

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY IN THE WORKPLACE

Towards a more inclusive working environment

Report of a preliminary survey by the
British Assistive Technology Association

June 2013



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Foreword

As Patron of the British Assistive Technology Association (BATA), I welcome this report they have commissioned on assistive technology (AT) in the workplace. It is a subject on which too little is currently known, yet one in seven working adults has a long-term illness, impairment or disability. With an aging population and many more people working until later in life, the potential for AT to enable individuals to lead fuller, more productive lives will increase.

Despite the growing use of technology in our everyday lives, the general level of understanding of what AT is and how it can be used is still patchy at best. As this report shows, when the right AT is used, employees report high levels of satisfaction and improvements in all those areas – such as sickness absence, motivation – that employers know are key indicators of effective organisations.

We are fortunate in this country to have an AT sector that is a world leader, with a solid mix of the tried and tested alongside ground-breaking, cutting edge technology. In the current difficult economic climate, we cannot afford to waste any talent and by investing in the provision of appropriate AT from the earliest stages of education, right through to higher education and the world of work, we have the best chance of releasing and developing each person, regardless of any disability or impairment they were born with or acquire.

I wholeheartedly support research such as this as it will help raise awareness of AT as a key tool which we can use to empower people with disabilities and enrich their lives.

Baroness Joan Walmsley

I. Introduction

The British Assistive Technology Association (BATA), set up to improve public understanding of assistive technology (AT) and to promote its use, commissioned this report into the application of assistive technology in the workplace. Appropriate technology can help people with disabilities and impairments such as loss of hearing, vision and mobility or literacy difficulties, which might otherwise reduce their ability to work productively, to achieve their full potential and contribute effectively to the organisations that employ them.

However, anecdotal evidence from BATA members suggested that the value of AT was not well understood by employers or employees, and organisations may not be following best practice. Employers have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled staff and since the introduction of the Equality Act 2010 these adjustments must be anticipated by an employer not just provided when a disabled person has requested them.

The purpose of this survey was, therefore, to gain a clearer picture of the use of AT in the workplace, how it is requested and how it is implemented. The survey was split into two parts: one completed by actual or potential AT users, the other by employers, all of whom are responsible for supplying appropriate AT to support their workforce when required. By comparing the two sets of data, it was hoped it would be possible to highlight discrepancies between employer intentions and employee experience and in so doing, identify gaps and issues and changes that might need to be made to improve access to and implementation of AT in the workplace.

The online survey was conducted over a period of some months in 2012 by Gareth Headley of The Clear Company, specialists in inclusive best practice in recruitment. Through the Clear networks and BATA's own channels, more than 8,000 organisations and employees were invited to participate in the survey, with more than 2,400 visits to the online questionnaire.

However, only 170 employers and 140 users of technology completed the survey, so the final sample size was small. In addition, it is likely that (given the way the survey was publicised) many of the respondents came from organisations connected with the AT sector in some way or were in companies with an established record for disability awareness. For these reasons, the survey can only be seen as preliminary.

Further in-depth research, involving a much larger sample, also including those unconnected with the AT sector and not yet publicly signed up to disability best practices, is now required to verify and expand on these initial findings. Despite these limitations, the survey does offer some useful pointers: even within what may be a sample biased towards the use of AT, there were some surprising findings as well as evidence of gaps and of issues that need to be addressed.

II. Executive summary

Purpose of survey

The purpose of the survey was to gain a clearer picture of the use of assistive technology (AT) in the workplace and, by looking at employer and employee experiences, identify any differences and come up with recommendations for action.

The key findings

(a) Users of AT in the workplace

Some 42% of respondents were in the public sector, with about a third being in the private sector. The rest worked in third sector organisations. Around half were in small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), with 48% working for large or very large employers.

Within the 48% who said they used AT, around 52% said they did not regard themselves as disabled. About two thirds of respondents did not know how many people used AT where they worked.

A sizeable 91% said they would know who to ask for support if they needed it and 88% were aware support is a legal obligation. However, only 21% of their employers proactively promoted AT availability. 71% agreed that taking AT with them when moving jobs would be helpful.

Of those who use AT, 78% said AT had improved their effectiveness at work; 30% said it had reduced their sickness absence; 64% it had improved their job satisfaction; 50% it had improved their motivation at work; and 55% said it had improved their opinion of their employer.

Overwhelmingly, they thought more should be done to make people more aware of AT in the workplace.

(b) Employers

Some 60% said there was some use of AT in their organisation but less than 40% had a procedure in place, known to managers, for obtaining AT for staff.

While 98% saw AT primarily as a support for employees, 87% had concerns about where to find that support. 78% thought their employees would not know what support was available, were they to ask.

While 85% knew the Equality Act 2010 covers AT in the workplace, 36% still thought the earlier Disability Discrimination Act applied, only 15% knew about public sector duties and the disability equalities duty, and just 18% knew that the Health and Safety at Work Act covers AT provision.

Although 75% knew that provision of AT in the workplace is a legal obligation, 28% either did not know or thought that did not apply to them.

Where AT had been provided, only 17% measured impact on their brand, 60% either were not sure or did not measure impact on sickness absence, and 68% did not measure impact on performance.

An overwhelming 99% said the Government should do more to promote the use of AT in the workplace.

The key conclusions from the survey

Users of AT appeared generally reluctant to see themselves as being disabled. Whatever the reasons for this, it is clear that an essential pre-requisite to the wider and more effective use of AT is a more positively supportive management culture.

AT solutions are much more likely to be offered to employees as a result of individual requests for support than because they are embedded in the culture and procedures of an organisation: only 21% of employers were said by employees to be actively promoting AT.

