

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 - 09.01.03

PRESENTER: Peter White

WHITE

Now if you've been listening regularly this week you'll know we've heard a good deal about the frustrations of working for other people if you're disabled. The difficulty of getting a job in the first place, finding yourself up against misunderstanding, ignorance, prejudice. And then often discovering that if you do land a job you don't then receive the necessary support to do it to the best of your ability.

Well a surprisingly large number of disabled people solve this, or try to anyway, by working for themselves, arguing that if they want to be employed by someone who understands the flexibility a person with a disability needs, both in terms of hours and the accommodations that sometimes have to be made, who better than to do it yourself? After all you're probably not going to sack yourself. But how practical is this?

In a moment we'll be discussing some of the pros and cons and what assistance is out there to help you. First though, two tales of people who've gone it alone and made good.

ACTUALITY

Okay, I'm just going to measure the door width of the bathroom.

WHITE

Not the most obvious first act for the new hotel guest - measuring the bathroom doorway - but Leah Finch is no ordinary new arrival, she's checking out the Hilton Islington for its accessibility to disabled guests, she seems to be satisfied.

ACTUALITY

And it's 80 centimetres which is fine.

WHITE

This is a cardinal rule of ATL or Accessible Travel Ltd. The company is the brainchild of Richard Thompson and Paul Derbyshire, both themselves disabled. Any hotel or form of transport appearing on their website or in one of their access guides has to be thoroughly checked out by a bona fide disabled user.

THOMPSON

We learnt pretty early on that we don't believe a word anybody says to us about accessibility, so unless we've visited, verified and photographed a hotel, a villa, apartment we don't sell it, which is quite a nice little perk for the staff because it means that they actually get to travel abroad and to visit the hotels.

WHITE

Richard and Paul are the kind of Galton and Simpson of the holiday business, they met in a rehab

unit after both suffered spinal injuries in separate accidents, both had worked in tourism before their accidents. With plenty of time to brood and with a distaste for most of the suggestions for paid work they were being offered by disability employment advisors they came up with their own idea.

THOMPSON

I looked at what was happening in the travel industry and what was available for people with disabilities and what I found was actually there was very little and what did exist would not stand up against mainstream travel companies. I honestly believed that I had the ability and the skill to create a company which could actually do that, which would be a quality travel business. Having had the experience of the industry but also the experience now of the world of disability and that I could put the two things together and come up with something unique.

ACTUALITY

Good afternoon Accessible Travel how can I help you?

WHITE

The beauty of the scheme was that it served a triple purpose - it gave them a business, created work for other disabled people, either as direct members of the company or as agents, like Leah checking out sites for the accessibility guides and it provided reliable access information for disabled people who wanted a tailor-made holiday or access information about the city of their choice.

ACTUALITY

No problem at all - when you arrive at Gard du Nord in Paris you'll be met by one of our representatives who will take you to an accessible vehicle and will take you to the hotel of your choice. We've got two or three hotels varying from three, four or five star hotels where you can either have a bath option or a rolling shower option.

THOMPSON

I think I took the right path which is create my own employment. I was given no vision of anything anymore exciting than that, it was pretty much - Well you've broke your neck we don't know physically what the outcome's going to be but it ain't going to be too exciting for you, so the quicker you get used to sitting beside a PC because they can do wonders with PCs these days.

WHITE

And the right path is proving a lucrative one too.

THOMPSON

The turnover projections for next year are three, three and a half million pounds. It's a company which has got huge potential because there is such a huge need for us.

WHITE

Richard Thompson. And we'll have another story of self-employment for you in a moment. But first joining me from Rugby is Ann Boylan of Adept Community Development Agency that helps people to develop their skills and Ann also spent six months researching some of the barriers to self-employment for disabled people. First of all Ann how common is it for people to go this route of self-employment if they're disabled?

BOYLAN

Well there's some very interesting facts about this Peter. Of those people who are in paid work 18 per cent of disabled men are self-employed compared to 14 per cent of non-disabled men, 8 per cent of disabled women are self-employed compared with 6 per cent of non-disabled women. So obviously it's quite a high statistic and very, very interesting indeed.

WHITE

Now if you listened to that though - and Richard Thompson and Paul Derbyshire because they knew the business in a way they didn't have too many barriers to get in - but how difficult is it and what do you have to be wary about?

BOYLAN

Well first of all let me say that it's not easy to become self-employed, whether you're disabled or not disabled, it's a very difficult road to follow. But having said that disabled people do face more barriers than non-disabled people and that's about discrimination, it's about business advisors believing that you can actually do something. It is quite a problem.

WHITE

What you mean people go along perhaps and aren't taken seriously - is that what you mean?

BOYLAN

Absolutely. I've known of someone with both sight and hearing impairment who wanted to be a furniture maker and when he went along for some business advice - What you? You really think you could do that? - that sort of thing.

WHITE

And presumably where there is a question of money being advanced is that a problem as well with banks or various schemes that perhaps loan money for this kind of thing?

BOYLAN

Yes it's a big problem and there are various reasons for this. First of all, there's the disbelief that somebody might be able to do this or whatever their business is but there's also the issue that if they've been on benefits for a long time they haven't been able to save up any money to actually match any loans from banks and other financial institutions.

