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Career Routes and Barriers for Disabled People in the UK TV Industry.

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Executive Summary and Key Recommendations

This paper examines the experiences of disabled people working in the UK television industry, with an emphasis on those who have worked in the industry for a significant period of time, career progression, retention and “glass ceilings”.

The report identifies consistent difficulties for disabled people working in the industry, most notably a difficulty gaining experience on a comparable level to non-disabled people, often because of a lack of employer understanding around legal responsibilities to disabled people and difficulty obtaining appropriate adjustments in the workplace.

The report also highlights the importance of disabled role models in a professional environment, and that mentors can be useful to some disabled people as they navigate the industry.

Recommendations based on the findings of the the report include, but are not limited to:

1. Management positions are given regular, up-to-date training regarding their legal responsibilities toward disabled workers.
2. Consideration is given to the wording of job advertisements, interview process and selection criteria to ensure disabled people who've had atypical career routes aren't inadvertently screened out.
3. The industry agrees a consistent approach to supporting disabled people who require funding for adjustments in the workplace or those who would find it helpful.
4. Disabled people are offered access to industry mentors, including other disabled people working at a more senior level.

All of these recommendations are based on robust quantitative survey data and qualitative in depth interviews. We believe that it is vital to listen to and empower disabled people working in the industry to shape effective policies to increase the diversity, inclusion and equality of disabled people throughout the media sector.

A man with dark, curly hair and a beard, wearing a blue and white horizontally striped sweater, is sitting in a chair. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. Behind him is a whiteboard with a line graph. The graph has a y-axis with labels 5000, 10000, and 15000. The x-axis has labels 'Sep' and 'Oct'. The line starts at 5000 in Sep, rises to 10000 in Oct, dips slightly, and then rises again. The word 'growth' is written on the right side of the whiteboard. To the left of the man, there is a camera on a tripod with a blue light attached.

Introduction and Framing

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Disability representation has long been recognised as a problem in the UK television industry, both on screen and off (Johanssen and Garrisi 2020; Ellis 2016). Despite persistent attempts to resolve the issue, low numbers remain. Most broadcasters embrace initiatives to champion diversity, yet few disabled people make it to positions of influence, and research has not adequately explored the reasons for this.

This research is an attempt to fill that void. The people best placed to solve this mystery are disabled people themselves, especially those who have been working in the industry for decades. I'm one of them, having been a producer for twenty years and, during that time, having relied on the support and experience of other disabled people to find ways through. Too often I'm asked about my own experience, but my own experience by itself reveals only limited insight to the systemic problems in the industry. This piece of research centres the voices of disabled people working in TV production. Through survey and interviews, dozens were asked about their experience, their career progression, or lack of it, and the barriers they have faced while trying to build a career, in the hope of identifying common themes, and potential solutions to recurring problems. Participants came from a range of backgrounds within the industry, with a wide and varied experience of disability. What's striking is the similarity of experience they described. Every single one of the people who responded to the survey identified at least one barrier they'd had in relation to employment in the industry, and many listed several. Many described the same barriers, regardless of whether they worked in news or factual programming, were autistic or physically disabled. Mostly, they were describing systemic cultural problems within the industry, and mostly they were confident that these problems are not insurmountable and there are potential solutions.

It's worth saying the television industry does not exist in a vacuum, and the UK as a whole has a significant problem with employing disabled people, especially in senior roles. There is a significant disability employment gap: currently 52.3% of disabled people of working age are estimated to be in employment, compared with 81.1% of the wider population (Powell, 2021: p1). Over the last year, unemployment rates have risen across the population as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, but disabled people seem to have been worse affected than others, meaning the employment gap rose slightly last year (Powell, 2021: p4). However, in general, the

proportion of disabled people in employment has been rising slowly since 2013 (Powell, 2021: p5). Although that is a positive step, disabled people are likely to be paid less than our non-disabled peers, partly because more disabled people take part time work, but also because we are more likely to be employed in lower paid roles. Analysis of government labour market data by the Trades Union Congress shows that 'workers who are managers, directors, senior officials, in professional occupations and associate professional and technical occupations are less likely to be disabled.' (Trades Union Congress, 2018: p7.)

The UK TV industry is aware it has a problem. In 2016, recognising the lack of diversity within its ranks, the industry launched Diamond, a system used by major broadcasters to collect and report on the diversity of TV production in the UK. The initiative is managed by the Creative Diversity Network, a not-for-profit organisation founded by the major UK broadcasters to drive the case for diversity and inclusion. The Diamond system collects self-reported data about the gender, gender identity, age, sexual orientation and disability of people who've contributed to programmes on and off screen. The latest Diamond results, published in January 2021, suggests just 5.8% of off-screen workers are disabled, compared to 17% of the working population beyond the television industry at the time data was collected (Creative Diversity Network, 2021: p4). The figures fluctuate between genres, so Diamond records the lowest figure as just 2.7% of off screen contributions in Drama being made by disabled people. The highest representation is in current affairs, factual entertainment and children's, genres where more than 6% of off screen workers were disabled (Creative Diversity Network, 2021: p22). Although these numbers only represent productions which returned data, other surveys have suggested a similar shortfall, with one January 2021 survey of the freelance community finding that only 6% of respondents identified themselves as disabled (Viva La PD, 2021: p2), and an Ofcom report estimating that the overall number is 7% of off screen staff (Ofcom, 2020: p3). At senior level, Diamond found that the lack of representation worsened for people from all minority groups, but particularly for disabled people, where just 5.3% identified as disabled (Creative Diversity Network, 2021: p26).

In 2019, broadcasters, independent production companies and other industry stakeholders signed up to *Doubling Disability*, a Creative Diversity Network initiative to double the proportion of off screen talent working in television within two years, although the disruption brought

about by the coronavirus pandemic means this deadline has now been extended until the end of 2021. The project combines broadcaster initiatives to increase the number of disabled people working on their productions with a series of specifically commissioned trainings and interventions. A report commissioned by *Doubling Disability* in 2019 to review the industry's current approach found that 'the provision of disability initiatives [in the broadcasting industry] is fragmented, as is knowledge about good practice and the circulation of learning from experience.' (University of Leicester, 2019: p2). The industry has since been working to improve that situation. An interim report on the progress of the Doubling Disability project was published this year, and found that there is still a significant way to go: 'If off-screen disability representation continues to increase at the current rate, it will be 2028 before the target of 9.0% disabled people in off-screen roles is met' and, 'It will be 2041 before off-screen TV production is representative of the UK working age population in terms of disability' (Tidball and Bunting, 2021: p12). The report contains the results of a survey of disabled workers in the TV industry, whose results foreshadow some of those in this report, including that a majority of disabled broadcasting workers believe 'discriminatory views around the capabilities of disabled people had significantly limited their career progression' and 'disability knowledge throughout the industry must be improved', as well as the fact that there is a 'need for industry-wide conversations about 'reasonable adjustments' specific to TV workplaces which should be led by disabled people'. (Tidball and Bunting, 2021: p19). The report emphasises the fact that there are disabled people available to the industry: 'Disabled workers are looking for more broadcasting work'. (Tidball and Bunting, 2021: p16).