The survey showed clear benefits provided by effective assistive technology. The results reported by employees - 30% reduction in sickness absence, 64% improved work satisfaction, 50% increased motivation to work, 55% improvement in the opinion of their employer – would, if validated by employer monitoring, translate into economic savings which would impact on any business's productivity and profits. Yet, according to the survey, less than half of employers measured whether provision of AT had any effect on these key indicators.

While these survey figures should be treated with caution, given the small sample size, the level of awareness and provision of AT might be expected to be higher, given its likely bias. This suggests that a wider survey of those with no current involvement with the AT sector or an existing strong commitment to disability awareness may show an even lower level of knowledge of an employer's legal obligations in relation to AT in the workplace and much less appreciation of its positive impact.

Implications for employing organisations, the AT sector, and policy makers

While there is a good level of awareness of what assistive technology is, the rate of take-up in the workplace is still low, even in this possibly biased sample. This suggests that awareness alone is not enough to increase the effective use of AT by employees.

There are positive responses from those who are benefiting from using AT, but also reluctance by others to ask for AT, and a low level of impact measurement by employers on the use of AT. Therefore, work needs to be done to educate and inform employees about AT and about what they are entitled to expect from an employer but there is also more that needs to be done to equip employers to play their part: objective information and advice about AT needs to be more readily available.

The lack of knowledge about AT needs to be addressed by more and better disability training, with an increased emphasis on the role of AT and the personal and productivity benefits AT could provide. Employers' lack of knowledge of what is available and how to set about getting it, coupled with the apparent paucity of set procedures, may be reinforcing employees' perceptions that they would not find support for a request for AT, when that might not, in fact, be the case.

A proactive, positive and non-discriminatory employment culture with management and human resources systems geared to initiate as well as respond to AT requirements needs to be fostered. But a much more profound cultural shift is also required so that AT is seen by all employers and by employees, whether disabled or not, as part of the appropriate tools for the job and no more remarkable in a modern workplace than those things normally provided for all employees to ensure effective functioning.

AT is currently seen by most respondents as the right thing to do and as a fair and equitable way to support performance for those who need it, but rather than being viewed as a necessary cost in isolated cases, AT should be seen as a way to improve performance. The survey findings support the argument that there is a strong business case for AT provision being used as a strategy to improve organisational performance. Understanding the cost benefits of AT should be not only an integral part of the culture of any ethical, socially responsible organisation but at the heart of any business's competitive strategy.

The strong and clear benefits that emerge include: reduced sickness absences (by 30%); increased job satisfaction (64%); greater motivation (50%); and increased loyalty and greater staff retention (55%). These key HR performance indicators - good predictors of increased productivity and lower staff turnover - suggest that, taken together and over the longer term, what is gained by an organisation through the provision of AT has the potential to far outweigh the costs.

However, further research is needed to verify these findings - to demonstrate in hard cash terms how AT costs are offset by longer-term gains - but this survey suggests that there could well be a much higher economic as well as social return on investment in AT than businesses currently realise.

In other words: when AT is needed, and the right kit is provided, both employee and employer gain, and so does the UK.

Recommendations for Action

We think that **employers** could make some key changes to improve the lives and productivity of disabled people in the workplace. For example, by putting in procedures for identifying employees whose performance could be enhanced by assistive technology, ensuring there is no discrimination against them and making sure that managers are aware of the legal requirements around AT. Better collection of data would help demonstrate how AT affects the performance of employees.

The **AT sector** also needs to make changes to the way it operates: working more effectively to raise awareness of the benefits of AT through training and providing easily accessible sources of information about AT.

It is notable that 99% of those who responded thought Government should do more to increase the use of AT and, while that is an easy response to make, some of the comments we received, together with further analysis of the data and our members' experience and knowledge, do suggest some further specific steps worth taking.

In order to bring about the cultural and organisational changes required, **Government and other agencies** need to take action to include AT in their policy documents and action plans. Government should support work being done to increase awareness and the use of AT in education and training, so that people with disabilities are better prepared for future employment, and work with the AT sector to improve communication channels.

Government should support and fund research into the economic and social returns on investment in AT in the workplace and monitor the implementation of the Equality Act. Access to Work, described in the recent review by Liz Sayce, chief executive of Disability Rights UK, as "the Government's best-kept secret" should be kept under review to check that it is delivering timely and effective assessment and provision of AT.

The Department for Work and Pensions should monitor students who have received Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) when they enter the workplace to ensure that their AT needs continue to be met and to build up an evidence base for the impact this has on their working lives longer term.

The Government should work with the AT sector, led by BATA, and including suppliers, assessors, employers, third sector disability organisations, education and healthcare professionals, users and carers, to identify how best to improve current levels of understanding of what AT can do.

III. Background

BATA defines assistive technology (AT) as any product or service that maintains or improves the ability of individuals with disabilities or impairments to communicate, learn and live independent, fulfilling and productive lives. Since 1995, UK organisations have been required by law to make reasonable adjustments, including the provision of AT, to accommodate disabled employees and to give customers equal access to goods and services, and this has now been strengthened by the Equality Act 2010.

In 2012, there were estimated to be 11million disabled people in the UK (19% of the population of 63m). The population is predicted to rise to 70m by 2030, with a greater number of people over 65, many of whom will still be working. Access to Work, the Government's support for disabled people in employment, cost £105m in 2010-11, with £5.25m being spent on AT, a sum that pales into insignificance when set against what is known already about levels of disability in the workplace.

