



Creative Access

Disability survey results.

2022



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# Introduction.

Our [Thrive report](#) in March 2022, showed worrying differences in career confidence and optimism by disabled\*, Deaf and neurodivergent respondents, particularly noticeable amongst those belonging to more than one under-represented group, for example those who were both Black and disabled. A follow-up survey in October 2022 revealed the shocking extent which disabled workers have experienced prejudice around access to jobs or progression opportunities in the UK's creative industries.

Some of the issues on employment of disabled people are common across all sectors; low levels of representation in the workforce, recruitment processes that regularly create obstacles for disabled job applicants, fewer opportunities for career progression meaning disabled people often remain in lower paid positions, and difficulties in getting employers to make 'reasonable adjustments' in the workplace. Disclosure – when and what to disclose about a disability or condition – remains a difficult decision for disabled people to make, particularly if living with an unseen or non-physical condition.

The nature of the creative industries can make all these problems more acute. The working environment can be fast-paced and often staff are on short-term contracts and working towards tight deadlines which are apt to change. Career progression is not as linear as in other industries and informal networking still plays a large role.

The results from the survey, although disappointing in many ways, are not entirely surprising and it is clear there are many challenges to address.

**Josie Dobrin**  
**Founder & executive chair,**  
**Creative Access**



# Executive summary.

**56%**

are affected by more than one category of disability (rising to 86% of respondents affected by mental illness and at least one other)

**1/4**

feel they have access to the contacts and networks needed to progress their creative career (vs 62% of general respondents)

**1/3**

feel they have the confidence they need to progress their creative career, with many describing negative experiences in the workplace contributing to this

**27%**

are optimistic about the opportunities for progression (vs 69% of general respondents)

**88%**

cited the two biggest barriers to their creative careers were:

- Employers' understanding of making adjustments to allow them to work better
- Awareness of disability issues amongst non disabled colleagues

**Over  
3/4**

said they would like:

- More flexible working
- Training for line managers in supporting disabled employees to thrive

**Many**

candidates choose not to risk disclosing their disability to potential or current employers

