

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 - 10.01.03

PRESENTER: Peter White

WHITE

Now all this week we've been trying to solve the conundrum: why don't more disabled people have jobs? And why is the joblessness figure so far resisted all attempts to boost it? Things like anti-discrimination laws and New Deal - aimed specifically at getting long-term unemployed disabled people into full-time work. Disabled persons' tax credits, enhanced services at job centres - the list goes.

The Labour government said very early on in its administration it thought that there were a million disabled people who wanted to work and it's a figure which still gets trotted out from time to time. Numerous agencies, statutory and voluntary, say they're doing their best to place people and many of the disabled people who've contacted You and Yours - and there have been a lot of them since the series began on Monday - obviously want to work too. But many of them cite as reasons for not being able to do so, things like an inflexible benefit system, government programmes like the New Deal which are too restrictive and either employers who don't want them at all or who can't handle the adaptations that they're asked to make in their work methods to accommodate them.

Well today we'll be making an attempt to sort out what's wrong and what can be done to change it and it is very much solutions we're aiming for today. We'll be discussing that in a moment. We're also going to be hearing from some of the people the system seems to be letting down, starting with Chris Phillips. Now Chris is partially sighted, he got a good upper second from the London School of Economics last summer and he's desperate to start work and develop a career. But as you'll hear it's not happening for him.

PHILLIPS

Actually my first interview I had was with a company who hire English teachers to work abroad. The first couple of stages they were very enthusiastic about my application, so I've gone there on the day and the interview seems to be going very well. At one point I was asked to read a passage from a book, now I have a special set of reading glasses which I use for small print, so I just slipped these on and read the passage and immediately I kind of noticed the mood of the interview changed after I put my glasses on. Basically I didn't get the job and I was kind of off-put by the change in the interview tone.

WHITE

When you say it changed, what happened?

PHILLIPS

It was before - the guy who was interviewing me - he was very enthusiastic and we seemed to be having a good rapport but after I'd read the passage I got the impression that he was going through the motions rather than actually taking in what I was saying.

WHITE

What effect - what influence would this have had on your ability to do the job that you were applying for?

PHILLIPS

I don't think it would have had any effect at all.

WHITE

Now I think in another instance you actually got as far as doing the job, tell me about that.

PHILLIPS

I'm signed up with a lot of temp agencies just to hopefully get some money in to keep me going. And one time I was put into a mail room, I had been there no more than two hours and the initial position was supposed to be a for a week and a half when the supervisor basically told me that she didn't think I would be dextrous enough for the job. I wouldn't have minded this if by the end of the day I hadn't completed all the work that was asked of me and the mail - all of the mail got out, there wasn't any problems but of course she'd already made her decision and that was that.

WHITE

Have you had any work at all of any substance since you graduated?

PHILLIPS

No, I've had a few days temp work and that's really been it.

WHITE

What's your reaction to what's happened to you so far?

PHILLIPS

It's difficult, I don't want to - I don't want to say that I'm continually discriminated against, I don't feel that I really have been. There are those two instances which they do rile me, they make me annoyed but I'm at a state where I just accept these things and carry on. If I'm in this position in a few more months time I may start to wonder. It's quite depressing, it really is, it's demoralising.

WHITE

Chris Phillips. And more stories to come.

Let's get a comment from our guests about this case and its implications. First of all with us is the Secretary of State for work and pensions - Andrew Smith. Minister I don't doubt - nobody doubts the government does want to get disabled people into work, after all you've made it clear you want as many people off benefits and into work as possible but if we, you, can't get a willing graduate with a 2.1 from a good university into work something's radically wrong isn't it?

SMITH

Well Chris's experience there is very disturbing and of course he was saying he's weighing up how far he's been discriminated or he hasn't but where there is a case for discrimination of course people do have legal redress and they shouldn't be shy of contacting the Disability Rights Commission which this government set up to help them.

