Written evidence submitted by Grant Thornton (ATW0288)

Executive Summary:

- Working with AtW as an employer and our experiences of the service
- Lack of clarity, understanding and consultation on the change of process
- Financial and time impacts to our business
- Enabling rather than prohibiting people who rely on the service to achieve high performance and progress their careers
- Our employee as a success story for AtW, showcasing what can be achieved with the right level of support

Introduction:

I have been working with our employee since November 2012 when he joined the firm following an acquisition. He is profoundly deaf and relies on a pool of interpreters in his role. His performance in role, promotion, relocation and building a new client base would not have been possible without the support received from AtW.

Only since working with him have I become aware of AtW and the support they offer to deaf people. The reduction in budget and 30 hour ruling came out of the blue and was not communicated to me, although I have made AtW aware that I am the main contact for our business.

Since hearing about this change to funding I have been trying to get clarity from AtW as to what has been agreed and how we proceed. I need to understand what the impact will be on us as a firm financially and consult with the business, giving them the options we have to continue to support our employee.

Up to this point the current arrangement has worked and suited both parties. Our employee is a great success story for AtW and other employers, this success would not have been possible without the support of AtW.

The AtW application and assessment process, from the perspective of employees and employers:

1. I introduced myself to AtW back in November 2012, as the main contact within the firm, I have then sent monthly claims for the last 18 months. Despite my best attempts to forge a relationship with AtW, I was not contacted about the 30 hour rule or budget reduction. I have not been called back since seeking a response to the level of support we have, I still have not received anything from AtW to date.

2. My understanding of the process comes from our employee, who keeps me informed of changes. As a business we should be consulted on any change and given time to think through our options, rather than assume the business will pick up the cost which AtW will no longer fund or that we are happy to recruit an additional resource.

3. I have had to make contact with AtW to ask what I should do with claims since 1 April. We have not received a written decision on future claims and therefore I continue to submit claims as I always have as I am unsure what I should be doing differently.

4. Whilst the budget agreed is still in question with AtW, the business are unable to make a decision on how we proceed, once confirmed we will need time to consult and decide how we can continue to support our employee.
5. The process of confirming the budget for 2014-16 has been frustrating, taking 6 months to arrive at a decision, although I still have not been informed of this decision verbally or in writing and I am unsure what happens next.

6. This change is a substantial difference to what has been working up until now and I do not understand how we can support AtW with this process without impacting our employee and his performance or on the business financially.

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:

1. Our employee receives no dispensation at work because of his disability. The support he has from AtW has enabled him to perform at the same level as his colleagues, which is important for us as a business and for him as an individual.

2. Our employee has been promoted and relocated from London to Leeds, establishing a new client base, which is not easy even without a disability. Commended by his manager as a valued member of the team, who has built great relationships with partners and directors, as well as supporting new trainees within the firm.

3. We use a pool of interpreters, whether this be for training, presenting to others or in a client meeting. With interpreters needing a break after 20 minutes we use two interpreters, rather than halt the meeting each time a break is required. Without this flexibility our employee would miss out on meeting content or we would risk frustrating clients and impacting on client time.

4. Our firm’s values, behaviors and language make up our brand and will help us achieve our future ambition and how we are seen in the market. The interpreters which we use have been coached in this area and are familiar with our employees’ role and responsibilities and are able to support him professionally.

5. On average we claim 106 hours / £3,890 monthly with an average interpreter costing £36 an hour. Based on 30 hours support per week this would equate to £4,600 per month, with AtW suggested a salaried person on £30,000 that would be a shortfall of £26,000. I don’t understand how we can make this work and how this can be viable to any business.

6. As a business I am uncertain how recruiting an interpreter would be achievable and would meet our needs, especially if Interpreters can earn more through short assignments and considering the on costs such as -

- pension and benefits
- maternity
- absence
- annual Leave
- CPD requirements
- travel costs
- cross charging to clients
- professional indemnity
- managing underperformance and ending contract

AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to: secure a job, stay in employment, and develop their careers:
1. How can AtW continue to support individuals and employers and achieve the success they have had whilst instigating this new process. This change not only has a financial aspect, it also has a time aspect.

2. Recruiting a full time interpreter -
   - prepare a business case to recruit an additional person into the team, review the on costs and management activities which will need to be picked up
   - spend time recruiting and selecting a full time interpreter This may be a tick box exercise just to demonstrate that there isn’t anyone with the right skillset, using chargeable time that could be spent with clients
   - increasing team size by one and additional workload on a manager who would be responsible for the interpreters performance, appraisals, goal setting, one to one’s and performance management
   - induction of new starter and achieving successful probation period, reviewing how moving from a pool of interpreters to one person works in reality, ending contract if not successful.

3. Continue to work as we do now –
   - claiming a maximum of £30,000 annually, with the firm picking up the additional cost of £26,000 annually
   - continued flexibility with the different skillsets required and enabling our employee to participate in meetings from start to end with two interpreters.

4. Consider whether the business can support the additional funding –
   - whether we are able to support the on costs and time to recruit and manage an additional employee
   - will the business pick up the additional £26,000 annually if we continue working as we do currently
   - will the role be at risk due to the additional costs on the business.

5. Our employee is forced to consider his employment and career –
   - unable to stay in role and achieve high performance without AtW financial support
   - unable to take on new projects and client work with limited support and therefore limiting his career progression
   - Our employee is out in the market (un-employed) searching for new employment within his chosen career path
   - using AtW to support his recruitment search and attending interviews, this will be a cost to AtW
   - difficulty in persuading a potential new employer they will need to recruit two people (one interpreter) and pick up the additional costs.

6. The above goes against how AtW are marketing themselves as supporting people to stay in role, develop their careers and reduce un-employment.

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

1. I hadn’t heard of AtW before November 2012. I assume, like me people will not be aware of AtW or the service if they don’t currently employ people with disabilities.

2. I would be happy to share our success story and experience prior to the change of process with others.

3. AtW could build better relationships with current clients, who could share their positive experiences with clients and other networks.
4. AtW should review the current process, as this is not supportive of reducing un-employment, retaining people in roles or supporting career development, this new process prohibits rather than enables people.

My Recommendations:

1. Continue with the current arrangement and be able to claim for full support, up to the number of required and agreed hours needed to perform the role to the same level as colleagues.

2. Not to burden employers with the need to recruit two employees to do the job of one, there is more to this to be considered than salary alone.

3. Market the scheme to make employers aware of its existence and build confidence in the support available when looking at employing people with disabilities.

4. Improve relationships with current clients, consult on changes and establish regular meetings. Develop service level agreements within the AtW on responding to questions and reviewing cases.

5. Simplify and improve the claim process, introduce online forms and signatories to speed up a paper heavy process. This is especially more difficult than it needs to be when the employee and employer are based in different offices and have to rely on post as email and electronic forms are not available.

26 June 2014