

Businesses and disabilities: Removing stereotypes, supporting talent



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My journey to legal employment

- Identified as autistic aged nine
- Caused difficulties, but academically I was always high achieving. Reached King's College
- When attending open days/events I found no-one open about autism in the legal profession, even at disability-specific events. I could have decided it wasn't for me but instead resolved to change things
- Worked with disability consultancies, speaking to firms about autism, dispelling myths & offering practical information

My journey to legal employment

- Reed Smith showed most interest; I connected them with the consultancies and I advised them on their recruitment processes
- Obtained four internships. Reed Smith were the most disability-friendly. I felt comfortable there and achieved passing the assessments with highest scores in intake. Accepted the training contract
- I now advise several governmental, international, parliamentary and legal organisations on disability – demonstrating differences need not be a negative

Some organisations I've worked with



Member,
Contributor,
researcher



Equality Improvement
Champion, co-founder
& co-chair of Equality
Leaders Group



Winner –
Outstanding
achievement by
person on the
autistic spectrum,
2016



Winner, Matthew Hunt award
2016 (national dyspraxia award)



People's choice award 2014



First autistic chair, Youth Council



Vice-Chair and
ambassador for disabled
people

ReedSmith

- Carolyn Pepper launched Disability Task Force in 2012 to attract, recruit, retain disabled people
- Have made training contract offers to six disabled people 2013-15 – all accepted. Also recruiting disabled people in non-lawyer roles
- Overhauled recruitment processes to ensure fairness
- Held several disability-specific events to attract talented disabled people
- Won nine awards 2014-15 alone for our efforts

Other firms: Disability across London & the UK

- Professional services firm EY has set up several disability networks, including autism and stammering
- Law firms increasingly hosting disability events following Reed Smith's example
- More focus on autism – launch of new networks
- Focus helped by status of disability in the Equality Act 2010 – but also by more firms understanding the business case for employing disabled people
- Also progress among SMEs, but less so

What employees/applicants can do

- I've written blogs & articles focused on dispelling myths around autism while emphasising positives
- It's not true all people lack empathy, creativity and imagination. It is true many have high attention to detail, energy, loyalty, commitment to work/employers, and different perspectives on issues
- I've been up-front with employers as I want an honest conversation – but trust needs to exist first
- Open & honest about what adjustments I do/don't need and how I work best

What employers can do

- ‘Soft adjustments’ as important as physical/procedural adjustments, especially for invisible disabilities
- Inclusion as important as adjustments
- Demonstrate on website/materials you are open to disabled applicants – e.g. case studies of past/current employees, named email contacts
- Trust applicants when they disclose/request adjustments – they know themselves best
- Invest in responsible business

Any questions?