For many years the industry has made efforts to attract disabled people to the industry, and keep them in it. For example, Channel 4 has an entry level trainee scheme with a disabled-only cohort which runs every 4 years, in conjunction with the Paralympics. It provides trainees with industry training and placements at production companies (Channel 4, Online, n.d.). The BBC has had a journalism trainee scheme, Extend, which offers disabled people year long entry level contracts in BBC News (BBC, Online, n.d.). Pact – the trade association for UK independent production companies – has a diversity scheme which provides similar entry level opportunities for trainees from under-represented backgrounds, including disabled people (Pact, Online, n.d.).

The numbers indicate that disabled people who benefit from entry level schemes don't always rise up the career ladder smoothly, and broadcasters have made efforts to address this too. In 2016, Channel 4 declared a Year of Disability, with commitments to increase representation of disabled people on and off screen, including supporting a cohort of disabled people at the mid-level of their career (Channel 4, 2016). In 2019, the BBC launched Elevate, an initiative specifically designed to address the fact that disabled people struggle to progress through the industry, and often leave at the 3-5 year mark. Each participant undertakes a role more senior than they've done before. The BBC gives each of them bespoke support, as well as insisting the production companies involved attend disability confidence training. The initiative is new but the early signs are good: the first two participants have been kept on by the indies who employed them through Elevate (BBC, June 2021).¹

Meanwhile, the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent disruption to television production has proved a catalyst for freelancer direct action. The Coalition for Change is a coalition of industry bodies formed in 2020, and committed to improving working practices for freelancers. The Coalition includes major broadcasters such as the BBC, ITV, and Channel 4, alongside groups which platform those underrepresented in the industry. Among them is Deaf and Disabled People in TV, a group led by experienced disabled freelancers, whose purpose is to campaign for disabled professionals working, or wanting to work in the industry. The Coalition for Change has a disability sub-committee, of which I am part, which will make recommendations to the Coalition for ways the industry could better support and nurture disabled talent.



¹ BBC, Press Release / Personal Communication, 4 June 2021.

Meanwhile, some broadcasters have established guidelines which encourage programme-makers to diversify their production teams. For example, the BBC now encourages suppliers to ensure 20% of their off-screen production staff are from under-represented backgrounds, including people with lived experience of disability (BBC, April 2021). Sky has committed to 10% of off screen staff on its productions being disabled by 2023, alongside other initiatives.² Channel 4 is launching a new strategy for improving off screen representation, which will include new resources for indies to support hiring, including and progressing disabled talent (Channel 4, May 2021, Online). ITV has a target of ensuring 12% of its workforce is made up of disabled people by 2022, and ITV Studios are trialling use of the Guaranteed Interview Scheme when they advertise for freelance roles.³

Although there is now significant recognition of the barriers for people from under-represented backgrounds working in the television industry, and significant efforts to improve the experience of those who work in it, change is not all about goodwill. Employers have legal responsibilities, too. In UK law, thanks to the Equality Act 2010, it is illegal to discriminate against anyone because of protected characteristics including age, gender, religion, sexual orientation and disability. However, exclusion can be subtle. Shinkwin and Relph noted a number of factors which prevent disabled graduates in the UK from equally participating in the workforce, including a lack of accessible housing and public transport infrastructure (Shinkwin and Relph, 2019: p8).

In the UK television industry, where jobs are advertised, some routinely ask for applications only from candidates who have a certain number of credits at a certain level in a certain genre. In an analysis of opportunities for disabled people working in the Australian media, Ellis has noted that 'media workers with disability... have found job descriptions can be exclusionary' (Ellis, 2016: p6). A quick sweep of UK TV recruitment sites in recent months finds many recruiters asking 'You should have a minimum of 3 credits at Producer level' or 'a minimum of 2 broadcast Researcher credits,' and so on. This is achievable if you have a linear career but, as this research shows, disabled people in the industry often don't. Many entry level job advertisements specify a requirement to drive, which some disabled workers are prevented from doing because of the nature of their impairment. Some participants in this research identify these things as a barrier to the industry for them. None of these recruiters are intentionally excluding disabled people, nor anyone else, but the net result is to limit the opportunities available to some groups of people. If disabled people's

² Personal Communication, 1 July 2021.


³ Personal Communications, 22 May 2021 and 21 June 2021.

career paths and credit histories do vary from those of non-disabled people, it's possible that they are being screened out of roles which are otherwise a good match for our skills and experience.

To acknowledge my own experience, I'm a disabled person currently working as an Executive Producer in the television industry, with twenty years' experience in a variety of roles, and the veteran of several diversity initiatives, including Elevate. I've usually – but not always – been the only disabled person on a team, and often had to explain my needs to senior colleagues, as well as fighting for those needs to be met. Anecdotally, I know other disabled people have had similar experiences. Little research has directly asked disabled people who've had sticking power in the industry how their careers have progressed, what the barriers have been, and what might have helped. This research does that. It asks disabled people how they feel being disabled has impacted on the career routes they have taken, what barriers they have encountered, and what issues they have had to take into consideration when they make choices about their work. It also asks what helped, and what might have made it easier. The aim is to establish any common threads in their experience, to highlight ways of working in the industry which may create barriers for disabled people, and suggest ways of creating a more level playing field for those who wish to progress into senior roles.

This issue cannot be looked at alone. For many people, disability intersects with other issues such as gender, race, class or parenthood, all of which might impact on an individual's career. This research focuses solely on disability and, therefore, should be looked at as spotlighting one aspect of the television industry's problem with diversity. In order to ensure the television workforce better reflects the population as a whole, the industry needs to consider elements of its culture which might create barriers for people from all backgrounds. This research offers an insight into only one aspect of the solution.



A photograph of a paved walkway with a metal railing and a stone wall. A yellow sign with a blue wheelchair symbol is attached to the wall.

The Social Model of Disability and The Equality Act 2010

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Throughout this research and in writing this report, I have chosen to adopt the social model of disability, and the language associated with it. The social model has been developed by disabled people over the last forty years, and states that exclusion and discrimination of disabled people is not an inevitable consequence of having an impairment, but is caused by the way society is organised (Inclusion London, 2015). To give an obvious example, if a wheelchair user is prevented from entering a building by a flight of stairs, the social model would view the stairs as the problem, rather than the wheelchair user. A social model solution would involve replacing the stairs with a ramp or a lift, focusing on the way the situation can be altered to become more inclusive of disabled people, rather than making it the disabled person's problem. Or, as the founders of UK Disability History Month explain, 'We are of the view that the position of disabled people and the discrimination against us are socially created' (UK Disability History Month, Online, n.d.).

The social model discusses 'barriers' which prevent disabled people from taking a full part in a situation – like stairs – and states that its these barriers which disable someone, rather than a particular medical condition. For this reason, the social model favours the term 'disabled people' over 'people with disabilities', and the word 'impairment' to describe someone's medical condition, rather than 'disability'. I will be using social model language in this report. While doing so, I want to acknowledge that there is wide variation in the language used by disabled people. Individuals make their own choices and have their own preferences about the language they use to describe themselves. In particular, not all deaf people consider themselves to be disabled. Likewise, some people with autism, ADHD and related conditions describe themselves as 'neurodiverse' and reject the term 'disabled', while others use both. All are included in this research.



