

Designing Inclusive Workplaces: A Persona Workbook for Employers

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Contact Count for Work (Disabled People)

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How to Use This Workbook

This workbook is intended to help you in your efforts to become a more inclusive and accessible organisation. It is guided by real people as each section in this workbook presents a persona that reflects patterns identified through conversations with disabled people.

The personas are not individual case studies. They combine multiple experiences to highlight common barriers and opportunities for inclusive practice.

Inclusive Employment Journey Map

The table below shows how the six personas relate to different stages of the employment journey. It illustrates how barriers can occur before recruitment, during recruitment, when starting work, and when trying to remain and progress in work.

The table can act as an inclusive employment journey map, which shows how the six personas relate to different stages of the employment journey. They illustrate how barriers can occur before recruitment, during recruitment, when starting work, and when trying to remain and progress in work. Together, these personas demonstrate that inclusive employment requires attention at every stage of the employment journey.

Employment Journey Stage	Personas and Key Themes
Preparing for Work / Transition	Ben – youth transition, supported entry routes, gradual start

Recruitment and Hiring	Amir – accessible recruitment design Helen – physical access and assumptions
Starting Work / Induction	Ruth – communication access and early adjustment conversations
Staying in Work / Sustainability	Aisha – fluctuating health and caring responsibilities Maya – mental health, housing and travel stress

You can use the workbook:

- In team discussions
- As part of management training
- During HR policy reviews
- In equality and inclusion workshops

Each persona includes:

- A short overview
- Key themes and learning points
- Reflection questions for employers

- Practical actions organisations may wish to consider
- Interactive exercises for each persona

Persona Section Format

Each persona section follows the same structure.

- Persona Overview
- Key Themes

3-4 bullet points highlighting the structural issues.

- Learning Outcomes

What employers should understand after exploring this persona.

- Reflection Questions
- Questions for discussion.
- Practice Considerations
- Possible areas for organisational change.

Personas With Learning Outcomes & Questions

1. Aisha

Aisha (42) (fluctuating health, caring, benefits, retention) is disabled, has fluctuating health, and is an unpaid carer. She has worked before but worries about income gaps and inflexible responses when her health or caring role changes. Staying in work depends on predictability, clear communication, and flexibility being treated as normal rather than exceptional.

Key Themes

- Fluctuating health and caring responsibilities
- Financial risk during transitions into work
- Sustainability of employment
- Importance of predictable flexibility

Learning Outcomes

After discussing this persona, employers should better understand:

- How fluctuating health and caring responsibilities interact with work expectations
- Why predictability and clear communication are essential for sustainable employment
- How financial uncertainty can discourage people from entering or returning to work

- How flexibility can support reliability rather than undermine it

Reflection Questions

- How predictable are working hours and expectations in our organisation?
- How do we support employees whose health or caring responsibilities fluctuate?
- Do our attendance or sickness policies allow for flexibility when circumstances change?
- How clearly do we communicate pay, hours, and contract conditions before someone starts work?
- Could greater predictability make roles more sustainable for more people?

Practice Considerations

- Flexible start and finish times.
- Routine check-ins rather than crisis conversations.
- Clear communication around pay and benefits interactions.
- Predictable scheduling where possible.

Aisha Exercise

Issue experienced: Fluctuating health and caring

Exercise: Risk Mapping

Ask participants to identify:

What risks might Aisha experience when moving into work?

Examples they might identify:

- Income instability.
- Caring responsibilities.
- Sickness absence policies.
- Inflexible schedules.

Then ask:

Which of these risks come from workplace design?

This helps employers see **structural barriers**.

2. Amir

Amir (41) (neurodivergence, recruitment design, digital access) is neurodivergent and wants to work, but recruitment processes often stop him before he gets started. Long online forms, unclear instructions, time pressure, and interview formats that rely on quick responses are major barriers, especially when applying on a phone. Small changes to recruitment design can remove significant barriers.

