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TX: YOU AND YOURS - DISABILITY - 07.01.03

PRESENTER: Peter White

WHITE

On Call You and Yours at around 12.30 we pick up our theme this week of disabled people in work, or rather, more often than not, out of work. Even the most optimistic estimates suggest that only about 40 per cent of disabled people who want to work have jobs - so why? Joining me for your calls is Tania Burchardt who's a research fellow at the Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion based at the LSE, Tania's also written a study of disabled people in the workplace.

Tania Burchardt, there's no shortage of initiatives on this subject - New Deal, job centre plus, tax credit - so why do they seem, all of them really, to have so little impact?

BURCHARDT

Well I think that's a very interesting point that you make. I think one of the problems is that most of the initiatives we've seen to date have focused on the disabled person themselves - encouraging them to try harder, look for more jobs and generally be more active in the labour market.

WHITE

So it's sort of blaming disabled people for being out of work in a way?

BURCHARDT

And not focusing enough, I think, on the structural problems and problems in the workplace themselves and the labour market more generally.

WHITE

Does that mean, in that case, I mean we had an awful lot yesterday about kind of old fashioned, outdated, and sort of downright sort of ill-informed attitudes of employers - is that the problem?

BURCHARDT

Well certainly there's far too much of that around but I think it's unfair also to simply blame employers, after all most employers are operating in a very competitive market economy, so they don't necessarily have the scope to do anything than choose the employee who they think is going to give them that competitive edge. Where I think there is a big gap is in terms of retention, job retention...

WHITE

Keeping people in jobs that they were already doing?

BURCHARDT

Exactly - when they become disabled and that is an area, I think, that could do with considerably more attention.

WHITE

Is this, in the end, down to legislation, are we actually waiting for 2004, when there are going to be a lot of changes, to kick in, is that the only thing that will really make a difference?

BURCHARDT

No I think there's plenty of scope for change before that legislation comes in, I think it would be a great mistake to leave things until that time. Apart from anything else there's all the people in the meantime - between now and 2004 - who need the help to get back into work.

WHITE

Okay, well stay with us Tania Burchardt as we go to Call You and Yours and take people's calls. I'll also be joined by Stephen Alambritis of the Federation of Small Businesses. Call with your own experiences - positive or negative - of the job market, we'd very much like to hear from employers too - are you being unfairly made the scapegoat for problems which perhaps have deeper roots? Do call, the number is 08700 100 444.

WHITE

It's Call You and Yours, the subject this week: Is there some iron law of nature which says the majority of disabled people are destined to be jobless? Despite anti-discrimination laws, awareness campaigns, New Deals, tax credits, only 40 per cent of disabled people available and willing to work have a job. So why should this be? It was suggested on yesterday's You and Yours that many employers had ill-informed and outdated attitudes about disabled people's capabilities but is this the whole picture? We're constantly being told we're dealing with all kinds of skills shortages - teachers, nurses, plumbers - do disabled people have the skills and training needed to fill these jobs or is an opportunity being missed? Does the government give enough help to employers or is it more concerned with getting people off benefit into any job, rather than matching applicant to job? Do call on 08700 100 444 and we want to hear both from disabled people and employers about their direct experiences of this issue.

We've already heard from Tania Burchardt of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion, she's still with us. Also with me is Stephen Alambritis of the Federation of Small Businesses. But let's go to the callers first.

Ann Eastwood is calling from Barnsley. Ann good afternoon.

EASTWOOD

Good afternoon to you.

WHITE

What's your experience been?

EASTWOOD

Well I was desperate to get back to work. I've been a professional nurse for 30 years and I phoned round a lot of nursing agencies to see if they had anything that I could do on the office sort of side - part-time, I can't work full-time. And one company actually made a job for me, which was perfect, that I could do from home. But then, because they changed the New Deal for disabled people, whereas therapeutic work you could work forever and day, for 16 hours a week, now they've changed it you can only work for six months and then you have to stop that job unless it becomes part of a disability programme. So I had to stop that job. Then you had to reapply again for therapeutic work. You've got to get the job before you can apply, I applied in September and I've still not heard, I rang before Christmas and they still hadn't opened the envelope.

