



**Presentation by The Open Doors Initiative**

[www.opendoorsinitiative.ie](http://www.opendoorsinitiative.ie)

**Oireachtas Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment**

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I am a CEO with an invisible disability. These make up nearly 80% of all disabilities. I have Dysphoric Elation, a type of Bipolar. With the correct supports put in place, I have been able to build a career and advocate for others. Without these supports, I would be in a very different space in employment, if in it at all. Not everyone has access to these and so do not fulfil their full potential.

People with Disabilities let you into their personal lives, give up their privacy and open up their lived environment in an effort to gain aid and employment, without which they cannot partake in society on their own terms.

We are portrayed as 'heroic' for fundraising for necessary supports, or even holding down work, when all they want is to be treated on an equitable basis and allowed to live their lives, without having to be othered. They need supports to gain that equity and these should be standard and not have to be fought for regularly or have to deal with a red tape, or inaccessible systems in order to access them in a timely manner.

Disability is not a bad word and needs to be recognised as a natural part of life for billions of people throughout the world. It is incumbent on Government and wider society to recognise societal barriers and attitudes as the disabling factors for people with disabilities. In order to support people who may face challenges into equitable employment we must first recognise existing barriers and the need for structural, attitudinal and systemic change.

It is also an economic imperative. Full employment is not achieved when so many still face unemployment and no way of accessing it. Employers mindsets need to be changed to see people with disabilities as viable and valuable employees. All government departments have a role to play in this, especially those working directly with employers.

In this room, there is statistically another person with a disability who may not feel empowered to speak out due to stigma, past negative experiences and a lack of support. I personally know of only two other CEOs, and one politician who are open about their

disability, and how it forms part of their work and lived experience. This does not make sense in terms of numbers and lessens the number of role models for people with disabilities whose work they can look to for a career roadmap.

Until we recognise disability as an entrenched part of our society, one which can impact us all through acquired disability at any stage in our lives, or that of our friends and family, these barriers such as stigma, will remain.

There are several changes that could be made, by cross department work, which would immediately alleviate the burden on people and allow them to take part in employment, lessen stigma and create self-support.

There are some overarching points we would like to make in relation to getting people with disabilities into work -

- Enhanced investment in evidence-based employment supports is required to benefit individuals with a disability, the economy and broader society.
- An awareness raising campaign is required targeting employers and potential employees who have disability so there is clarity on what supports and grants are available. A Programme of Open Doors, [www.employersforchange.ie](http://www.employersforchange.ie) can help with this dissemination. The DCEDIY are currently looking at this and input from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment on the campaign would bolster its effectiveness within the employer community.
- All supports must be reviewed to make them work better for the jobseeker, by amalgamating all the current disability supports into one grant that will cover an employee's needs as achieved by the UK's Access to Work scheme.
- Remove the onus from the employer to apply for grant support and empower the jobseeker with a disability to seek work with their supports already in place. Tie the supports to the person so they can change employment if they wish, without going through the process again

The following are the key points around disability in the context of the Pathways to Work Strategy, but these should be owned by wider departments alongside the Dept of Social Protection, to ensure take up and compliance. A lateral approach is needed to ensure accessibility, timely supports being put in place and ease of access.

- Create an online application platform for all grants and supports. For digital delivery of services - online forms and forums should all be fully accessible. Many employers and job seekers are not aware/able to easily access what is available at present, shown by the low take up of grants
- Increase the Subsidy Scheme for persons with a disability from its current level at 55% of the minimum wage to 70% of the minimum wage level and index it to future increases. A review of criteria for subsidy scheme is urgently needed. At present the wage subsidy scheme is underpinned by the medical model of disability. It needs to be underpinned by the social model of disability which underpins UNCRPD, to which Ireland is signed up.

- Remove the threshold of 21 hours work per week required to access the Subsidy Scheme for persons with a disability - this would enable people with disabilities who may work from five to 15 hours per week to access part-time employment
- Provide €15m to extend personal assistant supports available for persons with a physical disability who work on certain schemes (e.g. CE schemes) to persons in other forms of employment. The *Prime Time* special last week, showed the positive impact of personal assistant supports. Equally it showed how debilitating the removal or lack of such supports can be for a disabled person
- In October 2015, the Department of Social Protection conducted a confidential Survey of a random sample of Disability Allowance (DA) recipients, in the context of the Government's Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities. Respondents were asked what supports are important in helping them achieve their employment ambitions and goals. 'My Medical Card' was the most often mentioned support (cited by 64% of respondents), 38% of respondents noted their fear of losing a Medical Card as a barrier to employment while 36% noted a fear of losing social welfare benefit entitlements. Extend Make Work Pay so that people who no longer qualify for Disability Allowance due to employment are still eligible to receive a free travel pass and free medical card; acknowledging that being in employment does not remove a disabled persons need to access both
- Introduce an Access Employment Programme for people with disabilities. This programme will subsidise a paid work placement with an employer for up to six months. It will be applicable to long-term unemployed members of the disabled community who need work experience and to upskill to start or restart their employment journey. This will encourage employers to create opportunities for people with disabilities. The model will be similar to the Work Experience Placement Programme, allowing the jobseeker to retain their full benefits for the duration of the fixed term placement
- Employers who access Dept of Social Protection and other state employment supports to create work opportunities for people with disabilities should have access/information to disability awareness training

#### **Jobseekers:**

- Training is required in Know your Rights for applicants when dealing with employment issues and public bodies
- Partner with companies to offer mentorship and/or career coaching to scale impact beyond INTREO case officers. Open Doors can help with this through its Programme [www.towardswork.ie](http://www.towardswork.ie)
- Increase access to further education courses, through bursaries and scholarships for part time education where there are no existing grants
- Increased flexibility and an online system for part time/self-employed people. The current system is too rigid and does not allow for the nature of this work, especially in start ups
- More flexible, part time roles in the Public Appointments System – there needs to be less onerous recruitment pathways and greater accessibility for people from marginalised backgrounds

- Offer job training and apprenticeship programs in high-demand industries, such as healthcare, construction, technology, and renewable energy.
- Partner with community NGOs to offer job readiness workshops and career development seminars for people facing additional barriers to employment.
- Offer financial and other supports to help people with disabilities start their own businesses, especially outside of tech/digital. Open Doors are shortly running a third programme for Entrepreneurship with people with disabilities with TUD, and it shows there are many potential start-ups coming through this community that need assistance to get off the ground

Implementing these changes would make an immeasurable difference to people with disabilities seeking work. They would also help those who acquire disabilities in their working life to retain their careers and continue to be employed.

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