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TX: YOU AND YOURS - DISABILITY - 06.01.03

PRESENTER: Peter White

WHITE

Now why don't more disabled people have jobs? It's a question that we'll be trying to answer throughout this week and it's prompted by two statistics - both government figures - which seem totally contradictory. We've been repeatedly told by ministers that a million disabled people without jobs want them but we're also told that current unemployment rates amongst people with disabilities are five times higher than for non-disabled people genuinely seeking work. What's more, despite a whole range of initiatives, these figures have hardly changed over the last 20 years - just slight fluctuations. Initiatives such as legislation, which prevents people discriminating against staff or prospective staff on the grounds of disability without justification, financial help from the government with the cost of equipment or adaptations - schemes like Access to Work for example - our very own New Deal we have aimed at helping long-term unemployed disabled people.

So why do the numbers of disabled people with jobs remains so stubbornly low? Is it just that there are too many employers - like this one as depicted in an ad screened in cinemas last autumn?

CINEMA AD

[This uses the David Brent character from BBC2's sit-com 'The Office']

INTERVIEWER: Would you hire a disabled person?

DAVID BRENT: Oh yeah definitely, yeah, definitely. Not dwarves, they can't reach stuff and they take a lot of time off as well - Christmas and January panto season. But all other disableds. Not the little wheelchair ones, they knock stuff over, but all other - not blind obviously, no good, a dog's no good to you in here, they can't grip - a Labrador. But the deaf - no reason why a little deaf fellow couldn't work here, although in the afternoons it might be a bit of a problem because he'd looked round and he'd see us all laughing and he'd think we was taking the mick and we ain't we're listening to Chris Moyles in the afternoon. We had a woman here once.

WHITE

Okay, so maybe Ricky Gervais's unreconstructed and chauvinist boss is a bit of a caricature but how many such attitudes lie at the root of much unconscious discrimination? Well that's the suggestion which seems to be borne out by some new research done by the charity Scope, which has a particular focus on people with cerebral palsy but also deals with other disabilities as well. Their research, due out in March, says really that initial trends show that focused on the attitudes of employers, staff and disabled people and what they seem to show is there is a great deal of misunderstanding.

With us in the studio is Margie Woodward of Scope's campaigns team. Margie, what does the research tell us?

WOODWARD

Well it's early days but we've just done the initial kind of looking at it and it picks out some astounding figures that it's actually attitudinal why people think they can't employ disabled people. We launched this survey in September and closed it at the end of December and our initial findings from employees, employers and disabled people are going to knock the tops of people when we publish the report in March.

WHITE

I mean some of the more startling ones are that over half the population say they've never worked with a disabled person?

WOODWARD

Yes and if you think now the latest figures of disabled people in the UK is something like 11.2 million that is unacceptable.

WHITE

And what does it say about employers' perceptions about disabled people as employees?

WOODWARD

Well 90.3 per cent of the employers on the survey thought that disabled people would work more slowly and 14 per cent thought that disabled people wouldn't fit in with other staff and that being a disabled person in front line you put the customers off.

WHITE

Does that actually fit in with what the staff say?

WOODWARD

Yes it backs up, the employees because they've never worked with disabled people find it fearful, they're frightened of this and really and truly they're missing the point because if we actually identify through this survey not by hammering people but actually working in partnership to remove the barriers we'll take away the fear and hopefully change the attitudes.

WHITE

Margie, thank you very much. We'll come back to you. And those findings really which suggested fear and ignorance are surprising in the sense that it seems that even knowing someone well won't always protect you from people's preconceptions about what disabled people can and can't do. Many people lose the jobs that they were doing when they became disabled - some leave because they feel they can't any longer do the work but many are eased out before the possibility of them carrying on with the job have been properly explored and possible adaptations made. People like Alan Franklin who worked for the same firm of bookmakers for over 30 years, Alan Franklin is also with us. Alan, just explain what happened to you.

FRANKLIN

Well basically I lost the use of my legs about a year ago, I'd been with the company E. Coomes for 32 years. I informed them of my problems and said I'm getting a wheel chair - a newa wheel chair - 64sl0 TmbTi

Yes certainly. On the 17th August I got this hand delivered. It says: "It has been decided that a licensed better office cannot be managed satisfactorily by a person confined to a wheelchair who is unable to leave that wheelchair to walk, even with the aid of sticks or crutches. As there is no alternative employment available within the group for a person confined to a wheelchair it is my sad duty to have to inform you that your employment with the company will be terminated on the 31st August next."