WHITE

So their attitude, as far as you understand it, is that they only want to make New Deal jobs if they lead directly to full-time jobs?

EASTWOOD

I assume that is so, yes, because you cannot stay on benefits and have a job for more than six months without stopping and starting again six months later.

WHITE

So there you are, you're sitting at home, you want to work and basically you're saying government rules won't allow you to do so?

EASTWOOD

Yes, yes.

WHITE

Thank you very much for your call. Susan Utley is calling from Bideford, Susan good afternoon.

UTLEY

Good afternoon.

WHITE

What about you - what's happened to you?

UTLEY

Well basically I am lucky enough to be in full-time employment but the only way I am in full-time employment now is the fact that I have been lucky enough to use the Access to Work. Now I only stumbled upon Access to Work by accident really.

WHITE

Shall we explain, straightaway, that this is a scheme which will help employers and help you directly with equipment or assistance that you need to do the job on equal terms.

UTLEY

That is correct. But no one seems to know anything about it. I only stumbled upon it by accident because a lady I work with her husband worked in the vicinity of the Access to Work, there's no advertisements about it, there's no press releases. I did hear it, perhaps, on your programme yesterday in connection with but I've been lucky to draw on that for the last six months at my place of work because I was - well I was working in the same job and then I became disabled - partially sighted.

WHITE

So why do you think they would have a scheme a not advertise it? I mean are you suspicious that maybe they don't want too ...

UTLEY

Well are they saying - basically the things that they said to me, when I stumbled upon it, well if you'd have been unemployed and looking for a job you would have had all these gates open for you but because I was not and never have been, thankfully enough, unemployed or unemployable I hadn't accessed these things. But on the other hand for the last kind of 8 or 10 years have, through my sight, found difficulty in lots of things, if I'd have known about that I could have had help much, much sooner.

WHITE

Susan thank you very much indeed. Tania Burchardt how typical is this - that there are actually schemes that would help people but they don't know and maybe, perhaps even more important, employers don't know?

BURCHARDT

Well unfortunately that is just far too common, partly because there are such a wide range of schemes available and the government does keep moving the goalposts in terms of both the names of the schemes and benefits available ...

WHITE

Yes, Access to Work's had about eight names hasn't it?

BURCHARDT

I think that's right. And in terms of what the rules are for claiming these things. A particular problem with Access to Work, your caller, Susan, is quite right to draw attention to that, it does seem that this is one of the government's more successful programmes, it's been evaluated very positively, both by people who receive it and by employers who use it, although there are some problems with delays in getting the benefit through, but nevertheless a very positive evaluation on the whole but just not enough people know about it, either from the point of view of employers or from the point of view of the disabled person who might benefit.

WHITE

Can I ask Stephen - do you think that that's the case, that a lot of your employers don't know in your federation, for example, that they wouldn't be footing a lot of the bill for a disabled person coming and working for them?

ALAMBRITIS

That would have been the case about two months ago but two months ago we featured the Access to Work in our magazine to all our 175,000 members but up till then, yes you're quite right, there is a plethora of schemes of help for small businesses but also these small business organisations that the government supports - like the small business service, which used to be the small firms division, then the enterprise unit - so there has been a lot of concerns. The scheme is good, the scheme is welcomed by employers. What I would urge government to do is to publicise these schemes through the accountancy profession because the accountants have a close relationship with their clients ...

WHITE

You mean when the clients go to save money they'll be listening?

ALAMBRITIS

Yes that's right. The duty of an accountant is to save money for an employer and they might be able to say to the employer - look Access to Work we'll claim you some of the money back for aid and adaptations and transport in employing disabled people.

WHITE

I do want to return Ann Eastwood's point and not lose it but Pamela Blumfield is calling, she is an employer, Pamela good afternoon.

BLUMFIELD

Good afternoon.

WHITE

What's your view about this?

BLUMFIELD

Well from an employers' point of view I tried to employ a telephonist, now this is probably four or five years ago, and I wasn't successful. I tried various agencies, departments, social services and I found that either people weren't available, I left messages they didn't respond, when I did get through I felt we were viewed with suspicion.

WHITE

What you mean why are you asking to employ a disabled person?

