UK tech companies are failing disabled people – here's how to fix it

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Like any other industry, technology companies have a legal responsibility to support their disabled employees. This is enshrined in the 2010 Equality Act, which defines disabilities as physical or mental impairments that adversely affect people's day-to-day activities in a "substantial" and "long-term" way.

Under this law, employers can't discriminate against disabled staff and must be willing to accommodate their needs through reasonable adjustments to the workplace. Ignoring this could result in disabled employees taking their employer to an employment tribunal, which would be both financially and reputationally damaging for firms.

But despite this, the UK tech industry is currently inaccessible to thousands of disabled workers. Research from BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT, suggests that just 11% of UK technology experts are disabled and that the sector is [missing 88,000 disabled employees](#). So, why is this the case, and how can the industry turn this situation around?

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UK tech is failing many disabled workers

Based on the BCS figures, it's fair to say Britain's tech sector isn't currently doing enough to attract and support disabled talent. Steve O'Hear, a former technology journalist and founder of tech communications advisory O'Hear & Co, is disabled and agrees with this sentiment.

O'Hear believes that companies are only doing the bare minimum to meet UK employment laws and that they can "certainly do more". Throughout his two-decade career in technology, he has seen very few visible signs of disabled tech workers and finds this "surprising" in a sector that claims to base progression on personal merit.

"Of course, we know this isn't true; many factors, such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, heavily influence the chance of success in the tech industry," he explains. "What's striking, however, is that even the loudest champions of diversity rarely mention disability."

At the start of his career in the late 1990s, O'Hear saw firsthand how difficult it can be for disabled people to get their foot through the door in the technology industry. Describing this period in his life as "a struggle", O'Hear explains that it took him around two years to find work and that things seemed easier for people without a disability.

"This created a catch-22 where no one would employ me because I didn't have experience, but at the same time, I couldn't get experience because no one would give me a job," he says. "Until I broke this cycle by creating a job of my own building websites, it was really difficult."

While several decades have passed since O'Hear entered the industry, he isn't convinced that much has improved for disabled people in tech. O'Hear says he often encounters stories of people struggling to land a tech role due to their disability. He urges tech companies to think "more imaginatively" about how they can better attract disabled tech workers, instead of excluding them.

"Create ways for disabled graduates to break the work experience catch-22. Apply the same 'can-do' attitude used in startup building to employing more disabled talent. A bit of creative thinking on problems like this can go a long way," he says.

He admits, however, that things tend to get easier for disabled technologists as they gain more experience and climb the corporate ladder, explaining how his "25-year track record" and "public profile" have given him "a position of power".

"I tend to get a lot of support, and companies like Zapp really invested in me and set me up for success. But I'm not sure that's universal across the industry, especially for less senior employees," continues O'Hear.

Offices aren't fit for purpose

Often, disabled people don't find traditional working environments fit for purpose. Cybersecurity expert Lisa Ventura, who has ADHD, says open-plan offices are "very

overwhelming" due to their "noise and visual distractions". As someone who prefers "routine" and "clear expectations", she also struggles with "unstructured meetings". Because of these issues, she started working remotely and doesn't regret her decision.

"My cognitive processing differences also made traditional office settings and standardised work practices very challenging, so I made the move to working solely from home and I never looked back," she remarks. "My productivity went through the roof and I was achieving more than I ever thought possible."

Daryl Tavernor, who is the disabled owner of an ecommerce agency, has experienced similar struggles. He says: "I have gone through the challenges of finding suitable office environments. This is often a limiting factor when finding employment in tech.

"Often the offices have extremely poor wheelchair access and no disabled toilet, and although they may allow you to work from home there will be occasions where you will desperately want to get into the office just for the social side or to have an impact on important meetings."

Better support for disabled tech workers

While the odds seem stacked against disabled technologists, there is a glimmer of hope in the positive stories of people like soon-to-be computing graduate Will Simpson.

Last year, he joined EE as a tech support specialist and says the telecoms giant has been "really good" at listening to his needs as an autistic person and implementing reasonable adjustments at work, such as helping him pay for the neurodivergent support app Brain in Hand.

Simpson explains that the app, which he couldn't afford to buy himself, helps him work and live independently. He uses it as a software-based diary to record his feelings every few hours, and there is also an emergency response system.

Lucy Ruck, an amputee who leads the technology taskforce at the non-profit Business Disability Forum, explains that employers can work out the reasonable adjustments needed by disabled people like Will by listening to their feedback.

Ruck encourages employers to consider reasonable adjustments that will "even the playing field" for disabled staff, such as investing in assistive technologies like screen readers for hard-of-seeing employees and dictation tools for those who can't type on physical computer keyboards.

She also urges companies to think about disabled employees' needs and ensure accessibility is always a "key requirement" when purchasing new IT systems, explaining that this benefits both staff and the business as a whole.

"If the technology systems we buy now are accessible, then we'll save ourselves a lot of effort and money in the long run," she says. "It is estimated that having to retrofit accessibility can increase costs by 100 times for example."

Inclusive language

Such issues should be discussed internally as part of a disability employee resource group, according to Joanne Dewar, project leader at fintech industry disability inclusion initiative Project Nemo. She says this would be a space where disabled employees, their loved ones and other stakeholders can discuss inclusion and accessibility matters.

Dewar advises technology companies to take part in the Disability Confident scheme as this will help them "recruit and retain great people". She explains that many disabled job seekers look for companies with this status because it shows their "commitment to inclusion and accessibility".

She also recommends participating in accessibility movements like Purple Tuesday, using inclusive language in all communications and tracking key performance indicators like those developed by the Valuable 500 to ensure "disability inclusion is embedded within companies".

Ashish Devalekar, senior vice president and head of Europe at global tech firm Mphasis, points out that firms can comply with the Web Content Guidelines (WCAG) to ensure disabled staff don't find it hard to use office software.

But he admits that "accessibility goes beyond digital tools" and requires a "phased approach" encompassing many different formats, such as disability awareness training, flexible working and ergonomic office furniture.

He says: "This phased approach ensures employees with disabilities can fully participate in meetings, conferences, and other events, fostering a truly inclusive environment where everyone can thrive."

As it currently stands, the needs of many disabled technologists are being ignored in the UK tech industry. Such a lack of accessibility threatens to deprive the sector of a large number of talented individuals, which is alarming given the well-reported tech skills gap. That said, some companies are making positive strides towards a more inclusive tech industry, so not all hope is lost.