



Cardiff Business School  
Ysgol Busnes Caerdydd

# Legally Disabled? The career experiences of disabled people working in the legal profession

## Conference report

Prof Debbie Foster  
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# **Legally Disabled? The Career Experiences of Disabled People in the Legal Profession in England & Wales: Conference Report**

## **Introduction**

Our conference took place on the 24th January 2020 at the British Academy in London. It launched the findings and recommendations of nearly three years of research led by Cardiff University, which gathered data from focus groups, interviews and questionnaires to document the experiences of disabled people working in the legal profession in England and Wales. This was a unique piece of research, funded by a consortium of disability rights organisations (DRILL) and led by disabled people for the benefit of disabled people.

Across the course of the day we welcomed close to 100 delegates and speakers from across the legal profession and third sector organisations. These included disabled legal professionals, employers and a range of professional bodies, regulators and stakeholders. Our speakers, panel and workshops set the scene for productive and vibrant discussions on how we can take the recommendations of the research forward and influence change to create a more inclusive, accessible and disability-friendly legal profession.

One aim of the conference was to create a platform for the voices of disabled people to be heard and for this reason the vast majority of speakers were disabled people in the legal profession and we opened up debate to everyone in the afternoon so that audience members could contribute to discussions.

Our research team has continued to work with our partners, the Lawyers with Disabilities Division of The Law Society and the Diversity and Inclusion team at The Law Society, to build on the conference and disseminate research findings more widely. Before Covid-19 hit in the UK we had organised a series of visits to firms, regulators and meetings with groups in organisations and in regions of The Law Society. Some meetings have gone ahead remotely, but others have been postponed and we hope to resume impact activities in full when this crisis is over. One of the purposes of compiling this post conference report is to keep events and recommendations 'live' in people's minds and sustain momentum. We have received so much positive feedback from those who attended the conference we want your help in ensuring that the work we have done so far can be built upon in more positive times.

This report sets out the key themes that emerged from the discussions and workshops and provides additional resources to support practical measures to improve policies and practices across the profession.

Our thanks go to our partner, the Lawyers with Disabilities Division of the Law Society and our Research Reference Group, all of our conference speakers and contributors, funders,

stakeholders and the British Academy for their support.

Further information and updates about our research can be found on [www.legallydisabled.com](http://www.legallydisabled.com)

## **Conference highlights**

Jane Burton, Chair of the Lawyers with Disabilities Division (LDD) of The Law Society opened the conference. She commented on the fruitful partnership the LDD had forged with the Legally Disabled research team and outlined how the research provides a platform for the voices of disabled people in the legal profession to be heard. Citing the rigorous methodology used in the research, she believed this creates an evidence base that disabled people's groups in the profession can draw on and cite in policy debates. The research report, she commented, highlights many obstacles that disabled professionals face at all stages of their career and gives concrete data for organisations to understand the lived experience of disabled people in the profession.

Evidence from 'legally disabled' highlights how a person's impairment or health condition is not the key limiting variable in their work. It is practices, traditions and other people's attitudes and misconceptions about disabled people that block their career progression. Jane reflected on how the report demonstrated how disabled people often had an "arsenal of qualifications, to be taken seriously as a candidate worthy of competing with their non-disabled peers" and yet still were often not provided with opportunities or literally able to get through the door.

Finishing her welcome, Jane called on the audience to understand that "reasonable adjustments are not benefits, they are statutory rights; they must be implemented to break down the barriers... It is now the responsibility of the profession to hear these voices and take positive action."

## **Keynote speech**

Robert Hunter, founder of City Disabilities and a solicitor advocate with over thirty years experience in Magic Circle Firms, opened his speech with the message that as a disabled lawyer, he had found the report very cathartic to read.

