

Podcast Interview with Jodie Bowles – Associate Director of Badenoch and Clark, UK.

Ahmed

Welcome to the 'Let's Discuss Disability' podcast. A podcast by Enhance the UK charity where we will discuss all things disability awareness. Let's get stuck in.

Yes, welcome to Let's Discuss Disability with Enhance the UK, where I'm going to be interviewing recruitment expert Jodie Bowles, Associate Director at Badenoch & Clark, UK. It's within the recruitment industry that I'm quite curious about on what's new, what changed, what could we do better?

And especially now with all the lockdown and the pandemic happening, how will that impact what we are doing right now, and will it change for the future?

So many things to think about. And that's why I thought the best person to talk to would be Jodie, and she is working in a recruitment agency and she'll be able to share her insight of industry, of how the industry and the employers can make a difference for disabled employees. And also, what can disabled employees do to ensure the maximum success rate when it comes to applying and getting a job and also just to make sure it's healthy, vibrant, comfortable, working environment for you.

With all that in mind, let's discuss disability with Jodie Bowles.

Well, Jodie, thank you for being on the podcast. I really appreciate it.

Jodie

I'm glad to be here.

Ahmed

Fantastic. I'm very curious about the industry of recruitment and especially around the disabled workers and how they are, whether they have an advantage or disadvantage, that's where I want to come from your perspective, because I've got my own experience as well. So, I would love to start off; what is your link and the company that you work for, what is your combined link to disability and why is it important to the both of you?

Jodie

OK, so I work for a recruitment company that recruits very specific roles, but we're part of a very large recruitment group who recruit into all sorts of sectors, all sorts of jobs. And so for us, I think the importance of...in terms of having a diverse candidate, including people who have disabilities or see

themselves as having a disability, feeling comfortable to come to us, means that...I guess the selfish benefit for us is we have access to talent, which we might not otherwise have.

And I hope for people who have a disability, we can offer a welcoming environment and also ensure that they are getting put forward for jobs at companies who also have a drive to want to have a diverse workforce for all the benefits that it brings, which is obviously reflective of the world of the population.

But also, as I say, you don't want to cut out a section of society because they feel there may be a barrier to them using an agency to find a job.

Ahmed

Do you find that a common thing in your industry and in the workplace? There seems to be a barrier and either they are not given the opportunity or maybe they don't feel like they can fit in that environment or they can't fit in a culture. Do you see these barriers yourself, these problems?

Jodie

So I think I had a look at some of the sort of government statistics around this that run up to the end of 2019. I'm happy to use those because I think any data from 2020 due to the COVID situation is slightly different. But it's just interesting to me that both the employment rate, if you look at people who see themselves as having a disability against those who don't, the employment rate is lower by some sort of, you know, 20-25%.

And the economic inactivity rate is much higher for this for people who see themselves as having a disability. I think there is a sense there are, firstly people not even behaving in a way that looks like they're looking for a job. They're not employed or unemployed, they're inactive. But I don't believe those people couldn't work. I think there's probably reasons that they don't.

And I think in some of the...we have worked with Enhance the UK to look at our own, I guess, our physical property and also our online presence. And some of that wasn't as user-friendly as it could have been to people with certain types of disability. So I think there's definite barriers there.

There's also, I believe, a lack of understanding from perhaps job seekers who are disabled, but also from companies around how they can access government money to make reasonable adjustments in the workplace. Some of those things are very simple, but I think there isn't enough awareness of them yet, because if you look at the statistics about people of similar educational level, for example, who are trying to get into the job market, there's still a higher unemployment rate for people who have a disability than those who don't.

Ahmed

You make a good point, though. The numbers are up to 2019 and of course, 2020...I don't know how to describe it. It's just a complete upside down of a year. So the numbers will look very askew compared to the previous year. That makes a lot of sense.

And obviously, because of the pandemic and everything, the way we work has changed. Even though remote working has been around for a long, long time, it's kind of been forced upon in a lot of situations. From your perspective, then, what does the "new normal"...what does that look like at work for disabled people in particular? Has anything changed at all?

Jodie

So I don't know if there's been any changes yet because it's been like emergency mode. What I think will change is I don't think we're going to go back to the old status quo. I believe that what will happen is, and I know this from speaking to many of our clients who sit across many, many sectors, e.g. financial services, the legal sector, retail, commerce and industry, we work across all those sectors. Most of them are saying to us that when they do eventually go back to having some office presence, it will not be every day.

So people will be in an office two days a week, three days a week, because in their existing office space, they're going to have to make adjustments anyway. They're going to have to have seats that are further apart. Look at the sort of communal areas, all those sorts of things.

