

The role of workplace personal assistants for physically disabled people

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Workplace personal assistants (PA) are important in facilitating people with physical or sensory impairments to do their work.

Difficult situations can occur when colleagues do not understand the PA's role, or when the PA is unclear about how they should behave. This can affect the disabled person's ability to do their own job.

Boundaries need to be clear; it is important that communication between the disabled person and both their PA and line manager is open and honest.

Organisations should review their policies around employing disabled people, and consider how these make provision for the workplace PA role.

Disabled people entering the workplace may need advice on the funding for a PA. Social care staff should be aware of resources available to support disabled people to work and manage their PAs.



BACKGROUND

Employment rates for working age disabled people are far lower than for their non-disabled counterparts. Some disabled people require support to undertake employment. The Equality Act (2010) places a duty upon employers to make 'reasonable adjustments' to the workplace to ensure that it is accessible to employees. Where the barriers cannot be overcome by 'reasonable adjustments' disabled people are entitled to support in the workplace, in the form of a personal assistant (PA) or support worker, which can be provided or paid for by employers, or funded by other sources, such as the Access to Work scheme in the UK. There is, though, limited awareness of the role of the workplace PA for people with impairments.

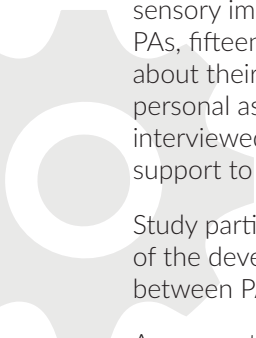
This study involved disabled people, workplace PAs and employers to gain a greater understanding of how these roles and relationships can be better supported.

WORKPLACE PERSONAL ASSISTANTS (PAs) support disabled people to do their jobs more effectively by providing assistance with personal care and/or workplace tasks, e.g. taking notes in meetings, driving, or setting up rooms for events.

They are variously named, e.g. 'support worker', 'employment support worker' and 'access worker'. The choice of term is up to individuals, however funders such as Access to Work may have preferred terminology.

The role emerged through disabled people's campaigns advocating for the right to independent living. The core values of self-determination and self-direction of assistance are fundamental to the role in all contexts, including in the workplace.

Methods



This study focused on PAs who support people with physical or sensory impairments in their workplaces. Seventeen workplace PAs, fifteen disabled people and four employers were interviewed about their experiences of giving, receiving or being aware of personal assistance in the workplace. The research team also interviewed representatives of six organisations who provide support to disabled people who employ PAs.

Study participants and other stakeholders were invited to be part of the development of a resource to support conversations between PAs, disabled people and their employers.

As support needs and experiences are likely to vary, studies could helpfully explore how workplace assistance is experienced by people with mental health support needs and people with learning difficulties.



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THE WORKPLACE PERSONAL ASSISTANT (PA) ROLE

Workplace PAs in this study facilitated disabled people in work to do their jobs by providing assistance with personal care and/or work-related tasks, for example, note-taking in meetings, driving, or setting up rooms for events. Several job titles were used, including 'support worker' and 'disability aide' as well as 'PA'. This could lead to misinterpretation by colleagues. Disabled people and workplace PAs characterised the workplace PA role in several different ways. These different perspectives had implications for how the PA was expected to behave in the workplace and their interactions with their manager's colleagues. This will be discussed in more detail in the boundaries section below.

CHARACTERISTICS OF WORKPLACE PAS

Disabled people and PAs both considered it vital for PAs to understand their role as enabling and empowering (rather than 'caring for') the disabled person. This was an important element in ensuring the boundaries were not blurred between the disabled person's own job and the PA's support role.

Workplace PAs were recruited by the disabled person through a variety of different routes including word of mouth recommendations, job adverts, and via a pool of PAs (for example, in a university or disabled people's organisation). Some disabled people had attempted to recruit someone to support them at work through agencies, and while recruitment was more straightforward, this option was more expensive for the funder, and it was difficult to find agency staff who could support with both personal care and office tasks.

There was little consistency around the career backgrounds of workplace PAs. Some had worked in care or administrative jobs, others had personal experience of supporting a disabled friend or family member, and others had

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worked in a similar field to the disabled person. In a very small number of cases, PAs had applied for the role believing it to be either a more traditional office personal assistant role, or a different role within the disabled person's organisation.