WHITE

Well we'll come back to that and also perhaps to some of the help that is out there. But first of all Mark Brown from Maidstone has also created an imaginative self-employment opportunity, indeed he sells exotic pets, which means he often receives some pretty eccentric inquiries.

ACTUALITY

My mate's just bought a spider but it won't do nothing and all it does is hide underneath a rock all the time. Is that normal?

Yeah.

It's normal.

WHITE

A distinct touch of the Monty Python's about this. But Mark proved equal to the challenge, it turned out the tank was too big.

ACTUALITY

Too big?

Yeah. Spiders are reclusive - they like to hide away - and if you give them a small area they'll be a lot happier than giving them a big area.

Oh lovely.

BROWN

I've the Exotic Pet Centre now for nearly three years, three years in April and every year we've been in profit, we've been doing very, very well. We're a reptile specialist - we sell snakes, lizards, spiders, scorpions, all kinds of things, insects, anything that's not fluffy basically we sell.

WHITE

In Mark's case the motivation to go it alone came from sheer frustration. In his late teens he developed epilepsy and from then on he found himself on an employment roller coaster which was much more down than up.

BROWN

In three years I actually went through 23 jobs. I'm a qualified graphic designer, that's what I wanted to leave school and do, I did a planner course in it, advanced planner course in it but finding a job in graphic design, especially with no driver's licence of being epileptic you've immediately got a brick wall in front of you. I was a carpenter, a labourer on a building site, soffit and fascia fitter, a window fitter, shed maker - basically you name it I done it. And right at the very end I actually became a graphic designer for three months. The reason why I was losing the jobs was because of my epilepsy. Now if I was telling the employer that I was epileptic they'd say yes that's not a problem, not a problem and then I have a seizure and then it's a problem. It frightens them or worries them and pretty much they'll find a reason to get rid of me because they're scared, because they're scared of me. Obviously due to my epilepsy I try to work twice as hard as everybody else did to keep my job.

So what I then done was I thought well if I don't tell them that I'm epileptic then maybe you know it'll be easier to get a job, so I used to lie - Got any illnesses? - No. Then I'd have a seizure and lose my job for lying. I got fed up with being sacked. So I thought if I employ myself I can't get sacked because I'm not going to sack myself. Anyway I had a pet snake and I looked into the feasibility of opening a shop that just specialised in reptiles because there isn't any around. I looked into it and with the help of my father-in-law and my mother we came up with a business plan and then we approached the Prince's Trust which was a long drawn out thing but eventually I got a grant for £3,000 or a loan of £3,000 to basically open the Exotic Pet Centre.

WHITE

And business success has had another effect on Mark - it's changed his attitude to his disability.

BROWN

I was denying the fact that I did have it to myself. I didn't want to know that I had it and refused to the point that I did. But now, instead of refusing it, I embrace it - it's got me where I am today, I wouldn't have my own business if it wasn't for my epilepsy. Use disadvantage to your advantage - that's what you've got to do.

WHITE

Mark Brown. Ann Boylan, if I can come back to you, first of all on a purely practical note. Mark mentioned the Prince's Trust there as a source of money - is that something that disabled people can make use of?

BOYLAN

Well yes but mostly it's young people under 31 years old that can access the Prince's Trust money. So there is a problem there. But there are other sources of support, for example, Access to Work

which is a government scheme which funds special equipment that suits an individual's needs or perhaps helps with travel expenses, can provide a support worker and so on.

WHITE

What about the mainstream kinds of help that are available, I mean things like Business Link and so forth, are they just as open to disabled people to make use of?

BOYLAN

Well yes but the issue of grants and loans varies according to where you live, which part of the country you live, so if anyone were really interested in becoming self-employed it would be sensible to actually go and talk to a Business Link advisor in your own area and see what's available. And some local authorities offer small grants and some charities as well - you really have to tout around if you like.

WHITE

And presumably you have to do all the other things that anyone else would do - you have to make sure that it's a good opportunity, that there is money to be made, you're in the right place - you have to do all those things as well.

BOYLAN

Yes, the most basic thing to remember is that you need to have a good business idea, that the market isn't already saturated and that you are going to be able to sell your service or your product. And so you need to write a business plan and if you've got a good business plan and you can always get help from Business Link with that or the Prince's Trust or other business advisors, then you can start applying for some grants.

WHITE

Just very briefly Ann, is there more that you think could be done, given that for people for whom this does work it seems to work extremely well?

BOYLAN

Yes, I think there's a lot more that could be done on the part of government, for example, I think there's a case for a halfway house, a supported self-employment scheme, where people can test trade, they can try their service or their product out and they are supported, very much in the way that the Prince's Trust offers support by an advisor for a couple of years so that when problems arise, if problems arise, then there's somebody there on hand to actually help them through it.

WHITE

Ann Boylan thank you very much indeed. I'm sure there are other things that could be done too and we will raise those and many other issues with, amongst others, Andrew Smith, the minister for disabled people at work and pensions, tomorrow when we pull many of the threads of this discussion together.