Overall, a third of people aged between 50 and 64 years have a disability and a third of all employees is disabled or is close to a disabled person, according to the Business Disability Forum. Office of Disability Issues figures show only 17% of adults were born with a disability. The majority of people acquire their disability in adulthood. The need for AT may arise not just when someone starts a new job but at any point in a person's career because of illness, accident or the worsening of an underlying condition, and may relate to physical, cognitive or mental difficulties, or a combination of these.

It is estimated that one in seven working adults has a long-term illness, impairment or disability. Based on information from RNIB, keeping a newly disabled person in employment has a cost benefit of at least 2.5 times an employer's investment. This is particularly true when it comes to the growing number of older employees. Recent research by the British Dyslexia Association suggests that about 10% of adults aged 16-65 – around 6m - have some difficulty spelling or reading, with 4% having severe difficulties.

An employee who is struggling to meet targets, or who is experiencing high levels of stress in the workplace, may well have an undiagnosed specific learning disability (such as dyslexia) or increasing visual or hearing or physical impairment and could benefit from the vast range of AT tools available. However, outside the AT sector, because of the fast pace of technological change and the very wide range available, too few people currently know what solutions exist and how to identify and source the one most appropriate for a specific individual.

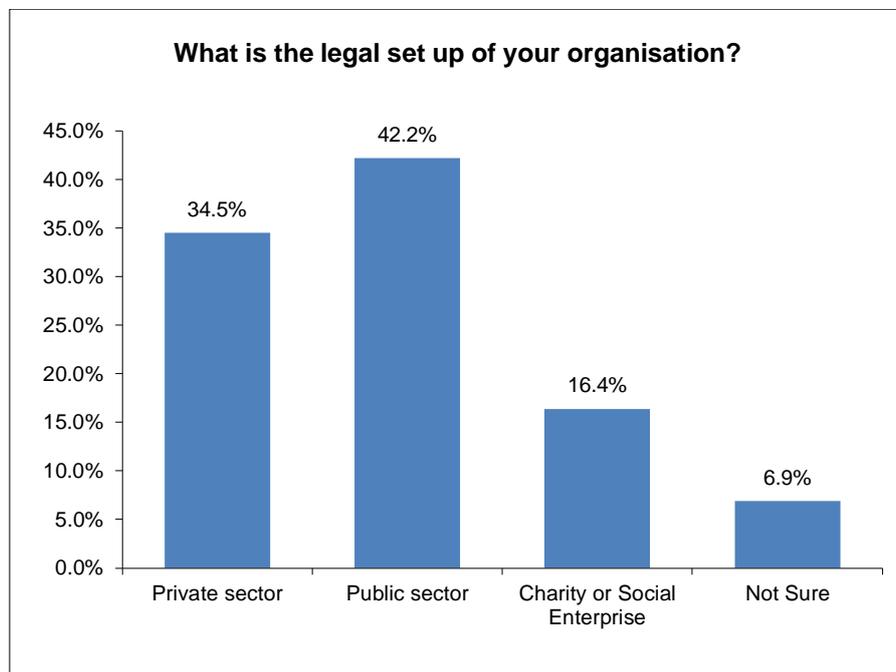
Increased awareness, knowledge and understanding of AT, leading to changes in attitude and the introduction of best practice procedures, would benefit both employee and employer. AT, properly used, is another business tool, a way to reduce costs and improve productivity. With the right AT, individual potential can be unlocked and valuable experience and knowledge made available for the good of the user, his or her organisation, and the social and economic growth of the country.

IV. Key findings

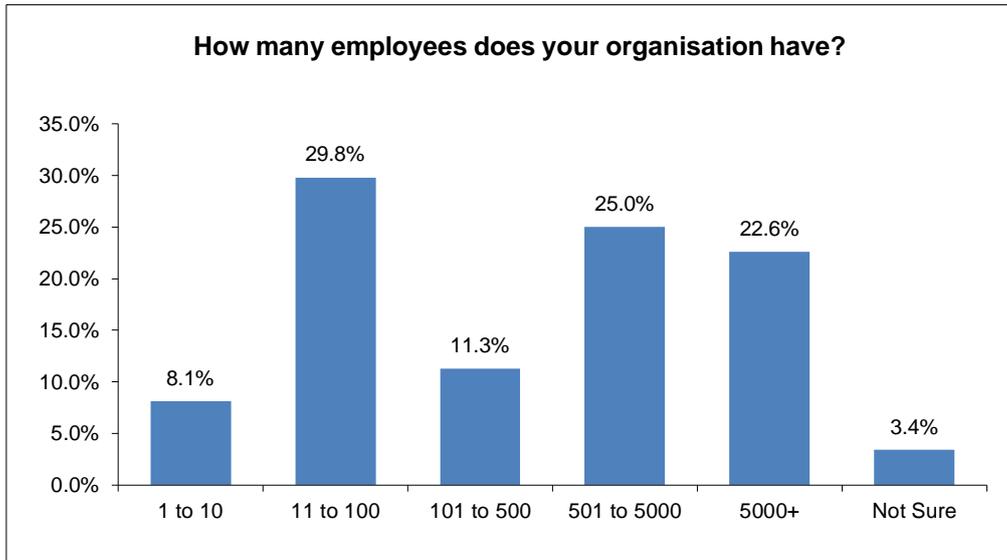
(a) From AT user responses

In this section Clear asked people who use AT in the workplace about their experiences of finding, accessing and implementing support. They collected data to profile the employees who responded and categorised these employees by the type of organisation and its size.