WHITE

But are there more direct ways that you can help him?

SMITH

More generally, of course, we are, as a government, dedicated to extending employment opportunities of disabled people and we've got a range of programmes, both the action we've taken to counter discrimination, setting up the Disability Rights Commission, the New Deal programmes, the introduction of disabled persons' tax credit and of course more generally running the economy in a way that generates more jobs. Job Centre plus as well.

WHITE

Can I ask you - sorry - can I ask you specifically about New Deal - we'll come back to many of these things as we go along - but surely the New Deal for disabled people has been much less successful than you hoped and indeed than some of the other new deals like those involving youth employment?

SMITH

We recognise that New Deal for disabled people which, let's acknowledge, has helped 8,000 people now into jobs ...

WHITE

Which compared to a million that you say are looking for ...

SMITH

And we're looking at how it can be streamlined and further improved so the benefits of those who are providing the help through New Deal for disabled people and ultimately of course disabled people themselves. But can I just make one very important general quick point on overall levels of employment of disabled people because whilst it's true the labour force survey shows something like a million disabled people not in work who would like to work and we want to help them and whilst progress is never fast enough in this area and I'd like it to be faster, it's not true to say that no progress is being made. Since 1998 the gap in the employment rate between non-disabled and disabled people has narrowed by some three per cent, it does represent some 200,000 more disabled people in jobs. So there's a lot further to go but we are making progress. I actually think ...

WHITE

Can I just ...

SMITH

..we're in the middle of a big cultural change ...

WHITE

Okay, well we'll talk ...

SMITH

... in this country's ...

WHITE

... about that.

SMITH

... and we need to carry that forward faster.

WHITE

We'll talk about that cultural change. Susan Anderson is director of human resources policy for the CBI. Susan, employers who lose interest at the sight of an enhanced pair of spectacles, that doesn't bode well for reasonable accommodation does it?

ANDERSON

I think - I have a lot of sympathy with the story that we've heard. I think we shouldn't get too disheartened by one or two bad experiences, certainly if the individual was to continue to effectively be discriminated against I think that would be very disheartening but I think we should bear in mind that there's an awful lot of very good employers out there who have very good policies. So I would encourage our young man to continue applying - there are good employers, I don't think the nature of his impairment, given his enthusiasm, given his good qualification, I feel confident that he will be able to find a suitable job. I think he's probably been applying things for which he's well over-qualified. But I wouldn't argue that discrimination doesn't exist but I think things are changing and I think there's enough good employers out there for this young man to find a job.

WHITE

Sue Maynard-Campbell has spent much of her time representing other disabled people in the workplace, first as chair of the Association of Disabled Professionals, now a managing director of a consultancy called Equal Ability. What do you think the main barriers are and how optimistic are you about the situation?

MAYNARD-CAMPBELL

I think that the employers' attitudes are really a significant issue. But Andrew Smith says that there is a lot going on and there is but it's a very confusing picture out there for disabled people getting support. There is support to get into employment but with all the various New Deal projects that are going on, you go to different places in different areas and for a disabled person, who's not necessarily keyed in to being a disabled person within a discriminating world, it can be very difficult.

WHITE

Can I put that back to Andrew Smith - is it - are there too many schemes really? This government loves schemes, isn't it just a question of giving people really good professional help to get them into work?

SMITH

I don't apologise for us having a variety of schemes and dedicated to different purposes and different needs. And I think it's very important that when we speak of disabled people of course we're not speaking about an undifferentiated mass - they're individuals, a range of disabilities, a range of abilities and aptitudes, a range of expectations and they face a range of barriers. But what we are trying to do through Job Centre plus is to provide a much more supportive advisory service to help disabled people ensure that they're able to draw on the help and advice, both about benefits and about work, which is best for them and those advisors can be accessed through the local job centres. And just to pick up a point from the previous discussion - there are many, attitudes are changing, practices are changing, there are a lot of good employers too and we work closely with an excellent organisation - the Employers Forum on Disability - which is doing first class work in spreading best practice to help employers do the right thing, which I think most of them actually want to do.

