

DWP's preparations for changes in the world of work

Select Committee written evidence

Submitted by Policy Connect

About Policy Connect

Policy Connect is a membership-based, not-for-profit, cross-party think tank dedicated to improving people's lives by influencing UK public policy. We bring together parliamentarians and government in collaboration with academia, business and civil society to inform, influence and improve UK public policy through debate, research and innovative thinking. Our work focuses on key policy areas including: health and accessibility, education & skills, industry, technology & innovation, and sustainability. This submission has been compiled by Geena Vabulas, Policy Manager for Assistive Technology.

Evidence

This submission is based on research carried out during the Commission on Assistive Technology and Transitions into Employment (which is run by Policy Connect and is due to report in full later this year) and on evidence presented at meetings of the APPG for Assistive Technology (for which Policy Connect provides the secretariat).

1. What are the main challenges that DWP faces as a result of the "Fourth Industrial Revolution"?

- 1.1.** Digital technology has already transformed the modern workplace. But in many cases it has left people behind and failed to bring the benefits in productivity that were promised. Instead of adapting itself to users' individual needs, tech in the workplace has too often taken a one-size-fits all approach that ultimately excludes us all as our needs change over time in different contexts and environments.¹ However, the maturing of this digital age - The Fourth Industrial Revolution - heralds a new era of personalisation and accessibility in technology, breaking down barriers for older and disabled people and boosting productivity for everyone. New technology, from specialised assistive products to mainstream platforms with accessibility settings built-in, has taken huge steps forward over the last decade - and artificial intelligence is supercharging this

¹ See discussion "temporary or situational disabilities", e.g. <https://medium.com/valtech-design/inclusive-design-dd4e03f82094>

process. As we build back after the COVID crisis, we need to accelerate the Fourth Industrial Revolution to build an inclusive economy that makes full use of all of our talents. Yet employers have been slow to adopt accessible technology: many are simply unaware of these tools while others are not confident they can implement them effectively. **The DWP should not only help people adapt to the future of work but should help drive the accessibility revolution within 4IR.**

1.2. Accessibility is a core digital skill. DCMS- commissioned research points out that “Digital skills in the workplace are now a near-universal requirement”.² However, many people lack even basic accessibility skills. Disabled people are more than twice as likely to be offline than their non-disabled peers, and one-third of disabled people are unable to make their devices easier to use by changing accessibility settings.³ **DWP employment programs need to upskill customers to take advantage of assistive and accessible technology.**

1.3. Home working is no longer the exception. As a result of COVID-19, and enabled by technology, 40% of medium and large businesses plan to permanently change their business practices by increasing remote working.⁴ This increased flexibility to work from home when it’s convenient can benefit all workers, including people with children, those who live far from work and disabled people who may find working from home a good option for a variety of reasons - such as taking rest breaks or cutting down on difficult journeys.⁵ Anecdotal evidence suggests that, prior to COVID, employers had been reticent to let disabled people work remotely as a reasonable adjustment, but that this is improving. **Access to Work must not assume the old way of working but support new flexible approaches, e.g. some customers may need support relating to both home working and on-site working.**

1.4. Access to Work is an important route by which disabled people gain access to assistive technology for employment. However, awareness of Access to Work is low and the programme is not widely used. It serves only 30,000 new clients per year while there are 4.2 million disabled people in work (pre-COVID).⁶ One element of the scheme - TechFund - which was introduced in 2018 to increase the use of assistive technology (replacing human support), has been taken up by fewer than ten people.⁷

² [No longer optional: employer demand for digital skills](#) (2019)

³ https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/lb-consumer-digital-index-2019-report.pdf

⁴ Savanta Comres research presented to parliamentarians April 2020.

⁵ At the same time, remote working can also be disabling...

⁶ Access to Work provision was approved for 27,730 people in 2017/18 and 32,010 people in 2018/19. (some of these approvals may have been previous clients who re-applied after a change in work circumstances). See [Access to Work: statistics](#). For the number of disabled people in work see [People with disabilities in employment](#) (HoC Library).

⁷ See the Minister for Disabled People’s response to [question 24287](#) . It’s unclear if lack of awareness or other factors explain the low take-up of the TechFund.