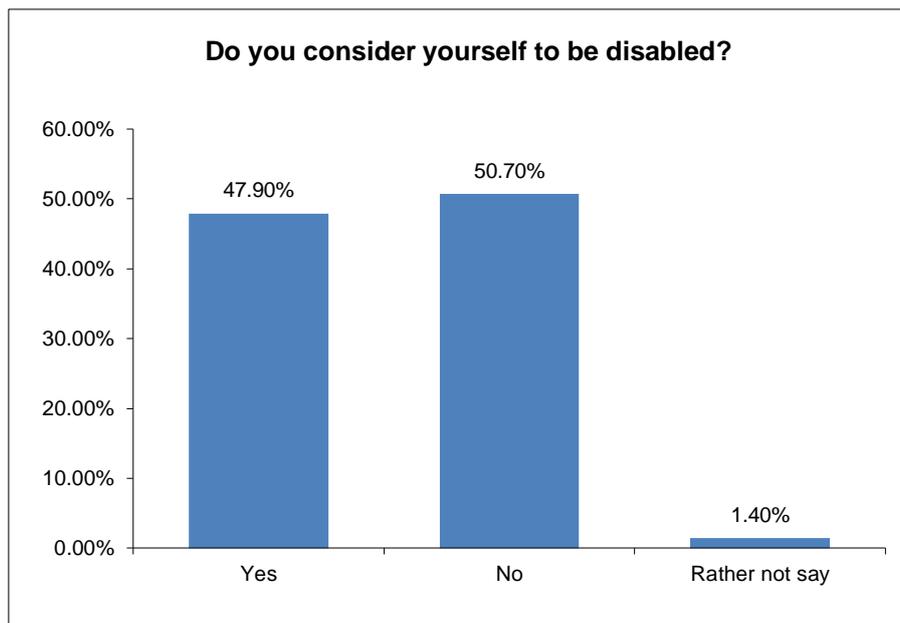
While the majority of employees surveyed were employed in the public sector (42%), those in the private sector made up over a third, with the rest that were identified as being in the third sector (charities, social enterprises, Community Interest Companies).



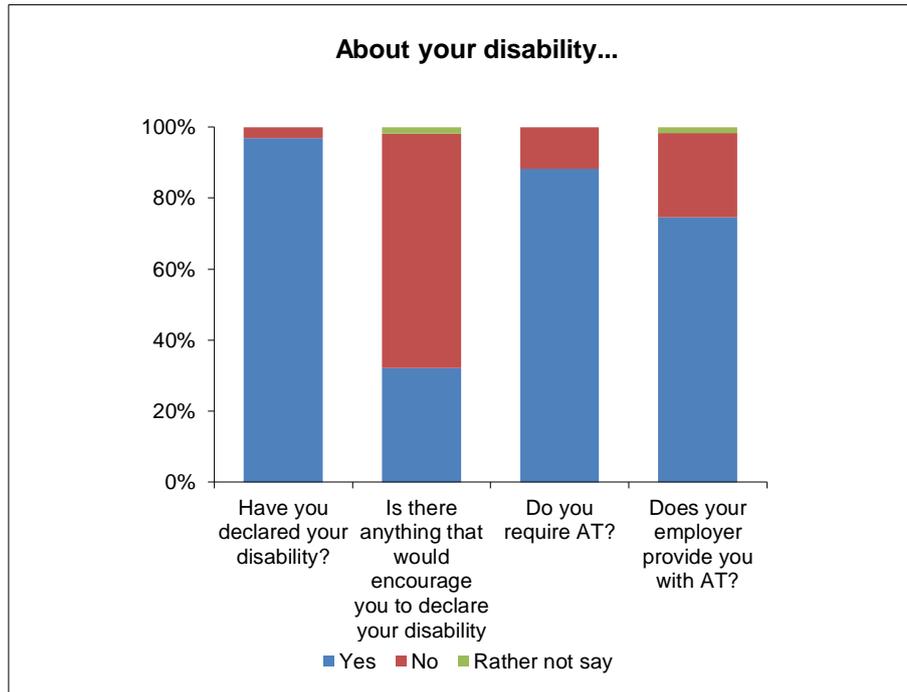
While we cannot be entirely certain, as not all respondents chose to give contact details, it is probable that because of the way the sample was obtained, many were in companies connected with AT in some way, either as suppliers or advisers or established users in the education and health sectors, or were in companies with a public commitment to their disabled employees.



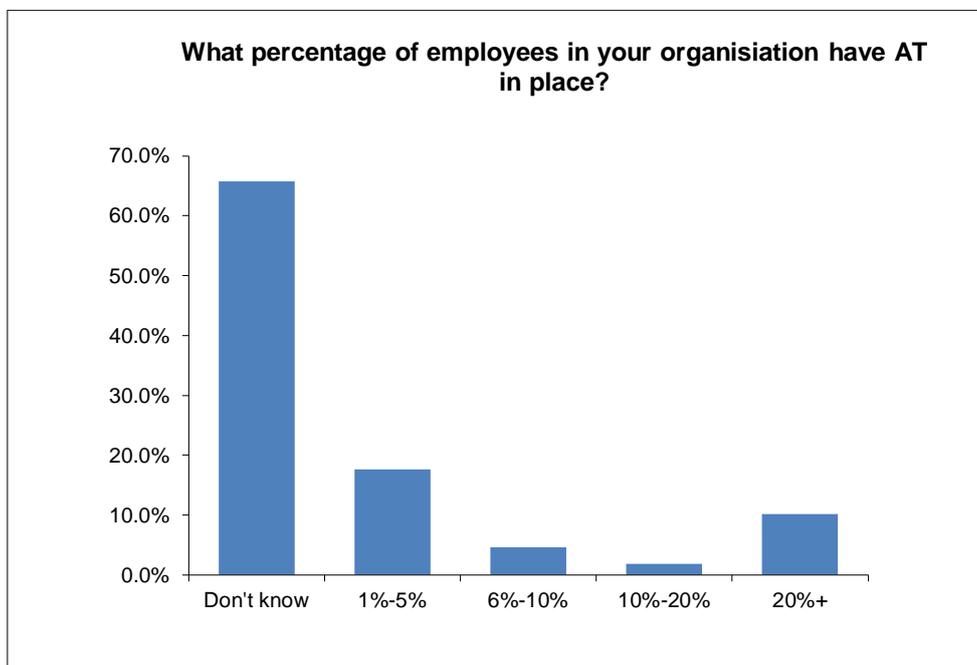
Around half of employees work for small and medium size enterprises employing less than 500 people – and within that group, microenterprises - while 48% work for large or very large employers.