He described his education experiences as a child with dyslexia and progressive hearing loss and the strategies he employed to get by, which included concealing his impairments. At the start of his career in the early 1980s, concealing his deafness enabled Robert to get hired and prove himself in the job before his colleagues 'cottoned on to it'. He found himself being asked to provide proof that his hearing wouldn't deteriorate any further in order to be considered for partnership. Were he not able to demonstrate this, not only would his progression be obstructed in that firm but it would likely see him unable to get a

positive reference to be employed anywhere else. He talked about how he effectively “called their bluff” by providing the requested report and demanded that the issue not be raised again, implying he would leave if it was.

After being made a partner, Robert then faced the challenge of gaining clients. Deafness and networks, dinners and cocktail parties do not mix. So, he specialised as a fraud lawyer at a time when the conference circuit was starting up. By organising and speaking at conferences on international fraud, he became known as a leader in that field, bringing the work in.

By the mid-1990s, Robert was unable to ‘get by’ and conceal his hearing loss and so started using transcribers. After transferring firms as a senior equity partner, the traditional working environment made life much harder. Work involved frequent international travel which led to his PA, who also transcribed for him, becoming exhausted and ill. When he requested additional assistance, he was told none could be made available. Further negotiations bore no fruit so Robert declared that he would pay for an additional PA from his own pocket. The firm responded to say that they would provide the assistance but this would be removed if he didn’t improve keeping his time sheets. “They would take away the means to do my job. A bit like saying, as I said to them, we will remove your wheelchair if you fill in your time sheets wrong.”

Robert has also faced his deafness being used as a leading feature on publicity when he has been invited as a speaker, when ultimately, it should be up to him to choose if, when and how he wishes to share this information with an audience.

Throughout the examples given, Robert identifies the fact that he was not afforded his dignity in the way that he was approached by others. He pointed to aspects of tokenism where disabled people are inappropriately feted as ‘inspirations’, or seen largely as disabled instead of being seen primarily as a lawyer.

Robert concluded his speech with the following statement, “Can we not just have the simple grace and dignity to let these people do their jobs? We have all got issues, we have all got differences, you might call some disabilities, but we all make reasonable adjustments for each other, we all help each other within reason, it really is as simple as that.”

## **Presentation of research findings**

The research findings were presented as a dialogue between the Legally Disabled researchers, Prof Debbie Foster and Dr Natasha Hirst. The full research report and the executive summary of findings and recommendations can be downloaded from the website at [www.legallydisabled.com/research-reports/](http://www.legallydisabled.com/research-reports/)

Prof Foster introduced the context of the research, co-produced with disabled legal professionals in order to give a voice to this group who she described as largely 'unexpected' and, therefore, not catered for in the legal profession. The research centred on the experiences of disabled legal professionals, not firms, managers or other stakeholders. The data collection consisted of eight focus groups, fifty five face to face interviews and two surveys that gathered nearly 300 responses.

For many interviewees, it was noted that this had been the first opportunity they had encountered to talk about their experiences. Interviews, in particular, gathered a great deal of very powerful and often emotive testimony that the researchers hope will motivate senior leaders and decision-makers to take steps to create real change for disabled people. Many of the findings reinforced what disabled people already know of their experiences in the labour market, but some findings also emerged that had not been anticipated. The key findings from the research were then discussed by the researchers:

### *Entering the profession*

- Personal Injury or Medical Negligence cases in childhood brought individuals into contact with the legal profession, providing contacts, experience and sparking an aspiration to go into law.
- In some cases, settlements and compensation provided the resources needed to ensure that individuals had the support in place to remove day to day barriers outside of the working environment.
- Positive university experiences empowered confidence and the expectation to be treated fairly when applying for training and jobs.
- 59% of solicitors and paralegals were disabled when they entered the profession.

### *Recruitment agencies:*

- Fewer than 10% of disabled people using legal recruitment agencies had a positive experience.
- Individuals reported being filtered out or important information not being passed onto employers, creating difficulties in interviews.
- Use of AI that is based on a non-disabled 'ideal' worker screens out diverse applicants.