# The national picture.

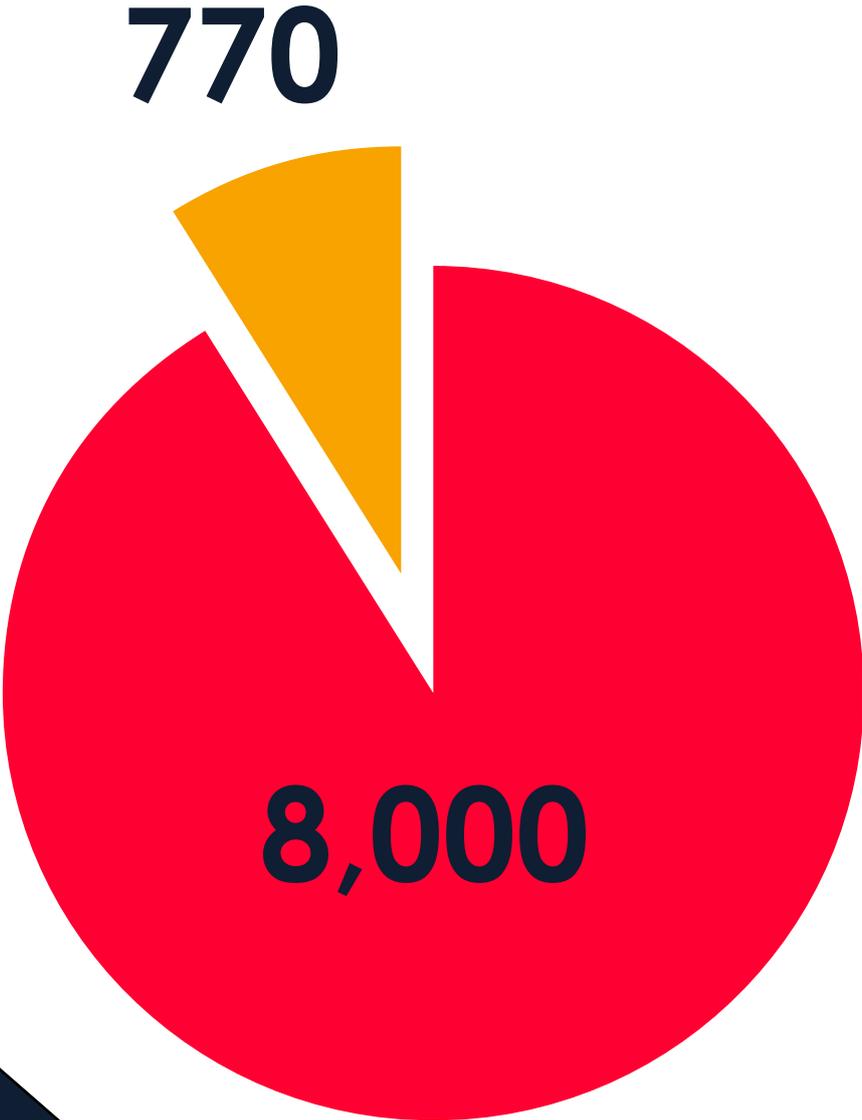
- 1 in 5 of the working-age population are classified as disabled
- More people are reporting a long-term health condition or disability than did so eight years ago, largely driven by an increase in mental health conditions
- Only 54% of disabled people are employed, compared to 82% of non-disabled people<sup>1</sup>
- The disability employment rate is lower for disabled people with a mental health condition or with multiple health conditions
- Disabled people are more likely to be working in lower-skilled occupations, self-employed, working part-time or working in the public sector
- Disabled people are more likely to be working in health, retail or education than other industries<sup>2</sup>
- 45% of workers with disabilities have concealed their conditions to increase their chance of securing a promotion
- 40% feel their colleagues valued them less after learning of their disability<sup>3</sup>
- The Equality Act 2010 states employers must make reasonable adjustments to support disabled job applicants and employees, this includes support progressing in work

1 ONS Labour Market Status of disabled people, May 2022  
2 All stats are according to the ONS 'The employment of disabled people 2021', 11 February 2022  
3 Samsung UK, May 2022



# Methodology.

We designed the survey in consultation with a disability consultant. This was sent to approximately 8,000 contacts on the Creative Access candidate database who had identified themselves as disabled, Deaf or neurodivergent. It was sent by email and completed via an online form during September 2022. In total we received responses from 770 candidates, a response rate of just under 10%.



# Responses.

## i) Type of disability

Respondents provided information on the broad area of disability or affecting condition affecting them and were able to select more than one category. In order of prevalence, their responses were:

Neurodivergence	417	54%
Mental illness	362	47%
Long-term illness or health condition	263	34%
Physical	161	20%
Learning disability	143	19%
Sensory & communication	67	9%
Other <sup>1</sup>	31	4%

**56%**

respondents to our survey selected more than one category

**23%**

selected three or more

**86%**

of those who selected mental illness also selected another category

**70%**

of those who selected neurodivergence also selected another category

The majority of respondents have a disability which is potentially invisible to employers (neurodiversity, mental health or long-term illness).

<sup>1</sup> Responses in the category 'other' included responses such as Hard of hearing/Deaf, Epilepsy, PTSD, Dyslexia, Cerebral Palsy, Stammer and Multiple Sclerosis amongst others.