The majority of AT users who responded said they were not disabled: only 48% of respondents said that they had a disability. Among respondents who use AT at work, 52.3% said they were either not disabled or would rather not say.

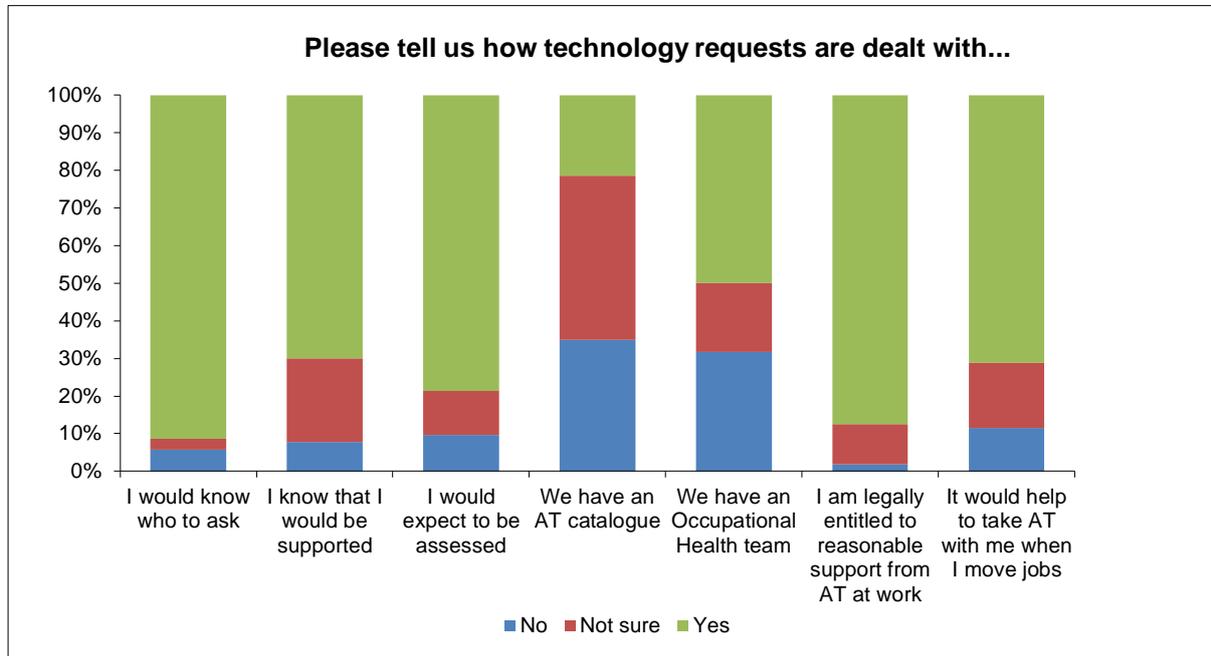


However, in answer to another question, 99% of respondents said they **do** declare their disability to their employers, which is not consistent with data cited above. The discrepancy may be because 52% of respondents chose not to answer this question, so the actual percentage of declarations is just below 48%, which would make it more in line with the previous answer.

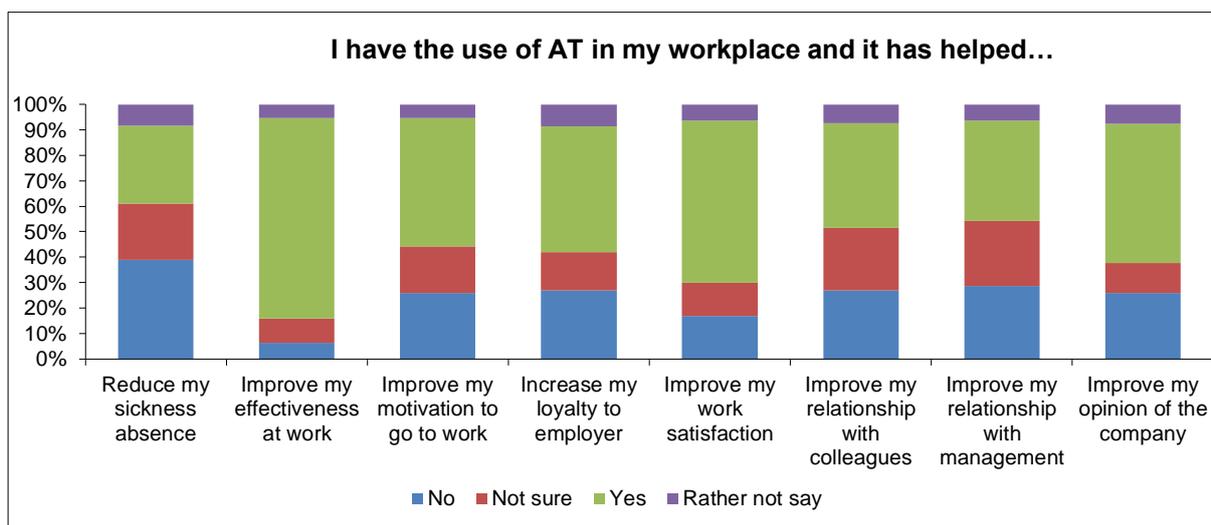


From the responses provided, around two thirds of employees do not know how many people have AT in their workplace. This could be simply because the figures on AT use are not known to