Researchers spoke about how organisations can make an easy change by improving the information given on their websites for disabled candidates. They also stressed that employers are responsible for ensuring that the recruitment agencies they use are instructed to adhere to inclusive and disability-friendly equal opportunities policies.

The research was interested, not only in examining experiences of joining the profession, but of experiences of progressing within the profession. It was felt that not enough disabled people were visible in senior roles and unless this could be rectified it would be difficult to provide mentors and role models. Some of the reasons for this under-representation were explored in relation to research findings:

*Career progression including leadership roles:*

- Rigid working practices, rooted in tradition and a lack of willingness to implement even simple, inexpensive reasonable adjustments.
- Poor understanding of the Equality Act and the ways in which reasonable adjustments can be applied to location and hours of work and job descriptions.
- Adherence to an 'ideal worker' concept (which is usually based on certain characteristics: socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity, and is ableist) that many people can't meet.
- Expectation of physical networking a disadvantage for many, and lack of willingness to look at alternatives such as writing articles, using social media or building contacts through voluntary work.
- A need for more disabled people to reach leadership roles to increase representation and opportunities.
- The use and application of billable hours and a long hours and presenteeism culture created barriers for many disabled people.
- Organisations can have strong policies but if this is not cascaded down with training, they can be implemented inconsistently from manager to manager.

Researchers discussed how reasonable adjustments should be an integral part of recruitment and promotion processes, but often are not. This includes criteria that can be flexible to draw upon talent and individual strengths, allowing individuals to perform to their best. One problem discussed was that there is still a reluctance to disclose because of fears of discrimination or stereo-typing. For example, the research found that some people, once they did disclose they were disabled were given work that was unchallenging and impeded promotional prospects. Researchers called this 'misplaced paternalism'.

Exploring their findings on disclosure more closely researchers discussed the following:

*Disclosure:*

- Over 90% of respondents surveyed had an invisible impairment but disclosure rates remain low, preventing individuals from requesting reasonable adjustments.
- A positive, proactive approach encouraging an open dialogue enabled individuals to secure support and progress within their roles.
- The role of HR and senior leaders in addition to Diversity and Inclusion professions is crucial for setting and promoting good practice.
- Variable experiences with Access to Work but it can provide advice and insights on common reasonable adjustments.
- Lack of clear routes to disclose and request support, especially with the Courts.

A culture change it was argued, is needed in many organisations, where a 'safe' environment would facilitate more individuals to disclose. The research found that even after 25 years of disability employment legislation too few conversations about disability were taking place in workplaces. There was also a need to better understand, discuss and utilise positive action and positive discrimination. Disability legislation differs from other legislation on protected characteristics because it allows for positive discrimination, acknowledging that people's experiences of impairment and disability can be very diverse. The analogy of the shackled runner was referred to: this illustrates how not everybody starts the race equally and applies to disabled people who may experience barriers getting to work, managing fatigue and pain, planning ahead in detail; all tiring processes before they've even reached their desk.

The researchers went on to discuss their findings on ill-treatment. This term was used in questionnaires and interviews to describe a range of common negative behaviours towards disabled people that go beyond the legal definition of discrimination:

*Ill-treatment:*

- High levels of ill-treatment were a shocking finding that had a significant impact on people's careers and physical and mental health. Rates of reporting ill-treatment were low.
- Ill-treatment is a form of ableism - equivalent to racism and sexism - and occurred in many forms, including a refusal to provide reasonable adjustments and the assumption that everybody is non-disabled.
- Good work is already done on discussing mental health and that learning could be applied to wider disability workplace issues.

There is a need to retain institutional knowledge about disability to learn from previous experiences of providing reasonable adjustments and support to ensure a smoother process for disabled people in future.

Researchers also discussed the role of disability networks and disabled people's organisations in supporting good practice. The research found disabled people often reported feeling isolated and marginalised, not knowing other disabled people in the profession or within their employing organisations. Stigma around declaring a disability made this isolation worse and disability networks were vital in addressing this.

