

THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

TX: YOU AND YOURS - DISABILITY - 08.01.03

PRESENTER: Peter White

WHITE

So far in this week's series about employment and disability we've concentrated on the opportunities and often the lack of them for people working in open industry. But it's still true that for many people the reality of work is what used to be known as sheltered employment - supported work is now the preferred term. We're talking about workshops or factories primarily set up, often many years ago, for people who had disabilities which it was thought would mean they'd stand little chance in the open labour market. The factories often required a heavy subsidy, which might come from a local authority, a voluntary organisation, central government or all three. But increasingly there's been pressure from successive governments for such factories to pay their way and tender for work competitively. But the dilemma is obvious, is it practical to achieve that and still find room for those with more profound or complex disabilities in the workplace? In a moment we'll be discussing these issues but first two very contrasting stories of supported employment today.

WRIGTH

The first area that we're walking into is the surface mount area, this is the deluxe of electronics if you like ...

WHITE

It's Martin Wright's first week as plant manager of Remploy's Medway factory in Rochester. He shows me round with obvious pride. They do electronic assembly work here, typical of the new look Remploy. The company has had a thorough shake-up in the past couple of years, back in early 2000 moral was low and the company was threatening large-scale redundancies, some people even thought its existence was in doubt. But under new management the ethos now seems to be to combine a secure environment for vulnerable workers and the opportunity for those who want to, to move on and to move out. More of Remploy's 12,000 workers now work supported in open industry than in the factories themselves. And in those factories there are now far more opportunities for workers to develop their skills and have far more say in how jobs are organised.

WRIGTH

We slowly moved recently into designated areas for our customers. If a customer comes in with a big order what we'd actually do is we'd put together a cell and dedicate the floor space and the people to that customer - so they're getting continuity and quality product all the time. It gives the employees ownership of a job and an area and it also gives the customer the warm feeling that they're getting a service that's tailored to their needs.

WHITE

In the past almost all management jobs in Remploy went to non-disabled people, now the policy is to offer promotion from the shop floor. But not everyone wants promotion or to leave the security of a factory they've worked in for some time.

WORKER

I've been here 11 years and I like it here now and I probably wouldn't want to step out. If I went to somewhere like GEC across the road you get sort of more pressure on you.

WHITE

Regional manager, Roy Easthope, is at pains to point out that we haven't just been brought to a show factory. He says diversification of production is happening throughout the Remploy network.

EASTHOPE

We have changed the trades for many of our units - in Barking, for example, in Essex we used to be a carton and box manufacturer and a book binding centre, that now does recycling of computers and white goods and produces electronics as well. Those provide us with real challenges but I think it demonstrates that the company is moving and reflecting the needs of the industrial environment that we work in. They're certainly not sheltered workshops, we are operating commercial manufacturing concerns with true commercial and economic constraints.

WHITE

Typical of the new spirit abroad is the Kits Green Factory in Birmingham, which recently won the order to make components for the latest James Bond super car for Aston Martin. Yet just a few miles up the road in Wolverhampton things could hardly be more different. Here Beacon Industries is about to fall silent for the last time, its workers received redundancy notices just before Christmas and despite frantic attempts since to save the factory it's due to close on Friday, apparently the victim of past bad management and the withdrawal of funding by the voluntary organisation which has housed and partly subsidised it up until now. Until a few weeks ago the plant was managed by Pat McLary, whose plan to revive the workshops and then a subsequent buy-out plan now seem to have been completely rejected. He's fearful of the future of the employees.

MCLARY

We have 50 disabled, including blind people, onboard here at the moment. I think with the best will in the world of those 50 disabled people in all probability 45 will never work again.

WHITE

And the workers themselves, bitter but resigned about the way they feel they've been treated by the Beacon Centre, see things in much the same way.

WORKER

Well I think it's a disgrace because not a month ago he stood here telling everybody we'd got a year to try and sort it out then four weeks later they went back on everything they'd told us.

WHITE

If this place did close what would happen to you?

WORKER

I'll probably spend the rest of my life on benefits I should imagine, you know there's just nothing around at all.

2ND WORKER

I've been here 20 years and the way the blind people have been treated here over the years through bad management and people looking after themselves is disgraceful, absolutely disgraceful.

WHITE

The target of much of this anger is Arthur Sidley, the centre's chief executive. He argues though that talk of a rescue plan came far too late and that his organisation, with many other obligations to look

after non-working blind people just couldn't go on footing its share of the subsidy bill - £800,000 over the past two and a half years.

SIDLEY

We have contact with towards a thousand visually impaired blind people each and every week here. We have a day centre that takes 350 people, we have 30 people that live in our sheltered bungalows on the site and we have a 50 bedded residential home. There are 13 visually impaired people that work in the workshops and another 20 plus disabled people. I think this is not a decision that anybody's taken lightly, I think it's a difficult decision but it's based on the current economic problems that industry are facing everywhere.