## ii) Other characteristics

**75%**

are Black, Asian or ethnically diverse as well as being disabled, Deaf or neurodiverse (BAED)

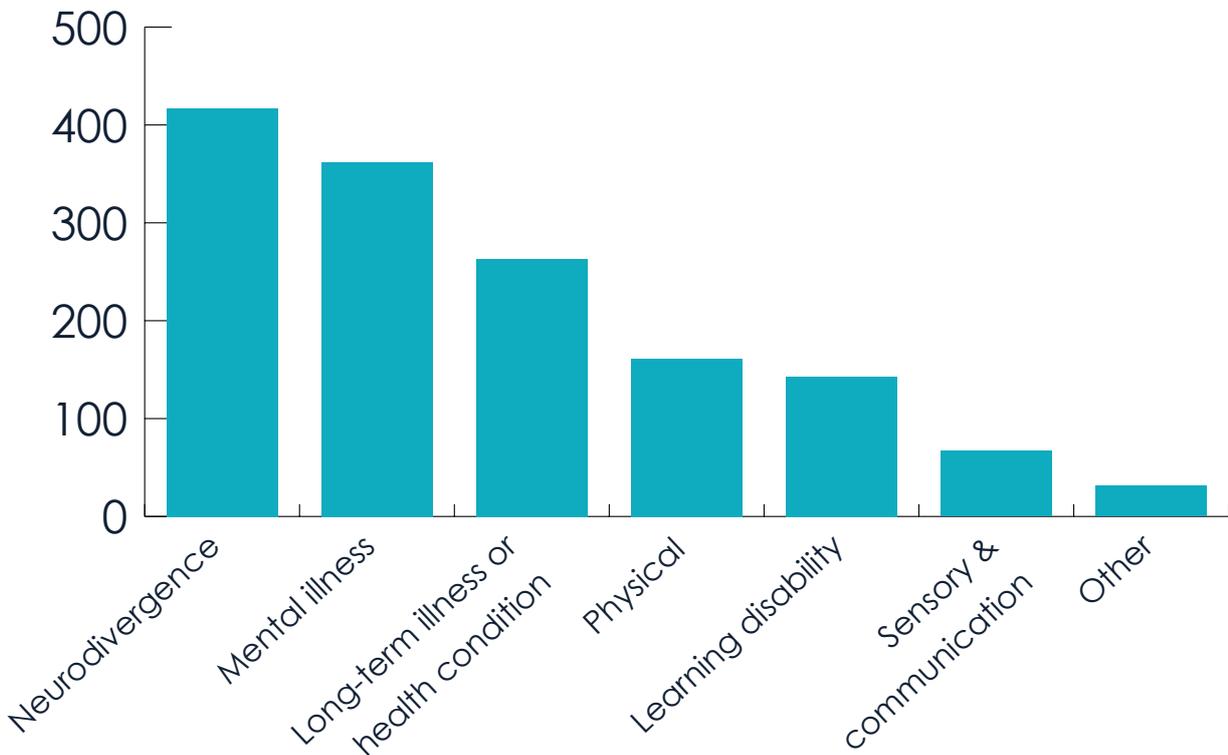
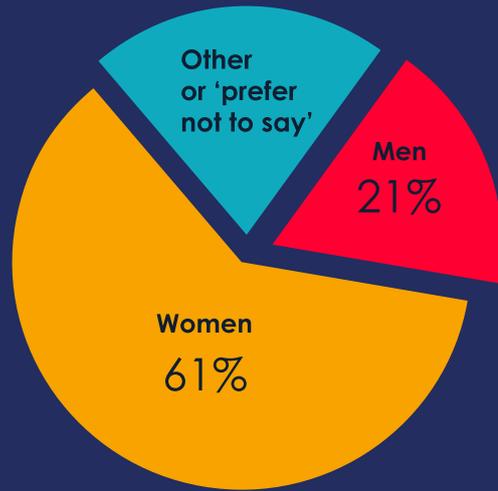
**59%**

from lower socio-economic status backgrounds

**13%**

are BAED, disabled and lower socio-economic status

This reflects our community of interns, alumni and applicants across the creative industries



# Results.



## Career metrics

We asked candidates to rate five key statements on their career prospects. These metrics are used across all our impact research work, to enable us to compare data sets.

The table below shows the percentage of respondents answering 'agree' or 'strongly agree' to each of these five key metrics. The second column is the comparative figure, taken from candidates in receipt of services from Creative Access, all of whom are from groups under-represented in the creative economy (this group is referred to as Thrive respondents in the table). This dataset includes both disabled and non-disabled candidates.

