Prejudice can endure throughout a career

Equality Landing a job may now be easier but disabled workers are often sidelined later, says *Alicia Clegg*

When aspiring lawyer Robert Hunter began work for Allen & Overy in London, he omitted to tell the international law firm that he suffered from progressive hearing loss. By the time they found out, he was on the way to becoming a partner.

Thirty years later, Mr Hunter is a fraud lawyer and a partner at Edmonds, Marshall, McMahon. These days he participates in meetings with the assistance of a typist who transcribes what is being said for him to read. Yet he is dismayed when he looks around the City to see so few people with disabilities in senior positions.

In 2014, Mr Hunter set up City Disabilities, a charity that mentors professionals and students with disabilities to help them forge successful careers.

In today's recruitment market, he says, he would be more confident of being hired than when he started out. Even so, such is the "subtle nature of City dealings that it's still possible for professionals with disabilities to be quietly sidelined".

"Is there an issue? Self-evidently," says Tony Cates, a vice-chairman at KPMG and sponsor of its disability network, "because when you look around we don't have many disabled people at partner level."

Encouraging applications from candidates with disabilities will not by itself build fairer workplaces. How far and fast people make progress once they are hired often depends on having the right connections and acquiring the experience to build an impressive CV. This is where disadvantage can creep in.

"Instead of listening to the circumstances in which candidates need support, employers start to put limitations on people," says Liz Dawes, trust officer at City Disabilities.

A blind employee or a wheelchair user might find they are given less challenging work, for example; managers may not include them in overseas projects because they assume travel would be arduous.

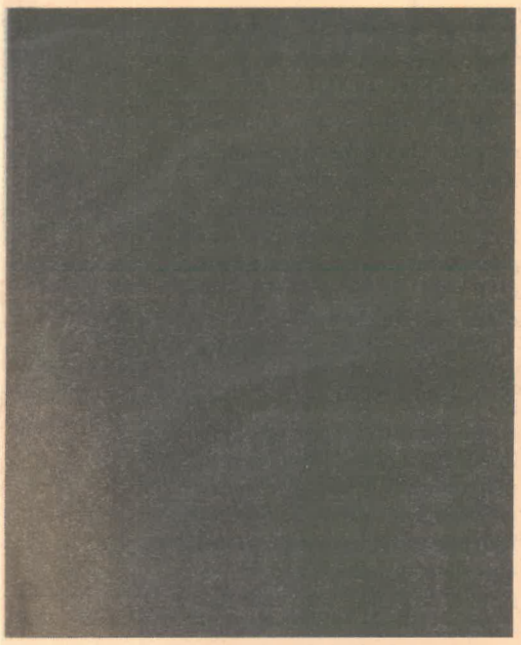
According to research by Badenoch & Clark, a recruitment business, 60 per cent of UK workers with a disability say they have encountered bias.

One popular approach to tackling workplace inequality is to expose people to the idea that everyone unconsciously harbours some form of prejudice. However, some research suggests that when people are told this, they feel absolved and their views may even harden.

Another approach is to make equal treatment the easy option. Making it plain that managers will be marked down if they neglect the professional development of team members with disabilities would be a good start.

It is not only the expectations of others that can hold people back, says

Architects of Meritocracy



Career advice : Robert Hunter set up City Disabilities to mentor disabled people — Anna Gordon for the FT

Mike Adams, chief executive of Purple, a not-for-profit organisation that works to reduce disability barriers. Having found a role that suits them, workers with disabilities may be tempted to stay put, to avoid having to explain their condition to a new boss and renegotiate the adjustments they need from scratch.

To mitigate this problem, Mr Adams recommends workplace passports. This is a system — adopted by Enterprise Rent-A-Car and the UK civil service among others — by which workers carry their current working arrangements into a new role.

Companies might tick all the boxes but fall short, simply because bosses have low expectations of what a disabled person can achieve, says Daniel Danso, global diversity manager at lawyers Linklaters. This is why it is important to break down the stigma that surrounds disability, he adds.

The company recently launched VisAbility, a network to promote peer support for people with disabilities and mental health conditions. Open to all, it hosts lunchtime talks that focus on dispelling the mutual nervousness that hinders communication and can lead to talented people being marginalised.

Mr Hunter urges younger colleagues to be ambitious and research potential employers thoroughly. "Strangely, we find the firms that are best at disability very often have no stated policy at all — while those with the glossiest websites miss the mark."

Advice from the experienced How to make it work

Tips for employers: Robert Hunter, founder of the charity City Disabilities, is deaf. He advises companies on disability etiquette and mentors City professionals.

1. Avoid tokenism. Being seen to be inclusive is important to many large employers. Yet, an all-too-common experience in the City is for disabled employees to be featured in recruitment advertising and then sidelined into non-fee earning work or a diversity role, while their peers move on to partnership.

2. Do not needlessly identify a colleague by their disability. Referring to a colleague by their disability — the director in a wheelchair, rather than the director in charge of finance — is as unprofessional as identifying a colleague by skin colour. Phoning ahead to warn a client that a colleague is blind implies their blindness, not their expertise, is what matters.

3. Treat disabilities purely as practical problems. If someone's disability makes participating in particular activities difficult, such as noisy networking events, find another way to build their profile.

4. Listen to what employees say about your organisation before promoting it as a good place for disabled people to work. Almost all large organisations harbour pockets of good and bad practice.

Tips for employees: Naomi Riches, a consultant and Paralympian, (pictured) won a gold medal for rowing in 2012. She works as a consultant in sport and education for Thomas International, a psychometric assessment provider, and has a severe visual impairment.

1. Approach employers confidently and be ready to suggest coping mechanisms. "If you say, 'I cannot do this or that', an employer won't be interested. But if you say, 'This is how I [handled it] in the past', or 'It would be helpful if you were able to provide such and such'. It takes away the fear factor."

2. Find an employer that wants you for your skills not your status. "I'd been caught out by a couple of acquaintances, who just wanted to say they were friends with me on Facebook, and that made me aware that it could be an issue with employers, too." In her rowing career, Ms Riches had used psychometric profiling to train with her teammates and that made her attractive to her employer.

3. With a little flexibility, most workplace problems are easily resolved. Before a meeting, Ms Riches asks the organiser to print handouts in extra-large type and, instead of hot-desking, she has a corner of the office with her screen set to the right contrast. **AC**