### **Panel discussion: How can the legal profession lead change and influence a more inclusive culture?**

Chaired by Yasmin Sheikh, Lawyers with Disabilities Division and founder of Diverse Matters.

Speakers: Jonathan Fogerty (Solicitor), Demi Rixon (LDD/paralegal), Faisal Sadiq (Barrister), Lizzie Hardy (Trainee Solicitor)

The speakers shared the impact that disability has had at various stages of their careers, highlighting the barriers they had encountered and identifying solutions for inclusion.

#### **Barriers**

##### ***Courts:***

- Instructions being received late and court papers not available in time.
- The need for additional preparation and planning to ensure access and reduce costs e.g. for travel, or parking near the court.
- Physical access to courts and 'tools for the job' e.g. carrying folders, bags, robes, taking separate entrances for access, security concerns, persuading staff to help, inadequate seating and broken lifts.
- How to determine what is accessible and for whom? The need to think ahead to what barriers may arise and how to mitigate or seek support. Disabled professionals are often unexpected and it can be difficult to obtain contact with courts, creating a barrier to securing provision and thus representing clients effectively.
- Hearings moved about to different courts, trying to secure accessible courtrooms, long hearings and expectations to uphold traditions in the courtroom.
- Lengthy waits at the courts whilst provision is sorted, adding to billing time.
- Striking a balance between putting up with inadequate access or seeing a drop in work and billing and consequently reducing the ability to move Chambers and progress career.

##### ***Entering and progressing in the profession:***

- Very little thought given to applying reasonable adjustments for trainees such as flexible working or part time training contracts.
- Learning how to manage a condition that is variable and seeking to develop coping strategies and ongoing conversations about requirements. Recognising limitations and building confidence to negotiate appropriate reasonable adjustments.



- Getting hired, securing reasonable adjustments for interview and work environments.
- Dealing with attitudinal barriers and intrusive questions which lead to tension and subsequent non-disclosure and lack of support. Diversity between disabled people is poorly understood.
- The challenge of having to upsell disability to overcome ignorance or poor attitudes or surprise that a disabled candidate is present.
- Invisible impairments not well understood, nor the challenges outside of work time such as care and PA support that can absorb time and energy.
- Billable hours culture, lack of imagination to find solutions and environmental factors creating barriers linked to an assumption that everyone fits a mythical vision of an 'ideal lawyer'.

### **Positives:**

- Previous experience of the legal profession, through personal cases or work experience.
- In Personal Injury, disability is often seen as a positive quality but there are wider skills that should be valued across the profession.
- Skills developed as a disabled person including empathy and ability to build rapport, organisational skills and ability to multi-task or focus.
- Understanding how to use the provisions in the Equality Act 2010, and utilising Access to Work support.
- Developing confidence and positive mindset to have constructive conversations with employers to request adjustments.
- Demanding schedules can make it difficult to take care of physical and mental health.

### **Tips to increase inclusivity**

- Flexibility with job design, positive communication and open discussion about disability and maintaining a continuing dialogue.
- Individuals to identify strengths use this in their arguments for reasonable adjustments. Use of reasonable adjustment passports, to include provision for fluctuating conditions.
- Training for HR, professionals and senior management, publicising how accessible firms/employers are, implementing and raising the visibility of networks. Acknowledge there will be disabled people in the workforce already and improve confidence to disclose.
- Firms to publicise access facilities and disability policies on their websites and social media platforms, including photos of their office.
- Redesigning job descriptions to work to strengths e.g. instead of in-person networking, seek other forms to attracting business.
- Organisations need to overcome the reluctance to change to encourage the 'best people to do their best job', and consider how to bring improve the working culture.

- Encourage disclosure and be the most 'authentic self' at work. Roles models and champions encourage others to come forward and know it is safe to seek support.
- Part-time training contracts and flexible opportunities for trainees.
- Thinking carefully about the nature of work. Think proactively about managing your time and fitting in activities that are essential for maintaining the best possible physical and mental health.