And I think what this will mean is that when you look at that number of people who have a disability, who are economically inactive...one of the reasons for that, I think, is that feeling of barriers to entry and some of that may be that they don't feel they are qualified to do the job, but there may be issues around the travel, or around the office environment. And as we've become more comfortable with, you know, people working remotely, my hope would be that people will/who saw that as a barrier will now go, "actually you know what? You know what? It's simply down to my ability to do this job. I don't have to worry about the journey or about a hostile working environment. I can be seen as more of a level playing field than everybody else to start with", but also practically for that person, I think the levels of confidence in terms of job seeking should go up because any of those extra things should be less relevant.

Ahmed

It makes sense, doesn't it? Because then if you are more confident and you're more comfortable with the company that you work for, surely your efficiency and productivity will go up. I feel like what you are saying should apply to a lot of people. If you have the option and you give the best working environment possible for that person, anybody, not just disabled employees.

Jodie

Yeah, I think it will. It will be a real shift for lots of groups of people. So maybe people who are carers for other people who are unwell or need looking after, for parents, for people with disabilities, for people with mental health problems, I think I think there will be a whole range of people who will feel more comfortable and more confident.

Interestingly, looking at the research, I'm a Type One Diabetic. So I've been diabetic since I was a child. And I noticed actually I'm included in that group who would be considered to have a disability because it can have an impact on my work. And I looked and actually, you know, sometimes when things are personal, they really hit you strongly. And I was looking at some statistics around, you know, if your disability is "this", how much does that affect your likelihood that you'll be unemployed, and diabetes was listed, which I wouldn't have expected.

But actually, I've been working at home since the end of March 2019. And whilst most days my condition doesn't affect me, if I've had some sort of turn in the night time, which for me is the pattern, previously, I would probably have taken that as a day off because I didn't feel I was up to the commute. I wasn't up to facing people and having to jump in the shower at 6am because I had a slower start. Since I've been working from home where that's happened, I've actually felt I can just have a slightly slower start to the day.

But you know what? I can still put in that core eight hours of that day, but I'm much more comfortable doing that in a home environment. So, you know, my sense is from a personal perspective, that will be the same for people with all types of disabilities.

Ahmed

And if people can't understand from your perspective about Type 1 Diabetes, I can feel it first-hand because my wife is also Type 1.

Jodie

Oh, okay!

Ahmed

And I can see it first-hand in terms of "yes, if you have some kind of issues overnight and then that will affect your job if you wake up that day in general". But working at home had allowed us to adapt to the situation and she performed as well as you can be. But when you have to commute and you have to deal with the day-to-day things on top of what you had to deal with overnight, which people don't see, and just like any other disability people don't see it, then you don't realise how much of a mental cognitive energy is required to really work the best that you can.

But if the workplace can just make small adjustments, then I feel like everyone can win.

Jodie

I agree. I, I think in the recruitment industry, you know, the people who work in my team, one of the big activities for them is going out and meeting clients and candidates. And again, if people have particular mobility or travel issues, that used to be a problem. But actually, now that we're conducting most of our interviews, you know, via technology.

Actually, that's been eradicated because actually we're not expecting anybody to travel for those interviews. And I think that even when we are back in the office, we'll be much more comfortable for somebody to say, "actually, do you know what?"...You know..."this is my limitation. Would you or this is my situation, would you be happy for me to conduct this from my own home? Absolutely".

Before we would have thought that was a bit strange because it wasn't the normal, whereas I think now both for us and for the clients where we're trying to get people jobs, people are really comfortable with that.

Ahmed

That makes a lot of sense. And I'd be curious to see how the recruitment industry will change when they communicate with clients about, "you know what? If we can work together and make these adjustments, you will get the better quality of talent pool available and that will help you in the long run.

So do you think then, in terms of the recruitment industry, what can they do better on the whole to make sure that these talent pools are tapped into and there is a level playing field for disabled employees. What can the industry do to make things better?

Jodie

I think the industry as a whole needs to firstly make sure both in the office and outside, they are equipped to carry out interviews with anybody who has the right skill set, who is looking for a job. What I mean by that is we didn't have not all of our interview rooms like a hearing loop (technology). So, if somebody came in and you're interviewing them face-to-face, we could make that a lot easier.

Things like I think the static pages on websites should be available. So you've got something if people need to use sign language so that that is a feature. I know it's very difficult to do with things that change all the time, but it's pretty simple to do for your basic "this is what we recruit for. If you're "this" sort of person"...you know..."please apply" and make that process as easy as possible. I think the most important thing we can do is share learning and knowledge with our clients. So providing them with a really diverse talent pool when we're looking at CVs for them.

Some companies are, I've seen it happen very...perhaps driven by things like the Black Lives Matter situation that's happened, obviously, since it was very much to the forefront, since we've been in lockdown. I think in all terms, whether it's some sort of social inequality, I think it's our job to really push people on their diversity agendas, offer them support, make sure they know about the government grants that are available to them so that they're really not at a disadvantage, and just highlighting that at the moment they are limiting their talent pools. And if they widen them, they will get that extra talent that perhaps their competitors aren't seeing.

