

Access to Success: A Disability Insight Career Panel

Wednesday 11th March 2026 2pm-4pm

Introduction to Speakers:

- **David Bedford:** David is a neurodiversity and inclusion speaker with lived experience and over 25 years in software testing. He is the founder of *AuDHD Unzipped*, supporting organisations in creating inclusive workplaces and improving retention of neurodivergent employees.
- **Izzy Watkins:** A University of Surrey alumna and former VP Community, Izzy is a Training Lead at Mental Health First Aid England and a Disability Consultant. She advises organisations on best practices and inclusive policies to support employees with disabilities.
- **Libby Taylor:** Libby, also a University of Surrey alumna, works as a Corporate Partnerships Executive at Carers UK. She has extensive experience in advocacy and fundraising, supporting charities such as Maggie's Centres, Compton Care, and the NSPCC.
- **Julia Sienko:** Julia is a final-year student and part-time Support Zone Officer, actively involved in student advocacy and representation. With experience in HR and the charity sector, she has contributed as an Access & Participation Student Advisor, volunteered with Scope, and co-founded the *Ramped Up Podcast*. Julia is the organiser and host of this event.

Summary:

This meeting explored the experiences of disabled and neurodivergent individuals in education and the workplace, highlighting challenges such as late diagnosis, workplace barriers, and the impact of disclosure. Speakers emphasised the importance of self-advocacy, reasonable adjustments, supportive environments, and inclusive workplace practices in enabling individuals to succeed.

Personal Experiences & Key Insights:

Libby Taylor: Libby shared her experience of being diagnosed with dyslexia at age 17, during sixth form. Prior to this, she was unaware of her condition and had limited knowledge of available support. Throughout school, she found academic learning particularly challenging, despite enjoying education, and initially assumed that her struggles were similar to those of her peers.

Her transition to university marked a turning point. For the first time, she was able to access appropriate support and tools, enabling her to better understand her needs and advocate for herself.

Transition into the Workplace:

Entering the workplace presented new challenges, particularly during the job application process. In her first role after university, Libby chose not to disclose her dyslexia and selected a position that minimised tasks she found difficult. However, in her current role within the charity sector, which is more people-focused, she has found greater fulfilment and confidence.

She emphasised that having supportive managers and access to reasonable adjustments, such as assistive technology can significantly improve workplace experience. She also highlighted the importance of confidence in requesting adjustments, even at early stages such as interviews (e.g. requesting questions in advance).

Key Messages & Advice:

- Understand and recognise your strengths to build confidence.
- Reasonable adjustments are a legal right: individuals should feel empowered to request them from the outset.
- Not all organisations are equally supportive; it is important to identify environments that align with your needs.
- Seek out supportive networks and communities, both within and outside the workplace (e.g. LinkedIn, professional groups).
- Be open to change: career paths may evolve, and it is not necessary to follow a fixed plan established during university.

David Bedford: David shared his lived experience as someone who is Hard of Hearing, Autistic, and has ADHD (HAuDHD), with diagnoses occurring later in life, hearing loss at 30, autism at 40, and ADHD at 50. Earlier in life, his challenges were not widely recognised, as he performed well academically and was supported by encouraging teachers.

He spent over 25 years working in IT, beginning his career in software testing following an accidental placement year application during university. His analytical thinking and attention to detail made software testing particularly well-suited to his strengths, although he found aspects of workplace social interaction, such as small talk, more challenging.

Workplace Experiences & Challenges:

David highlighted the impact of the “*double empathy problem*”, where communication differences between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals can lead to misunderstandings. For example, he noted how brief responses such as “okay” were interpreted differently by managers, underscoring the importance of clear and explicit communication.

Unstructured interactions, such as impromptu meetings or discussions without an agenda were a significant source of anxiety, making it more difficult for him to participate effectively. In contrast, virtual working environments, particularly those introduced during COVID-19 (e.g. meetings with subtitles), enabled him to engage more comfortably and contribute more confidently.

Support & Adjustments:

David emphasised the value of workplace accommodations, particularly through the UK *Access to Work* scheme, which funded assistive tools such as digital hearing aids and ADHD coaching. He noted that many adjustments are either low-cost or fully funded and can significantly enhance workplace performance and wellbeing.

Key Messages & Advice:

- Timing and boundaries are important when disclosing a disability; individuals can choose when to share this information, although early disclosure may help facilitate support.
- Reasonable adjustments are a legal right and should be viewed as enabling success, not as a burden.
- Clear communication is essential: misunderstandings can arise if expectations and experiences are not explicitly discussed.
- Structured working environments, including clear agendas and expectations, can significantly improve participation and reduce anxiety.
- Subtle forms of disclosure (e.g. sunflower lanyards) may provide an alternative for those not ready to formally disclose.
- Seek out tools, environments, and communities that align with your needs: individuals have the ability to shape their own working experience.

David concluded with an empowering message: “*You are the future*” encouraging individuals to take ownership of their environment and find strategies that enable them to thrive.