Key Themes

- Complex recruitment processes.
- Time pressure and information overload.
- Digital access barriers.
- Interview format expectations

Learning Outcomes

Employers should understand:

- How recruitment design can unintentionally exclude neurodivergent candidates.
- Why predictability and preparation reduce anxiety and improve performance.
- How small changes can significantly improve accessibility.
- That inclusive recruitment often benefits all candidates.

Reflection Questions

- How accessible are our application processes for people using a phone?
- Do our application forms require unnecessary repetition of information?
- Do we offer alternative application formats such as CV and covering letter?
- Do candidates know what to expect in interviews?
- Could sharing interview questions in advance improve fairness?

Practice Considerations

- Simplify application processes.
- Offer multiple application formats.
- Share interview questions in advance.
- Clearly explain interview format and expectations.

Amir Exercise

Issue experienced: Recruitment design

Exercise: Recruitment Stress Test

Ask participants to review one of their own job adverts or application forms and ask:

- Could this be completed on a phone?
- Is the process clear and predictable?
- Could someone complete this without time pressure?

Then ask:

What small change could improve accessibility immediately?

3. Ben

Ben (18) (youth, neurodivergence, transitions, entry routes) wants to work but feels stuck at the point between education, benefits, and employment. Busy environments, travel, and “all or nothing” roles are overwhelming, and there are very few paid options that allow a slow start. Supported, paid routes into work make it possible to start safely and build confidence over time.

Key Themes

- Transition between education, benefits and employment.
- Need for gradual entry into work.
- Sensory environments and travel barriers.
- Importance of paid entry routes.

Learning Outcomes

Employers should understand:

- The challenges young disabled people face when entering the labour market.
- How “all or nothing” job structures can exclude capable candidates.
- Why gradual and supported entry routes matter.
- How early work experiences shape long-term employment confidence.

Reflection Questions

- Do we offer entry routes that allow people to build hours gradually?
- Are entry level roles designed with flexibility?
- Could some roles be adapted to reduce sensory overload or public-facing demands?
- Do we offer paid opportunities rather than unpaid placements?
- How do we support young people transitioning into work?

Practice Considerations

- Gradual increases in hours.
- Supported induction periods.
- Structured routines.
- Accessible travel considerations.

Ben Exercise

Issues experienced: Transitions into work

Exercise: First Step Into Work

Ask participants:

If Ben applied to your organisation tomorrow:

- What role could he realistically start in?
- Could the hours build gradually?
- Could the environment be adapted?

This reveals whether organisations actually have **entry pathways**.

4. Helen

Helen (59) (physical access, assumptions, recruitment and induction) is a wheelchair user and expects to have to chase information about access. She has experienced assumptions being made about her ability before she can talk about her skills. When access details are shared as standard, it removes stress and shifts the focus onto the role itself.

Key Themes

- Physical accessibility of workplaces.
- Assumptions about capability.
- Lack of information about access.
- Burden on individuals to ask.

Learning Outcomes

Employers should understand:

- How lack of access information discourages applicants.
- How assumptions about disability shape recruitment experiences.
- The importance of sharing access information proactively.
- How planning access early reduces stress and barriers.

Reflection Questions

- Do we share practical access information with job applicants?

- Do candidates know who to contact with access questions?
- How confident are we that our interview locations are accessible?
- Are we making assumptions about someone's abilities based on appearance?
- How could we make access information more visible?

Practice Considerations

- Publish access information.
- Provide building and travel details.
- Identify access contacts.
- Ensure accessible interview spaces.

Helen Exercise

Issues experienced: Physical access

Exercise: Access Audit

Ask participants to imagine Helen attending an interview.

They should check:

- Building access.
- Transport.
- Toilets.
- Meeting rooms.
- Parking.

Then ask:

Would Helen know this information before attending?

5. Maya

Maya (early 30s) (mental health, housing, travel) has fluctuating mental health and lives in insecure or shared housing with little space to recover. Stressful travel and lack of rest mean she often arrives at work already depleted. Without early, routine support, small issues can escalate quickly.

Key Themes

- Mental Health Fluctuations.
- Lack Of Recovery Space Outside Work.
- Travel And Sensory Stress.
- Importance Of Early Support.

