

MENTAL HEALTH AND EMPLOYMENT

Introduction

This bulletin looks at research undertaken by the TUC into the employment of disabled people, and in particular the employment of people with depression and mental illness. Some people may become disabled while they are at work, which may then require adaptations to their job. And some people have to leave work due to becoming disabled because they do not get the right changes to their workplace.

Labour Force Survey

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) data shows there is a significant difference in the employment rates of people defined as disabled under the Equality Act (EQA) 2010 compared with non-disabled people. Along with the TUC TSSA believes this employment gap to be eliminated.

Encouragingly, the survey highlights that employment rates for all disabled workers have increased since 2013. While this increase is positive, the latest employment rate for disabled people in late 2016 is still only 50 per cent, with 3,488,894 in employment.

The employment rate for non EQA disabled people in the same period was significantly higher at 80.4 per cent.

Ill health arising from mental illness

The survey shows that for EQA disabled people whose illness stems from mental health (defined as depression, bad nerves and anxiety or mental illness, or who suffer from phobia, panics or other mental disorders) their condition is a key reason for not being in employment. In contrast people with difficulty in hearing had the highest employment rate at 66 per cent and those with learning difficulties were least likely to be employed at 23.6 per cent. Just 26.2 per cent of disabled people experiencing long term mental illness or phobias as their primary, or most significant, health issue, were in employment (118,342 people).

The news that employment rates of disabled people with long term mental health problems have increased since 2013 is welcome. The employment rate of people with long term depression and anxiety

increased from 38.2 per cent in 2013 to 45.5 per cent in 2016. In 2015 there was the greatest uplift in the employment rate of disabled people with depression and anxiety with an increase of 3.4 percentage points.

However this slowed in 2016 with the employment rate of disabled people with long-term depression and anxiety rising by only 1.8 percentage points. Precise figures vary over the years studied - 2013 to 2016 - and there is some fine detail in the TUC report.

Improvement but...

Despite the welcome increase in the employment rates of disabled people with long term mental health problems, these figures still show that less than half of people with depression and anxiety and only 1 in 4 people with mental illness or phobias are employed. The low numbers in employment suggest that adequate changes are not being made in the workplace to enable people with mental health problems to obtain employment or remain in work.

Increasing the employment of disabled people

In 2015 the Conservative Party election manifesto pledged to “halve the disability employment gap” and a subsequent commitment said this would be by 2020. This was a welcome commitment but the TUC analysis of LFS data shows the government is unlikely to meet this commitment.

In March 2016 the Work and Pensions Select Committee announced an inquiry on the Government’s commitment to halve the disability employment gap. The figures used by the Select Committee used this same data and in January 2017 the Select Committee’s report concluded that:

“clear reporting and measures of progress are, however, essential to keeping the goal of halving the gap in focus and ensuring transparency over whether and where progress is being made. This is especially so because halving the gap—and indeed, going beyond this where possible—is an ambition that will, in all likelihood, not be achieved by 2020.”

In the light of the current general election, new pledges from the political parties on addressing the disability employment gap could have been expected, but have sadly been neglected. Therefore, it remains important to assess progress towards the government’s current targets.

Policy recommendations

To address the disability employment gap action is necessary by employers and government. There are complex and often overlapping barriers which make it harder for disabled people who experience mental health problems to obtain and then remain in work. Employers have a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments for disabled workers and it makes good business sense to keep disabled staff and thus retain their skills and experience. A

number of policy interventions are noted in the report for both employers and government to ensure disabled people can stay in work, have recourse to justice if they face discrimination and have the necessary support when they are unemployed and looking for work.

Workplace policies

Employers have a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments (these can be ways to remove the physical barriers and/or providing extra support for a disabled worker). For people experiencing mental ill-health this could include time off for counselling or other medical appointments; changes to their role; moving their workplace or allowing working from home.

Employers may adjust their sickness absence policy for disabled staff where time off is related to a disability. This is in recognition of the fact that some disabled people (although not necessarily all) may have different and higher forms of sickness absence and the policy needs to be adjusted accordingly.

As stigma remains a huge barrier, it may be useful to consider suitable awareness raising exercises which could include working with the trade union, disabled staff and mental health charities on awareness raising sessions for other, non-disabled, colleagues.

Employers should create a workplace wellbeing policy that looks at the issue of mental health holistically. This can include information on regular breaks, reducing workplace stress, the importance of physical activity, signposting to relevant agencies.

On mental health, like other disability issues, efforts should be made to consult with staff experiencing mental ill-health. This is in keeping with the notion that disabled people themselves should be able to determine the solutions to the issues they face.

Employers should include reference to mental health in the sickness absence policy, reasonable adjustments policy, dignity and inclusion policy, health and safety, bullying and harassment, workplace domestic violence policy and any others which are deemed relevant.

Ensuring senior managers champion awareness of mental health and fight to remove the stigma around mental health in the workplace is an entirely positive option.

Engage with the recognised trade union so they can have an input into all policies related to mental health to ensure collective equality rights for disabled workers.

Government policies

The government should abolish tribunal fees to make it easier for people with mental ill-health who

have experienced discrimination in the workplace to access justice. The government can make more efforts to widely promote Access to Work for people with mental health problems if funding is required for the adjustments.

The government could stop cuts to disabled people's financial support which make it harder for disabled people to survive and even harder to access work. This includes cuts to ESA and PiP, both of which are sources of welfare support that help those people furthest from the employment market.

Reps' Action

The full report is available from the TUC website at www.tuc.org.uk. Reps could usefully familiarise themselves with the content, and seek to negotiate with their employers around the policy suggestions detailed above.

Acknowledgements

This Bulletin has been compiled based on the TUC report "Mental Health and Employment" which is a thorough analysis of information provided by the relevant Labour Force Survey.