WHITE

Arthur Sidley. Well joining me to discuss some of the issues that raises is Phil Davies of the GMB trade union, which represents workers at Remploy and Roger Paffard joins us from Coventry, he is Remploy's chief executive. Roger if I can come to you first. There is a dilemma here isn't there, you have a good story to tell, which I'm sure you want to tell, but is that being achieved by having a more physically able workforce which squeezes out more severely disabled people?

PAFFARD

Hello Peter. No I don't think that's fair really. The people that we have predominantly in our businesses are referred to us under the Workstep programme, so they qualify for supported employment because they're severely disabled, so they either have multiple disabilities or severe disabilities which will prevent them finding work under their own steam within sort of six months to two year horizons.

WHITE

But of course people vary in their ability to do the kind of production that we heard about in that report and what's often suggested - and we heard it indeed on Monday's programme, didn't we, we heard Alan Franklin saying he was finding it difficult to be accepted by Remploy, which suggests that perhaps the policy of, as it were, moving people up and out isn't working quickly enough.

PAFFARD

Yes I was pretty horrified to hear what Alan had to say and I would like to apologise to him because the advice he got was bad. Ironically Alan actually had interview with our interwork people the day of your interview, which has now been postponed to next week, but I'm sure we can help him.

WHITE

Let me go to Phil Davies, how concerned are you about this - the members you're representing perhaps who are, what you might call, at the higher end of physical disability can't get gaps in this sort of market?

DAVIES

Well we're quite concerned but first I'd just like to say that disabled people don't just want day centres to go to, they want decent jobs and decent work to go to. We've been concerned for quite a number of years, across the whole spectrum of supported employment, not just Remploy, that the most severely disabled people are not being given the chance to come into the factories. We, at the GMB, do not accept in factories the redundancies of disabled people. We've made some marvellous strides since the year 2000, over the last couple of years, in Remploy to secure better employment and better training but we do want to see more blind people, more people in wheelchairs coming into the organisation and to receive training.

WHITE

Can I just go to Roger on the point of the people moving into open industry - how much is this - I

talked to some people at Rochester who understandably were very happy where they were, it's a good working environment and there's a good atmosphere - doesn't that mean though that clearly you can't tell people that they've got to move on necessarily, so isn't there a tendency for the workforce to stay fairly stable?

PARFFARD

Well more than half of the people we support are actually in open employment with their host employers, so a choice is available - when somebody's referred to us we have a conversation, as we will do with Alan, about what their aspirations are and where they want to go, now if somebody wants to go into retail we don't run retail stores but we do have partnerships with all the major retailers and we can find the best way of getting ready and feeling comfortable about working in a retail store. Now if they want to work in manufacturing and we have a manufacturing facility nearby then obviously we can provide a different sort of opportunity for them.

WHITE

We have been looking at people who do go into open employment and who are supported, we've been spending the day with someone who's been introduced into a mainstream job with the added support of a mentor to assist him during the early stages of the job. And the environment that he's working in could hardly be more mainstream.

ALLPORT

My name's Wayne Allport, I work at Manchester airport, I'm an airport assistant and I'm on trolleys. What we do is we push the trolleys, keep them outside and we make sure the floor's totally clean and it's like if people have got any problems we help them get them where they're going. I was working with my dad putting the [indistinct words] but I just came out of that because I got enough of it. So that's why I went to Breakthrough, to help me to find a proper job to suit my special needs. I went from straight from Abraham Moss College and then I went to this Breakthrough UK, I was there for like two years and they found me the airport job. I was excited because it was my first job, without them I wouldn't be here today.

HAMBLETON

My name's Geoffrey Hambleton, I'm a team leader for Ringway Handling at Manchester airport. He's improved a hell of a lot, has Wayne. When he first started his mind used to wander and he'd have passengers coming up to him asking him where a certain terminal was, most people would say oh it's over that way but Wayne would take them to that terminal and go missing for an hour and then we'd have to go searching for him. But since he's been here he has improved a lot. Well there has been times, especially during the summer when it's very, very busy, even myself I forgot that Wayne was a special need and I must admit I did shout at him once or twice but realised later that it wasn't his fault, it was just the pressure of work. Now and then you'll get one or two will take the mickey out of him but he can take it now, as well as give it but lots of people now consider Wayne to be - as a team member. He's alright. Wayne's turned out a good one. We've got another lad now who we've got to keep a watch on him and try and help him but he's a bit difficult sometimes depending on what mood he's in. But we try to be helpful as much as possible and try and make them a part of the team.

ALLPORT

Yeah you go one way and they go the opposite way. It's like give a quick [indistinct words] ..

WHITE

Wayne Allport. My thanks to Roger Paffard and Phil Davies.