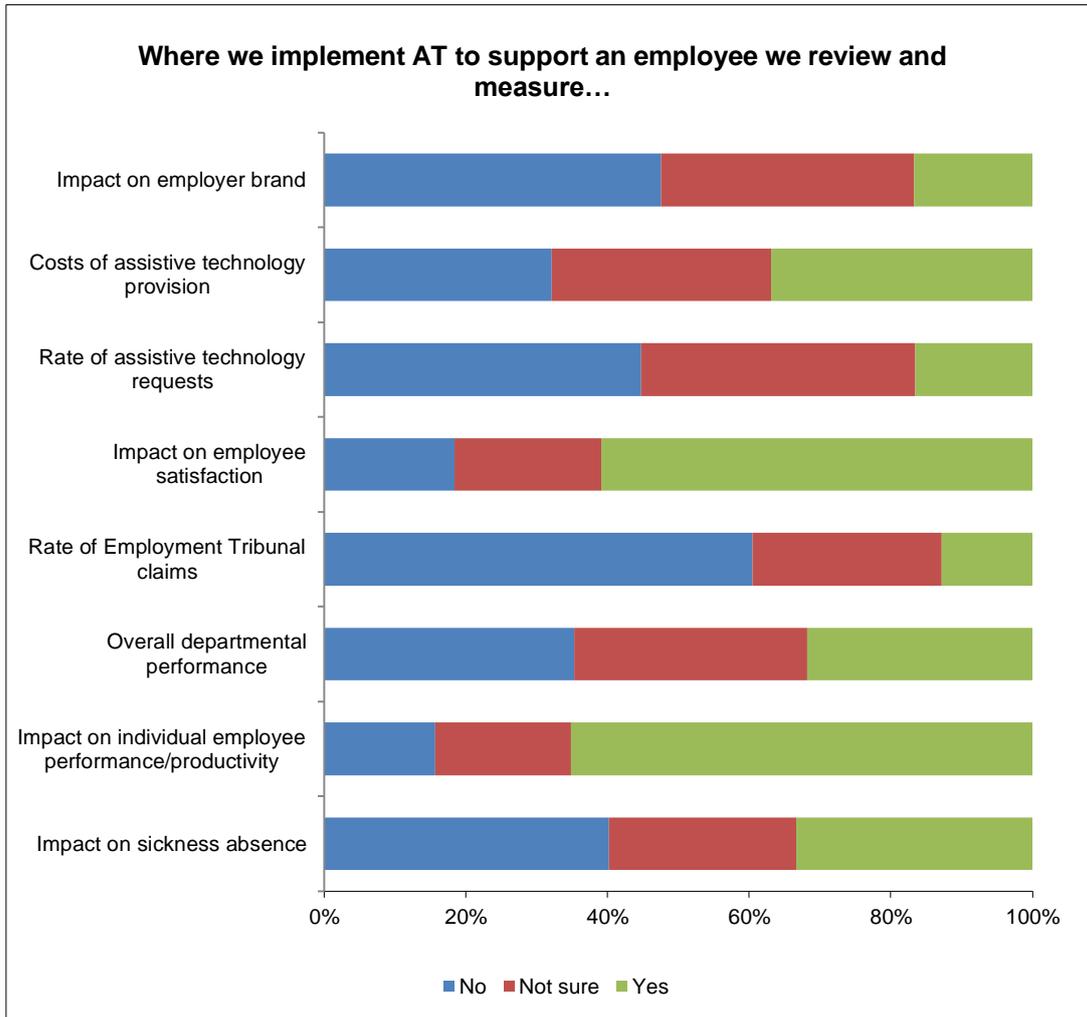
individual employees (particularly likely in a large organisation) but it may also indicate that AT use is not obvious to others or that the culture encourages AT users to conceal the fact.



91% of employees said they would know who to ask for support if they needed it and 88% were aware that support is a legal obligation but it is the employee who has to ask for support with only 21% of employers proactively promoting AT availability. Some 71% agreed that taking equipment with them when moving jobs would be helpful.

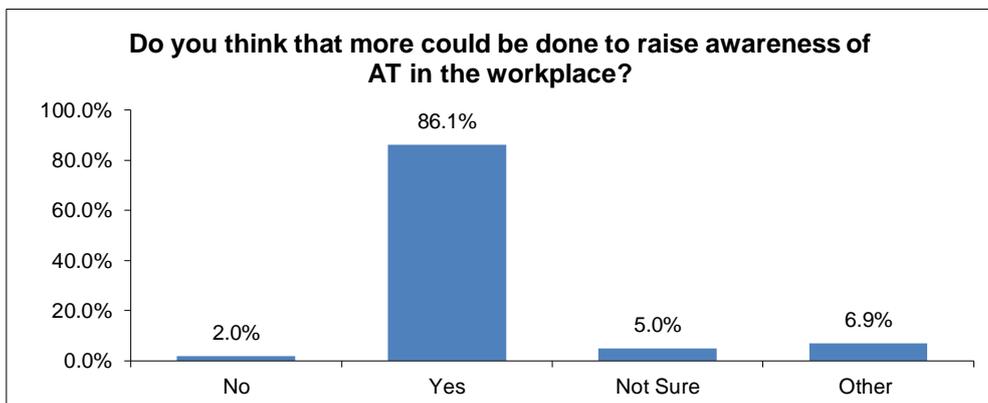


When questioned about the impact of AT, 78% said AT had improved their effectiveness at work, 30% said that AT provision had reduced their sickness absence, 64% said it had improved their work satisfaction, 50% agreed that AT improved their motivation to work, and 55% said it improved their opinion of their employer.



