Randstad Student and Worker Support response to the Work and Pensions Select Committee inquiry into employment support for disabled people via Access to Work (AtW)

This paper has been developed by Randstad Student and Worker Support, a specialist provider of support workers to individuals with disabilities, in response to the Work and Pensions Select Committee inquiry into employment support for disabled people via the Access to Work (AtW) scheme.

1. Introduction to Randstad Student & Worker Support:

1.1. Founded in 2002, Randstad Student & Worker Support is the UK’s leading provider of specialist support workers to students and employees with disabilities in both education and the workplace. We currently support over 17,000 individuals with disabilities in over 250 colleges, universities and employers, across the UK. Randstad Student and Worker Support is also part of the Randstad Group, a global staffing and recruitment business who works with Governments around the world on programmes to enhance access to work for vulnerable worker sectors.

1.2. This support is delivered through our national database of some 3,500 specialist support workers, whom are suitably experienced, trained, qualified and vetted to deliver specialist support for a range of disabilities and health conditions, including: Physical, visual, vocal and hearing impairments, specific learning difficulties (dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia etc.), mental health impairments, Asperger’s and Autism, as well as other health related conditions that may require or benefit from human support.

1.3. The support we provide is aimed at ensuring these individuals are able to stay in and fully participate in their education or work and are able to achieve their true full potential. The support we currently provide to employees in the workplace is funded via Access to Work (AtW), whom we have worked alongside for the previous 7 years delivering this type of support, as well as working on other joint initiatives in order to promote and progress the Access to Work (AtW) agenda.

2. Summary & conclusions of Randstad response:

2.1. Randstad feels that the current Access to Work (AtW) scheme offers real value for money overall, compared with other disability support programmes, however, it is not without its problems or blockage points. We have endeavoured to outline in this response some of the key benefits and problem areas experienced by Randstad and its’ stakeholders.

2.2. We have also outlined the following summary points of the key messages we would like to share in relation to the inquiry:

2.2.1. Access to Work would benefit by being expanded further both in terms of additional funding (as outlined in the Sayce Review 2011), as well as being promoted more directly and pro-actively to SME businesses, whom would really benefit from this valuable support/resource;
2.2.2. The application process and the integration with employers and employees would benefit from being reviewed, to allow employers to play a more active role in the process at as earlier stage as possible, in order to ensure that any support or recommendations can be implemented in a timely manner;

2.2.3. There needs to be better consistency and clarity over the rates available for support workers as there are inconsistencies of what is awarded over different parts of the country and for similar impairments/circumstances;

2.2.4. In addition to the above, it should be easier for employers to engage third parties in the provision of support workers, particularly where staff need supporting for more than 20 hours per week, as this is pushing additional and substantial burdens on the employer and can impact on the ability of the employer to be able to provide the right quality of support worker, if at all it can be provided;

2.2.5. Access to Work could be extended to support more people with mental health impairments and could be extended to support individuals that may be accessing other government schemes, such as Work Choice and Work Programme. Often, there is not sufficient scope for funding specialist mental health support through these programmes, however, with this support more customers would go on to sustain in their employment.

2.3. In summary, we feel that the Access to Work scheme generally does work, however, it needs better consistency in terms of application process, awards made and how support is arranged; earlier and more employer engagement; and much wider promotion and awareness building.

3. The AtW application and assessment processes, from the perspectives of employees and employer:

3.1. How accessible is the application process? Randstad has found that individual’s experiences of the application process varies significantly depending on the disability and support available. Some customers experience a relatively smooth process of application and award, especially those whom are able to easily access the on-line application process. The below two examples shows that there are inconsistencies in the feedback Randstad has received regarding the application process for different types of stakeholders/applicants:

Example 1 - Company:

“The application is so simple and employee focused. We undertake an assessment, if there is a diagnosis then the employee contacts ATW which then send someone into a review followed by recommendations. We contribute the first £1000 and there is a quick turn-around”.

Example 2 - Self-employed customer:

“My nickname for AtW is in-accessibility! I have to deal with lots of difference people due to staff changes in AtW so nobody knows my story, but I couldn’t do without it, in fact I need support to complete the application for support and to do the paperwork which eats into my allocated allowance. They are not flexible with the needs of my business either. I definitely couldn’t run a viable business without support”.

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3.2. Some customers experience delays in the process, which can have an impact on their ability to start or continue their employment. This experience can be affected by both the mode that they are able to interact with AtW Advisors (i.e. phone or on-line) as well as the knowledge and experience of the AtW Advisor about the individuals disability and the challenges this may create for them in their work.