WHITE

We have one other guest, I'll bring her in in a moment but is there a flawed assumption in some of this that all disabled people want to work or at least feel able or want to work with the workplace as it currently is? Clare from the Northwest has both mobility and psychiatric problems and is now not sure as the system is constituted that paid work is necessarily the answer for her.

CLARE

For a long time I felt quite guilty on benefits and now I realise that I am working and other people have helped me to realise that, I actually do a tremendous amount of work, I do nearly all of it for

free. I'm involved in the disabled people's movement nationally and locally, I run a website, I co-moderate an e-mail group, I play music round the country.

WHITE

I suppose the government might say well clearly if you've got those kind of capabilities, whether you're disabled or not, that would mean you could work, you could make a contribution and pay your tax like everyone else.

CLARE

Well that would be great wouldn't it? So is the government going to offer me a job that I can do, any time of day or night at my own pace, not do for two weeks when I'm ill, I can do within school hours at my own speed? I mean most of the things that I do, I do when it suits me and when I can fit them around my health, around my child. I think it's very difficult, I am a skilled woman, a multi-skilled woman, I'm also educated, I've also got an employment background but I know if I was to try and get full-time work that it just wouldn't work out, not when I'm going to be constantly off sick and then in again and then off sick. Sometimes I'm capable of doing a hell of a lot and I can work really hard, I can work right through the night, other times I'm absolutely flat on my back and I can hardly do anything.

There a lot of disabled people who do want to work, I think the problem is, is that the way society's organised and the way work generally is organised is so rigid and it's been created and started and set in place without us in the first place, to try and put us back into it now is quite complex, without actually creating some kind of change in how employment works.

Here's an example, this is something that's happened to me recently. I was offered some work by an organisation that I volunteer for on a frequent basis, and have done for a very long time, I've worked for free for them doing things. There came a vacancy which would have been a fortnight once every three months, I would have got paid for it, I would have got paid quite well for both of those two weeks. I rung up the benefits and I said - Oh it's brilliant right, I've found this job, it's once every three months, it's only two weeks work but I'd really like to do it, I would learn new skills, it might mean that I could get future work, it might even give me the skills to go and work freelance - And they were like hum ha, you could do it but basically it's going to take you two months to reclaim your benefits. I go - What do you mean? - Oh well you'd have to sign off. - I have to sign off to do two weeks work? - Well is it going to be more than x hours a week? - Well yes. So basically they didn't tell me I couldn't do it but who is stupid enough to actually in a three month - you're talking about a three month space of time where I would have to sign off, work for two weeks then it would take two months to get back on benefits, I'd be on benefits for two weeks and I'd have to sign off again. It's ridiculous. Now maybe I'm a bit thick but it doesn't sound that complex to me, I think they make it complex and there's got to be a reason for that.

WHITE

Clare's story. Andrew, isn't it unduly complex and is the benefit system actually too inflexible here?

SMITH

Well within a benefit system you do of course need rules as to who is entitled and who isn't, else there'd be a lot of people working and claiming at the same time. We have been trying to make the rules more flexible, including guaranteeing if, for example, people come off incapacity benefit in order to do work that they can, within a 12 month period, they can go back on to their benefits with a minimum of fuss and difficulty. So we are trying to make it more flexible. And obviously it's difficult to comment on one individual's particular circumstances without knowing all the dimensions of it - we've clearly got a person of ability there and I'd hope that working with disability employment advisors that she would be able to find work that suits the varying nature of her

condition and circumstances, I very well understand that and we are trying all the time to make the system more flexible and responsive so it can help people like her. And of course many disabled people, I mean obviously we've got to make more flexible opportunities for employment and we do have a more flexible labour market in the UK than many other countries which does offer more flexible opportunities but also self-employment for many disabled people has been found to be a good way of tailoring their contribution to their abilities.

