

INSTITUTE OF HOSPITALITY

WHITE PAPER

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THOSE
WITH DISABILITIES

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by Katherine Price MIH



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Our focus on disability inclusion, not only for our employees but also our company, has actually helped our business massively... we have got so many charities from all over the place coming to our hotel for events, not because they need the facilities that we've got, but because they like our ethos. And we have customers that come in the door because they like our ethos and they love helping to support what we're doing and the message that we've got. There is a bottom line impact on that.

**James Dixon-Box MIH, operations director, Marsham Court Hotel,
Bournemouth**

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The background

Committed to driving awareness and action, the IoH is dedicated to breaking down barriers to entry in hospitality for people with disabilities. Industry experts came together to share insights, ideas, and actionable next steps. At the IoH, DEIB isn't just a priority – it's part of our DNA. As a professional body, we play a vital role in empowering our members and the wider industry to engage, evolve, and create a more inclusive future.

It is clear that having a disability is a major barrier to employment – just 4.8% of people in the UK with recognised learning difficulties can find appropriate paid employment[1].

Taking disability inclusion seriously can positively impact a business both internally and externally, affecting how customers perceive a company, how willing they are to recommend it, return and spend their money. It has also been known to improve wider staff retention and satisfaction.

With around 98,000 vacancies in the food service and accommodation sector[2], supporting more disabled people into employment in the hospitality industry is a clear win-win for both businesses and people.

Employers must make 'reasonable adjustments' to avoid disabled employees being put at a disadvantage compared to non-disabled people in the workplace[3].

The challenge

Common barriers to entering the hospitality job market for people with disabilities include biases in hiring, lack of accessible training, and physical access limitations. The interview process itself can not only be intimidating for candidates, but a real barrier to inclusion.

Employers need to overcome their own fears and preconceptions of those disabilities and be helped to effectively support those with disabilities into employment. They are equally deserving of support to achieve their own ambitions and aspirations.

Employers also need to be aware of what they can and can't ask potential candidates during the interview process, and what their legal requirements are to provide for disabled employees. For example, under employers must not ask about a job applicant's health until they have been offered a job, except in specific circumstances [4].

Hospitality – creating opportunities for those with disabilities

An accessible hospitality workplace means fostering an inclusive environment for all employees and a culture that values equality and diversity. Crucially, this has to come from the top to ensure that policy change, inclusive hiring and investments are long-term and a priority for the entire organisation. Equality needs to be part of the business' strategic direction and a core value to create long-lasting and meaningful impact.

Bringing disabled people into the hospitality workforce has a multitude of benefits: it can positively impact bottom line and staff retention, it can bring new skills and perspectives into the organisation by creating a workforce that reflects the diverse range of customers it serves and the community in which it is based, and it can improve team cohesion and workplace culture.

Stakeholders such as investors may also want to invest in businesses that can demonstrate a commitment to accessibility. As well as the benefit to the individual, case studies need to tell the whole story including the wider positive impact on teams and employers.

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Businesses have a responsibility to ensure disability inclusion is fully integrated and valued across all roles and departments, especially if they want to tap into this pool of talent in a sustainable way. However, businesses also need to access the right support and training, for example disability awareness training, which local organisations or educational institutions may be able to offer.

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The individuals need support, but the companies also need support.

Valen Calanche, head of employment, diversity, equity & inclusion, Fair Shot

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Best Practice

Premier Inn owner Whitbread has a long-term partnership with Hereward College in Coventry, which provides study programmes and work placement opportunities for young people with complex disabilities and learning difficulties. The hotel group has a special built 'mini-Premier Inn' hotel on site, which serves as a training facility for students to gain real experience.

The students learn hospitality skills at the hotel, which is a replica of a Premier Inn complete with a reception and three bedrooms, before taking up work experience and supported internships at real working hotels nearby. This allows students to practice their skills in a live hotel environment under the guidance of a job coach appointed by the college.

On successful completion of their placement and passing a work-based assessment, students can move into apprenticeships to develop into other roles, such as front-of-house or reception. Retention for staff hired this way is 95%.

Premier Inn has announced that the initiative has been so successful that it is launching additional further education college partnerships across the UK to help young people with additional needs learn new skills and get into work.

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Solutions

Think differently about recruitment

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The interview process can be a barrier... Those skills that you need to get through the interview, they're not the skills that you need for the actual job.

Paul Cook, director for employment, Natspec, and principal, Hereward College

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According to Hilton research, almost 80% of adults with learning disabilities who responded to a survey said that fear of being judged at interview put them off applying for a role altogether [5].

Consider whether HR processes can be adapted to be more disability inclusive. For example, is an interview the way to get the best out of a candidate or could a process be developed that is more centred around the specific skills the job requires and is more accommodating of people with disabilities, such as a work trial? John Lewis and Waitrose, for example, now provide job applicants with interview questions beforehand in an attempt to make the recruitment process fairer, particularly for neurodiverse candidates.

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I think for people with learning disabilities, the interview route is not the way.

Katharine Weston, chair, Mission EmployAble

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Explore what your business can offer in terms of flexible work arrangements and assistive technologies for employees with disabilities and make it clear in any job adverts that your business can make modifications and accommodations. Employers need to be rethinking recruitment processes in light of staffing challenges and reconsider job adverts and processes that are designed for volume rather than individuality.