The online survey which comprised the first stage of this research asked participants if they considered themselves to be deaf or disabled according to the Equality Act 2010 definition. According to the Equality Act, a disability is defined as 'any long term impairment which has a substantial adverse effect on your ability to carry out day-to-day activities' (Gov.UK, Online, n.d.). Examples include conditions which affect your learning, mobility, physical co-ordination, mental health, speech, hearing or eyesight, as well as conditions such as diabetes and epilepsy which may normally be controlled via medication. All except one of the participants whose data is included in this report agreed this definition applied to them.

When a person meets the Equality Act definition of disability, employers and organisations have a responsibility to ensure they are not disadvantaged by being disabled. As the Equality and Human Rights Commission explains:

Under the Equality Act employers and organisations have a responsibility to make sure that disabled people can access jobs, education and services as easily as non-disabled people. This is known as the 'duty to make reasonable adjustments... What is reasonable depends on a number of factors, including the resources available to the organisation making the adjustment (EHRC, Online, n.d.).

Not all disabled people do require reasonable adjustments in the workplace. Some do, and these enable us to carry out our jobs on the same level as a non-disabled person. They vary according to the person and the situation. Examples would include a sign-language interpreter for deaf people, screen-reading software for those with visual impairments, flexible working hours for those with limited stamina. Sometimes these requirements are referred to as 'access needs' or 'support needs'.



Methodology

Methodology

First, participants were invited to complete a short online survey detailing their experience to date, and asked if they felt being disabled had affected their career choices or career progression. The survey ran for two weeks from 16 May to 30 May and was distributed among industry representatives with an interest in disability and diversity, who were asked to circulate amongst their contacts. This included but was not limited to broadcaster staff disability networks and disability leads, the Deaf and Disabled in TV group, individual disabled freelancers, and wider social networks including Twitter and Facebook. There were 88 complete responses. One respondent has been excluded from the results because they stated they were not disabled, not just according to the Equality Act definition, but at all. Another was excluded because they stated they had never worked in the UK TV industry.

Surveys were selected as the initial means of data collection as 'the point of a survey is to find out how many feel, think or behave in a particular way, and surveys provide the general picture relatively quickly and easily.' (Hammond and Wellington 2020: 171) The survey included open and close-ended question to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. Consideration was made in relation to survey accessibility (with alternative formats offered) and length (with a rough estimate of time to complete given at the beginning).

The survey asked respondents the nature of their impairment, and their current employment status, as well as the genres they work in, and whether lockdown restrictions have impacted on their employment. They were further asked how long they have worked in the industry overall, how long they have worked in their current role, and how long they worked at a more junior level. This was to get a sense of the way people's careers had progressed.

Participants were also asked if they had any access needs or required reasonable adjustments to do their job, and whether they had ever applied for a grant to cover any costs associated with these access needs.

Respondents were also asked if they felt their impairment had impacted on both their career choices, and their career progression, or was likely to in future. The final question was a multiple choice one suggesting a range of barriers a disabled person might have to consider when considering work options, including practical issues such as being unable to drive, working hours, or attitudes of colleagues toward disabled people.

Before the survey closed, participants were given the opportunity to add anything else they wanted to say, to ensure that if things were not asked in the survey they were able to add their own thoughts or address issues that they may have felt unable to expand upon elsewhere in the survey. Finally, they were asked if they would consider participating in a follow up 1:1 interview in the coming weeks.

The second phase of research was 1:1 interviews with a selection of survey participants, who had indicated at the end of the survey that they would be willing to be interviewed to discuss the issues raised further. Not all participants wanted to be interviewed, but of those who did, a cohort of interviewees was selected based on their availability, level of experience in the industry, and the genre they worked in, as well as the nature of their impairment. This was to ensure a range of voices and experience was heard within the interviews. All the interviewees worked in off screen editorial or production roles. Because the focus of this research was on the ways disabled people have managed to progress in their career, interviews were limited to people who had at least 5 years' experience in the industry, and were around producer level or above. Ten people were invited to interview, and seven accepted.

Interviews were selected to support the survey data, as 'qualitative data provide insight into cultural activities that might otherwise be missed in structured surveys or experiments' (Tracy 2013: 5). Semi-structured interviews were used, where 'the researcher not only follows some preset questions but also includes additional questions in response to participant comments and reactions' (Savin-Baden 2013: 359) with open-ended questions 'to allow interviewees to express their perspectives on a topic or issue' (Savin-Baden 2013: 359). Given the sensitivity of the topic explored, it was important to ensure that participants felt empowered to tell their own stories and therefore that room was given for follow-up questions, and topics that may have deviated from those planned initially. At times, examples from my own experiences were provided to interview participants in order to expand on the questions asked without leading them to a particular conclusion. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, interviews were carried out via video-calling to ensure health and safety, and access needs were discussed in advance and provided to participants.



Ethics

Ethics

There were several ethical aspects to consider for this research. Firstly, all participants were given clear information as to the nature and purpose of this research, and informed consent was obtained at both survey and interview level. However, on a more personal level, the relatively small number of disabled people working in the television industry means I was likely to know several of the participants, either professionally or personally. In a freelance industry, it was also possible that we might meet each other in recruitment situations in future. It was made clear to all participants as part of the informed consent process at interview stage that this research was separate from my usual professional role, and nothing they told me would influence future employment decisions. It was also agreed that participants would be anonymised in the writing of this report. Because of the low number of disabled people in senior positions in the industry, this means certain details about participants have been changed with their permission, and interviewees have been offered the opportunity to read a draft of the parts of this report which relate to them, to ensure they are happy their identity has been protected.

In undertaking any research, it's important to recognise your own position in relation to it. As a disabled woman who has worked in the television industry for twenty years, I recognise the experiences of many of the survey participants and interviewees. In most – but not all – of the teams I have been part of, I have been the only disabled person in the room, and have often had to fight for my access needs to be met. Like many of my interviewees, I have both struggled with career progression, and been the beneficiary of several diversity schemes, with varying degrees of success. This research is the product of my experience.





Participants and Interviewees

The Participants


86 disabled people took part in the survey. Largely, they were an experienced cohort. Over half – 52% – have been working in the industry for over 10 years. Fewer than 7% of respondents said they had been working in the industry for less than two years. They worked in a range of roles – from those with commissioning responsibilities to assistant producers – in a variety of genres. A third of respondents currently work in a staff role within the UK television industry; more than half said they are freelance or working on fixed term contracts. Two participants run their own production companies. Between them, they disclosed an array of impairments.

The Interviewees

Of those who took part in the online survey, seven were selected for interview. They are:

- Senior Producer with commissioning responsibilities who has worked in the industry for over 20 years
- An Executive Producer and Head of Development who has worked in the industry for almost 15 years
- A freelance Executive and Series Producer who has worked in the industry for over 20 years.
- An Executive Producer with commissioning responsibilities who has worked in the industry for over 20 years
- A Shooting Producer / Director and Editor who has worked in the industry for nearly 10 years
- A Production Manager who has worked in the industry for nearly 10 years
- A Producer / Director who has worked in the industry for almost 15 years

Between them they have worked in a range of genres, including news, current affairs, factual and factual entertainment programmes. For purposes of anonymity I have not connected their impairments with their job titles because to do so would be to identify them, but their experiences of disability differs widely and includes people with significant mobility or dexterity impairments, people who are neurodiverse, people who have significant long term mental health conditions, as well as a range of other conditions. Some interviewees have impairments which are visible as soon as they enter a room and others have to make decisions about telling their employers they are disabled.