WHITE

Which we featured on this programme. I'd like to bring in Tania Burchardt who was here on our Call You and Yours spot on Tuesday, you, in your report on disabled people in employment, you featured on this whole issue of the difficulty of benefits. The government has made some changes, as Andrew Smith has said, have they gone far enough?

BURCHARDT

Well I think it's fair to say that progress has been made in this area, certainly in terms of the rules of the benefit system. There is - there are now more ways of combining benefits or tax credits and work and there is more support for people during periods in which they're moving between work and benefit. On the other hand there are still several areas of distinct problems. One is simply in the administration of these benefits - it takes far too long to process people's claims and as Clare was explaining that can mean that the whole thing falls apart if that work - if the job is only for a short period. There's a big problem around housing benefit for people who are renting their property and getting help with their housing costs - that's a complete minefield and means that many jobs that would otherwise pay quite well, relative to benefit levels, in fact end up not being worth the person's while at all. There's also a problem with part-time work, part-time work, for example, less than 16 hours a week doesn't - isn't subject to support from the in-work tax credits. And that's another area where people can find that it's just not worth their while to take the job.

WHITE

And doesn't this scare off employers as well, Susan Anderson - you know all this bureaucracy, all these things that they might get involved in?

ANDERSON

Yeah, I think it can but I think actually what we need is more awareness, particularly for smaller firms, and they're not aware sometimes of the help that is available for them. And because they're not aware they can feel a bit fearful about taking on a disabled person. I don't think it's so much the administration of the benefits that comes through the wage packet, it's more that they're really at a loss to know who's going to help them, who's going to hold their hand through the process, what support is available. So I think particularly for smaller firms I think there's a need for more guidance, it's not so much the red tape, although certainly the time it takes to get the support and all the support lined up, particularly if adjustments are required to premises or particular adjustments for machinery for example.

WHITE

Nick Walker is someone who picked up on this issue of employment, he'd been listening to the programme, he has multiple sclerosis, which of course is a progressive condition, although it can stabilise, a freelance journalist and broadcaster by profession, he was diagnosed with MS at the age of 24.

WALKER

In August 2000 I moved to a wheelchair accessible home in Central London. The move was accompanied by significant slip in my condition - I could no longer dress myself, I was doubly incontinent, tetraplegic and the strength in my right hand was ebbing. My disability had progressed

to a point where I could no longer support myself financially. In the same week I moved, turned 30 and, for want of a better word, retired. Retirement is the wrong word, not only because I don't claim any pension, I claim instead incapacity benefit, but more precisely it's the wrong word because I have a job. It takes me two hours, with the help of my carer, to get out of bed, breakfasted and dressed. I commit two hours a day to physiotherapy and exercise. At least one hour a day's consumed by the bureaucracy of disability. I spent this Tuesday afternoon in a surreal meeting with a social worker discussing how much extra I spend on washing powder to clean sheets soiled due to incontinence. The aim was to assess the additional costs of living with a disability, in order to calculate my contribution to the cost of my care. My carer suggested that the cost of Jaffa Cakes be considered as he would not broke a workplace absence of a ready supply. Five hours a day, seven days a week, no weekends, no holiday - 35 hours a week, a full working week in some of the more civilised countries in Europe. It is a difficult and demanding job and the pay is poor.

Still after months of adapting to the ever changing demands of this condition I've created a few spare hours a week, between 8 and 16 I would guess, and I try to write. And here's the rub. My talking to you now contravenes almost every rule. It's taken me most of the week to write this and I hope you find it informative because when my cheque arrives the path of least resistance will be to tear it up. This is hardly something of which the Inland Revenue would approve, after all some of it will belong to them. I'm not expecting a huge fee - nobody works in radio for the money - but if You and Yours pays me more than £70 it will be enough to jeopardise my income support and more seriously my housing benefit and council tax benefit.

