

Making a wheelchair work in the workplace



Getting yourself into work on a Monday morning can be difficult enough for many people. But it can be particularly challenging, when living with a mobility difficulty. Starting a new job or returning to work can seem daunting - especially if you've only recently started using a mobility aid like a wheelchair.

We spoke to Nick Atkinson, an ombudsman at the Financial Ombudsman Service – the free service that can sort out your money problems - to find out how his wheelchair works for him in the workplace.

Hi Nick, can you tell us a bit about you experience as a wheelchair user?

Sure! Most people assume that using a wheelchair must make a huge difference to your life - and in some ways it does. I am a wheelchair user and have been since the age of 16. Odd though it may sound, I don't think too much about my situation – it's not important why I'm a wheelchair user. I simply prefer to get on with life. I've never thought of myself as different to everyone else. So I went to a mainstream school and had a pretty normal upbringing, an approach to life I'm continuing now that I'm a father.

So, how did you become an ombudsman at the Financial Ombudsman Service?

I decided I wanted to go to university and the opportunity to go to Cambridge came up. I never thought that I would fit in at Cambridge with the type of people who I thought would study there. I soon changed my mind after visiting and I'm glad I did. My experience taught me to never assume because you're in a wheelchair you won't fit in.

I graduated with a law degree and took a year off to relax after three years of hard work. I then went on to work as a solicitor

for 15 years until I decided I needed a change. A number of possibilities arose, but I saw an advert for a position as an 'ombudsman' and was intrigued. I looked in to what being an ombudsman meant and thought it would be great to have the opportunity to resolve money disputes between consumers and businesses. I get to move away from the legal jargon and provide straight forward, plain English solutions to problems that can often be complex or distressing. It's very different to being a solicitor.

How does being a wheelchair user affect your day-to-day life?

At work it doesn't make a difference. For me, it's always been about people's attitudes and I'm lucky to work in a place that's in line with my approach to life, in terms of my positivity. If an employer is positive about disability then they'll focus on what's important, like your skills and experience, sorting out the practical matters isn't a big deal.

It's often the day-to-day things that you wouldn't expect to have such an impact that can have the biggest effect. My local authority, for example, was difficult about providing support so I could get out and socialise. They simply couldn't understand why I wouldn't want to just sit at home all the time. And more recently, I was told I'd have to wait an hour before I could go into a major tourist attraction because they only allowed "one wheelchair in at a time" – "health and safety" I was told!

I'll often turn the tables when I face barriers like that and ask if the person in responsibility would accept what they are saying. It's surprising how often that changes their attitude.

What has been the best moment of your career so far?

My first victory in court as a solicitor will always stand out in my mind. Now, I find it very satisfying getting a case where a consumer has a genuine problem which the bank or business has not dealt with properly – and being able to put that right for them. Being able to tell a consumer, who has been trying desperately to battle against a big bank that I agree with them – and hearing their relief – is pretty high up there as a highlight.

What would your advice be to a wheelchair user returning to work?

It's not easy finding a job at the moment and it's made harder if you have a disability. Focus on the employers with a good attitude. It can be difficult when you get a rejection call or email, particularly if you think it's down to the employer having a bad view of disability. I always think it's worth remembering they're the ones who will miss out on the talent you have to offer.

And most of all good luck!

The Financial Ombudsman Service is the free service that can help you sort out problems with your insurance, bank account or credit card. If you've faced a problem, give us a call **0300 123 9 123** or find us online.