The background image is a blurred photograph of a control room or data center. In the foreground, on the left, there is a piece of equipment with a small screen displaying a blue-tinted image. Behind it, a large monitor is visible. In the background, several people are seated at desks, looking at multiple computer monitors. The monitors display various colorful graphics and data. The overall scene is dimly lit, with light coming from the screens and some overhead lights.

Results and Analysis

Results and Analysis

The results of the initial survey were striking. A large percentage of disabled people said they felt their career choices and career progression had been impacted by being disabled. Despite a wide and varied experience of the industry, and of disability, there was much consistency in the barriers they identified and the experiences they described.

Survey participants were presented with a multiple choice list of possible barriers to employment, and asked, 'When considering your work options, do you think about any of the following?' Every single one of the participants stated they considered at least one of those things, with several adding more in the 'other' box.

The barriers listed were as follows:

- Practical issues such as being unable to drive or physically use equipment – 51% of participants identified this as an issue.
- Working hours – 65% identified this as an issue
- Needing consistent work – 35% identified this as an issue
- Needing support from other people, such as BSL interpreters or support workers – 14% identified this as an issue
- Needing an Access to Work grant – 22% identified this as an issue. The Access to Work scheme is explored in more detail below.
- Attitudes of colleagues toward disabled people. – 71% identified this as an issue
- An employers' understanding of their legal obligations toward disabled people – 63% identified this as an issue

Participants were given the option of adding other choices. Flexible working options were mentioned by several, including the flexibility to attend hospital appointments, or work remotely or on a part time basis. The question of how much travel was involved in a job was raised. The unpredictable nature of work was taken into consideration by some.

Elsewhere in the survey, some took the opportunity to highlight issues which had affected their career progression. One said. "Big changes like relocating are huge for disabled people. Finding accessible accommodation is the obvious one, but issues like losing your support network, changing health professionals... made it impossible for me." This respondent had been invited to apply for a significant promotion if she were able to relocate but, for disability reasons, she was not. She says, "It prevented me going for the big job."

Another, who has found a role they are comfortable in, explained that “My disability stopped me considering certain roles in the industry... but it just so happens the job I love is very accessible for me.”

Another, who has left the industry, wasn’t so lucky: “Routes into the television industry are usually via roles such as runner which are physically demanding. You work long hours for minimal pay. I got to a stage where junior roles were too taxing on my body and I couldn’t do them anymore.”

These responses – and the consistent nature of them – are significant because they highlight some of the considerations which are a regular part of disabled people’s professional lives and thought processes, but which non-disabled workers simply do not have to take into account with the same regularity. Of course, there are issues of intersectionality in play – some mentioned parenthood as a reason for changing route, alongside specifically disability-related concerns; another mentioned a racist colleague as a reason for quitting a job – but the responses here indicate that, again and again, disabled people have to consider factors other people do not always have to think about when weighing up their career options. Below, I consider some of the most prevalent.





Career Choices and Progression

Career Choices and Progression

- 77% of respondents said they felt their impairment had impacted on their own career choices, with a further 8% saying they were unsure whether it had.
- 80% believe their impairment has impacted on their career progression, with a further 12% being unsure.
- 51% said practical issues such as being unable to drive or physically use equipment were a consideration
- 65% said working hours were a consideration

The vast majority of participants felt their career progression had been impacted because they were disabled. People who worked in freelance roles or on fixed term contracts were more likely to feel their career progression and choices had been affected by being disabled than people in staff roles but, regardless of employment status, a majority of people answered yes to these questions.⁴

The non-linear nature of some careers was highlighted in some survey responses. One said, “I feel lucky that I have carved my own path;” another, “My career has not been linear... I find I do whatever I can get regardless of grade.” Others highlighted the prevalence of entry level roles which required the ability to drive, and the lack of part time work opportunities.

Survey respondents expanded upon the ways these issues had impacted on the choices they’ve made, and continue to make, about the work they do. One said he was “on a mission to find a job where I can work in production without having to go on location. There just isn’t room for adjustments there that I need.” Another explained, “I veered out of programme-making because I would have needed to wield cameras regularly to progress, and prove myself, and I didn’t feel capable.” This respondent continues to work in the industry but has sidestepped to a different genre and role, because aspects of the traditional route were inaccessible to him. Another physically disabled respondent said he had become a writer because it suited him better than working in production: “Being a writer allows me to still make TV but work from home... Plus I can set my own hours. If I did not write, I would no longer be working in TV, because of my disability.”

⁴ 62% of participants in staff roles believed their career choices had been affected by being disabled, with a further 12% being unsure. For freelancers or those working on fixed term contracts, the figure was 83% of people believing their careers had been affected, with 15% unsure. In terms of career progression, 73% of people with staff jobs felt their career progressions had been affected by disability, compared to 81% of freelancers.

Sometimes, participants made the decision to continue in a potentially harmful role, with one physically disabled interviewee describing the toll of years on the road carrying heavy equipment and kit bags. “I was travelling all over the UK... And now I think my back problems are actually a direct result. If you imagine a [mobility impaired] woman, I was having to carry two flight cases and rucksacks on my back. The strain on my body was immense, but I can’t prove a causal link. It’s quite a difficult thing to unwrap.” These are practical decisions, weighing up the physical or mental health consequences of doing a particular task, with the professional consequences of not doing. People who aren’t disabled simply don’t have to make these decisions, or not usually to the same degree. Some in this research feel choosing not to push their body to its limits has slowed down their careers. The expectation that workers in the TV industry will push themselves in this way surely disadvantages disabled people.

At interview, two participants elaborated on the unconventional nature of their career paths. One, a successful Producer / Director who joined the industry after giving up another career said, “It’s not really been linear. I didn’t do that thing of leave university, become an AP, then become a PD, then become an Exec, become a commissioner. I’ve never done that.”

This is not limited to people with physical impairments. Another, who is newer to the industry describes a similar trajectory. She is neurodiverse and struggled with the admin tasks and spreadsheets in one of her first roles in the industry. It took her a long time to move on to find a different job, partly because of her impairment. She has recently produced and directed her first film, and told me, “I’ve had a really unconventional career. It’s always really confusing trying to talk to people about it... Not the traditional runner / researcher / AP.” She produced and directed her first film in her own time while working as an Assistant Producer on another series. The film she made independently was acquired by a broadcaster and was a success. She has felt like she struggled to get noticed in some other roles. “I’m definitely not the loudest person in the room. I’ll get things said, but I’m not that person.”



It took her some time to find a role which suited her. "I felt really trapped. I was there way too long as well, I found it really hard to get out. I was applying for things and I wasn't I wasn't getting them. Application forms and things are such a huge barrier. To someone like me, who... finds it quite difficult to be succinct, unless I find someone that I trust that has the time and is willing to read through an application, which you can't always keep asking people to do." She did find a new job, after preparing hard for the interview. "I was so desperate, I wrote down every single question I could think they might ask and I wrote essay answers, and I spent a week reading through them and rehearsing them like a script because I was just like 'I need to get out of this job'. So I worked really hard."

