



Natalie's challenges in the mainstream fitness sector

Profile

Natalie is in her 30s and has had severe visual impairment since birth.

In her mainstream primary school, she wasn't allowed to do PE, but on moving to a specialist secondary school, she discovered a talent and passion for sport, going on to play at national level.

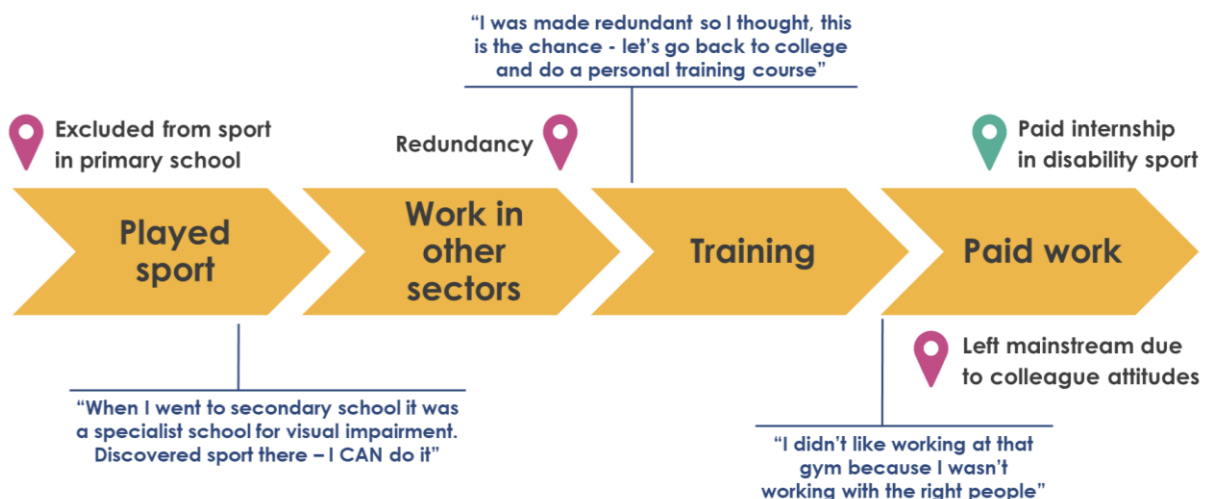
After school, Natalie had a couple of paid jobs that weren't in sport, but then redundancy presented an opportunity to follow her dream, by doing a personal training qualification. She secured a job in a council-run gym, but following the Covid-19 shut-down, moved into a part time administrative role with a disability sport charity.

One of the reasons for moving jobs was the desire for a role focusing on supporting people with visual impairments and other disabilities. The other was the negative attitude of a colleague at the gym. While the organisation was supportive, this one individual made it difficult for Natalie to feel completely confident and comfortable in her role.



"I love working in sport and I don't think I would go and work in another sector now - the only exception would be if it was guide dogs. But sport is where I thrive the most."

Natalie's journey





Negative perceptions around disabled people in mainstream sport

Natalie wanted to work as a personal trainer so that she could support disabled people to participate in physical activity, bringing her knowledge of accessibility and her lived experience to the role.

The recruitment process was largely positive. In the interview, she was encouraged to talk about how she would carry out the role – there were issues with risk assessment, but Natalie overcame these by explaining how adaptations could be made.

She enjoyed the role and got along with managers, colleagues, and gym users. It was agreed with the employer that she would not undertake certain tasks that the non-disabled trainers did and would instead do other tasks. But a colleague had an issue with this, and their hostility made Natalie feel uncomfortable and devalued. She raised it with a manager, but nothing was done. Before she had a chance to escalate, the gym closed due to Covid-19 lockdown, and she decided not to return.



“If you have an issue with me as a colleague, what would you be like with a member? It can really deter someone from coming to the gym, if that is the attitude they encounter.”

Barriers

- Negative perceptions and misconceptions around disabled people's capabilities in relation to personal training.
- Unwillingness of colleagues to accept adjustments put in place for a disabled employee, perceiving these as 'unfair'.
- Lack of action by managers to address negative attitudes and behaviours by other staff.

Enablers

- Open dialogue, starting during the recruitment process, around adjustments and adaptations – led by the disabled person's knowledge of their own abilities and needs.
- Adjustments may need to look at task allocation across a whole team, rather than only at what can be changed within a specific role.



“I know so many visually impaired people who have trained to be PTs, but no one will take them seriously. They just have these perceptions about disabled people, like, ‘are you actually capable of that?’”