BLUMFIELD

Yes, yes and it didn't work, we never did, we wanted a telephonist and we never did get our telephonist. But we did try very, very hard.

WHITE

So I mean are you therefore questioning these figures which suggest that there are a lot of people out there who want to work but can't because it would seem ...?

BLUMFIELD

I'm sure there are lot of people who want to work and can't. What I would question is the people who actually bring the two ends together don't seem to be very effective.

WHITE

Okay, thank you very much indeed. Ian Yates, calling from Cirencester, also an employer I think - Ian what's your point?

YATES

I think there's two points. One is actually trying to employ disabled people and two are the regulations once you have. Just before Christmas and also earlier in the year we actually offered jobs for two people - two disabled people - both of them were turned down, both of them were quite honest with us that they had, what they thought, were quite high benefits and they weren't going to lose them. They both had the skills, office skills, that we required but they were both through the Job Centre and what really annoyed us, because we spent ages interviewing people, was that when we rang the Job Centre and said look what's going on that nobody follows this up - why isn't there a follow up? This will never work, this scheme, which is the New Deal and whatnot, unless people follow up why people aren't accepting the job.

WHITE

So you believe that some people are actually coming for interview who don't actually want to work?

YATES

Yes, I think most of them - they seem quite decent people, the two people we interviewed were quite pleasant.

WHITE

Is it that you weren't paying enough ...

YATES

No.

WHITE

.. I mean if you're better off on benefits it sounds as if your wages are low?

YATES

No the benefits are too high. We're now in a silly position where I'm afraid it's right across the board benefits are so high and also so complicated that people are scared to come off them and they'll be quite honest with you - you've got to live in a real world I think, I think one of the problems is that employers actually are dealing with the problems all the time and they're there at the sharp end. Sadly the government and people who do these various plans aren't there and they don't understand that people will play the game and they will use these benefits to suit themselves.

WHITE

Okay. Before ...

YATES

The other side of it, of course, is regulation.

WHITE

What sort of regulation?

YATES

Well more regulations sadly means less jobs and I think all employers will say that, especially smaller ones, and if you really want to increase jobs for disabled people then you should stop regulation for any employers under 50 numbers.

WHITE

Right before we move on Tania Burchardt let me just get your view on this. Ian's picture of the world is that benefits are so good that disabled people - it's not worth their while to actually be working anyway and they therefore don't want to.

BURCHARDT

Well I think there are two points to make here. One is that for decently paying jobs that isn't the case - that someone will be better off out of work than in work - so there is a real problem about low wages. And many disabled people, of course, don't have the sort of educational qualifications or work related skills that enable them to get into the higher paying jobs. So it is a question of, very often, for someone coming off benefit of comparing their benefits to a low wage job. Now there has been increasing in work help through things like the disabled persons tax credit, which helps to boost disabled people's earnings in work, precisely to try and address this problem but by the government's own admission in their recent Green Paper there's still something like half of people who are currently on incapacity benefit who would not be significantly better off, even if they worked full-time at the national minimum wage.

WHITE

Isn't that also exactly the kind of thing that Ian is suggesting is a bit of a pain for employers - the tax credits, there's a lot of bureaucracy involved, more forms to be filled in?

BURCHARDT

It's clearly a ludicrous situation where claimants are being obliged through something like the New Deal for disabled people or other schemes to go for interviews for jobs that they know they can't afford to take because they simply don't pay enough to help them get by.

WHITE

Okay let me go to another caller before I bring Stephen back in. Phil Jenkins is calling from the Welsh Development Agency, Phil good afternoon.

JENKINS

Hi, how are you?

WHITE

Fine. You are ringing with a kind of solution really or an approach anyway?

JENKINS

Well it's an approach to helping small businesses develop a positive attitude towards employing disabled people yes.

WHITE

Okay, what do you do?

JENKINS

We work with small companies across Wales, developing examples of good practice where employing disabled people is concerned. And then use those examples to persuade other similar organisations of the benefits of employing people in this way.

WHITE

So what kind of benefits do you point to? I mean particularly against the - I mean you were probably listening when Ian was ringing, he's saying we get sent people who don't want to do the job, there's loads of bureaucracy and really it's not in my interest to have the hassle - that's really what he was saying?