But, you know, it's working in conjunction with them to say, if you're really serious about changing this, you know, what changes are you happy to make? And also, will you commit to interviewing candidates from a different background if we can provide that talent for you? Will you commit to doing that?

Because I do feel when people are in a mindset, you sometimes have to push a little harder to start with, to get people to (do it). Then you get a few success stories and people see about the benefit that the diversity and the wider talent pool bring them. And once people have started to see that, it's very easy to get other people to understand what they're missing out on.

Ahmed

A little nudge can make a difference. Just like "FYI, you know, if you could make the kind of tweak, you will benefit a lot in the long term". I know I keep saying that. And I like how you said that, you as the industry, can take responsibility for your own actions and also share your own experience and knowledge to your client to say, "well, we can help you with this. But not only that, if you can add *this* on top of it, then you can also make things a lot better for you in the long run as well".

So I love how you said, "yes, the recruitment industry, we should take responsibility and help make a difference, help make an impact to people's lives", really, I mean. You are affecting people's lives and making the situation better for them individually, which I really like on top of. that as well, as from a personal perspective.

But then again, it's up to your client, the employer themselves, to also accept that. What do you think they need to do better? The employers, the clients...If they want to ensure more equal opportunity, better working environment for disabled employees. What do you think they need to do to make it better for them?

So I think I think they need to accept help. We offer our clients access to some of the awareness workshops that I've done internally at my company with Enhance the UK. We offer unconscious bias training. But actually the real game changer for us internally was some of the stuff we did with Enhance the UK where it's around breaking down those barriers, those fears, those...the uncomfortable moments

that people have when dealing with somebody who has a disability. You know, I think people were uncomfortable before to talk about how they might be able to make those adjustments.

But in fact, we've had great training sessions. We've have really broken that down in a really fun way. We involve some of our clients in that. And I think that is what...so we can push two things. One is to build awareness of the people who work in your company. So you embrace on having a diverse workforce and culture, but equally so that those people are more welcoming to that talent pool. So I think that's one thing.

And I think the other thing is drawing attention to how that environment feels for people. So as I said before, there's lots of adjustments you can make that are not expensive, that are not big, that just makes somebody who maybe is a wheelchair user feel more...immediately more comfortable when they come into an environment, you know, you'd like to think those things already happened.

But it isn't just about happening. It's about people being comfortable with how to, as I say, use that hearing loop and make sure it's working, make sure it's switched on for the right people, asking the questions up front so that you've created that environment when somebody first interacts with you.

But, you know, I do think it is about also initially perhaps...we work with a company who is part of our group called Stafford Loans, who run events for specific, diverse groups of potential talent and invite our clients to come along and engage with those people just so that you (have) a feel when you've got an imbalance. As I said before, you give a bit of a push, you wish it could just happen organically, but give a bit of a push, give people the opportunity to overcome any barriers, then meet with those diverse talent pools.

And then we know when those people are hired, they'll do a good job. They'll make very loyal employees. They'll be very tied in because those companies bothered to do the things to make their working environment as comfortable and productive as possible. And as you mentioned, they'll be highly productive. And then actually it's sharing those success stories.

Ahmed

It's one thing that you mentioned that I've definitely picked up is about, for example, making *this* situation comfortable in the environment for wheelchair users or anybody who you can visibly see has a disability, is there a different attitude in terms you can see someone is disabled, for example, a wheelchair user, but those who have "invisible disabilities" and you don't see it. And you might want to put yourself in that category if we're going to follow the government guidelines. But even myself as a deaf person, I put myself in that category unless I wear my hearing aids.

Is there a difference in attitude between the two categories as such for employers and the recruitment industry?

Jodie

Yeah, I think...one of them, you know, if people don't have a visible disability, I think it's probably partly about making that part of your interview process when you're going to work with somebody. So actually asking that question to everybody. We, in fact, did an audit internally in our own company and the number...and it was worded in a really positive way. And I think, you know, the percentage of our employees who came out of that survey saying, "yes, they identified themselves as having a disability" compared to what maybe HR had on file before, grew massively because I think people felt perhaps before if they mentioned it, would it when they were first applying for a job, would it have acted against them?

But you need to...because I think that disclosure piece is important. But, yes, that's to do with the individual. But it is also to do with that individual having the opportunity to talk about that at the beginning of a process. So I think that that's a really important part.

I think when people have a disability, so as you say, a wheelchair user is something that is apparent as soon as you meet them, that that's where maybe the training we did with Enhance the UK was wonderful because it's about, you know, that's something you've seen.