She also said she has struggled with the more informal style of recruitment favoured by some employers. "I just wish people would say what they mean...I've had some really painfully embarrassing chats that I didn't realise were interviews, and I was just completely unprepared. And then that throws you off. I guess, you know, someone who isn't neurodivergent, maybe the brain can switch quickly... but it just threw me, and then I'm just useless. And I think they asked me what have you watched recently that you liked? And I just couldn't think of a single programme, because I was so thrown by the whole thing. Oh, my God, it was humiliating." In this context, she got her first break as a producer / director by making a film in her own time, and then selling it to a broadcaster, rather than by rising through the ranks at a production company. Her experience highlights the fact that some disabled people's talent may not be immediately spotted by mainstream employers because the recruitment processes work against them.

This participant rarely discusses being neurodiverse with employers unless they ask her it or it comes up in conversations naturally. Many of the interviewees were more obviously disabled, and raised the subject of being pigeon-holed as a result. Some were asked to work on disability-focussed programmes above all others, or worried that they might be. Ellis highlights this as a problem for some in on-screen roles, quoting disabled actor Shannon DeVito, who says, "Any actor with a disability has been pigeon-holed into playing a person with a disability." (Ellis, 2019: p82). In this research, participants highlighted a similar tendency to push disabled off-screen workers to programmes about disability issues. One made a conscious choice to embrace this route explaining she had chosen to pitch disability-themed ideas because she knew commissioners would be interested in her unique perspective. "You have

to navigate the system that's put in front of you... I think [I got where I am] by pushing at the door and saying, you don't have any disabled people in the industry and how could you be making these films if they're being made by people that don't have any understanding of the situation?" She explained she usually has to pitch her own ideas. "I don't get offered jobbing director jobs...People think I only want to make films about disabled people, which I don't."

Ellis has touched upon this problem in the Australian industry. She says, 'Disabled media workers are ironically expected to integrate into this industry while also working as cultural revisionists, offering news perspectives and promoting previously unseen media approaches to disability' (Ellis, 2016: p10). Whilst some disabled people embrace this role and do well out of it, this is not necessarily what all disabled people want to do. One interviewee described avoiding working on programmes about disabled people because "I was really reluctant to get pigeonholed into disability programming." Another, who has often worked on disability-specific programmes, said she has had that very problem. "I've been pigeonholed a lot. [We're] put in a box and we're expected to stay there." She described rising to producer level on a disability-specific series, and gaining experience on other mainstream shows around that, but then struggling to find work when the disability series was decommissioned. Eventually she landed a role as a trainee researcher on another disability-focussed series, and had to work her way up the ladder again. She has also gained some experience on mainstream shows, but feels her opportunities have been limited.

She is not the only participant to discuss the struggle to access the same opportunities as non-disabled people. One, who is physically disabled, describes a boss who was reluctant to send her on location.

"She never sent me anywhere. She would send the runners abroad to do things but, God forbid, she should send me out to do anything. And I don't whether that was driven by fear that something would happen, or by insurance, or what it was driven by, but she wouldn't do it."

However, when this disabled person moved jobs, a new senior producer did give him those opportunities. “As soon as I [started working on the] programme, it was like we’re doing a report in Tuscany or we’re doing a report in the Scilly Isles or we’re doing a report in Spain and [he] sent me all over the place. And I always look at him now and think he comes across this really as like your archetypal white posh guy, [but] actually was so forward thinking in terms of disability.”

On this note, Ellis has said that ‘disability is experienced beyond the impacts of the impairments. Experiences related to disabling attitudes and lack of opportunities intersect with the experience of impairment’ (Ellis, 2016: p4). For some disabled people, there limitations on physical capacity which result in them having to make difficult choices about their career paths. However, other barriers are created by the attitudes of non-disabled people, which result in them being given fewer opportunities overall. For the interviewee who feels she has been pigeon-holed throughout her career, this has been the case, and the subsequent perceived lack of experience has been a real barrier to promotion. She told me she had got down to the interview stage for a senior role at a broadcaster, only to be unsuccessful. She asked for feedback. “The feedback was there was nothing more I could have done, they loved my ideas and my charisma, it just came down to experience. Look, I’m a disabled woman in television, in the mainstream arena, where it’s really fucking hard. Where am I going to get more experience? The broadcasters have to take accountability for this.”

One participant has risen through industry ranks, and seen the lack-of-experience problem from the other side. He is frustrated by the attitude some employers’ take to disabled people’s CVs. “They’ll look at CVs and say, ‘...Oh this white person, for example, or this non-disabled person’s got so much more experience than this disabled person. It won’t for a second occur to them that that’s because discrimination exists. They’ll just think all have to choose the person with more experience. And it makes me so angry.”

If disabled people are not given opportunities to gain experience early in their career, they will struggle to be promoted into senior roles when competing against non-disabled people for those roles later in their career, which might go some way to explaining why there are so few at senior level now. If the industry wishes to address this problem, it needs to ensure there is a level playing field for disabled people at all stages of our career.

For some, being disabled has meant quitting jobs which make managing their impairment harder, even when those roles were good for their careers. One interviewee who has an autoimmune condition described taking a role which involved lots of international travel. Although she was good at her job, the travel made it impossible to manage her condition well:

I kept telling myself it was fine, but the reality was it was killing me, my health was bad. And my doctor was like, “What are you doing?” It’s not good.” So that’s part of why I took another job, which was UK-centric. I was doing really well career wise, but I [couldn’t] hack it, it was going to kill me.

Disabled people are sometimes faced with a tension between their positive career trajectory and the negative consequences for their physical or mental health. Another said,

“My work roles have definitely been more challenging and taken a toll on my physical health in [ways] that weren’t recognised by my managers. I was reluctant to highlight challenges due to the fear of discrimination [or] career progression being blocked.”

So, some participants carried on regardless and didn’t mention problems so as not to damage their career progression, while others quit high-flying roles to preserve their physical well-being. This suggests workplace culture can be inflexible, in ways which are damaging to the career prospects of disabled people in particular.

One interviewee with a long term mental health condition explained her impairment has made her very selective about the jobs she chooses. “I just look at jobs now, and I’m like, that sounds hellish! Not going to do it... I’m very picky about what I do. I have to really turn over every possible job and how it affects my life in great detail. I have to look at the whole project and go like, how does it fit? What will my day to day life be like? When can I go to the gym? What will my weekends be like? What will my hours be like?” This participant has had a fairly linear career and believes her career progression has been relatively fast. For her, the need for work-life balance is key to managing her impairment, and this meant she

pushed to be promoted: “I was always impatient. The work life balance, the happiness balance, is not right unless you pay me more money, and I’m being more challenged, and I’m getting more responsibility.”

That said, she feels that her progression could have been faster if she was not disabled:

Because I’m very anxious, I don’t like moving up unless I’m totally sure that I can do the next job. So I think there are also ways I could have moved up even faster if I was, say, a more confident person, for example, a white man, and definitely could have moved up faster or asked for more in certain situations.”

Although this participant has progressed more quickly than some others, she does struggle with some aspects of her impairment at work, especially when conversations spill out beyond typical office hours. “What I find difficult mainly these days is fatigue, I’m tired a lot. I’m very tired most of time, and I’m usually in bed by nine thirty, so people can continue having conversations two to three hours after I went to bed. I wake up in the morning, I’m like, oh, wow, so many messages!”