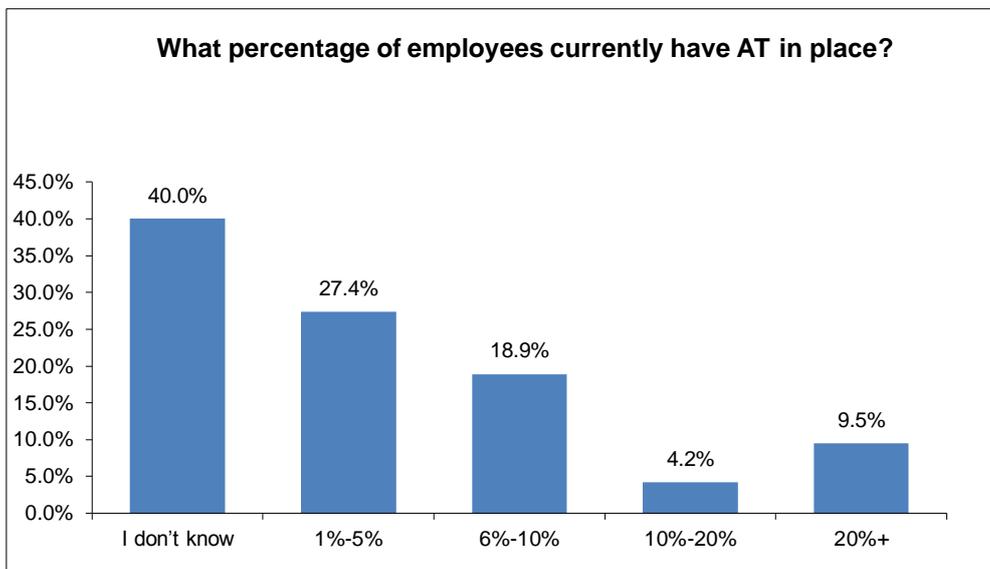
These employee perceptions need to be validated against employer records to be robust demonstrations of the effectiveness of AT: as stated in the previous section, 68% of participating employers said they did not measure the impact on performance and 60% did not measure impact on sickness absence.

Overwhelmingly, employees felt more should be done to make people aware of AT services and support in the workplace.

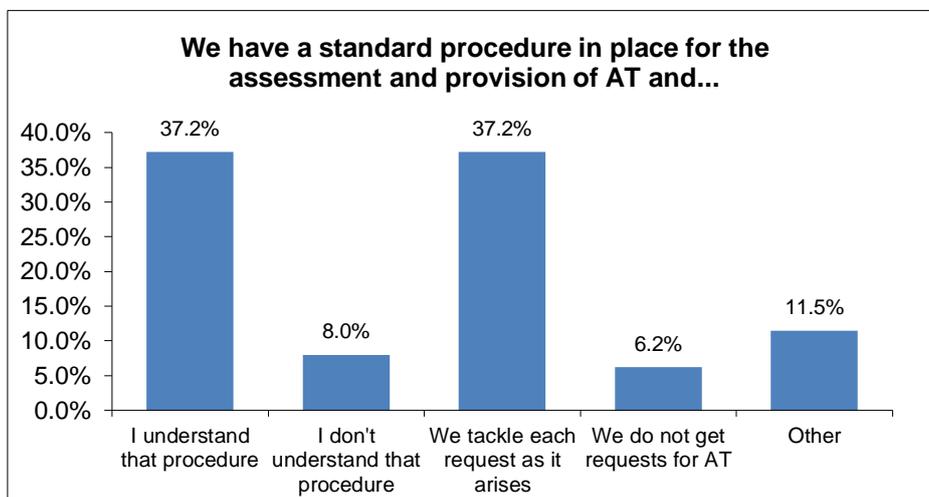


(b) From employer responses

In general, employers who responded to the survey appear to be well aware of AT and its importance in the workplace, which might be expected, given that many who completed the survey were likely to be connected in some way with the sector, as it was promoted primarily through BATA’s channels, or were companies who already have a public commitment to disability, through the Clear network, hence perhaps their willingness to participate. Even so, nearly 10% of employers said they do not use the term ‘assistive technology’, which suggests there is scope for further awareness raising.

