I have used Access to Work sporadically over the last few years, and have found it very very useful, certainly enabling me to stay in work, where without the supported funded through AtW my health would have deteriorated to a point where work would have been unfeasible.

However, there have been things that made accessing that support challenging, primarily the administration of applying for AtW.

I have a mixture of impairments - Dyspraxia and mild Autism along with chronic pain and impaired mobility caused by slight deformity of my hips and degenerative disc disease.

My Dyspraxia / ASC manifests in a range of sensory processing problems including auditory processing disorder. I have a very fragile working memory, so as my brain attempts to process speech, I can't file it at the same time. This means making phonecalls is very difficult - I often can't understand what people are saying over the phone, and even when I can, I won't remember afterward what has been discussed.

Being able to contact AtW by email was incredibly useful, in terms of access provision it was a vital means of communication. Having to go back to all contact with AtW being done by phone means I will struggle to manage my claims.

I have found AtW a truly social model benefit, providing support to work around barriers rather than focussing on what I can't do. I would love to see this continue, as if the support provided by AtW is diminished, the only people who will lose out are disabled people.

Disabled people are already significantly disadvantaged in the workplace. Disabled people taken as a population have lower rates of qualifications, and when in work earn less than the non-disabled population.

Whilst employers are legally obliged not to discriminate based on grounds of disability, and are obliged to make "reasonable adjustments" for disabled people, this can be very hard for people to navigate, and not all employers are enlightened or aware of what adjustments can work for people. Access to the law is expensive and hard to understand, so it isn't simply a case of each disabled individual being able to take discriminatory employers to court as needed.

Some of the support provided by AtW is very good indeed. I have had a support worker provided for when I've needed to travel for my job, and had a weighted vest funded which helps with reducing the effects of sensory overload, meaning I'm able to stay in the office for longer and can concentrate better, so I'm a more efficient employee. I've also had assistive technology provided, which is useful for reducing my error rate with written material.

However, there was a sense of a lack of understanding of Dyspraxia, offering solutions that would be well suited to someone with Dyslexia but I am not Dyslexic. Whilst there are considerable overlaps within the Specific Learning Difficulties,
Dyspraxia has a range of issues quite specific to it, and I feel AtW assessors would do well to improve their understanding of this condition.

There is also an issue with the funding of support workers, where a support worker may be required to be on hand for a range of tasks throughout the day, but the times they will be needed may not be certain. It isn't possible to always know when support is needed, so someone has to be booked for a full day to ensure that support is there without needing to worry about it.

If I am working away from my office, I may need support to be calmed down, or to navigate an unfamiliar area. It may be that I need to visit a theatre to check the backstage is accessible, and advise staff how to support disabled theatregoers. When I do this, I'll need to travel with someone, and they may help if, for example, the train is cancelled and the journey plan changes. Or when I get to the theatre I may need help finding my way inside. I can struggle to talk to strangers so I need to work with someone familiar. I can't know I'll need help for 25 minutes from 12:45, then 40 minutes from 15:00, and 15 minutes at 17:30! (For example).

Dyspraxia and Autism both frequently result in high anxiety levels, with a need for routine and advance notice of things to help reduce that anxiety. AtW letters and notices of claims coming to an end, as well as waiting times whilst claims are processed, and the uncertainty around whether a claim will be approved are not helpful for people with anxiety issues.

Clearer guidance of rough timelines for claims, as well as clear information of the full process would be invaluable for many people, including those of us on the Autistic Spectrum and with anxiety conditions.

I believe this would also benefit people with learning disabilities, and possibly people who experience fatigue and similar side effects from medication. Many disabled people, whilst not cognitively impaired by their condition, may be on medication that affects awareness and memory.

There seems to be a big lack of understanding that self-employed people can access AtW funding. As self-employment can be a way to ensure flexibility with hours and suitable working environment, I think it needs to be more widely publicised that AtW is available.

Self employed work is also a good way to try a new way of working out. I am a linocut printmaker in my spare time, and have started selling my work, with a view to hopefully making this my main source of income. However I am currently only slightly above breaking even, and so need to keep my part-time job on.

To be eligible for AtW for my self-employment I need to show this is a feasible job, but as I'm early in my art career, significant profit is unlikely! It may take me a couple of years at least to build up a customer base, learn which art fairs are worth me doing, develop my workshop leading skills etc. Whilst I do this,
however, I am no less disabled and no less in need of support, though I may not earn much.

There also needs to be a way for disabled volunteers to be supported. Voluntary work can be an excellent way to develop skills, test the waters in different fields, try out working to a routine etc. However, not all organisations that take volunteers on will be able to fully meet all of a potential volunteers' access needs, particularly as many organisations that use volunteers are operating on a shoestring budget.

One major failing of AtW is the length of time it can take to put support in place. Many employers will not be able to wait several weeks for a new employee to have appropriate support in place, and for someone who is in work but not having their access needs met, those weeks waiting for support can be a huge struggle, and health can suffer as a result of long waits.

Access to Work can be a fantastic scheme, and should be more widely available and better funded. It can really act to remove barriers to work for disabled people, and secondarily creates employment through both the infrastructure of the scheme, and through the employment of trainers, mentors, support workers and interpreters.

I strongly believe if there is any contraction in the Access to Work scheme the government is both shooting itself in the foot as fewer disabled people will be able to stay in work, and will be making yet another decision that actively worsens conditions for a group of people who already face systemic discrimination.

The government can choose to act to remove barriers to work for disabled people here. Challenging systemic discrimination should not be falling on the shoulders of those who already carry the burden both of that discrimination, and live lives that carry the challenges of impairment. As a government, you have the capability to lift that burden significantly, and not to do so is to shirk your duty. Those who have been placed in power by the country should use that power to better the lot of those with the least, and disabled people are amongst those both with the least, and who will struggle the most to change their own situations.

4 July 2014