commenced in May 2016 when Christina expressed an interest in the position, applying through the WAM Programme. Christina attended an information session with about 40 other applicants to understand more about the role, run by Leslee O'Loughlin, Group HR Manager of Enterprise Rent-a-Car. From this information session, applicants were asked to confirm whether they were still interested in proceeding with the role.

There were many accommodations made through the recruitment process for all graduates who applied, which included waiving the psychometric test. This type of assessment can often be a barrier for people with disabilities, and may present even more of a difficulty for graduates who are blind or visually impaired. This is due to the incompatibility of accessibility software, which can result in being precluded from progressing through to the next recruitment stage - as a result the company loses out on talent. Christina went forward through the stages of recruitment and was successful at each and every stage. The company believed that she was a good fit for the opportunity and her skills and knowledge were in line with the core elements of the position. In fact they relooked at

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the role and made adjustments to ensure that Christina could be accommodated within their organisation before carrying out a needs assessment.

## The Needs Assessment – Assistive Technology

As part of all placements through the WAM Programme, a needs assessment is carried out with successful graduates to identify what supports or accommodations, if any, the WAM participant may require successfully to complete the work placement they have been offered. As Christina was going to be based across two sites, two separate needs assessment were required for both locations. The needs assessment process identified a number of accommodations including orientation training, a Braille display and printer. However the main and most important requirement was the use of a text-to-speech software called JAWS (Job Access With Speech).



JAWS is a screen reader installed onto a PC to enable a person who is visually impaired or blind to navigate and hear what is displayed on the screen. JAWS provides speech output for the most popular computer applications on a PC such as Microsoft Office, internet browsers etc. with a simple one-click installation. However, with more intricate and custom built in-company software systems in large global companies, like the one in Enterprise Rent-a-Car, it is a little trickier! It involves development, re-coding, testing and learning to manage the systems for both the employee and the company. There were precedents in other countries in which Enterprise operate where the company's systems had been made accessible.

This technological development work was critical if Christina was to be accommodated in the workplace and also to stay in employment and progress within the company. The costs involved were significant at an estimated €20,000 and the job was quite specialised - only a company based in the UK could complete the development and implementation. No other company based in Ireland had this knowledge or expertise. There was a precedent in the UK offices of Enterprise, where the work had been carried out for another blind employee.

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## Funding – Reasonable Accommodation Fund

As the cost of the development and re-coding of JAWS to be compatible with their software was quite significant, Enterprise Rent-a-Car contacted WAM for assistance.

WAM identified a number of different funding streams available which Christina may have been eligible for, including the Workplace Equipment Adaptation Grant (WEAG), the Personal Reader Grant and then, separately, the Wage Subsidy Scheme.

WAM were informed that the WEAG would, in the first instance, be the most appropriate support to apply for. The grant itself is a contribution towards the cost of an adaptation or of equipment up to €6,350. However, applications in excess of this sum are considered on an individual basis up to a maximum of €9,523, if specialist training for the assistive technology is required. WAM explained to the DEASP that the adaptations to the software was very specific and that there were no other software providers who could do it on the basis of the data protection obligations for Enterprise Rent-a-Car.

In relation to the Personal Reader Grant, which pays for a person to be employed to assist in job-related reading for 640 hours a year on minimum wage, the equivalent maximum funding available for this grant was €6,112. WAM believes that this is somewhat outdated, as technology is now replacing the 'human intervention' to enable and ensure independence for the employee in the workplace. WAM therefore asked whether it could be used where technology does the job of a reader e.g. for the purchase of JAWS or to purchase a Braille display.

WAM also conveyed to the DEASP their concerns that the monetary amount for these particular grants had not changed in 15 years, and technology has evolved so much since that a review is urgently needed. This means the existing schemes have limitations in today's workplace. The schemes have not yet been reviewed in terms of how they might be changed/updated in order better to address the needs of customers.

With regard to the Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS), this is a payment to private sector employers in order to encourage them to employ jobseekers with a disability. They might be reluctant to hire a person with a disability because of a perception that the nature of a disability can restrict an employee's productivity in comparison with other staff. In situations where there is a restriction that results in a loss of productivity for the employer amounting to 20% or more, the WSS allows the employer to make up the shortfall through grant assistance. To participate in the scheme, an employee must work a minimum of 21 hours per week up to a maximum of 39 hours per week. The basic wage subsidy rate is €5.30 per hour per employee, giving a total annual maximum subsidy available of €10,748 per annum based on 39 hour week. The subsidy is incentivised under three strands, based on the number of employees with a disability engaged. Christina was eligible for this support on the basis that she requires extra time to do tasks.

### The Implementation

The key issues in relation to the grants were:

- **Timing – how long do the grants take to process?**
- **Can the employer apply for all above (obviously meeting the necessary criteria)**
- **And is it possible to utilise the personal reader grant for technological purposes?**

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WAM was informed by the DEASP that Enterprise Rent-a-Car were eligible to apply for both the WEAG and the WSS however not the Personal Reader Grant. Enterprise chose not to proceed with an application for WSS and proceeded with the WEAG. The application for this grant was made by both the employer and the employee where various documentation was needed to be sought and completed correctly.

In this case, it took approximately 8-12 weeks from submission to payment and received the maximum level available through the WEAG.

After a lot of re-coding, modifications and training by the software developers, by July 2017 Christina was up and running and could work independently in the role with Enterprise. During the interim period, it was the determination, flexibility and patience not just from Christina but from a dedicated and supportive team in Enterprise, who wanted to allow Christina the opportunity to use her skills and flourish within the company.

Christina's initial contract was for 6 months, however as the technology was only fully implemented 6 months later after she started, Enterprise extended her contract for a further 6 months. In January 2017, Christina was now a permanent hire with Enterprise and continues to work there today.

Whatever the future may hold for me career-wise, having the support of AHEAD throughout my first year has made a massive difference to my confidence and in my adjustment to being back in work after 2 years of searching.

Quote from Christina

At Enterprise, we are committed to building and maintaining a workforce that mirrors the diverse communities in which we serve. AHEAD and the WAM programme have been helping us to achieve this in Ireland for the last seven years. Christina has been a wonderful addition to our team and she continues to smash barriers and add value with every customer, account and employee interaction.

Quote from Enterprise Rent-a-Car

The Reasonable Accommodation Fund is available for employers in the private sector to utilise and it is a great resource to promote the employment of people with disabilities. However it is time that these grants are reviewed to keep up with a rapid and ever-changing technological advances which are enabling more and more people with disabilities to participate fully in the workplace independently. It is also worth noting that the process of applying for grants could be streamlined whereby employers and employees can apply online making the process more efficient.

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WAM would like to thank Enterprise Rent-a-Car for their time, willingness and persistence in ensuring that Christina was fully supported in the workplace.

For [more information about WAM visit the webpage](#) or watch the video below.

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**Caroline McGrotty**

Employment Manager, AHEAD

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Caroline oversees AHEAD's projects relating to the transition to employment for students and graduates with disabilities, namely GetAHEAD and The WAM Programme which is a work placement programme. Caroline holds qualifications in Deaf Studies, Irish Sign Language Teaching and Equality Studies. Caroline has over 15 years experience of working and volunteering within the disability sector and various organisations within the Deaf community.

@carolinemctweet



**Angela Glancy**

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Angela Glancy is a Client Liaison Officer at AHEAD working closely with graduates and employers on the WAM Programme. Angela graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce from University College Dublin and is a Chartered Accountant. Angela has been with AHEAD for over four years.

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This article appeared in the AHEAD Journal. Visit [www.ahead.ie/journal](http://www.ahead.ie/journal) for more information

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