The most common source of funding for workplace PAs in the study was the Access to Work scheme run by the Department for Work and Pensions. Other sources of funding included local authority social care (via direct payments) and the NHS (continuing healthcare funding). One self-employed person included PA hours as a business expense when pricing work.

The disabled people involved in the study described a range of skills and attributes that they looked for in a workplace PA. Many were similar to those desired in home-based PAs (such as reliability, a compatible personality and an understanding of confidentiality, both in relation to their employer and the organisation in which their employer works), but relevant practical skills, such as driving, filing or use of particular computer software, were considered essential to facilitate the disabled person's work.

Some disabled people thought it was useful if their PA was familiar with how

their work environment operated (for example a school or theatre). However, this was not a universal requirement, and other disabled people expressed concern that a PA with work experience in a similar environment may be inclined to 'take over' aspects of their role.

BOUNDARIES IN THE WORKPLACE

Disabled people and PAs in this study expressed a range of views about what boundaries were appropriate and who was responsible for enforcing these.

Some disabled people involved were clear about how they wanted their PA to behave in formal work situations, and communicated this to both the PA and to colleagues. However, others did not have these conversations at the start, and several PAs talked in terms of developing a 'sixth sense' and taking 'cues' from the disabled person to know when it was appropriate to speak. There was a general feeling among PAs that these skills were often not recognised as part of their role.

Several of the disabled people involved acknowledged that the workplace PA could have long periods of inactivity when they were not required. Some were happy for PAs to read or study in these situations, while

others invited their PAs to get more involved in the work of the organisation. This invited boundary-crossing was more likely when PAs had some relevant skills or experience in the work area. However, others felt this was inappropriate, and, as noted, they were concerned about PAs 'taking over' some of the disabled person's responsibilities.

Confusion could arise when role boundaries were not clear. Examples given by participants included:

- colleagues misinterpreting the PA's role and asking them to fetch drinks or do filing;
- a manager trying to 'include' the PA out of politeness and the disabled person feeling excluded;
- a PA's role expanding beyond their job description, for example by being someone the disabled person could reflect on the day's events with on the journey home, or by becoming an 'unpaid proof reader'.

Unclear boundaries could provoke anxiety for PAs, particularly for those with little PA experience. Unclear boundaries could also affect colleagues' and managers' perceptions of the ability of the disabled person to do their job.



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The emotional work of boundary negotiation was not always recognised, but both the disabled people involved and PAs did talk about the relationship being 'intense' and how it could be important to have some time away from each other during the working day.

The workplace PA's position within the disabled person's organisation also affected the boundaries they encountered. PAs who were employed directly by the disabled person often had no acknowledged role in the organisation, meaning they could feel isolated and invisible in the workplace, and also could be denied access, for example to computer systems or buildings, which was required for their work.

The study found a lack of clarity in the responsibilities of the employers; for example, one employer, when describing a workplace PA, stated "they [PAs] exist but they don't exist", which can lead to a hands-off approach.

Where PAs were employed by the disabled person's organisation the relationship is fundamentally changed. The study found that PAs had more support, for example in supervision within the organisation. However, their loyalties could be divided between the needs of the disabled person and the needs of the organisation and conflicts of interest may arise if management of the PA is split.

Some of the disabled people involved expressed concern about the consequences of asking their manager or HR department for support with managing their workplace PA, worrying that they may be seen as a 'poor manager', which may affect their career prospects. Some employers assumed support was not needed.

Most of the disabled people involved in the study described how their own employers had little involvement in their relationship with their workplace PA. However, the employers in the study reflected they could have been

more proactive, for example by making sure the PA had an appropriate induction to the workplace, and asking the disabled person whether they wanted any support with managing their PA.

A RESOURCE TO SUPPORT THE WORKPLACE PA ROLE

A key finding of the research was the lack of guidance or support available for workplace PAs, disabled people using PAs and employers. The research team consulted with participants and other stakeholders to develop a resource to support the workplace PA role by suggesting a series of useful conversations to have with their PA and employer, and good practice tips.