Izzy Watkins: Izzy shared her journey as a wheelchair user, autistic individual, and someone living with multiple health conditions. Her career has focused on higher education, student support, wellbeing, and the charity sector.

She joined the University of Surrey in 2016 to study Music but later recognised that a traditional music career did not align with her needs. Instead, she found purpose through extracurricular activities, including founding PetSoc and AutiSoc, and serving as Vice President Community. These experiences inspired her to pursue a career centred on support and inclusion.

Career Development:

- **2018/19:** Placement year as a Digital Communications Assistant, her first full-time role as an autistic professional. She experienced significant *masking fatigue*, expending additional energy on social expectations without awareness of available adjustments.
- **2020/21:** Vice President Community (remote role during lockdown), which significantly improved accessibility and energy levels.
- **2021–2023:** Roles in university wellbeing services (Residence Life Coordinator and later Officer). During this time, she faced challenges with workplace support and experienced adjustment fatigue.
- **2023–2025:** Senior Programme Manager in a fully remote, inclusive environment where accessibility was embedded by default. This role coincided with the

development of her physical disability, and she received strong organisational support. She also began informal consulting work during this period.

- **2025–Present:** Disability and Co-production Consultant and Training Lead.

Reframing Career Expectations:

Izzy reflected on her decision not to pursue a traditional music career, recognising that it did not align with her needs as an autistic individual. Instead, she adapted her goals, continuing her passion for opera independently, building a social media following, and eventually collaborating with organisations such as the Royal Opera House. She emphasised that success may take different forms than originally envisioned.

Key Messages & Advice:

- “Disability drives innovation” – barriers should be seen as opportunities to adapt and create new pathways.
- Adjustments are an ongoing process, not a one-time solution, and may need regular review.
- Disabled professionals often need to educate others and advocate for themselves in the workplace.
- Experiences differ between visible and invisible disabilities, and both come with unique challenges.
- Imposter syndrome is common, and traditional notions of “professionalism” can be exclusionary or ableist.
- Strong communities exist among disabled professionals: seeking these networks can be highly valuable.

Understanding Employers:

- **Positive indicators of inclusive employers:**
 - Proactively discuss adjustments during recruitment
 - Focus on outcomes rather than presenteeism
 - Embrace flexibility and remote working
 - Demonstrate confidence and openness around disability
- **Potential red flags:**
 - Phrases such as “we’re like a family”
 - Lack of flexible or remote working options
 - Framing adjustments as an inconvenience
 - Limited representation of disabled individuals in leadership

Q&A Session:

What has been your biggest challenge navigating the workplace?

- **Perception and judgement:** Concerns about being misunderstood, underestimated, or labelled negatively, particularly when disclosing a disability.

- **Lack of awareness and support:** Difficulty understanding what support is available and what can be requested, especially for those newly diagnosed or entering their first professional roles.
- **Workplace barriers:** Experiences of employers being reluctant to implement adjustments, sometimes citing fairness concerns.
- **Balancing health and work:** Managing full-time employment alongside medical needs (e.g. appointments, treatments) can be physically and emotionally demanding.
- **Imposter syndrome:** Many individuals experience self-doubt and feel pressure to prove their value to employers, impacting confidence and wellbeing.

How do you stay motivated when facing setbacks, stigma or accessible barriers?

- **Self-care and perspective (David):** Engaging in activities such as walking and spending time in nature, practising self-kindness, and recognising that difficult days are temporary.
- **Support systems and advocacy (Libby):** Building supportive environments and communities, and developing the confidence to advocate for personal needs particularly when navigating generational differences in understanding accessibility.
- **Knowledge and empowerment (Izzy):**
 - Understanding legal rights (e.g. Equality Act) to feel informed and empowered.
 - Reframing barriers as systemic issues rather than personal limitations.
 - Avoiding comparison with non-disabled peers and setting realistic, personalised goals.
 - Recognising that requesting adjustments can create positive change for others in the future.
- **Community and connection (Julia):** Finding and engaging with supportive peer networks provides a safe space to share experiences and challenges.

Could you share a moment when you felt supported and empowered in your career?

David Bedford:

David recalled joining a company where, shortly before his start date, he was asked to travel to Japan for four weeks. He accepted the opportunity, and the nature of the role primarily email-based communication due to language barriers suited his working style. Upon returning, he felt valued and supported by colleagues who recognised his contribution.

In another role with a US-based company, David disclosed his conditions from the outset. His employer responded positively, asking, “*How can we help?*” and provided consistent support through regular check-ins and open communication, which significantly enhanced his workplace experience.

Libby Taylor:

During her probation period, Libby received feedback about the time she spent proofreading and the number of grammatical errors in her work. Although initially difficult, this led to a supportive conversation with her manager, who suggested practical adjustments.

Libby chose to include a short disclosure note in her emails acknowledging her dyslexia. Despite initial hesitation particularly when communicating with senior stakeholders the response she received was overwhelmingly positive. A simple acknowledgement of support

from a recipient was particularly empowering and reinforced her confidence in being open about her needs.