## **Workshops**

### **'All Bar None' – Barristers' workshops**

Chair, Daniel Holt

Bar Standards Board – Amit Popat and Ben Burns

Bar Council - Sam Mercer and Faisal Sadiq

Participants in this session Were invited to help the BSB to translate the findings of “Legally Disabled?” into strategic action. The BSB is currently developing its Equality and Diversity Strategy for 2020 to 2022 and reviewing the Equality Rules of its Handbook. As the regulator of the Bar, it is keen to learn from participants' expertise by engaging them in discussion on how to best influence a culture at the Bar that is inclusive for disabled practitioners.

- For the BSB to make a strategic commitment to “Nothing About Us Without Us” - engage disabled people in a targeted Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) of our Equality Rules and run an event led by disabled people for all staff at the BSB, to influence best regulatory practice.
- Produce case studies on disability across a range of impairments.
- Include disability as a key part of our qualitative research about discrimination, bullying and harassment at the Bar.

### **'Getting in' - the challenges of qualifying and creating inclusive recruitment practices**

Chair, Jane Burton, LDD. Jane Hatton, Evenbreak and Richard Ceeney and Vaibhav Adlakha, Reed Smith

This workshop set out to explore the challenges of getting into the profession and how to creative inclusive recruitment practices that break down barriers. In setting the scene, Jane Hatton talked about the tendency for employers to feel that they had to get everything right before employing disabled people, leading to non-disabled people trying to guess at what disabled people may need. The Legally Disabled research has been disability-led and for employers to improve their workplaces, it is important that they involve disabled people in identifying issues and solutions. Good practices for disabled

people can have a wider benefit for others in a workplace.

The audience was invited to share the barriers they had experienced in getting into the profession and dealing with recruitment. They then identified possible solutions, outlined below.

Barrier	Solutions
Difficulty in attracting disabled candidates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive action (advertise in specialist disability journals and on specialist job boards)</li> <li>• Make it easy to request adjustments for recruitment process</li> <li>• Give overview of recruitment process in adverts</li> <li>• Highlight good practice, policies and case studies</li> </ul>
Candidates' negative perception of recruiters/law firms as employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work in partnership with other organisations (disability organisations and others who are doing well in this space)</li> <li>• Celebrate and share good practice (diversity awards, case studies of successful disabled employees)</li> <li>• Share figures on disability pay gap, number of disabled employees at all levels, rate of declaration, etc.</li> </ul>
Recruiters' negative perceptions of disabled candidates and poor awareness of RAs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change narrative around disabled candidates from one of 'pity', 'charity' and 'problems', to one around skills, talent, additional qualities and perspectives</li> <li>• Emphasise the benefits of employing disabled people</li> <li>• Train recruiters in conscious/unconscious bias, and disability awareness</li> </ul>

<p>Prescriptive entry requirements and inflexible job design</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scratch them!</li> <li>• Review job design to be more flexible (e.g. remote working, flexible hours, part-time hours), allowing job carving to play to people's strengths</li> </ul>
<p>Assessment process and poor access</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audit process for potential barriers (in conjunction with disabled people) and remove/reduce barriers</li> <li>• If using online tests, remove time limits</li> <li>• Offer guaranteed interviews for disabled candidates who meet the minimum criteria for the role</li> <li>• Avoid psychometric tests</li> <li>• Focus on strengths</li> <li>• Objective, standardised, strength-based assessment</li> </ul>
<p>Other</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make reporting on disability (pay gap, number of disabled employees at all levels, rate of declaration, etc) mandatory</li> <li>• Make inclusive recruitment and employment practices mandatory</li> <li>• Share 'Legally Disabled' report widely, within and outside legal profession nationally</li> <li>• Involve disabled colleagues throughout</li> <li>• Improve disability policies and seek Disability Confident accreditation</li> <li>• Legal profession to consider it's own disability quality standards</li> <li>• Educate clients and lead by example</li> </ul>

This was followed by city firm, Reed Smith, outlining how they sought to improve their recruitment practices to be more inclusive and increase the number of disabled applicants.