Useful conversations to have with workplace PAs and employers include the specifics of the PA role; their support needs; the responsibilities of the PA, disabled person using the PA and the employer; how workplace policies and practices will apply to the PA; and guidelines for the PA's interaction with colleagues.

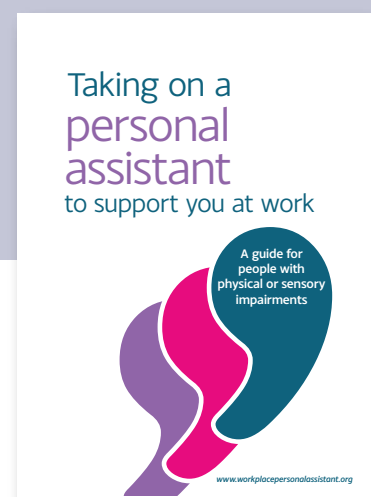
The good practice tips section for the PA focuses on the development of their skills; maintaining the boundary between their own role and that of the disabled person; and avoiding becoming a general resource within the organisation for other colleagues.

For disabled people using PAs in the workplace, tips focus on aspects of being a good PA employer, including working with colleagues to ensure the PA can do their own job well within the workplace.

Tips for employers include considering workplace PA policy and offering the disabled person support with their PA management role if necessary.

The full resource is available at:
<https://workplacepersonalassistant.org>

Hard copies in accessible formats are also available.



CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- With disabled people being under-represented in paid work, PAs potentially play a vital role in addressing this inequality. However, while there is information, advice and guidance for the role of PAs more generally, there is little available for the role of workplace PAs.
- To a degree, every job role, each employing organisation and disabled person requiring assistance in the workplace is unique and, therefore, there is no one, detailed way of managing a workplace PA.
- Disabled people involved in the study identified a range of responses from their employers to the existence of their PA, with often a lack of clarity over employers' responsibilities.
- The findings suggest that employers struggled to balance their responsibilities under the Equality Act (2010) to make reasonable adjustments to create inclusive workplaces and the disabled person's right to autonomy in their management of their PA. The hands-off approach may be perceived to be empowering, however it may also result in a lack of acknowledgement of the challenges of working with a PA in the workplace.
- In order to support the development of accessible workplaces it is important that workplace PAs, disabled people in the workplace and employers are clear about the role of the workplace PA. Conversations about support needs and the role of the PA at the start of the working relationship can help build understanding and supportive work environments.
- Managing a PA takes time and energy. Disabled people who employ workplace PAs do two jobs simultaneously – their own job, and management of the PA. This is often not recognised by their employer or colleagues, and little support is available for this management role.
- Disabled people involved in the study funded their workplace PAs through a variety of means, typically the Department for Work and Pensions' Access to Work scheme but also local authority social care and NHS Continuing Care funding. Disability support organisations reported a general lack of knowledge among disabled people of funding for workplace PAs.

TIPS

Resources produced by the study have set out a number of good practice tips:

For Workplace PAs

- Workplace PAs often work one-to-one with their manager so expect a close working relationship. This can take time to develop
- You need to have confidence and people skills to provide the best support
- Professionalism: be aware that you are representing someone in their workplace
- Respect and maintain role boundaries
- Keep alert and be prepared to be available to your manager when needed

For line managers who have employees with PAs

- Consider writing a workplace PA policy
- Keep your managerial focus on your employee
- Workplace PAs can feel isolated
- Offer ongoing support to your employee to be a good PA employer

Read more on the Workplace PAs website
<https://workplacepersonalassistant.org>

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NIHR School for Social Care Research
London School of Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street
WC2A 2AE

Tel: 020 7955 6238

Email: sscr@lse.ac.uk

sscr.nihr.ac.uk



STUDY TEAM

Professor Yvonne Birks, Dr Katie Graham, Jane Maddison (University of York), Dr Jenni Brooks (Sheffield Hallam University).

For further details please contact:

Dr Katie Graham
Department of Social Policy and Social Work
University of York
YO10 5DD

01904 321205

Katie.graham@york.ac.uk

Dr Jenni Brooks
Department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics
Sheffield Hallam University
S10 2BP

0114 225 5991

j.brooks@shu.ac.uk

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