JENKINS

Yeah, well I mean we focus very much on the best person for the job, so we work with organisations to help them, in a way, to challenge their own preconceived ideas about what it is that disabled people can and can't do in the workplace. So we help them to perceive the benefits of the best person for the job without having any sort of preconceived idea about what a disabled person can do and what a disabled person can't do.

WHITE

But how do you do that given that many people say well it kind of goes against my what I would regard as my common sense to think that a disabled person would do a job better than a non-disabled person?

JENKINS

Well again it's to do with sort of fixed preconceived ideas about what a disabled person is. And in fact we are able to use organisations who've employed people non traditionally and disabled people at all as examples of how you can actually gain benefit from employing disabled people.

WHITE

Phil thank you very much. I want to go to Robina Lloyd from a charity which deals with the issue of arthritis, Robina good afternoon.

LLOYD

Good afternoon.

WHITE

Yes, what's your view about this - I think you wanted to make a point about employers as well?

LLOYD

Absolutely. I've been fascinated listening to all the arguments of course and I think there's a lot of truth in a lot of things everybody has said but I have to say the vast majority of people that I speak for - friends with arthritis - do very much want to work, they really don't want to be on benefits, they do want to get out there and to get into the employment market, they really do.

WHITE

So what's stopping them?

LLOYD

Well I think one of the problems is that employers don't always understand the fluctuating nature of disease - I think this is a big problem. Not only people with arthritis but for people with a lot of chronic conditions it's the same thing. I think it's quite hard for them sometimes to understand that you may be relatively well one day and walking around bright eyed and bushy tailed and full of the joys of spring and 48 hours later the fluctuating nature of arthritis means you're in a lot of pain, you're struggling physically and perhaps mentally too because if you're in a lot of pain you obviously do struggle mentally. And most people with arthritis are pretty stoical - they will do their best - but I think that fluctuating nature of the disease is really quite hard for people who've not actually had it or had experience of it to understand and I think we need to get that over first and foremost. And I think the second thing is employers quite often have to think they have to get very expensive equipment for people with disabilities, it isn't - a lot of the aids and adaptations are very cheap and there is government help today with them.

WHITE

We've talked about the Access to Work scheme already.

LLOYD

And Access to Work yes, for example, I have a little ball mouse thing which I use, as opposed to using a proper mouse, for the computer - it costs very little. Because I have arthritis in my hands it makes all the difference. So those sort of things. But I think trying to understand the fluctuating nature I think is a point I would like to make and employers please listen to that.

WHITE

Robina thank you very much indeed. Before I bring Stephen back in I'd just like to take a call from Dean in Hampshire because I think it's related. Dean good afternoon.

DEAN

Hi, what I want to say is the biggest problem with the mentally disabled getting back to work is basically the benefits and the fact that they're not really given a lot of benefit. I think one of the people there said they were given quite a lot of benefit and the problem was that they couldn't get back to work because they were scared of losing it but it's more of a sort of survival benefit really.

WHITE

Is this your own situation?

DEAN

Yeah and of many of my friends etc. Unless you're on DLA or something you're only given like £70 a week plus a bit of money for electric and stuff and ...

WHITE

So when you hear people say people aren't going back into work because they are earning - they're getting enough on benefit for it not to be in their interest what's your reaction to that?

DEAN

Well they're only doing that when they've got sort of a long-term problem, it's just sort of a mixed thing really. Certain - if they've got support workers who know how to operate the system then they can probably get a lot of money and they just give up the system because it's just flat all round really because if you've got social services who don't actually bother offering a lot of sort of like supported work schemes then you're not going to get back to work and if you've got benefits which you can't actually earn money on to get back to work there's no stepping stones so you just basically - it's dead flat all round really.

WHITE

Dean thank you very much. Stephen Alambritis you've heard a lot of these criticisms and indeed what was being said yesterday was - in the survey that Scope have done - that there is a lot of misunderstanding and that employers often don't a. understand what disabled people can do, b. they don't understand things like fluctuation in conditions - what do you feel about that, is that fair?

ALAMBRITIS

Those are fair points to make. Small employers want to have defined notions of what's happening in their workplace, they worry about open-ended situations, there is a lot of worry about disabled people and the kind of illnesses and absence that they may incur. But ...