As anticipated from prior research, we saw significantly lower scores across all metrics from respondents to our disability survey, when compared to respondents from our Thrive report.

	% Disability respondents	% Thrive respondents
I have the knowledge and skills I need to progress my creative career	68	85
I have access to the contacts and networks I need to progress my creative career	25	62
I have the confidence I need to progress my creative career	32	69
I am optimistic about the opportunities for progression that are open to me	27	69
My organisation has a supportive and inclusive culture	34	64

Overall, the additional comments from respondents made for dispiriting reading. Many respondents expressed considerable **frustration at their career progression**.

"Not entirely optimistic about the opportunities right now, as they don't seem to be wanting me for interviews, but I do feel confident in my ability to deliver and progress my career. I just need the right opportunity that sees my value."

The **creative economy** in particular is seen as especially competitive, inflexible in its working practices and consequently inaccessible.

"I believe that it has taken me far longer to get here because it is almost impossible to progress in British creative industries especially if you have career limiting illness."

"I have epilepsy and driving is an issue for me. I've found some networks that are very understanding... but I still find getting jobs that have good hours of work quite difficult in TV."

Respondents also highlighted problems with **personal confidence**, often stemming from negative experiences.

"I struggle with confidence in my career - I feel defective and like everyone around me finds things easier. Work can feel like a battle for me."

Many respondents recounted experiences with **unsupportive organisations and managers**, ranging from lack of understanding and support to direct discrimination and even bullying.

“Ableist comments made by other staff members and a general lack of understanding towards disability have affected my career significantly.”

“It’s not nice when at work your colleagues see that you do something differently than the others and start asking questions. It makes us people with invisible illnesses extremely embarrassed.”

Survey respondents also expressed frustration at colleagues’ and managers’ perceptions of neurodiversity, long-term and mental health problems. Not only were these conditions often misunderstood, but respondents felt they **had to work harder to justify themselves** as having a disability, and subsequently needing or deserving adjustments.

“The reality is that I have had to work twice as hard to get to where I am now and actually, could do the job better in most cases due to my ability to retain knowledge and analytical thinking skills.”

This is significant in light of the comments by many respondents on the additional barriers faced by candidates as a result of **intersectionality**.

"I have worked incredibly hard to gain the knowledge and the skills that are needed to proceed in the industries that I am interested in - but, as I am also a working-class, first-generation student, some networks are simply not open to me the way that they are to others."

**Disclosure** was another running theme, with many candidates choosing not to risk discussing their condition with employers.

"I never mention my disabilities to anyone in the industry anymore. The moment I used to, I can see people lose interest, and opportunities fade away."

"As a woman with high-functioning autism, I often feel that, were I to disclose my disability, people would look upon me as not disabled enough, or they simply wouldn't believe me at all. I feel I may be overlooked in favour of other candidates."



Many respondents cited a **lack of knowledge and understanding** amongst colleagues and managers about their disabilities, placing them at significant disadvantage.



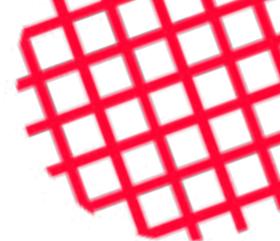
“I am openly neurodivergent in my office and despite me being highly competent, I am not being progressed. I feel lost.”

Respondents also provided information on the particular challenges faced by disabled people with regards to **building up networks of contacts**.

“It is difficult to network when I often struggle to understand social cues”

“To progress a creative career, my experience is that it calls for networking and ‘hustling’ which can be exhausting for people with mental health conditions and autistic people.”

# Perception of barriers



In the next section, we asked candidates about their perceptions of:

- a) The barriers to employment in the creative economy
- b) Whether they had been personally affected by these barriers

The barriers in the following table are ranked in order of the significance.

