

Workplace personal assistants : what do we need to know?

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Workplace personal assistants – what do we need to know?

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While I finished my PhD, I worked as a personal assistant (PA) for a physically disabled woman. At first I worked evenings in her home, but later I switched roles and accompanied her to work.

I was surprised to find how different the role was. At home my job had been roughly how you might imagine a more traditional 'care assistant' job – largely making food and household chores. But as a 'workplace PA' I was taking notes in meetings, filing, and working on complex spreadsheets and reports.

I was always with my employer, of course, and she gave step by step instructions if needed, but the days went more smoothly because I knew how to use a spreadsheet, and could judge what parts of meetings were important enough to write down.

It was an interesting experience, and one I've continued to reflect on since.

I was at work, but within my employer's workplace. My contract and confidentiality agreement were with her, not her employer. If I was late, that made her late through no fault of her own. My behaviour and appearance reflected on her, and if I had been untidy or rude to her colleagues she would have felt responsible.

My employer's colleagues were used to having her PAs around, but other people seemed unsure about how to react to me. Some would acknowledge my presence, offering me tea (always welcome), asking my name to write in minutes (unnecessary), and trying to include me in discussions in meetings (inappropriate). Others would focus on my employer (good) and act as if I wasn't there at all (not so good).

I haven't seen much written about the professional role of workplace PAs who support a physically disabled person. Having spent several years as a workplace PA myself, it seemed to me that my role was very different to someone supporting a learning disabled person or someone with mental health issues at work.

It is likely that more PAs will be needed as people take increasing control over their own support arrangements through both social care and workplace schemes. We need to know more about the current and potential roles of the workplace PA. That's the only way we can provide appropriate support to workplace PAs themselves, the disabled people who employ them, and to *their* employers.

What do we already know?

What do we already know about workplace PAs? Not much. The Department of Health's [Social care workforce research initiative](#) (Qureshi and McNay, 2011) acknowledged the current lack of information about PAs more generally, and identified a need to collect routine information such as numbers and levels of pay.

Similarly, the [Framework for supporting personal assistants working in adult social care](#) (DH, 2011) recognised the need for a better understanding of personal assistant working, including the range of tasks carried out by PAs, particularly given that they are likely to be working in isolation with little opportunity for reflection and professional development.

There is some mention in such work of supporting people to take an active part in their communities, including access to education and employment. But there is very little, if anything, written specifically about PAs supporting people at work.

Employment rates of disabled people are relatively low. In 2012, only 46.3% of working age disabled people were in employment, compared to 76.4% of working age non-disabled people ([Office for Disability Issues](#)). In 2010, young disabled people were twice as likely to be not in employment, education or training as non-disabled people of a similar age ([Equality and Human Rights Commission](#), 2010).

If we are to meet disabled people's employment aspirations, there must be appropriate support. For some this will include workplace PAs.

The [Access to Work](#) scheme is the primary mechanism for supporting disabled people in work at present. A recent review ([Department for Work and Pensions, 2011](#)) described this as 'the government's best kept secret', and suggested demand had been kept low by lack of advertising. In April-December 2012, Access to Work granted 11,580 awards (out of a total of 33,180) to pay for support workers, but does not indicate how many of these were to physically disabled people.

Specific questions that need answers

If we are to improve support for workplace PAs, the people who employ them and *their* employers, then we need some specific information. I suggest some initial questions should include the following.

- **Numbers:** How many physically disabled people in employment use a PA at work? How many workplace PAs are there?

- **Roles:** What roles do workplace PAs have? If they also work as a home-based PA, what are the differences between the roles?
- **Payment:** How much are workplace PAs paid, and where does the money to pay them come from?
- **Recruitment:** How are workplace PAs recruited?
- **Career development:** What is the employment background of workplace PAs (and do they consider themselves to be part of the 'social care workforce')? Do they consider being a workplace PA as a career, or a temporary job?
- **Issues and relationships:** What issues have disabled people using PAs experienced at work (with PAs, colleagues, or employers)? How do workplace PAs find relationships with the disabled person, their colleagues, and others in the workplace? How do employers feel about having PAs in their workplace?

For disabled people, particularly those applying for their first jobs, knowing about the role of a workplace PA may encourage them to aspire to a job they may not have otherwise considered. For the organisations who support them, an understanding of the specific requirements of the job will help with recruitment and retention of suitable PAs.

It's tempting to group workplace PAs with the rest of the social care workforce. But by doing so we risk planning for the recruitment of the same people through the same channels as we have always done. Workplace PAs aren't necessarily paid with social care money, and while their work may include some personal care, it's likely to include other specialist skills too. If we think only in terms of social care workers, we risk losing the expertise of people who may be perfect for the job, but who haven't considered a social care career.

This is my initial attempt to get some of my musings about this written down. I'll be developing my thoughts further over the next few months, not least about whether 'workplace PA' is the appropriate term. I'm interested in anything anyone has to say, either about their own experiences, or just thoughts on reading this. Please get in touch.

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About Jenni Brooks

Biography: I currently work on a project exploring the feasibility of evaluating life story work for people with dementia (funded by the National Institute for Health Research). Previous projects looked at how physically disabled young adults take on control and management of their own support arrangements; good social care for people with very complex needs; and at the role of family carers in social care assessment and support planning.

I'm also interested in the role of music in dementia care, and in the development of the role of 'personal assistant' as part of the social care workforce.

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