WHITE

The facts show that disabled people don't take more time off?

ALAMBRITIS

Yes they do and that's what we're trying to get across to our members in particular - about the retention, about the good absence record that disabled people can bring to an employer. But what we've had today is two calls - one from Pamela, seeking a telephonist, one from Ian seeking two members of staff that they interviewed who were disabled and what's happened there is that the middle people - the Job Centre, the people they were dealing with - didn't go back, didn't phone back to say I'm sorry we haven't found you this person, or you had two interviews and it didn't quite work, what's happened there. So I think Job Centre Plus needs to be a bit more upmarket and a bit more professional in returning back to an employer that's actually interviewed disabled people to find out what went wrong and why it hasn't worked.

WHITE

Okay. Let me go to Judith Lythard in Derbyshire, Judith good afternoon.

LYTHARD

Oh good afternoon.

WHITE

You wanted to make a comment about New Deal I think?

LYTHARD

Yes I do really. I have the same sort of problem with the fluctuation really - I've had chronic fatigue syndrome for three years, I was a manager before that and I really - I've been trying to get back out to work a lot on my own, doing it myself. I have found a company that's been very helpful but I had

flu again. And then I've been on the New Deal and I've just found that it's not really helpful because of this six months limit thing, that we actually have to work like two days for therapeutic hours or go full-time and I'm finding, for my condition, as I'm improving I need a sort of progressive programme.

WHITE

Right, let me - let me go - stay with us for a minute - because I want to go back to Tania Burchardt because this is exactly the point Ann made right at the beginning. This seems to be a perennial problem for quite a lot of people, is this just misconceived do you think by the government?

BURCHARDT

Well I think what the six month limit was trying to address, although perhaps a bit hamfistedly, was the problem of people who were continuing to claim benefit and work part-time pretty much indefinitely and these were often on schemes that were supposed to be moving people on and helping them progress into full-time work or a more permanent kind of employment in the mainstream.

WHITE

Is this what we used to call therapeutic earning?

BURCHARDT

That's right, yes, and it seemed to be acting as a bit of a trap in fact and people on therapeutic earnings for very long periods of time are not actually moving through on to full-time employment, perhaps despite their best intentions. So I think the idea of - behind the six month limit was to try to ensure that there was progressive on from that first sort of toe in the water ...

WHITE

Six month's not long is it?

BURCHARDT

It isn't very long and I think there is certainly a case for evaluating how that's going, listening to people like Judith and Ann and their experiences of it and seeing whether a more nuance, a more subtle approach to the types of time limits on this sort of benefit can be reached.

WHITE

Maybe that's the kind of thing we can discuss with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, he's going to be part of our discussion on Friday when we raise a lot of these issues. Let me go to Janet Boreman, calling from Burton-on-Trent, Janet good afternoon.

BOREMAN

Good afternoon.

WHITE

What's your point?

BOREMAN

Well my point is employers could be a little more flexible. I was recruited by a company and wasn't allowed to use the car park because it was an executive perk and had to walk from a public car park which was very difficult and had to give up.

WHITE

You have a mobility problem?

BOREMAN

Yes I have a mobility car in fact.

WHITE

Right.

BOREMAN

So my mobility is difficult.

WHITE

So do you think this is sort of typical - that they'll employ you knowing the difficulty you have and then not make the adaptation ..?

BOREMAN

Well I think they were just short-sighted really, yes. But now I'm reliant on incapacity benefit after working all my working life supporting myself which I feel rather cross about.

WHITE

Why, because you had to give up that job because ...?

BOREMAN

I had to give up the job yes, I had to resign yes.

WHITE

And so you're taking benefits and you'd much rather not be?

BOREMAN

And needn't have done had they been more flexible yes.

WHITE

Okay, thank you very much. Donald Lord is calling from Middlewick, Donald good afternoon.