Learning Outcomes

Employers should understand:

- How external circumstances affect workplace capacity.
- Why early support prevents escalation.
- How rigid expectations can worsen mental health pressures.
- The importance of flexibility and safe conversations.

Reflection Questions

- How do we support employees experiencing mental health fluctuations?

- Do we provide opportunities to discuss support early?
- How flexible are start times or work locations?
- Do managers know how to have supportive wellbeing conversations?
- Are there multiple routes for staff to seek support?

Practice Considerations

- Flexible working options.
- Wellbeing action plans.
- Routine check-ins.
- Alternative support contacts.

Maya Exercise

Issues experienced: Mental health and environmental stress

Exercise: Hidden Barriers

Ask participants:

What external pressures might affect someone arriving at work?

Examples:

- Housing conditions.
- Travel stress.
- Lack of sleep.
- Caring roles.

Then ask:

- How could workplaces reduce the impact of these pressures?

6. Ruth

Ruth (61) (communication access, recruitment, trust) is Deaf or hard of hearing and is re-entering recruitment after facing redundancy. Past experience has shown her how damaging it is when communication access is overlooked at interview stage. When access is discussed early and handled consistently, trust is built and work feels more manageable.

Key Themes

- Communication barriers in recruitment.
- Inconsistent access support.
- Lip reading and environment design.
- Trust and credibility of inclusion policies.

Learning Outcomes

Employers should understand:

- How communication access shapes recruitment experiences.
- Why early discussion of adjustments builds trust.
- How small environmental changes can remove barriers.
- Why inclusion claims must be matched by practice.

Reflection Questions

- Do we routinely ask candidates about communication access needs?
- Are interview environments set up to support clear communication?
- Do our accessibility policies translate into everyday practice?
- How confident are managers in supporting communication adjustments?
- What processes ensure consistency across teams?

Practice Considerations

- Discuss access early.
- Ensure clear communication environments.
- Provide interpreters or communication support where needed.
- Maintain consistent accessibility processes.

Ruth Exercise

Issues experienced: Communication access

Exercise: Interview Simulation

Ask participants:

If Ruth attended an interview:

- Could she lip read the interviewer?
- Is the room well lit?
- Would questions be clear?

Then ask:

- What small adjustments would make the conversation accessible?

Reflections

Wrap up the workshop by reflecting as a team, what these personas tell us about inclusive employment.

These are our shared insights:

- Sustainable work depends on flexibility and predictability.
- Recruitment design can unintentionally exclude people.
- Access needs vary and may change over time.
- Small practical changes can remove significant barriers.
- Inclusive practice benefits everyone in the workplace.

What are yours?

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Appendix. Workshop Formats

1. Short Introductory Workshop (60–90 minutes)

Best for:

Busy employers, HR briefings, conferences, or introductory sessions.

Purpose:

Introduce the social model and show how workplace systems shape disabled people's experiences.

Structure

1. Introduction (10 minutes)

- Social model of disability.
- Purpose of the personas.

2. Persona discussion (30 minutes)

- Participants work in small groups.
- Each group receives one persona.

3. Group feedback (20 minutes)

- Key barriers identified.
- Initial ideas for better practice.

4. Key learning summary (10–20 minutes)

- Connect learning to the Good Practice Guide.

Outcome

Participants leave with:

- Awareness of barriers.
- Simple actions they can take.

2. Standard Employer Training Workshop (2 hours)

Best for:

Local authorities, HR teams, employer networks, leadership teams.

Purpose:

Move from **awareness** → **practical workplace change**.

Structure

1. Introduction (15 min)

Project background and social model framing.

2. Persona analysis (40 min)

Groups analyse:

- Barriers.
- Risks
- System design issues.

3. Whole group discussion (25 min)

Compare findings across personas.

4. Good practice solutions (25 min)

Use the **Good Practice Guide** to identify solutions.

5. Action planning (15 min)

Participants identify:

- One recruitment change.
- One workplace change
- One cultural change.

Outcome

Employers identify **practical actions**.

Contact

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