

Research into the workforce gap: Executive summary

Disabled people in the sport and physical
activity workforce

Activity Alliance

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Executive summary

In 2024, Activity Alliance commissioned a research project to explore the barriers and enablers to disabled people becoming part of the sport and physical activity workforce. The aim of this was to better understand why disabled people are often under-represented in the workforce. The research was undertaken by independent researchers from the Better Decisions Together collaborative.

A review of existing research into this area showed that there are limited sources of data into disabled people in the sport and physical activity workforce in the UK. Most of the insights were very high level, identifying barriers such as negative attitudes towards disabled people, but there was very little evidence that helped understand these barriers in more detail. There was also little evidence around intersectionality, considering other aspects of identity alongside being disabled.

These were issues that we explored further in our research, through 25 interviews with people in the sport and physical activity workforce, most of whom were disabled employees, volunteers and/or employers.

The sector at large

Interviewees recognised that they bring the **benefit of lived experience to the workforce**, which helps the sector to meet the needs of diverse participants. This was felt to be particularly beneficial in roles such as coaching and leadership.

They shared what they felt were the **wider benefits of work for themselves**, including learning, social networking and friendships, keeping fit and making a difference.

Participants had a **mix of sports-based qualifications**, from sport-specific coaching qualifications to post-graduate qualifications, but they also talked about barriers to obtaining qualifications, including **cost** and a **lack of accessible training**.

Joining the workforce

Many participants had wanted to work in the sport and physical activity sector for a long time and were very keen to pursue work in the sector. However, they were particularly attracted to employers who had a **reputation for inclusion** or **values-based** work, where people felt they could make a difference.

Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of joining the workforce. This highlighted many areas of **good practice** in recruitment, including accessible application processes, upfront information about roles, welcoming messaging, and inclusive approaches to interviews (for example, choice of video or in-person).

However, participants identified **barriers** including a lack of suitable, well-paid, flexible roles, particularly for participants who needed to manage fluctuating conditions or non-work commitments. Participants had also encountered negative attitudes and basic physical accessibility issues.

Employers noted key shortcomings across the sector, including **lack of disability awareness** and **concerns about costs** of employing disabled people, and identified a need for guidance and signposting.

Staying part of the workforce

A passion for working in sport was key to keeping people in the workforce, particularly seeing the impact of their work on others. Fair treatment and inclusion were also key, particularly **practical support** such as accessible working environments and flexible working arrangements. **Emotional support** was also important to disabled people we interviewed, such as from supportive colleagues and managers who foster a welcoming and supportive culture.

There was mixed awareness and experience with **Access to Work**, with some participants benefitting but others facing significant challenges with the application process, timeframes, and lack of employer awareness.

Some thought that **progression opportunities** were limited for disabled people, and **training experiences** in work were varied; some reported accessible programmes, while others faced barriers like inaccessible materials.

Moving on

We found that employers were not always making it easy for disabled people to stay in their roles. **Lack of flexibility, inaccessible workplace environments** and **lack of reasonable adjustments** were key reasons for leaving. With these barriers, work could be complex to manage, especially for those with fluctuating conditions. Lack of training and progression opportunities were also reasons for leaving roles.

Other issues affecting retention included roles being poorly paid and that self-employment felt like the only option. Some participants in receipt of out-of-work benefits felt that they were financially 'punished for working'.

Workforce journeys

We explored participants' journeys through the sport and physical activity workforce, focusing on 'moments of truth' – pivotal moments where their journeys mobilised or changed direction. Early experiences were cited by many as important, often starting with childhood experiences of sport and activity. Others started taking part in sport or physical activity as adults, and then moved into volunteer and paid roles.

There were several common features on interviewees' **pathways** to paid work. **Training** or **qualifications** featured across almost all journeys to employment. Some remained in **volunteer** roles without transitioning to paid employment, either by choice or because paid work was too difficult to manage alongside their impairment.

Pivotal moments often centred on supportive **role models or cheerleaders**, personal connections who encouraged people to take a step into the sector. Participants spoke about the importance of work to their sense of **identity and purpose**; particularly those with acquired disability, for whom working in sport had a profound impact on coming to terms with becoming disabled.

In terms of **intersectional factors**, those that came up included having acquired disabilities, invisible disabilities and caring responsibilities. These could further complicate workplace experiences for disabled people, making it more difficult for people to stay in roles.

Participants' journeys challenged perceptions of **what 'success' means** in the workforce – the traditional model of paid employment as the ultimate goal does not always align with lived experiences. Making a difference to the experience of others can represent a more meaningful 'pinnacle' of a workforce journey.

Taking the research forward

The research suggests the following **three key recommendations**:

1. Adopt a **'flexible by default'** approach to job roles.
2. Provide **advice and guidance for employers**.
3. Proactively **identify and remove barriers** that exist at all stages of the workforce journey.

More detailed recommendations are also suggested for employers, the sports and physical activity sector, and the government or national stakeholders.

Recommendations for employers include suggestions for improving recruitment, including: removing practical barriers to recruitment; normalising adaptations; considering what qualifications are essential; using diverse communication platforms and resourcing individual support. Early applications to Access to Work should be initiated and plans put in place for accessible progression and training opportunities, alongside support for wellbeing.

Recommendations for the sector include developing an 'Employee Passport'; establishing a national disability sport and physical activity workforce network; and developing a national scheme for an 'inclusion rating' for leisure centres and other sport and activity providers.

Recommendations for government include making improvements to the Access to Work process, in particular making it 'portable by default', and making work pay for people who are in receipt of out-of-work benefits.

Suggestions for further research include exploring issues through a wider, quantitative study; sector-wide collaboration to add relevant questions to existing data collection channels; and further exploring employer perspectives. Potential topics for future research include training and qualifications, disclosure of disability, employer attitudes and data collection, and further exploration of enablers and barriers.

Conclusion

This research underscores the urgent need for the sport and physical activity sector to address recruitment and retention strategies. This would help to ensure that they are led by the voices of the sector's diverse disabled talent, who can in turn properly understand, support and nurture the diverse disabled athletes and participants that the sector serves.





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