The aim of the New Deal is to get those on long-term incapacity benefit back to full-time work. Personally I don't have the capacity, never mind the time. I've written these 500 words this week, I have physiotherapy to do, I have washing powder to weigh and Jaffa cakes to buy. There is only one question, as a journalist, I can ask - why do I have to break your rules, to break the law, just to ask this very question?

WHITE

Nick Walker with a wry look at some of the implications of disability. Sue - Sue Maynard-Campbell how much is bureaucracy at the root of some of these problems, not just benefits but some of the other things - Access to Work for example, a help which is acknowledged to be very useful but can cause all kinds of difficulties when you're trying to get it?

MAYNARD-CAMPBELL

I have to say that bureaucracy of disability rings so true. One can spend a full-time job, especially if you're having to have support for independent living, as well as support in work and may be transport to work and equipment - the whole bureaucracy is so time consuming and anything that can be done to simplify the way in which the support that we need to have every day functionality the better.

WHITE

Can I just say because we want to try and arrive at some solutions can I ask you all, starting with Sue Maynard-Campbell, if there's one thing you could do to make a difference - we've heard a lot of the things that are wrong this week - what would you want to change?

MAYNARD-CAMPBELL

What I would want to change would be the way in which Access to Work support can be - I would like it to be direct payments like you can get direct payments for independent living support so that you don't have to keep going back.

WHITE

So you're given the money and you pay it out to the people who you need equipment from or help?

MAYNARD-CAMPBELL

You have a budget ...

WHITE

You take control.

MAYNARD-CAMPBELL

... and you can use it, yeah.

WHITE

Tania Burchardt you've looked at this whole area for several years now - I don't want to make you sound too old - but I mean what do you think - what would you say to Andrew Smith what the government could do to make a real big difference?

BURCHARDT

Well I think there are three things very quickly. The first is that one of the lessons from the New Deal for disabled people pilots, which were undertaken during the first term of the Labour government, was that those schemes which had close links with employers and really concentrated their efforts on working with employers, informing them about the help that was available, overcoming ignorance and discrimination and indeed monitoring the progress of the employers at their success at taking on disabled workers - those were the most successful schemes. Not the schemes that concentrated on the job seeker. We heard from Chris, a job seeker who was doing all the right things in terms of looking for work, he wasn't the problem, the problem was probably with the employers.

WHITE

We may have to skip your other two I think, because I want to get everyone else's in as well. Susan, employers - that Scope report suggested that there was still a lot of prejudice, what would help them be less prejudiced?

ANDERSON

I agree with Tania that we can do a lot by providing information about the support that is available, both to employers and indeed to potential employees. So better information, particularly directed at those smaller firms who don't really know to whom to turn and often are put off because they just can't get access to good information. But can I just make a point? Employers are doing an awful lot already and some of the things they are doing don't cost money and often what a lot of disabled people need are flexible working or working from home and these things don't actually cost employers money and if we can get that message across to employers I think we can be doing a lot of good.

WHITE

Andrew Smith, finally and briefly, could you not simplify a lot of this stuff - this seems to be the overall message that people are sending, to the government anyway?

SMITH

We have been making it simpler, for example, for people to work whilst they get support, either through the tax credit or through, for example, incapacity benefit we increase the amount that people are allowed to earn in line with the minimum wage. In terms of what we can do, I very much agree with what's just been said about employers and it's important to remember that the Disability Rights

Commission has an extensive programme of support and advice for employers, especially small employers who of course come within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act in October next year.

WHITE

I've got to ...

SMITH

In overall terms what we need to do is to dismantle the barriers in people's minds which are the biggest bar to disabled people having the ...

WHITE

That's what we've been trying - that's what we've been trying to do this week minister, Sue Maynard-Campbell, Tania Burchardt and Susan Anderson thank you all very much indeed.