

New Writing: Opinion

Joe Mellone



Joe Mellone is editor of *OurSay*, a national magazine he helped found, which is run by and for people with learning disabilities. He also has a part-time job as a post-room assistant and he lives with his family in Colchester, Essex.

Summary

In a new report, the government in England has restated its determination to get more people with learning disabilities into employment. Joe Mellone says that, in his experience, securing a paid job really can be life-transforming.

At the beginning of April, the government in England published an update on its delivery plan for Valuing People Now, the strategy for giving people with learning disabilities a life like any other person.

It set out what needs to be done over the next 12 months to make sure we all have the same opportunities.

As this new report says, there is still a lot to do to make this happen. They have added a new priority about ensuring better information-sharing, commissioning and transition-planning across children's and adult services – which sounds like a good idea.

But the part of the new report that caught my eye was where it says that a key priority action for 2010–11 is to:

'Increase the number of people with learning disabilities in real paid jobs of 16 hours a week.'

The report says that latest figures show that only 7.5 per cent of people with learning disabilities are work-

ing. That is even lower than everyone thought.

And it adds that people are much more likely to get a 'real job' after school or college if they have work experience from the age of 14 with proper support. I couldn't agree more. When I think back to when I left school to go straight on the dole, I realise that a lot of years were wasted. I went on loads of training schemes and I was doing Job Club – but I never got anywhere.

It's not easy doing a CV if you have not had a chance to do much with your life and you have nothing to put on it!

I would apply for jobs advertised in shop windows and I would get interviews, but I was never successful. They never told me what I was doing wrong. The Job Club people just said 'sell yourself', but that's hard, and the more rejections you get, the harder it gets.

I would always apply for shop work but when I did some tests many years later to see what sort of job I was suited for it came out as 'office work'! That was after I'd moved to a new area and they seemed to be more geared up to helping you look for work.

I was unemployed for 17 years altogether. Then a Mencap Pathway scheme set me up doing work experience in a college post room. They said I was good and they created a new role just for me. When they told me I was getting a part-time paid job I was in tears I was so happy. I was 34 and it felt like my life was beginning at last!

I've been working there for 13 years and it has changed my life. Earning a wage gives you self-respect. You can pay your own way and hold your head up high. I have made a lot of friends through work and I think I am a more confident person. Working part-time suits me as it means I can do other things, like be the editor of *OurSay* magazine.

So I would say to young people with learning disabilities and those who support them, ask early on about work experience and make sure people are given the support they need to get a job, because they will end up with a better life. And they shouldn't give up trying, even if, like me, they get nowhere at the beginning.

The government says it wants to see 48 per cent of people with moderate and severe learning disabilities in work. That is going to be a tough target to achieve. But I think it is the right way to go to try and ensure that people with learning disabilities have the same life chances that other people take for granted.

Further information

Valuing People Now: The Delivery Plan 2010–2011,
Department of Health (2010)

www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_115173

OurSay! magazine: www.oursay.info