3.3. Randstad has received some positive feedback from customers about the overall accessibility of the process due to the large number of assessments being conducted over the telephone, however, we feel it is important that adequate consideration is paid to the range of application routes as well as ensuring the chosen route is the most appropriate one for the customer concerned.

3.4. Is the employer perspective adequately taken into consideration? A number of organisations have feedback to Randstad through our review process, that they would prefer to have more involvement in the assessment and awarding process as it would support them to ensure recommendations are implemented effectively. Often employers are not aware of the application or award process or that an employee is going through the process until the award has been made.

3.5. Many employers would prefer to be involved earlier in the process in, order to anticipate what role they may need to play in it, to support the person through it and ensure that all recommendations are workable with their own systems and ways of working. For example, one organisation noted that certain software may be inaccessible with their hardware and systems, but alternatives may be available or more appropriate. There may also be more that an employer could do in terms of adjustments, if there were more effective three-way communication between AtW, the employee and the employer, both earlier and throughout the process.

3.6. Randstad has also had feedback from employers that there seems to be a big drive for employers to contribute more financially to the funding, particularly to the funding of Support Workers. An example of this can be found in the recent push for employers to recruit and employ their own Support Workers if more than 20 hours of support is required each week. Although this move towards employer contribution may be positive in supplementing the AtW funding available, this often has an adverse effect on all stakeholders by placing significant pressure on budgets and capacity within organisations.

3.7. There can be significant on-costs and wider implications of employers having to employ their own Support Workers directly. These include:

- The ability and knowledge of the employer to be able to recruit an appropriately experienced & qualified Support Worker;
- Insurance costs to cover the activities of the Support Worker;
- The time and financial resources required to advertise for, recruit, interview, select, screen and appoint the Support Worker;
- The time and financial resources required to manage and employ the Support Worker on-going as well as the expertise to monitor and quality assure the work they deliver;
- The additional cost involved in offering the Support Worker full access to all benefits and facilities of the employer, despite the fact they are often engaged in part time
and/or short term work. This also creates the issue that employers are not able to flex their approach if there is a change in circumstances – i.e. the employee with a disability leaves the organisation or goes off sick.

3.8. The above issues, mean that it is difficult for employers to recruit, employ and engage Support Workers though their own organisations and this can lead to delays in getting support in place, and in some cases, an inability to get any support in place – particularly where an employer may have a headcount freeze in place or may not be able to recruit a Support Worker due to local labour market challenges.

3.9. Randstad has also seen a case of a self-employed customer having to employ their own Support Worker directly, which put significant financial strain on the customer and their newly established business.

3.10. This approach also has a detrimental effect on the Support Worker as: they have no guarantee that they will be paid and secure in post; there is an increased risk that the Support Worker may not always get access to the basic statutory benefits or protections that they may be afforded by being engaged through a more robust system; and in addition, this approach also puts pressure on employers or Access to Work customers to recruit, train and manage specialist disability Support Workers- something which they usually don't have the expertise or quality standards in place to do.

3.11. In addition, the rates that is awarded for Support Workers by Access to Work, often does not reflect the true costs associated with recruiting the support worker, which leads to employers having to supplement these additional costs. This would act as a barrier for SME organisations and may dis-incentivise them from taking on applicants with disabilities.

4. The adequacy of ongoing support, both in terms of the aids, adaptations and Support Workers provided through AtW, and the help and advice offered by DWP:

4.1. Randstad’s experience has demonstrated that some DWP staff are very knowledgeable about disabilities and the potential support required for an individual, however, much feedback indicates that this is by no means consistent and widespread. For example, Randstad has witnessed a disparity between the funding awarded to two people with similar levels of hearing loss both doing the same job. We believe this is due to the assessor’s/advisors knowledge of the disability and the appropriate support required.

4.2. Further and more consistent training could be provided to DWP and AtW Advisors in order to ensure that there is both the right level and range of knowledge of disability across the country, as well as the application of a more consistent approach to the support offered/awarded.

4.3. The Sayce Report (2012) made a number of recommendations, including the expansion of Access to Work, which Randstad and its’ stakeholders support. Therefore, we feel that more should be done to action these recommendations, in order to support both the wider promotion of AtW as well as make it available to more customers/employers.
4.4. Randstad have experienced a number of situations where Support Workers have been recommended for Access to Work customers, however, the rate chargeable for this support has been set at such a level that it has been difficult and in many situations impossible to recruit and employ an appropriately experienced and qualified worker within the limitations of that funding. This often leaves the disabled customer without vital support, with a worker who is not of the correct standard to deliver to their needs or leaves the employer picking up the cost of the additional funding required.