Overall, this research data suggests that some disabled people in the television industry have non-linear careers, or have chosen to veer from traditional career paths for practical reasons related to their impairment, such as being able to use equipment or work on location. Some have given up opportunities which would have progressed their career, because the expectations of those jobs were not compatible with the needs of their impairment. Others have chosen to continue in roles which may have been difficult for them, enduring physical discomfort for fear of limiting their progression. Others still have found it difficult to gain the experience afforded to their non-disabled colleagues due to the attitudes of managers, or a tendency to be pigeon-holed. Subsequently, they have found it difficult to obtain senior roles when competing against people who aren’t disabled and have not experienced the same barriers. Even when participants said their career progression had been relatively linear and relatively quick, they still had to factor in considerations which are less likely to be a concern of non-disabled people, leaving them feeling like their career progression would have been faster if they were not disabled.



Employers' Responsibilities, Support Needs and Reasonable Adjustments

Employers' Responsibilities, Support Needs and Reasonable Adjustments

- 84% of respondents said they had access needs or required reasonable adjustments some or all of the time.
- 71% of respondents said they took into account attitudes of colleagues toward disabled people when considering their work options
- 63% said they considered an employers' understanding of their legal obligations toward disabled people when considering work options.
- 42% of respondents had applied for an Access to Work grant.

A majority of survey participants said they had some support needs in the workplace. These people were also more likely to believe their impairment had impacted on their career choices or career progression, or might in future.⁵ Survey participants were not directly asked if they disclosed their impairment in the workplace or asked for adjustments, although some stated that they did not.

Survey respondents raised the issue of employer responsibility, with one saying "There is... little understanding of the Equality Act." All except one of the interviewees agreed, saying they felt employers didn't understand their legal responsibilities toward disabled people. One felt hers does; she has worked for the same employer for over a decade. One freelance interviewee who moves from job to job regularly describes recruitment techniques as being 'like the Wild West'. She has rarely been asked about her access needs, mentioning one HR manager who is a stickler for everything being done properly. Despite that manager's attention to detail, she did not ask the participant if she was disabled or might require reasonable adjustments. "She didn't ask me anything."

Employers' and colleagues' attitudes were a recurring theme in the survey responses. One said, "I can't think of anyone in my current work situation who I would feel comfortable asking for accommodations from." Another, "I often try and keep my disability as invisible as possible. It can impact people's view of my ability to fulfil my job." A third, "My disability is not visible and I've had to make hard choices about revealing my needs."

⁵ 78% of respondents who said they had access needs all or required reasonable adjustments all or some of the time said being disabled has impacted their career choices. This compared to 71% of people who did not have access needs. When it came to career progression, 83% of those with access needs all or some of the time said their career progression had been impacted, or might be in the future. This compared with 63% of people who said they did not have access needs.

It's worth saying that the TV industry is not the only one in which disabled people can be reluctant to ask for adjustments. In a 2019, the Business Disability Forum explored the experience of disabled workers in the UK who require reasonable adjustments. They found that 'employees find the conversation about adjustments sensitive and, in many cases, even amongst those with adjustments already in place, many avoid them for fear of stigma' (Business Disability Forum (BDF), 2020: p5). For disabled workers this means further physical discomfort, difficulties at work, and emotional labour, which their non-disabled counterparts do not experience. However, the Business Disability Forum also found that there are real benefits for employers when reasonable adjustments are put in place. Giving reasonable adjustments to people who need them means employees are happier, more productive, and stay in their jobs longer (BDF, 2020: p7). This suggests that if the television industry were able to find ways of discussing and implementing adjustments, retention of disabled workers would improve, as well as their career progression.

However, the data from this research suggest, in the TV industry, disabled workers do not believe they will be treated with respect if they do request adjustments. One interviewee told me, "[My impairment] definitely affects my working day, but I don't ask for any reasonable adjustments. And I should... I should ask for reasonable adjustments. But already, as a woman who has children, I've got reasonable adjustments there. So then to add on to that, I feel like the reaction would not be great."

Sometimes, the problem is that employers don't offer support, and the data suggests this can impact on career progression. One survey respondent commented, "There are positions I cannot do without help – which has not been forthcoming. This means missing out on experiences which would have helped progress my career. It is also very difficult when you are junior to ask for help, as you don't want to be labelled a problem." Already in this research, we have seen disabled people can struggle to gain the experience offered to their peers, and the reluctance to offer support or reasonable adjustments compounds this problem.

Several more participants noted that they had found it easier to negotiate adjustments as they became more senior. One survey respondent said, "As I've become more senior it's been easier to negotiate reasonable adjustments, and recent employers have been very accommodating. However, that has not always been the case, and it has been hugely detrimental to my career."

Another participant said she has become better at implementing the boundaries which enable her to manage her impairment as she grew more experienced: “Now I feel like I’m a bit of a well-oiled machine, I know really clearly that’s too much work, that’s an untenable situation. That’s not OK. You know, I’ve got much better at knowing how to navigate those things.”

Another interviewee echoed this: “I spent my early career insisting that I’m fine, I’m fine, you don’t have to do anything different for me.” Now she is in a senior position at work and, inspired by leadership training, she chooses to be direct about the impact of her impairment on her daily life. “I state the fact that, for you, that [task is] really easy. For me, I get up an hour earlier in the morning to get into work and do it.” She said she sympathised with disabled people at an earlier stage in their career:

“I think now, because I’m old enough... and I’m in a secure position in my job, I feel really sympathetic to people coming through the ranks... Despite all the all the great things that are said, I think the prejudice that disability equals problem is it is still there. And more importantly, in this world, that disability equals extra expense.”

Now she is senior, and in a secure role, she feels comfortable insisting her needs are met. But at more junior level, she opted to struggle on. Not all disabled people can struggle on, and it may be for this reason that fewer disabled people make it into senior ranks. Remember the survey participant who has now left the industry, and said, “I got to a stage where junior roles were too taxing on my body and I couldn’t do them anymore.”

Although it is disabled people who make decisions about whether to disclose their access needs and request adjustments, it is an employers’ responsibility to create a culture where they feel they can. The Business Disability Forum found, ‘The most common adjustments provided needed a degree of flexibility from the organisation but very often required minimal budget’ (BDF, 2020: p5).⁶ Their research recommends that managers are better equipped to discuss workplace adjustments, noting,

⁶ BDF, 2020: p5. The research noted examples of low cost adjustments, including ergonomic equipment, flexible working, or adjusted hours, working from home and time off to attend appointments or therapies to help manage a condition.

“It is critical that, as a first contact for most employees, managers in the workplace are knowledgeable about the process and well equipped to handle discussions about adjustments’ (BDF, 2020: p6). Many participants in this research said managers were not knowledgeable enough. One felt that neither employers, nor broadcasters, understand the full extent of what it meant to accommodate disabled people:

“My employers try very hard, but they have no clue what it actually means. This is true for commissioners too, on the network side, when they purchase a programme and they want it made and they go, we would like to have some disabled people. And then you go, well, then we need to make reasonable adjustments, which costs money, and they don’t want to pay that money. So what my employer and every employer, in my opinion, and all of the networks think that they have to do is just be sensitive, not say anything mean. But then that’s it.”

Disabled people who do require adjustments in the workplace have to navigate the ignorance and inexperience of managers when addressing the issue, and several participants said they only felt able to do this once they had grown in confidence and experience. Again, it is an issue most non-disabled people do not have to face, which adds pressure to the working lives of disabled people, especially in junior roles. The data suggests that if employers understood their responsibilities better, and managers were confident in broaching the subject of adjustments, more disabled people would remain in the industry, be more confident in their jobs, and find it easier to gain experience and get promoted.