1.5. The Disability Confident scheme can help address organisational barriers including ensuring employers are engaging in (digitally) inclusive recruitment. However, we have heard from some employers accredited by Disability Confident that technology is not adequately promoted by the scheme. Although Disability Confident does promote Access to Work,⁸ some employers report that Access to Work is not given a prominent position within Disability Confident’s messaging.

2. What do we know about the possible likely impact on the labour market? Are some groups of people more likely to be affected than others? What new types of jobs and opportunities could become available?

2.1 The ability to effectively use assistive technology is a vital work skill for many disabled people.⁹ Of all working-age disabled people, those without a university degree may be most increasingly at risk of unemployment due to changes in the labour market.¹⁰ This may be compounded by non-graduates having less access to assistive technology than graduates. While university students can receive assistive technology and training via the Disabled Students’ Allowance, the program does not extend to schools and colleges, where access to assistive technology is uneven across different settings.¹¹ **The DWP should work with the DfE to support its efforts to promote assistive technology and Edtech in schools and colleges, which can help prepare learners to use accessible and assistive technology in the workplace.**¹²

2.2 As collaborative and cloud-based services increase, there will be more opportunities to work remotely, which could remove travel and environmental barriers for disabled people to succeed in work.

4. Are DWP Work Coaches well equipped to advise people who are looking for work on new and emerging sectors and jobs? How could DWP improve the training and advice it offers to jobseekers?

4.1 We have heard some reports that DWP Work Coaches are not well equipped to advise job seekers on digital accessibility and assistive technologies. Pilots such as J2E have been implemented to specifically address this issue.¹³ **DWP should scale successful**

⁸ See the Minister for Disabled People’s response to [question 27688](#)

⁹ see evidence gathered during the the APPG Assistive Technology event held June 2nd 2017, event summary at <http://www.policyconnect.org.uk/appgat/news/journey-independence-assistive-technology-skills>

¹⁰ https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/lb-consumer-digital-index-2019-report.pdf

¹¹ AtW covers paid apprenticeships and T-level work placements, but this leaves much of post-16 education without an equivalent program for assistive technology

¹² DfE ‘[Realising the potential of technology in education](#)’

¹³ <https://diversityandability.com/social-justice/journey-to-employment/>

pilots accessibility skills for the workplace and consider establishing and facilitating a 'community of practice' for Work Coaches around workplace technology, including accessibility.

- 4.2** Some employers (including government departments) use 'equality adjustment identification tools': these digital tools match employees with the free / low cost assistive technology they need.¹⁴ This helps overcome the problem of identifying the needs of employees, without relying on individuals to disclose a disability and request a needs assessment. **The DWP should consider the use of digital tools to identify the needs of their clients to tailor the advice and training given to job seekers.**

5. What support, advice and training should DWP offer to people who are looking to progress in work, or take up more hours?

Currently, Access to Work and the technology and training provided by it are only available for those with an interview or an offer of work (or a supported (unpaid) work placement as part of particular employment schemes)¹⁵. **DWP should consider how it can better provide access to technology and training for unemployed disabled people to help them gain work.**

- 5.1** Many large employers bypass Access to Work, in part due to the delays in the system. Instead, these employers go directly to specialist organizations to provide assessment, technology and support. However, SMEs and the self-employed (who make up the majority of employment in the UK¹⁶) are unlikely to have the resources to do this. **Access to Work could learn from these alternative systems for implementing technology and support: for example, these systems reduce delays in part by using online portals rather than paper based processes.**

6. What is DWP's role in ensuring that young people have the skills they need to get into and progress in work?

- 6.1** DWP should work closely with the DfE and training and skills providers to ensure that awareness of Access to Work is high for young disabled people, including those who may aim to enter employment after FE.
- 6.2** DWP should raise awareness of Disability Confident and Access to Work, particularly among SMEs, to help ensure young disabled people do not face digital barriers to entering the workforce.

¹⁴ For example, <https://cleartalentsondemand.com/>

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work/eligibility>

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/business-population-estimates-2019/business-population-estimates-for-the-uk-and-regions-2019-statistical-release-html#:~:text=the%20SME%20share%20of%20total,2019%2C%20a%20rise%20of%20%25>

6.3 To help measure success, efforts recommended in of 6.1 and 6.2, **DWP should collect more fine-grained data on the characteristics of Access to Work customers and publish statistics on take-up of the program by age, employment setting (e.g. self-employed, SME), and employment status (e.g. paid apprenticeship, supported apprenticeship, interview offer etc.)**

July 2020