Barrier	% perceiving significant or very significant	% affected personally
Employers' understanding of making adjustments to allow you to work better	88	85
Awareness of disability issues amongst non-disabled colleagues	88	85
Unconscious bias regarding disabled people affecting recruitment and progression decisions	87	75
Line managers' knowledge with regard to supporting disabled members of staff	80	64
Willingness of employers to hire disabled employees	79	71
Line managers approach to supporting a team member with a disability or condition	77	76
Accessibility of workplace or working environment	76	64
Structure of the working week/day	75	77
Accessibility of transport system	64	49
Contacts and networks of disabled people	62	66
Understanding of legal duties under the Equality Act	61	66
Accessibility of communications and information systems	57	55
Work experience of disabled people	52	55
Confidence or resilience of disabled people	50	66
Lack of skills and competencies of disabled people	27	35

Overall, respondents feel:

- The most significant barriers lie within organisations, management and non-disabled colleagues
- Many of these barriers stem from lack of knowledge or unconscious bias, pointing to a need for improved training, especially for senior staff, line managers and those involved in hiring decisions
- Respondents see structural barriers in the flexibility and the accessibility of the workplace
- The least significant barriers are those which lie within candidates themselves, such as their confidence or skills

Patterns emerged of the interactions between **barriers** restricting candidates' opportunities to **thrive and progress** in their careers.

"Companies always act like your limitations are an inconvenience for them... I do my best to go above and beyond - even when it strains me physically. I'm dealing with constant chronic pain but still get the work done."

In particular, the attitudinal or structural barriers listed above were seen as negatively impacting respondents' **personal confidence**.

"It's easy to buy into the 'you can't do it because you're disabled' when in fact you could do it if the conditions were right."

Several respondents reporting **needing to work harder than others** to prove themselves, and suffering poor wellbeing and even burnout as a result.

“[If] you have a hidden disability and you can't deliver at 100%, let alone 80%, you are of no use to employers. Society has created a working environment in which even healthy people can't cope so how do we expect disabled people to cope?”

## Positive experiences

Where respondents reported positive experiences, these were largely because of:

- Line managers who had advocated for their welfare
- Being able to design flexible working patterns that suited them
- Colleagues and managers displaying a high degree of understanding of disability generally, and their needs in particular, including the impact of intersectionality

Even respondents recounting positive experiences often expressed a sense of precariousness.

“[My organisation had made] a lot of effort around disabilities. But it's mostly because I fell into the hands of an amazing manager. I'm worried things are 'lenient' while I'm entry level and as I go to my next role in career progression, they will want more from me and I won't be able to cope.”

# Improvements needed

We asked candidates what tactics they would like to see to improve the accessibility of the creative economy to disabled people. The items in the table below are ranked by the percentage of respondents selecting them.

Improvement	% selecting
More flexible working	81
Training for line managers in supporting disabled employees to thrive	76
Mentoring and networking opportunities for disabled people	74
Whole staff training on disability inclusion ableism	71
Positive Action Schemes aimed at disabled job seekers	71
Training for hiring managers on inclusive recruitment	71
Greater understanding of intersectionality	70
Reasonable adjustments to applications or interview processes	69
Improvement of Access to Work scheme for creative industries	66
Employers routinely asking about adjustment needs of all staff	64
Making online recruitment processes accessible	59
Dedicated budgets to allow for funding of adjustments	59
Greater awareness of legislation amongst employers	58
Leadership development training for disabled people	56
Existing leaders talking about disability more frequently	56
Positive role models	50
Creation and use of Disability Passports	34

- No single 'one-size fits all' solution was advocated – some people wanted to work-from-home, others wanted hybrid, and so on
- The highest ranked organisational tactic was flexible working; this theme was also strong throughout all the comments we received
- The most important thing was that employers be responsive to employees negotiating a working pattern that met their individual needs

Three of the top six rated improvements relate to training for non-disabled staff, either for whole teams, line managers or staff involved in recruitment and talent management.