Izzy Watkins:

Izzy shared an experience from when she first became physically disabled and was required to travel for work. Rather than making assumptions about her ability to attend, her employer engaged her in a collaborative conversation about how to make the trip accessible.

Together, they implemented practical adjustments, including funding assistive equipment and allowing additional time for rest. Regular check-ins ensured she felt supported throughout. Izzy emphasised that the most empowering aspect was the organisation's willingness to co-create solutions with her, rather than making decisions on her behalf.

Julia Sienko:

Julia described how her manager recognised she was struggling with the demands of commuting and workload. Flexible adjustments were introduced, including altered working hours and the ability to work from home to accommodate her commute.

Additionally, her manager provided structured support through one-to-one meetings, clear task lists, and access to tools such as Grammarly. This tailored approach enabled Julia to manage her responsibilities more effectively and improved her overall confidence and performance.

What are your perspectives on disclosure, and what advice would you offer to students navigating this decision?

- Disclosing reasonable adjustments: always disclose early. You don't need to put it on your CV. Be prepared for people to react to your disabilities negatively.
- Disclose only when you feel like you need the support. Don't settle with a company if you notice a red flag when disclosing. You don't need to disclose it to the whole company.
- No one owes an employer your diagnosis or medical details. You don't need to explain why you need adjustments. Especially with autism, it's such a diverse condition.
- Knowing that not every employer is going to want to put in the work. It is getting better. Do weigh up the pros and cons of disclosing. If you do get a bad reaction, don't let it get to you. Move jobs, it's better to save your mental health than push through. Having that community to talk to is key wherever you are.

How has the "Disability Price Tag" affected your personal and professional experiences?

- **Financial burden:** Disabled individuals often face significantly higher living costs. It was noted that, on average, a disabled person may require substantially more income per month to maintain the same quality of life as a non-disabled peer.

- **Access to support:** Navigating support systems can be complex and time-consuming. In some cases, lack of adequate workplace support has led individuals to leave roles that were not as inclusive as initially presented.
- **Career progression and self-perception:** Participants reflected on feelings of being “behind” peers, particularly when support was not available earlier in life. There can also be an awareness that earning potential may differ, which can be difficult to reconcile.
- **Daily management and coping strategies:** Practical approaches such as setting reminders, seeking support, and being open about challenges (where appropriate) can help manage day-to-day impacts, particularly for conditions affecting memory or executive function.
- **Long-term reflection and growth:** Experiences highlighted the importance of developing sustainable working habits, managing impulsivity, and recognising how early support could have influenced career trajectories.
- **Early life impact:** The effects of disability often begin at a young age, sometimes compounded by limited awareness or understanding from others, which can shape later experiences in education and employment.

How can individuals navigate starting a new role with a disability while managing disclosure and maintaining appropriate boundaries?

- **Setting boundaries:** Individuals are not obligated to share personal details about their disability. It is appropriate to give general responses or decline to answer questions that feel intrusive.
- **Managing disclosure:** Disclosure should be intentional shared with the right people (e.g. HR or line managers) at the right time. Oversharing can sometimes lead to unintended consequences, including bias or unsolicited advice.
- **Handling workplace dynamics:** Some colleagues may be understanding, while others may be more intrusive. In such cases, being firm and clear about boundaries may be necessary.
- **Seeking safe spaces:** Internal networks, such as neurodiversity or disability groups, can provide supportive environments to share experiences and seek advice.
- **Reframing conversations:** Situations can be used as opportunities to educate others, for example by reinforcing that not everyone is comfortable discussing personal matters.
- **Recognising limits of responsibility:** Employees are not responsible for fixing organisational culture. If an environment feels persistently unsupportive, it may be appropriate to consider alternative workplaces.

How can individuals effectively navigate organisations that have the resources to be inclusive but do not fully implement inclusive practices?

- **Move beyond compliance:** Inclusion should not be limited to meeting minimum legal requirements. Panellists emphasised that “*disability drives innovation*”, and organisations can benefit from embedding inclusive practices into their culture and processes.

- **Advocacy and influence:** Individuals may sometimes need to advocate for change, particularly when inclusive practices are not being prioritised. While this can feel isolating, it is likely that others share similar concerns. Raising these issues with HR or leadership can help bring wider attention to them.
- **Co-design and lived experience:** Actively involving individuals with diverse backgrounds in decision-making and design processes can lead to more effective and meaningful inclusion. Drawing on lived experience can help organisations better understand practical needs and improve existing systems.
- **Proposing solutions:** When identifying gaps, it can be helpful to suggest practical adjustments or improvements. Offering solutions not just highlighting problems can support more constructive conversations with employers.
- **Building knowledge and networks:** Educating oneself on both employee rights and employer responsibilities is key. Engaging with professional networks, particularly those of disabled individuals, can provide insight, support, and shared strategies.
- **Clarifying responsibility:** While employees can contribute to positive change, the responsibility for creating an inclusive culture ultimately lies with leadership and HR, not individuals alone. Employees should not feel obligated to carry the burden of driving organisational change.

If you would like to continue the conversation or have any further questions, all speakers are available to connect via LinkedIn.