They recognise that there is still room for improvement and this is an ongoing learning process for the firm.

Reed Smith were able to influence culture change through:

- Visible role models
- Networks
- Sharing experiences
- Mentors, including reverse mentors
- Raising awareness

**Reed Smith's recruitment process:**

- Started their programme after 2012 Paralympics
- No quota
- All CV's are looked at by firm
- Unconscious bias training for staff
- Strength based interview segment is "unsympathetic" ie the interviewer doesn't try to influence the answers, enabling the interviewee to shine
- Regularly audit recruitment processes to maximise diversity
- Minimal use of screening except in relation to answers to questions set by Reed Smith
- Ask all applicants about their mitigating circumstances, which includes any reasonable adjustments
- Collaborate with Barclays to recruit neurodiverse students with e.g. autism, to offer 1 week's work experience at firm and 1 week at Barclays
- Recommend outreach programmes i.e. with schools

**Reed Smith's disabled lawyer's experience:**

- Minimum academic grades are a given (i.e. 2:1)
- Important to fit in i.e. it's a 2 way process for the firm and applicant.
- Know what can/cannot do e.g. some tasks can't be accommodated or need to be delegated.
- Imposter syndrome often felt by a disabled lawyer; remove the "dis" from their own mind.
- Important to understand how a disability increases mental stress
- Each person is unique so job descriptions must accommodate this

**'Getting on and getting up' - supporting progression and disabled people in leadership**

Chair, Prof Debbie Foster (Cardiff University), Robert Hunter, (City Disabilities), Nina Tulloch (Hogan Lovells) and a statement from Katia Ramo, (CMS).

Robert Hunter set out how his experiences motivated him to set up City Disabilities in 2011. This is a network of mentors and mentees including lawyers, bankers, accountants,

PAs, civil servants, consultants and more. City Disabilities gives free talks to students and to employers about the experiences of employing disabled professionals and provides an independent and free service matching mentors with disabled students and young professionals coming into the City.

Nina Tulloch described her experiences as a legal professional. Nina acquired an impairment early in her career. In seeking to progress her career and manage her health, she sought the advice of a partner who attempted to match her with a disabled mentor within the firm, but couldn't find one. After being introduced to Robert and mentored by him, Nina later became a mentor for City Disabilities. She sees mentoring as a two way process that she learns from too as well as being able to offer support to young disabled professionals to build their confidence and skills to progress.

Katia Ramo's story can be found in the Appendix.

**Issues identified by the audience**

<p><b>Regulators and legislation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could/should the SRA do more to influence career progression, such as disability pay gap reporting, compulsory disclosure of protected characteristics by employees to firms (voluntary at the moment)</li> <li>• Work more closely with TLS (which represents lawyers)</li> <li>• Increase the balance of 'stick over carrot', to encourage improvements and to enforce compliance, investigate reports of poor behaviour and introduce sanctions if minimum standards are not complied with.</li> <li>• New guidance and a Bill to the House of Lords on mandatory pay gap reporting in in the pipeline.</li> <li>• SRA should consider a whistle blowing portal to report poor practice and disability discrimination in legal settings for both clients and employees.</li> </ul>
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<b>Firms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compulsory appointment of a disability adviser within a firm</li> <li>• Disability representation on staff council</li> <li>• Move away from the billable hours model to include other relevant contributions, or project based outcomes</li> <li>• Other diversity strands are covered by initiatives and schemes, but rarely disability</li> <li>• Under-representation of disabled people in senior roles and leadership is needed from the top to change culture</li> <li>• Need to improve understanding and creativity around reasonable adjustments including targets and progression criteria</li> </ul>
<b>Other</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behaviours such as out-grouping and bullying, behavior that is exclusionary but not formally discriminatory need to be addressed and requires culture change</li> <li>• Judges in courts not complying with the law, poor example, and individuals lack of awareness of own rights</li> <li>• Courts being inaccessible</li> </ul>

### Summation

Rhian Davies, Chief Executive of Disability Wales, reflected on the discussions that had taken place through-out the day. The Legally Disabled project was chosen by Disability Wales to be funded and for this reason Rhian was the most appropriate person to provide a summation.