4.5. We believe that additional money should be invested in to Access to Work as per the ‘Sayce’ recommendations and that this should be channelled in to providing adequate funding and suitable rates for support to enable employers to reflect and cover the true costs associated with the provision of specialist Support Workers.

5. The effectiveness of AtW in supporting people with mental health conditions and learning disabilities:

5.1. *Is the introduction of specific support for mental health issues proving effective?* These changes were welcomed, however, support has been predominantly provided over the telephone, which has been proven to be less effective than face to face support. In addition, take up has been poor and more needs to be done to advertise the support that is available.

5.2. Randstad believes that the economic cost of mental health is significant and can often be due to unemployment levels amongst this group of individuals. There are also significant impacts arising from sick leave and poor performance at work. Therefore, we believe that more targeted support and increased funding in this area would have a really positive impact on this customer group as well as the success and performance of the individuals, their employers and in turn the economy.

5.3. By providing tailored assistance to getting/keeping this group of people in work will ultimately pay for itself. For this group it can be best to access work on temporary assignments to start with to ease them into the working environment without the stress of the commitment of full time work. Therefore, a slicker and more flexible process for people getting short term support would enable real gains in this area.

5.4. We also feel strongly that there should be a review of what other government schemes could be complemented by Access to Work, such as Work Choice and Work Programme, as these customers are not able to access this funding while part of these schemes, however, often these schemes do not carry sufficient funding that would be required to provide the correct specialist mental health mentoring that may be required to keep those people in work in the long-term.

6. AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to: secure a job; stay in employment; and develop their careers:

6.1. *Is the current scope for AtW funding wide enough?* We feel that the scope of AtW is broadly sufficient; however, the key issue is that not enough people know about it, therefore, we feel more people could benefit from this vital funding if it were more pro-actively promoted. This particularly applies to SME businesses who have little or no knowledge of AtW and who would be the most benefitted recipients of such funding.
6.2. Has the inclusion of AtW for those moving into self-employed been effective? We feel that the changes made have been very welcome and useful. We have seen a large proportion of the people we support being self-employed and the funding and support put in place has a direct positive impact on the success of the individual and their business, with the obvious economic benefits this brings. However, Randstad is concerned that sometimes this support can put extra pressure on the self-employed individual in terms of knowing where to get the support and how to manage it, especially if they have are told they must recruit their own support worker. Therefore, more effective signposting to support organisations or providers is crucial in this area, as well as the ability to procure support through third party providers with relevant experience and capabilities.

6.3. What is the impact of AtW in supporting people to stay in work? We have seen numerous examples of where AtW has benefitted individuals and organisations on keeping people in work. We have attached two case studies in the ‘Appendices Section’ below, which demonstrate the impact AtW has had on some of our customers. We are also able to provide more on request should these be required.

6.4. In addition, in 2013 Randstad implemented a new process management system for all Support Workers to try and reduce absenteeism amongst Access to Work customers. Through our interventions, we successfully reduced staff absenteeism from 25% to 5%, and this has recently dropped to less than 3%. This demonstrates the really positive impact that AtW has on the individuals in keeping them in work when it is managed and monitored effectively.

7. The steps taken so far by DWP to extend AtW, including its marketing and funding of the scheme:

7.1. The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), amongst others argued that "ATW is the best kept secret in the DWP". In addition, The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) suggested that DWP needs to actively publicise AtW to disabled people, employers and intermediaries. The FSB believes that this should include GPs so they can alert anyone in work who develops a long-term illness or disability, to help them stay in work.

7.2. Randstad has worked with AtW and DWP to promote AtW awareness to Randstad stakeholders and clients (including over 35,000 SME’s) and this proved a success in terms of targeting specific groups of people and organisations, however, as per the point above, we feel more could be done to promote it further and widen the reach to new customers.

7.3. Specific on-line marketing campaigns could be run to keep costs to a minimum and this could be tagged on to the Governments current ‘Disability Confident’ Initiative to ensure employers are more aware of the scope and benefits of this funding.

8. Appendices – Randstad Case Studies

Appendix 1 - Randstad Case Study
Appendix 2 - Randstad Case Study
9. **Contact for further information:**

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