Although a majority of adjustments do not create a cost for employers, when they do, some government support is available to lessen this. Access to Work is a government scheme which provides grants to disabled workers who require support in the workplace which is not covered by their employers making reasonable adjustments. A grant can cover the cost of practical support, including adaptations, services from a support worker, or help getting to and from work. In recent years, Access to Work grants have been capped. In the financial year April 2021 – March 2020, the Access to Work cap stands at £62,900 (Gov.UK, 2021, Online).

Although this level of funding is sufficient for many disabled workers, the cap has been criticised for ‘disproportionately impact[ing] people with more expensive support needs,’ including people who work with British Sign Language interpreters (Business Disability Forum, 2021, Online).

Some interviewees commented that the onus is often on disabled people when it comes to organising adjustments and support, especially in the case of Access to Work grants. One, who is currently in receipt of a grant explained:

“It’s the admin that you have to do, all of this annoying paperwork... I have to chase my support workers to invoice to me. And then I have to go through and fill out the paperwork... it takes up my time and it shouldn’t be part of my job with my workload. I should be able to focus on my career. And it’s just crazy. There must be another way.”

The same interviewee also said she often had to explain what an Access to Work grant was to employers who hadn’t heard of it before, and rarely understood the extra work it can create. Having an Access to Work grant therefore creates extra responsibilities for disabled workers, who are expected to do their job, while also doing all the administration associated with having a grant, which can be voluminous. This creates another layer of work for the disabled worker, which may put them off applying in the first place, creating yet another barrier for some disabled people.

One interviewee felt that HR departments should bear the load. “Calling and arranging and getting all of the paperwork sorted is a lot of effort. And I think personally, if you have an HR department who are in charge of this kind of resource, that they should be the one who you say what you need and then they have the systems in place and the infrastructure in place to work that out with government schemes and whatever.”

Although many workplace adjustments do not cost money, when they do, the issue of who pays can prove contentious. Two interviewees told me that their current Access to Work grants did not pay for all the support they needed, with the shortfall being met by broadcasters, although that

support had to be negotiated. One explained she has less funding for support than she had a few years ago, because of changes to the Access to Work scheme. On her current series, a broadcaster is funding some additional support.

Another told me, “I’ve recently taken to fighting for extra money on the budget, above and beyond the tariff for, in my case, a support worker to help me... It’s not much, a couple of grand, but it makes a big difference.” She does have some funding from Access to Work, but broadcasters’ help makes a difference. She believes one solution to the problem of funding reasonable adjustments is for broadcasters to have a pot of money which is made available when a disabled person on production does have support needs which cannot be met by the production company or funded by Access to Work. The second participant also felt this would make a difference.

For an industry as fluid and multi-faceted as television, this is a complex issue. All employers have a responsibility to make adjustments, but the extent of that responsibility varies according to their size and the resources they have available (EHRC, Online), so the support available to disabled people in the industry will vary depending on where they are working, and the question of whether the broadcasters should contribute is fraught with political sensitivities. All interviewees agreed that, whatever the solution, it is important that disabled people are not left having to initiate the conversations around support in the workplace.

Indeed, this research suggests employers taking the lead makes a difference. Some interviewees who told me they did not usually ask for adjustments described how delighted they were when an employer asked if they needed them. One said she does not usually disclose her impairment at work unless it comes up in conversation. The only time she has had support in the workplace is when a manager noticed she was always working late, and asked if she needed help. She said she did, and he arranged for her to have specialist support as a result. She recommends managers talk to new employees, in a relaxed way, to find out if they do have support needs. “It’s rare that [those conversations] happen,” she said.

An interviewee with a more visible impairment described how refreshing it was when she did not have to initiate the conversation about her access needs. “[My boss] had a really positive view of diversity. And he was the only boss who’s ever approached me and said, what can we do?... And it

wasn't in a judgemental way. I didn't have to initiate the conversation. And actually, that's a really big point, because so often you are made to feel like you are the person who has to initiate it."

This data shows that employers do not have a strong understanding of their legal responsibilities to make adjustments in the workplace, and that workplace culture results in some disabled people being reluctant to request adjustments. As Ellis (2016: 24) points out, within research around the creative industries "an ability to cause minimal fuss was seen as an inherent job requirement, particularly in an industry where employment relied on 'word of mouth'". It is likely for this reason, that some of my participants chose to struggle on without adjustments for fear of disrupting their careers. When they do request adjustments, disabled people are having to initiate those conversations and take responsibility for ensuring the adjustments are put in place. Some participants commented on how difficult this can be, especially at junior level. These are responsibilities which non-disabled workers simply do not have, and which put additional pressures on disabled people in the industry.





**Mentoring
and Visibility**

Mentoring and Visibility

As Gill and Pratt (2008: 21) highlight, within the creative industries 'research has also pointed to the preponderance of youthful, able-bodied people in these fields, marked gender inequalities, high levels of educational achievement, complex entanglements of class, nationality and ethnicity, and to the relative lack of caring responsibilities undertaken by people involved in this kind of creative work.' For people who don't conform to this stereotype, it can be hard not seeing themselves reflected in their workplaces and the wider industry. Without being asked, several participants spoke in turn about the importance of disabled people being visible in the workplace. "I really believe in See It, Be It," said one. Another described a day she bumped into a large group of disabled people who'd come to her office to take part in a disability-specific project, which she was not involved in. "I walked in and there was loads of disabled people there. And I just felt, God, I love this. I wish there was more of it. I wish disabled people were much, much more visible than they are in the workplace."

Participants were not asked directly about mentoring, either in the survey or at interview. However, three of those I interviewed told me they had been involved in a mentoring scheme that had been transformational to their career, for a variety of reasons. Others, who didn't mention formal mentoring schemes, did name individuals who they felt had been key to transforming their careers.

One participant has always sought out mentors for herself in the industry, and found them helpful. It was a mentor who encouraged and supported her in applying for senior leadership training, which turbo-boosted her career. "It gave me the really strategic leadership skills. If I'd hit that 10 or 15 years earlier, I think my career would be in a completely different place now." It was important for this participant that she was able to choose her own mentor. She says, "I had a senior mentors, and that made a huge difference. I've been lucky. For the past 10 years, I've sought out mentors...I started off in the formal way, and it didn't work. So I then did it informally and approached a couple of couple of people... and that was really helpful."

Another, who is at an earlier stage of trying to navigate the industry said, "I always feel like such an outsider, because I've taken this very strange route, which means I haven't had the usual experiences and sometimes I can feel a bit disconnected from conversations. And I'm definitely not very well connected in the industry. I got a mentor and the main thing we're working on is how to build connections a bit more." She is one of the participants who has had an unconventional route through the industry.

Her mentor is helping her find ways of making connections outside of her existing network, which she lacks because of the way she gained her experience.

A third, who has been knocked by negative experiences in the industry said, “I was given an amazing mentor. She helped me to readjust my mindset and my way of thinking... I still think I still think about her advice today, actually. She reminded me what I brought to the table, my skillset and my knowledge base, and my worth.” This participant also spoke of the transformational experience of meeting other disabled women who had been successful in the industry, and realising she could be successful too. She realises this is important for disabled people who are newer to the industry, and feel the absence of their peers: “If you’re just entering the industry and don’t see yourself reflected back at you, what hope do you have?”