So like anything else in the process, you know, talk about it. You need to know how that is going to affect somebody's ability to travel to interview. I just feel that the world we're going into, the "new normal", as people like to say, we have the opportunity to look at so many different ways of being inclusive in our interviews, ways of communication, ways of introducing people to clients. But most of it is about that confidence on both sides to talk about things in the first place.

Ahmed

I agree. And it covers a lot of topics. You mentioned Black Lives Matter or anything about disability, talking about it would help to make things easier to talk about obviously, it makes it more comfortable and it allows a person like myself, for example, to open up about certain things that why "I need help on this. Could you provide it for me? And then obviously I'll do my work".

And you're right, I do wish that I was able to be more open in the past because I have kept things quiet. I have been deliberately holding back information because I felt that it will affect my success rate in the job application that I was applying for.

And we shouldn't feel like that, nobody should feel like that at all. So I think if we do have that conversation going on, you have things more comfortable in the environment, in the workplace, the culture, then everyone will benefit in the long run.

So I guess you're right; it's the employers' responsibility, the recruitment agencies' responsibility. But then, I just want to round up this podcast, I want to then ask you about the employees themselves, the disabled employees.

What should they do to make sure that they will have the best possibility in terms of, not just apply in the interview stage, but even when they get that job? What advice do you have for them to make sure that it's a smooth process and it is possible for disabled employees?

So I think be upfront, this is really important. So I think when you're sending out your CV, yes the focus is on your skills, your experience, what you've been doing. But I think in that first conversation, whether it's somebody from a recruitment consultancy or whether it's somebody who works directly for the client that you want to work for, it's addressing that upfront. So, they're going to want to meet you in some way.

That's the time to say, look, "you know, I'm a wheelchair user"... "I'm a Type 1 Diabetic"... "I'm deaf"... Whatever it is, it's about saying this is where we're at. So how can we make sure that the first meeting is as productive as possible.

So just being upfront about the technology that might be involved or the fact that, you know, you would if you were going to travel for that interview, you might need to know which entrance is suitable for wheelchairs. And just having that upfront conversation so that then the person who is meeting you, some of the times they feel strongly if they haven't sorted out what they needed to for you, they feel bad, right?

And then you just don't have such a good, effective interview. So, I think being upfront about it. I think once you've secured a position, many of our clients at the moment are really keen that employees who come from any group embrace that. So many of the clients, particularly financial services, they'll run focus groups for things, you know, women in technology, because that's unusual. People who are wheelchair users, because that's unusual.

Maybe the LGBTQ community getting together to talk about their experiences, because actually, if you can get that group together and then go back to senior leadership and go, "right, you know, this is a problem for us. Let's address it", bring that up to board level and also create a community for ourselves. But you can just share there will be different experiences. But as long as you're creating a forum to share those, then that can only be a positive thing, in my opinion.

Ahmed

It's human nature. Obviously, there are differences in different people, like how can you not even acknowledge that there are differences in every single human being on the planet? So it makes sense to be upfront about it and talk about it and get involved with the community and all these things, because everyone will win. And it makes a lot of sense. And I appreciate you sharing that because I think people need that affirmation. People need to be aware of that because I've made that mistake in the past and I wish I hadn't.

But it's also good to hear from your perspective about "right, we need to talk about it from the beginning, from the get-go". Because if you leave it too late, you'll make yourself more difficult...make the situation more complicated for yourself and the employer and of course, the recruitment agency and stuff. So I appreciate you sharing that. It's been insightful. I've learned a few things myself, and I appreciate you sharing knowledge from different perspectives and it's been great.

So I just want to round it up by saying thank you for your time. I really appreciate it.

Jodie

Yeah. Thank you very much. And I think, you know, if anybody listening to this has had a nervousness about applying for jobs or, you know, has had a reticence or not wanting to be upfront, you know, just, now is the time. I think we're, as a big community, we're creating how it's going to be in the future. So, let's use this as an opportunity. There are so many things we could change that will benefit everybody in this process of job searching and employing people.

Ahmed

Now is the time folks. Let's do it. Let's just do it all together and I'm not going to say everything's going to be all milk and honey and roses, all that stuff. Step-by-step; If we all can do it all, do our bit step-by-step, then we are going in the right direction. I appreciate that Jodie, thank you very much for that.

Jodie

Thank you.

Ahmed

Thank you very much Jodie, for being in a podcast. Really appreciate it. Really insightful. And I hope you have also enjoyed the interview. And if you have, we'd really appreciate it if you can leave a review on whatever platform that you're using, and it really will mean a lot to us, to learn what did you like and what do you want to see more of.

In the meantime, though, we'll come back with another episode of Let's Discuss Disability with Enhance the UK. Take care.

Thank you for listening to Let's Discuss Disability. Don't forget to subscribe to the podcast on whatever platform that you are using.

Until next time, take care!