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Businesses need different ways to recruit, and this is a fantastic way to recruit.

Simon Boyle, CEO, Beyond Food Foundation

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Collaborate across the sector

The best way to improve inclusivity and speed-up implementation of impactful initiatives is by sharing successful models of inclusive hiring that can be adapted industry wide. Partner with educational institutions, charities and local as well as national disability organisations and vocational training programmes to provide supported work placements. Share examples of skills-based training that has empowered individuals and helped them develop confidence in a hospitality setting.

Collaborate with local and national organisations to recruit talent, provide training and share best practice, but remember that their resources are limited and hospitality businesses that engage need to take it seriously. This work needs to be supported at the top level with projects and schemes signed off by the executive board as part of a strategic initiative so they are established as a long-term, meaningful partnership.

This also cannot be limited to a few sector stalwarts. Sharing activity that is effective and appropriate industry wide as well as engaging in advocacy at industry conferences and within professional organisations will foster a broader culture of inclusion. This will ensure not only a few individual businesses are disability inclusive, but support the entire sector to be so, and improve wider public awareness to reduce stigma and normalise the hiring of disabled people.

Sector-wide accreditation for organisations who have proven they can support people with disabilities into good paid employment opportunities may help partner organisations identify employers who are open to working with them. Establishing a framework or accreditation may also help employers know employees have been trained to a certain standard, providing them with consistency.

Meanwhile, a database of local disability organisations with details on what they do and how they structure programmes such as work trials and placements could be useful in helping hospitality businesses connect with local organisations that can work with them to engage local people.

Regular events and discussions connecting institutions, employers, disabled people and organisations will also help support the creation of long-term relationships, ensure all parties can connect with the relevant people, and showcase best practice.

Make accessibility a continuous process and priority

Regularly review facilities and processes to improve access and create feedback mechanisms for employees to help continuously improve accessibility and inclusivity. Provide ongoing training so that all staff can adapt to new tools and practices. Monitor metrics such as employee satisfaction, retention and advancement to evaluate the immediate effectiveness of inclusion initiatives, but also their long-term impact.

For the disabled people in your business, ensure they are provided with clear career pathways and support to move into leadership roles. Offer mentorship programmes, leadership training and growth opportunities tailored to their needs, and, with consent, share their success stories – but most importantly, listen to what your disabled employees are telling you they need to thrive in your workplace.

Next steps

- 1)** Get executive sign-off that disability inclusion is a priority within the business and a core business value.
- 2)** Look into training opportunities and explore how hiring practices and policies could be more inclusive, particularly towards individuals with disabilities.
- 3)** Regularly review facilities and processes, monitor impact, create feedback mechanisms for employees, provide ongoing training and contact organisations to establish mutually beneficial partnerships.
- 4)** Share initiatives that have worked with the wider sector.
- 5)** Explore opportunities for frameworks, databases or accreditation that may help connect businesses with new local partners.
- 6)** Host regular industry wide events and discussions to share best practice.
- 7)** Make disability inclusion an ongoing, continuous process and priority.

Methodology

This white paper is the outcome of a round table hosted by the Institute of Hospitality's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) Council, which took place as part of Passion4Hospitality at the Novotel London West on 29 November 2024.

Panel

Hosted by



Mark Grant MIH, sales director, EP&T Global, and chair, DEIB Council, Institute of Hospitality (IoH).



Erica Bendall, trustee, Mission EmployAble



Simon Boyle, CEO, Beyond Food Foundation



Valen Calanche, head of employment, diversity, equity & inclusion, Fair Shot



Paul Cook, director for employment, Natspec, and principal, Hereward College



Sam Coulstock FIH, former head of professional development, Institute of Hospitality



Dan Dean, area trading manager, The Parks Foundation



James Dixon-Box MIH, operations director, Marsham Court Hotel, Bournemouth



Alice Francis, steps into employment facilitator, Share Community



Christopher Hamilton, founder, AccessFirst



Claire Hilton, managing director, Unity Works



Abbey Hooper, operations manager, Trinity restaurant, London



Sarah Howard, board trustee, The Crumbs Project



Prof Peter Jones MBE FIH, chair, The Crumbs Project



Carl Manners, charity manager, The Dome Café Project, Basingstoke



Ann Moorcroft, director, The Dome Café Project, Basingstoke



Lynn Parker MIH, operations manager, Unity Works



Maggie Scott, chair, T-21 / Birch Tree Café, Peterborough



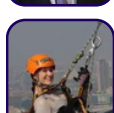
Denis Sheehan FIH, publisher, Hospitality & Catering News



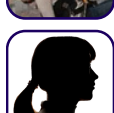
Robin Sheppard FIH, president, Bespoke Hotels



Alex Taylor FCIPD, learning & development manager, Harrison Catering



Suzanne Thomson, learning and skills manager, Unity Works



Katharine Weston, chair, Mission EmployAble

Resources & references

Access to Work

Disability Confident

British Association for Supported Employment

Scope

Mencap

Action on Disability

The 2010 Equality Act

Jobcentre Plus

(1) British Association for Supported Employment: Employment Rates for People with Disabilities 2022-23

(2) Harpers: Hospitality vacancies fall below 100,000 for the first time since the pandemic (2024)
Industry: SLTA Reveals 96% Consensus on Government Disconnect (2024)

(3) The Equality Act 2010