In the context of it being the 25th anniversary of the Disability Discrimination Act Rhian began by saying: "It's quite extraordinary and really quite shocking to be hearing how the legal profession, of all professions, rather than being the flagship profession spearheading good practice and implementation of the disability sections Equality Act, is flouting them in many cases, ignoring the legislation and rights due to disabled people." If disabled lawyers are unable to advocate and secure rights and progression, then what chance do other disabled people have?

The Legally Disabled project was funded by the Disability Research into Independent Living and Learning (DRILL) programme, a five year, four-nations project which has funded £3.5m of research produced, all co-produced by and with disabled people. The purpose of the programme is to find solutions about how disabled people can live as full

citizens and take part socially, economically and politically. A hugely competitive process, only 10% of applications were funded. Legally Disabled stood out as a groundbreaking project that could have a positive impact on disabled people's independent living choices, including the world of work. The Legally Disabled team is made up entirely of disabled people, enabling genuine co-production which has been effective in giving disabled people a voice.

Rhian made a strong argument for disabled people to be at the centre of change for it to be meaningful and effective. She argued that Identifying as a disabled person may be a very individual experience but the research demonstrates that there are many common barriers and shared experiences, saying:

“It's important to identify these shared experiences, whether they are physical, attitudinal, cultural, or even based on common misconceptions and stereotypes, that by recognising the barriers, it's then possible to integrate them into policy and practice, and ultimately depersonalise them.”

Finally, she concluded that disabled people in the profession have arrived where they are through “determination, ambition, tenacity and problem-solving skills that are ideally suited to a successful career in the legal profession”. It is, therefore vital to trust and listen to disabled people and to exercise the same imagination in finding solutions for the workplace that disabled people employ in their everyday lives.



## **Appendix:**

### **Getting on and up**

#### **Disability and career progression – Katia Ramo**

This article was published first in The Lawyer on 15 March 2019. It is re-published with permission from Katherine Ramo and CMS. Our thanks go to Katherine for her support for our conference workshops where we discussed career progression for disabled people in the legal profession.

Women Against Adversity: from PTSD after an Afghan tour of duty to City law with CMS CMS tech associate Katherine (Katia) Ramo: “At the most vulnerable time, I changed not only my career but my whole environment.” 15 March 2019.

In 2005, in Washington DC as I read Mary Oliver’s poem Wild Geese, these lines stuck with me:

*“Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting — over and over announcing your place in the family of things.”*

As much as the poem’s imagery was uplifting, I was numb. I did not want the life I found myself in. It was frightening. A life I did not know and could neither fathom nor comprehend. The inner voice I heard told me: What world? What place? What family of things? I was reeling from a slue of unrecoverable losses, or so it seemed given the succession of misfortunes I was experiencing. I was being treated from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and vision loss triggered by onset of traumatic incidents during a 14-month civilian tour of duty in Afghanistan. Top this with finalising divorce proceedings, accepting the end of a career and grieving the loss of many lives of close friends, colleagues and local staff that took place within a span of few weeks.

At the time of these life-altering changes, I was not a lawyer. I was a contracts, subcontracts and grants manager responsible for a portfolio of \$100m for a high-profile international development project that aimed to rebuild Afghanistan’s economy. I accepted the assignment as a natural progression of a highly successful career in international development, working on international acquisition and assistance projects in various sectors including investment and export promotion, financial services, environment, women in development, infrastructure, micro-lending and judicial reform. This involved working in Washington DC and in the field globally on behalf of the US State Department, USAID, the UN, the IMF, the World Bank, foreign governments, donor agencies and non-governmental organisations.