This was echoed by one of the other participants who benefitted from the advice of mentors, and believes that it’s important that she’s visible to those coming after her. She says, “Sometimes I wonder if there’s a narrative that’s being given to younger people at the beginning of their careers, that [disabled] people don’t work in the industry. They don’t exist. We do. There is a career path for you.”

As this research has shown, many disabled people have experienced huge barriers whilst navigating their careers in the television industry. The onus is often on disabled people themselves to find solutions to those barriers, with employers rarely initiating conversations about the possibility of adjustments. Although it is important that the industry finds ways of addressing these issues, this research suggests that – in the current industry climate – some disabled people find it helpful both to see other disabled people at senior level in the workplace, and to have mentors outside our immediate circle with whom they can discuss some of the barriers they encounter as they navigate the industry.



A close-up, warm-toned photograph of a person's hand holding a stylus and writing on a tablet. The person is wearing a blue and red plaid shirt. In the background, a laptop screen displays a colorful bar chart, and a professional video camera with a large lens is visible on the right. The scene is set on a wooden desk.

Research Implications


Research Implications

This research has surveyed 86 disabled professionals who have worked in the UK television industry. Around 91% are currently working. Largely, they were an experienced cohort. Over half – 52% - have been working in the industry for over 10 years. Fewer than 7% of respondents said they had been working in the industry for less than two years.

Three quarters – 77% - of respondents felt being disabled had impacted on their career choices, with only 15% believing it had not. A majority of respondents – 80% - felt being disabled had impacted on their career progression, or was likely to in future, with only 8% believing it had not.

Notably, every single survey respondent identified at least one barrier to employment in the industry, with attitudes of colleagues toward disabled people and an employer's understanding of their legal obligations toward disabled people being the most common (71% and 63% respectively). At interview, this was reinforced when a majority of participants stated they did not believe employers in the industry understood their legal responsibilities toward disabled people. This might be the reason several participants were reluctant to ask for reasonable adjustments in the workplace. A number of participants highlighted the fact that the onus is on disabled people to organise adjustments and arrange funding where necessary, and most felt this should not be the case. Several suggested that both production companies and broadcasters had a role to play in resolving this situation.

The non-linear nature of careers was identified by many participants as a feature of their working life as a disabled person, with some remarking that this contributed to a situation where employers perceived them as not being experienced enough to take senior roles within the industry. Several participants remarked upon the importance of mentoring and visible role models to help disabled people navigate their way through the industry.

A man with dark hair, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and large black and silver headphones, is seated in a green office chair. He is pointing his right index finger at a computer monitor. The monitor displays a complex waveform or spectrogram with multiple colored lines (purple, yellow, green, red) on a dark background. To the left of this monitor, another monitor shows a color calibration chart with various colored squares. The background is a rustic brick wall, and a warm, yellow light source is visible in the upper right corner. The man is wearing a silver watch on his left wrist. The overall scene suggests a professional or technical environment, possibly a studio or a control room.

Conclusions and Industry Recommendations

Conclusions and Industry Recommendations



This research provides a snapshot of experiences of disabled people working in the UK television industry. It profiles the experience of a diverse range of disabled people, who have wide and varied experience of the industry, and of disability itself. What's striking is how consistent their accounts are, despite that diversity of experience.



It's clear that there are common barriers to career progression for disabled people, and that there are actions production companies and broadcasters can take which will go some way to removing these barriers and improving representation of disabled people at senior level in the industry, not all of which are complicated.



71% of respondents stated that attitudes of colleagues toward disabled people was something they thought about when considering their work options, suggesting that the approach of managers is key to ensuring disabled people are happy and able to do their jobs to the best of their abilities. This can be addressed in several ways, including making sure managers have up to date legal training regarding their obligations to disabled people, and ensuring team leaders take the initiative in asking all employees if they need support or adjustments at work, which is discussed in more detail below. If an individual is being considered for a management role, their track record on supporting disabled team members should be considered as part of the recruitment process.



Many participants had non-linear careers, or felt at risk of being pigeon-holed. They believed this put them at a disadvantage when seeking more senior roles in the industry. Some identified the fact that this had made it difficult to gain the experience employers expected, and others that it made it difficult to network and build connections. For this to be overcome, employers and broadcasters should scrutinise their recruitment practices to establish they are not inadvertently screening out disabled people who might have the skills necessary for the job, having gained their experience through routes which are not typical. It's therefore recommended that employers ensure new job opportunities are advertised as widely as possible, avoiding narrow criteria based on credit history, instead emphasising the specific skills most relevant to the job.



Related to this is the fact that most participants felt employers do not adequately understand their legal responsibilities toward disabled people. The consistency with which this was said is shocking, and indicates that there is a real need for training of people who have recruitment responsibilities in the industry. In a freelance and fluid industry, this might be complicated to implement, but an understanding of equality law is no less important than an understanding of tax law when it comes to running a business on a day to day basis. It's recommended that all managers have up-to-date training on equality law and their responsibilities toward disabled workers.



It's equally clear that the industry needs to devise a way of taking pressure off disabled people themselves when it comes to identifying and organising adjustments in the workplace. Where adjustments cost money, the industry needs to agree a consistent way of ensuring they are implemented, combining the legal responsibilities of production companies, with those of the Access to Work scheme, and ensuring that programme budgets accommodate the possibility of adjustments for disabled team members which cannot be funded through other routes. This research suggests that it happens on occasion, when disabled people have fought for it themselves, but this is unfair and unnecessary. An agreed system which works for broadcasters, production companies and disabled individuals is surely not beyond the bounds of possibility, and would open many doors for disabled programme-makers. It's recommended that industry leaders agree a consistent system for supporting disabled workers who do require funding for adjustments in the workplace.



Given the fact that most adjustments are not expensive, but some disabled workers are reluctant to request them, it's equally clear that employers need to take the lead and talk to their teams about any adjustments or support which would make their working lives easier. Adjustments can be wide-ranging and include flexible working hours or specialist equipment, as well as other solutions, often requiring minimal budget. Some disabled people chose not to disclose their impairment in the workplace, so this should be a conversation which is had with every team member, regardless of whether they are known to be disabled. It is a very basic step which costs nothing, and could improve the working lives and productivity of many, giving benefits to employers as well as disabled people.



This research has also shown that some disabled people find it valuable to see other disabled people working in the industry, and some have benefited from the guidance of mentors to help them navigate their way through an often inaccessible culture. In an ideal world, the industry would not be inaccessible, and such guidance would not be necessary, but while it is, it's recommended that broadcasters and production companies should offer mentoring opportunities to disabled people who feel this would be helpful. It's important that mentors are not imposed on disabled people, and that disabled people have input into who their mentor is.



It is important for organisations to adopt measurable metrics for any and all the policy recommendations they adopt in order to track both implementation of the process and results over time.



The benefits of widening participation in the television industry go beyond the industry alone, and have the potential to impact on the wider world. As one participant said, "The industry is a window to the world, and so much could be achieved by greater on and off screen representation, which would ripple out and change everyone's perception of disability... We know the disability perception gap recedes when non-disabled people know a disabled person – if representation was improved, think of the difference that could make to everyone's lives. We'd all be richer for it."



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