Introduction

1. Argonaut Community Enterprises is a not-for-profit organisation delivering facilities management services and employing deaf or disabled people to carry out the various functions of domestic or commercial cleaning, gardening, laundry and ironing, renovations and refurbishments including painting and decorating, and PAT testing.

2. Argonaut was established in 2010 and of the current delivery staff all are deaf. Some of the staff also have other disabilities including vision, cerebral palsy and an undiagnosed learning disability.

3. We assess which staff need ATW support and work out what and how it needs to be applied. Of the 19 staff four have support and one is going through the application process.

4. Some of our team have had many years of ATW support and know when/how it is needed.

The application process

5. Because English is not the first language for some staff who need support the initial application is fraught with difficulties. Why do deaf people have to TELEPHONE to begin the application? Far better to use alternative methods.

6. The time for the advisors to gather the information they need is far too long. As an employer I am hampered by this because time is money and we are thus prevented from making progress in securing more business. Although our team is deaf, we work in a mainstream environment and constantly meeting with hearing people. Not having support in place quickly causes us to lose business.

7. Once in place the employee moves at a very fast pace and in keeping with what would be expected of a hearing person. This justifies we have made the right decision in our own assessment of the individual support needs.

8. During the negotiations for review or application we would appreciate that advisors are courteous to our team and their line managers. I have recently been informed that one advisor hung up on our Operations Manager – this is certainly out of order.

The review process

9. When the term is ended and a review is needed the ATW process asks for a completely new application despite the fact the job role is the same. As an employer it is difficult to understand why this happens especially when all the information is already on the ATW system. Needless hours are wasted with this re-application.

10. The time between submitting the information and the decision on support is running into weeks and months. One team member with additional disabilities that needs full support is extremely stressed with waiting for an outcome, knowing that our cashflow will be severely hit. Another team member has waited for EIGHT MONTHS for a decision on funding for extra hours to supplement the few he already has.

11. The team member with additional disabilities needs support full time (he currently works 21 hours a week). He was informed that his last decision was wrong and he should have had 10 hours plus 20% support and that the employer must provide reasonable adjustment. He
cannot function with this level of support. We already provide a huge amount of adjustment throughout the organisation.

12. When reviews are being undertaken it would expedite decision-making on further support if an assessor were to visit the place of work. Two of our team have requested this and been refused. Visiting would allow non-verbal and visual communication to take place, especially when deaf staff have difficulty in fully explaining their needs using English and also on the telephone via communication support.

13. When advisors learn that Argonaut is a disability (deaf)-focussed employment some of the questions seem inappropriate. We have been asked if staff can share their support. If an assessor visits they can see immediately that sharing support is not possible.

14. For both the application and review process we note there is an insistence on having named support people plus registrations to various bodies. In practice this is unreasonable. For some staff we try to maintain the same person for support and we firmly believe the support person needs to be one who the staff member is comfortable with and matches the communication needs. For other staff with more demanding roles this is simply not possible; a mixture of support is needed for the variety of tasks in hand. In addition working hours can vary from 7am to 9pm and stipulating that one interpreter is sufficient for that length of time is not feasible.

15. There is also a move to push hourly rates downwards. This is having a detrimental effect on the quality of support deaf staff use/need. I do not want our team to have to settle for support which they are unhappy with. ATW should also bear in mind that although we are aware of some unscrupulous interpreters we at Argonaut have enough knowledge of those we can trust and who charge a reasonable rate. We also know that for those interpreters the hourly rate has not changed in some seven or eight years so, in fact, their pay rates have diminished in real terms.

16. We request that ATW advisors respect the reasons and explanations that staff put forward in terms of what their needs are. We do appreciate it is difficult with a variety of needs but no two people are the same.

The actual support and payments

17. Once confirmation of support is received we very quickly put this into place and ensure advance booking is happening. Part of the reasonable adjustment is for staff to have time to book their support, complete forms and ensure all the checking has been done. This takes up time with the result that staff often decide to do this on a voluntary basis, knowing that undertaking these tasks in work time detracts from their job role.

18. We have noticed of recent that the payment processing has speeded up. This is to be applauded because, as with any employer, smooth cashflow is of paramount importance. The face we have a number of staff receiving support makes it even more important for us.

19. When support is finally in place we do not receive any ongoing advice and support from ATW.

Career development
20. We have noticed that if any of our team need support to undertake training the advisors have been especially blunt in refusing this, citing that the training providers should be funding the costs of the support. This is unreasonable, especially where providers are small companies and the cost of support is far beyond the course costs.

21. ‘Battling’ with ATW to provide funding and the delays in decisions has meant staff not being able to advance their careers.

22. Delays in decisions has meant cancellations on courses provisionally booked and also meant passing on qualifications which are essential to maintain the legal obligations of the organisation.

DWP Marketing of Access to Work

23. We have noted the roadshows to promote Access to Work to employers. As an employer who has experienced so many delays and difficulties in securing support I few this with distain.

24. I have attended several events and seminars over the last few years where Access to Work managers have presented. In each they have stated that for every £1 spent on Access to Work £1.40 is returned to the Treasury. Why, then, is it so difficult for deaf people to receive the support they so sorely need? Granted deaf people form the largest section of the allocated budget but communication is what enables the economy to function and deaf people are a part of this. Within the working deaf population there are highly skilled and qualified people, some with degrees and beyond, who have problems in securing work. Sometimes it is because of the employers’ attitudes and sometimes because employers are aware that securing access to work support for that person is fraught with difficulties. This needs to change.

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