There was relatively **low interest** in the idea of [Disability passports](#) and in general significant nervousness about this idea.

"I feel that if this were put into place it would make the workplace less accessible... Accommodations should be put into place without the need for a passport."

"I worry that disability passports would be used against the disabled person."

Some respondents expressed **cynicism** about these tactics and their ability to create real change.

"I feel companies advertise and talk about disabilities (for the good press) but then fall short on actually helping disabled staff thrive at work, there are also a lot of inclusion issues and a lack of training of staff to be more accepting."

Overall, the sense from respondents was that there is **insufficient action and accountability** coming from the sector. Suggestions for further interventions included.

“A comprehensive list checked and regularly amended of genuine firms that are not tokenistic that absolutely do everything to include disabled candidates.”

“Employers should be made accountable on why an applicant has been rejected”

“The only proactive help in my experience would be to create specific schemes and mentoring that provide a foot in the door. If you rely on recruiters to be inclusive, next nothing will ever happen. Recruitment practices have worsened over the years.”



The emphasis should not be on disabled people to make the change themselves. We are tired.

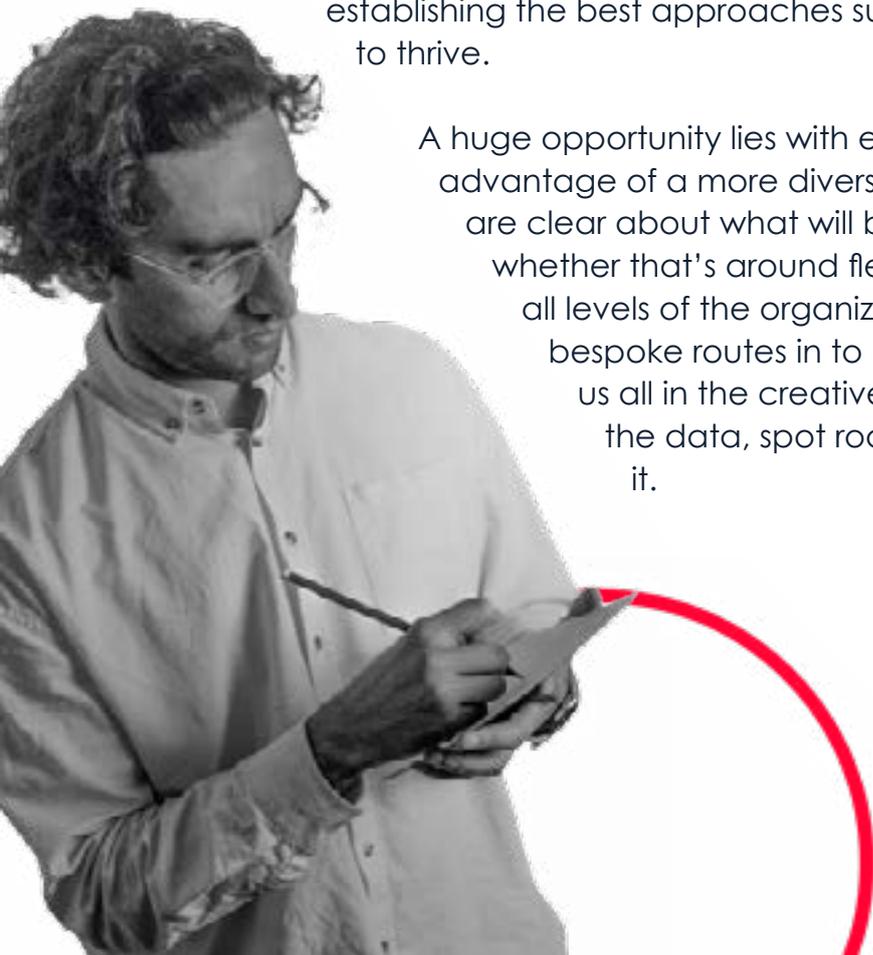
# Putting insights into action.