Coping and managing these changes took a herculean effort. I used music, poetry, art and mindfulness to mend mind and spirit. 'Know thyself' is a wise adage to live by. I knew that I had an active mind. I needed to give it a purpose, a raison d'être in so far as not to dwell on the losses and look to the future even when at times there was none.

At the most vulnerable time, I changed not only my career but my whole environment. I moved from Washington DC to London on my own living a new set of terms of reference as a person with disabilities. I took an LLM in International Comparative Dispute Resolution at Queen Mary University of London. I did the GDL and LPC at the University of Law.

In 2010, while completing my legal studies and after few years of elusive debilitating symptoms, I had genetic DNA testing at Addenbrookes Hospital in Cambridge where I was diagnosed with a rare genetic condition called Stickler Syndrome which causes vision loss, hearing loss and affects the joints. It has no cure. How could one envisage recovering from this long string of losses, despair, grief and excruciating physical pain? Especially when in my case I did not even have a support structure of my family to turn to.

Whilst the diagnosis came as a relief since it offered an answer to a mystery, it was at a cost. Stickler Syndrome presented a new set of challenges in my life compounded by the impact of the credit crunch. I struggled with fears and doubts: Will I be able to find a training contract, train, qualify and practise? Stephen Hawking's steadfastness fuelled my own. The law needs a sound analytical mind and as long as my mind functions, I will continue. I set my own resolution to succeed and vowed to disclose all my conditions in my training contract applications.

I trained and qualified with CMS as an energy lawyer and later changed my practice area. Currently, I practise as a transactional lawyer in technology, media and communications. I advise on corporate, commercial and telecommunication regulatory matters. I am also completing a PhD in International Law. The support on my way to qualification from the universities I attended, CMS as well as the Society of Visually Impaired Lawyers, BlindAid and select close friends, made a difference. In 2015, my life was even brightened when I was matched with my Guide Dog Cora, who became the First Free Dog in the City of London since 1237. She is a source of continuous vigorous joy.

Being re-engaged with life through the legal profession has become my homage to my friends and colleagues I lost in Afghanistan. It is a form of healing. Their work and sacrifices are always remembered and at the heart of my global diversity work especially for persons with disabilities. The legal profession gave birth to the advocate in me and heightened my sense of discernment to fight moral disengagement and the oppressive forces of discrimination and bigotry in any form. It gave me courage to become active in diversity, found and chair the CMS ENABLE Disability and Wellbeing Network, Co-Lead

on Interlaw Disability Forum Enable (dis)Ability Network and be member of the United Nations Stakeholders Group on Persons with Disability.

It is the legal profession's inherent pursuit of fairness and equality that gives us a special courage that makes us heroes of our own life stories, irrespective of circumstances, to speak up against inequities and inequality and to foster change whether in legislation, business practices or against archaic societal norms.

On International Women's Day, in a year where we are celebrating the first 100 years of women in the legal profession and the United Nations is holding its High-level Political Forum (HLPF) to assess progress achieved so far since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals of September 2015, the dreams and hopes are abound to see more fair representation of women in leadership positions and with equal pay.

On a personal note, I humbly share few things with Dr Ivy Williams, the first woman to be called to the English bar in 1922 after the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 came into force. Dr Williams came to law as a mature woman and became disabled by losing her eyesight as an adult. These labels of being mature, disabled, and woman then and now clearly show they were never a deterrence for success. As such, I wish to see more meaningful change in the lives of lawyers with disabilities in relation to increased utilisation of disabled talent in visible leadership roles especially in private practice and judiciary as well as enjoying better inclusion practices to ensure retention. To sum it all up – we cannot choose the cards we are dealt but we can play them wisely by finding purpose within ourselves, looking beyond limitations, rising above bigotry and being of service. And that is how my wild geese of adversity helped me find my freedom, and, in the words of Stanley Kunitz, to

*“live in the layers, not on the litter. Though I lack the art to decipher it, no doubt the next chapter in my book of transformations is already written. I am not done with my changes.”*

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