WHITE

Now were you in any doubt that you could go on doing the job?

FRANKLIN

I was in no doubt that I could do the job.

WHITE

And what did you then do? Because I think you actually looked at adaptations that could possibly be made just to deal with the physical disability ...

FRANKLIN

Yes we went to Access to Work previous to this letter coming and we met up in the shop and the engineer said there wouldn't be no problems, they would supply an electric wheelchair for me at no cost to the company, they would do the adaptations basically at no cost to the company.

WHITE

And what did the company say?

FRANKLIN

They didn't say anything. Apparently they'd had a board meeting three days after this meeting, I found out in letters from solicitors afterwards, and they decided to sack me in July but they waited

And what's happened?

FRANKLIN

WHITE

Sally let me stop you there. I want to see the extent to which it does come down though to employer attitudes. B&Q, the DIY chain, is a company with a comparatively good record, it claims that just

in terms of customer service, sort of helping people and being attentive, she's ideal. to be normal in the workplace, so all you have to do is treat them $ \frac{1}{2} \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \frac{1}{2} \left(\frac{1}{2} \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \frac{1}{2} \left(\frac{1}{2} \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \frac{1}{2} \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \frac{1}{2} \left(\frac{1}{2} \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \frac{1}{2} \int_{-\infty$	All they want is

the contribution that they make and we see people for the commitment and their ability to do the job and the disability really doesn't come into it.

WHITE

Well there certainly is evidence to show that given the chance disabled people can do jobs at the highest level and involving great skill and responsibility - it's not just politicians like David Blunkett and formula 1 team bosses like Frank Williams who defy the preconceptions, there are some

WHITE

Alan Tweddle. Margie Woodward, what people say when they hear cases like that is oh yeah but they're exceptional people, that doesn't apply to lots of other people. Can I be blunt - are we perhaps in the name of political correctness expecting miracles, implying that kind of anyone can do any job regardless of the disability?

WOODWARD

No we're not asking for miracles, we're just asking for a fair crack of the whip. We've got expertise, we want to work, we have the experience, you're missing out on a great workforce. Obviously if you're qualified for the job and if you have [indistinct word] in the job you should be given the chance for that job.

WHITE

Let me bring in Sally Whitcher. Your job, as I said, to advise ministers, Margie says there are many disabled people who could do jobs who aren't being given the chance but presumably there are some disabilities which are harder to place than others - that would be true wouldn't it?

WHITCHER

Well it's certainly the case that employment rates are different for people with different forms of impairment and that people with mental health problems or learning disabilities, in particular, have difficulty in getting work, although whether that's to do with their condition or to do with employer attitudes and the nature of barriers confronting them of course is somewhat open to debate.

WHITE

So what would you advice be to ministers to get people like that - those kind of groups of people - because I believe the evidence is that actually in some areas it's harder for people in the groups you've mentioned to get jobs than it was perhaps in the '80s when there was more manual work around, when perhaps there was higher employment as well?

WHITCHER

Well certainly the availability of certain types of jobs, or lack of availability, may mean that some people with certain forms of impairment are more likely to be employed or less likely to be employed. But there's some more fundamental issues here: in 2004 we're going to see an extension to anti-discrimination legislation and that will bring into the frame a lot of small employers who currently aren't covered, so that will strengthen the recourse that disabled people have who work for small employers or who want to be employed by them when it comes to challenging discrimination.

WHITE

Let me bring in Sue O'Neill at that point because employers are quite worried about that, particularly small employers - do they actually need more help than they get if they're going to fulfil these criteria, the kind that Sally's talking about?

O'NEILL

I think often small businesses do miss out on knowing some of the legislation and knowing certainly some of the services that are available to them, particularly services like Access to Work. And I do think that more can be done to increase the knowledge of small businesses.

WHITE

What sort of thing? Because I mean it's all very well sending out sort of tapes and pamphlets and ads, like the one we heard at the beginning, but does that really get through to busy people who think their main job is to make a profit?

O'NEILL

Possibly not but I do think you have to make a start and I think organisations such as Scope and Leonard Cheshire are raising the profile of disabled people. As well as cases like Alan's would actually make businesses sit up and think well this is ridiculous, they've lost 32 years of experience in Alan's case.

WHITE

Well let me bring in Alan at that point. You're at the sharp end of all this, you're the one who's had the experience that we're going to be talking about all week, is there one thing anyone could dogovernment, employers, disability organisations - which would help, I mean you're still waiting to get a job basically?