The reality is that we have a choice in who we choose to hire and to promote. Three quarters of our disability survey respondents said unconscious bias regarding disabled people is affecting recruitment and progression decisions. Sadly, even when these candidates make it into employment, they aren't given opportunities to take on a certain roles or to be promoted.

Whether we believe the research that the best performing teams are those with a mix of skills, experience and backgrounds - or whether we are driven by a constricted labour market and falling birth rates - there has never been a more compelling set of arguments and data for business leaders to hire and promote more disabled people and to create an environment in which they can truly flourish.

Whilst we acknowledge that the creative industries - in which disabled people are under-represented - do throw up many challenges, it also presents opportunities for companies to become trailblazer and lead the way in establishing the best approaches supporting disabled employees to thrive.

A huge opportunity lies with employers to gain from the advantage of a more diverse workforce. Disabled candidates are clear about what will best set themselves up for success, whether that's around flexible working, better training at all levels of the organization to support candidates or bespoke routes in to mentors. It's collectively down to us all in the creative economy to decide to listen to the data, spot room for improvement and act upon it.



# 1. Actions for Creative Access



As a consequence of feedback also collected regarding Creative Access services, we have already began implementing numerous changes to the way that we both recruit our own staff and how we support other organisations to recruit. This includes exploring the following:

- Modifications to how we recruit our own staff and the support we provide for existing staff to progress
- Use of imagery in presentations, in marketing material and our website
- Sharing examples of good practice to implement throughout the organisation
- Ensuring a more realistic picture of life in the creative industries is created at outreach and events and specifically for individual roles being recruited
- Encouraging and supporting candidates within our community to set up their own (online?) networks, to discuss the issues they care about, share the challenges they face and offer support and advice on 'what works'
- Focus group work to further interrogate accessibility of CA services and what can be done to improve this
- Consider a bursary scheme ringfenced for disabled candidates
- Explore a ringfenced mentoring programme for disabled candidates



## 2. Actions for candidates

It is clear that whilst it is incumbent on employers to improve their processes, there is also a need for individuals to take responsibility for ensuring that they are armed with sufficient knowledge about potential careers organisations for whom they seek to work:

- Take responsibility for investigating types of roles available in the creative industries and the reality of the work involved with each one
- Understand the exact nature overall you are applying to and whether or not it may be suitable for you
- Consider whether or not to disclose your disability to help manage expectations (both your own and of your potential employer)
- Before disclosing any information on an application form or in interview make sure you show that despite your particular condition, you can carry out the role as set out in the job description; give evidence of other achievements as proof of this
- Go with solutions that you know work for you and that demonstrate you can carry out the tasks expected of you, albeit with adjustments in how you carry out those tasks, compared with non-disabled employees.



## 3. Actions for employers

There is a pressing need for creative employers to improve access to and support progression within the sector.

- Base your approach on universal principles that benefit the entire team, so disabled people do not always require differentiation; foster respect and curiosity about what enables all staff to bring their true selves to work
- Review use of imagery, fonts and colours in presentations, marketing material and websites for accessibility and disability compliance
- Audit your staff to ensure hiring and line managers (including third party recruiters) sufficiently understand their legal duties towards disabled people as set out in the Equality Act 2010
- Audit policies and procedures around recruitment, training and promotion to flag up any barriers
- Consider making adjustments to your application procedures regarding forms, interviews and communication around the recruitment process
- Undertake appropriate [team training](#), e.g. on embracing neurodiversity, mental health or disability equity to ensure staff are more aware of what 'reasonable adjustments' can and should be made
- Consider running a Positive Action scheme specifically aimed at recruiting disabled people

### Useful links

- [Disability & Employment | Factsheets | CIPD](#)
- [The Employment Toolkit for Job Seekers with Disabilities - Differently Wired](#)
- [Employability toolkit - BeyondAutism](#)
- [Equality Act 2010: Duty on employers to make reasonable adjustments for their staff](#)
- [The 4 types of discrimination: what every employer needs to know](#)



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