LORD

Good afternoon. Mine's a simple point, I put my cards on the table - I've got blind friends, wheelchair friends and I've worked with disabled people but two things bothered me yesterday. One was the - we've got a deaf assistant in the shop, a customer shouted at her, she didn't hear it because she wasn't looking in that direction, an assistant went up to the customer, explained, and the customer went away angry. The other was when I was in a supermarket and a young man there filling shelves was ramming - and I mean ramming - wire baskets into elderly people, and you can break ankles that way easily. I asked the manager why and he said well he was disabled and I said well employ him on something else or persuade him to stop ramming, he wouldn't even say a word he'd just ram it in, he smiled, he was happy. And I think sometimes people who are looking after disabled people or working for them and I've worked with them, have tunnel vision. After all if you go in a shop you expect the assistant to be able to talk to you and if she can't and she can't hear what you've said I think that she shouldn't be in that job and she wants to be, according to the programme, a departmental manager. Now non-disabled people, such as myself, can't go for any job we want, there are limits.

WHITE

I should point out that there is a profoundly deaf man who's chair of the Audit Commission at the moment, which handles a £120 billion pounds of other people's money.

LORD

Oh yes I'm not bothered about that because he doesn't - what I'm talking about is somebody dealing with customers. If I owned a supermarket, which I don't obviously, I wouldn't be happy that the customers were going away angry. And I do feel that it would be useful to examine the relationship between the disablement and the job and if they can do it fair enough, I'm all for it.

WHITE

Okay, Stephen do you just want to comment on that - do you think that's a widespread view that people are being shoehorned into jobs for which they're not fitted?

ALAMBRITIS

No, no certainly not, if you ask one of the big supermarkets they would certainly be highly sensitive and want to use from a wider pool as possible in terms of the staff, that they want their staff to reflect their customer base, they're 8.6 million disabled people in the UK, they've got a purchasing power of 40 billion pounds so I don't think that's a widespread held view. The reputation of a business goes up when it employs from the widest possible pool. But certainly I sympathise with Janet who worked for a company that wasn't flexible enough to open up its car park space to her as well as to their executive staff and I think the company has probably lost out a very good member of staff there.

WHITE

Thank you. Let's go to Sylvia Wibley. Sylvia good afternoon.

WILDY

Ah Wibley, try Wildy.

WHITE

Oh shall I?

WILDY

Yes please.

WHITE

Okay you can be Wildy just for two minutes, what's the last point you wanted to make Sylvia?

WILDY

The last point is that I think that, especially with my own employer, although they advertise a thing - equal opportunity employers - when it actually comes down to it they don't. They haven't got the proper - they haven't got the proper organisation in place to actually suit the employees. I mean I myself have had to wait and I've had accountants actually turn down my ergonomically designed furnishings around my wheelchair for me to actually work and that's been a long-term problem.

WHITE

But you are there by the sounds of it and you're hanging on.

WILDY

I most certainly do, I fight for every right that I can, I mean you do have to because the alternative is that you actually give up and stay at home - it's not an alternative, not for a life anyway.

WHITE

No, but are you saying that if you do keep pressing then you do actually get what you want?

WILDY

Oh you do, yes you do, you have to fight for it, you have to know your rights, you have to find out who you need to contact - Access to Work in actual fact have been extremely good to me. I find out an awful lot about what my rights are and once I tell my employer and I push and push and push I do eventually get what I need.

WHITE

Tania Burchardt just before we have to end, what - having listened to these calls - what do you think are the key things that need to be done that aren't being done?

BURCHARDT

Well there's been such a range of issues that have been brought up in the discussion here and certainly one of the things that comes through to me is the crucial role that continuing support for people when they have got into a job, disabled people once they've got into a job, so that these kinds of problems, such as Janet experienced of the lack of flexibility, problems perhaps of people not actually getting the tax credits that they might be entitled to, to help the job actually pay for them, negotiations with employers about adaptations that need to be made and so on. So that kind of continuing support once someone has actually found a job is clearly missing.

WHITE

Can I get one very last - you'll have to be quick Geoffrey Thomas - 20 seconds - what's happened to you?

THOMAS

Hello Peter, yes I've had incredible service from the Access to Work team here in Cardiff. I'm actually the national spokesperson for Dr Hadwen Trust for humane research. I'm blind and my wife is my driver and secretary. Without the really flexible support I simply wouldn't be able to fulfil this job at all.

WHITE

Geoffrey, thank you, it's good to end on a positive note.