

WHEELCHAIRS in the WORKPLACE

We hear from **Nick Atkinson**, an ombudsman at the Financial Ombudsman Service, about how his wheelchair works for him at his place of work

Can you tell us about your past experience as a wheelchair user?

Most people assume that using a wheelchair must make a huge difference to your life, and in some ways it does. I have been a wheelchair user since the age of 16, but 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.

How did you come to join 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, but I soon changed my mind after visiting and I'm glad I did. My experience taught me to never assume that 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 jettison the legalese and provide straightforward, plain English



solutions to problems that can often be complex or distressing.

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 can have the biggest impact. 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. 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' – for health and safety!

When I face barriers like that I'll often turn the tables and ask the person responsible if they 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 that 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 up there as a highlight.

What would your advice be to other wheelchair users 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!

Further Information

The Financial Ombudsman Service is the free service that can help you sort out problems with your insurance, bank account or credit card provider. If you've faced a problem, give us a call on **0300 123 9 123** or visit www.financial-ombudsman.org.uk

