

Talking purple

Purple talent meets virtual reality David Caldwell

Last year the Government announced an ambitious programme to halve the disability employment gap and shortly afterwards launched a Green Paper to solicit insights from businesses, charities and individuals on how best to achieve this. There's been no formal output from the Paper, but there is a sense that the challenge ahead is huge.

While workplace adjustments certainly play a huge role in enabling people with disabilities to get back to work, for too long – in my view – they've been focused on people with physical and visible disabilities, leaving people with non-visible disabilities, such as mental health issues, autism and cognitive disabilities, with little or no real support. I believe the biggest challenge the Government faces isn't getting people back to work, it's ensuring that workplaces can support people with non-visible disabilities, as without this, they'll never reach their targets.

It's a topic that resonates with me and one I'll be writing about in the Talking Purple column in future issues. In my day job as a Digital Accessibility Manager, a campaigner for mental health issues, and a line manager of a colleague with mental health issues, I've been

'Statistics show that 81 per cent of UK adults now own a smartphone'

disappointed in the lack of support and tools available to assist people in the workplace with non-visible and more complex disabilities. It's what's prompted my interest in how new technology and companies entering the assistive technology industry, are shaking things up and forcing everyone to think differently.

You may have noticed that virtual reality (VR) has become an increasingly hot topic in the news, with some of the world's largest technology companies heavily investing in developing the technology, and the cost of consumer versions of the technology

becoming cheaper and more accessible. What you might not have been aware of, is that there is increasing research and evidence that this technology could have the potential to fundamentally change how we support people with certain non-visible disabilities.

For example, research is showing that people with anxiety conditions can be supported in managing their anxiety by using VR to experience situations which cause them anxiety and that they can be supported in a safe environment to overcome or reduce their anxiety and develop coping strategies to support themselves outside the virtual environment.¹ The University of Oxford, which completed a meta-study of over 1,000 studies about mental health and VR, concluded that there is potential for VR to provide a step change in how people with mental health issues are supported.¹

It's also possible to look at conditions like PTSD or eating disorders and see the potential opportunity that VR presents to support these individuals back into the workplace. For people with PTSD, VR offers a real opportunity to have exposure to settings and situations which cause a flashback or trigger a memory of a traumatic experience.

While there's less research into the use of VR to support people with autism, it nevertheless shows real potential. In 2014, Autism Speaks, a leading autism charity in the US, published an article demonstrating how virtual environments can provide opportunities for people with autism to develop social skills and brain activity through the use of safe and monitored environments.² The positive research shows that the future potential is there for VR to be used to help people with autism to practise situations in order to reduce anxiety and build understanding of how to deal with real-life situations.

Statistics show that 81 per cent of UK adults now own a smartphone.³ This amazing level of penetration has provided a real opportunity to support people with non-visible disabilities to get back into the workplace, including those with mental health

issues, through applications such as brain training. The pace of change within technology is phenomenal and while we're not quite living in the space age imagined by 1950s cartoonists and *Tomorrow's World*, we are getting close to realising the benefit of technologies like VR and robotics. With this pace of change, it's easy to get left behind and it's particularly easy for governments and those recommending assistive technology or adjustments to overlook the potential of future technology. With ambitions to reduce the employment gap looking difficult to achieve, it may not be long before everyone starts to pay more attention to what the future of assistive technology for people with non-visible disabilities will be and to take a more active role in helping them back into the workplace.

References

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