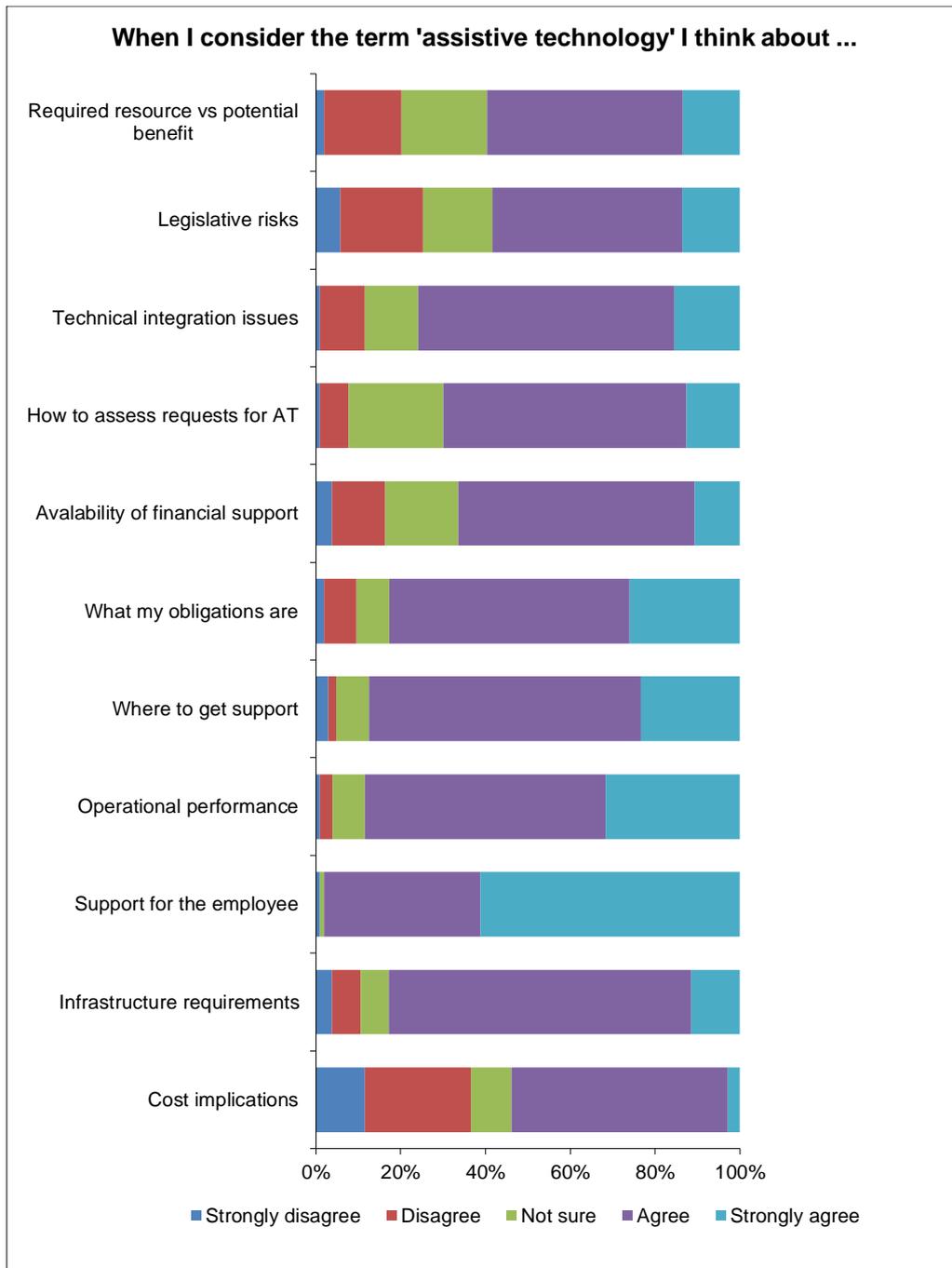


Similarly, although some 60% of employers responding said there is some use of AT in their organisations, when this figure is viewed against the sample’s likely bias, it is surprising that 40% of employers just do not know how many of their employees have AT. Of those that do, up to 50% had, it could be argued, well below the expected level of AT in place, given the number of disabled people in the working population as a whole.

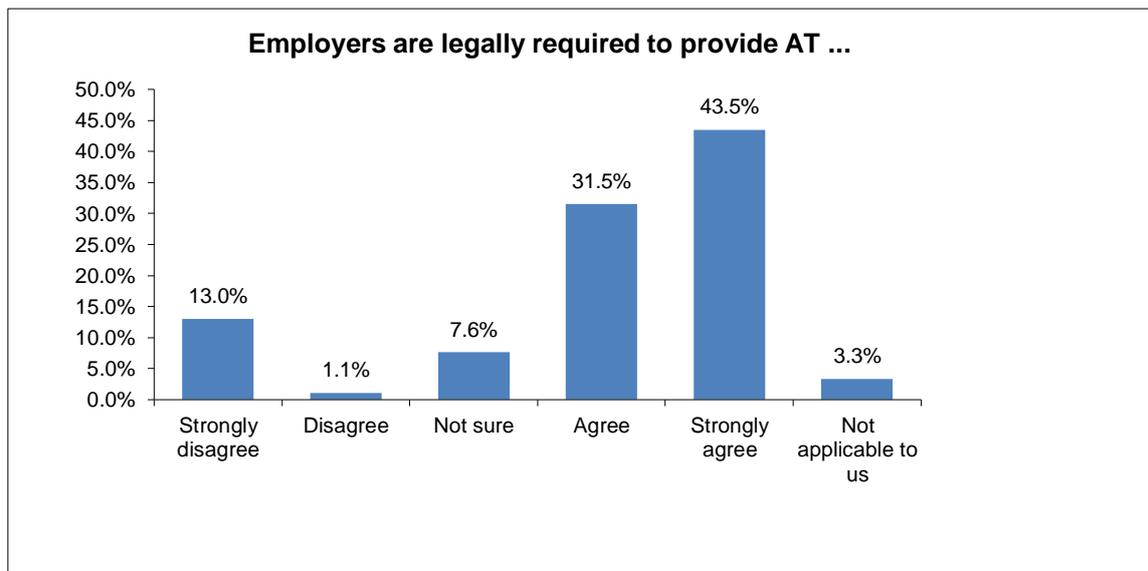
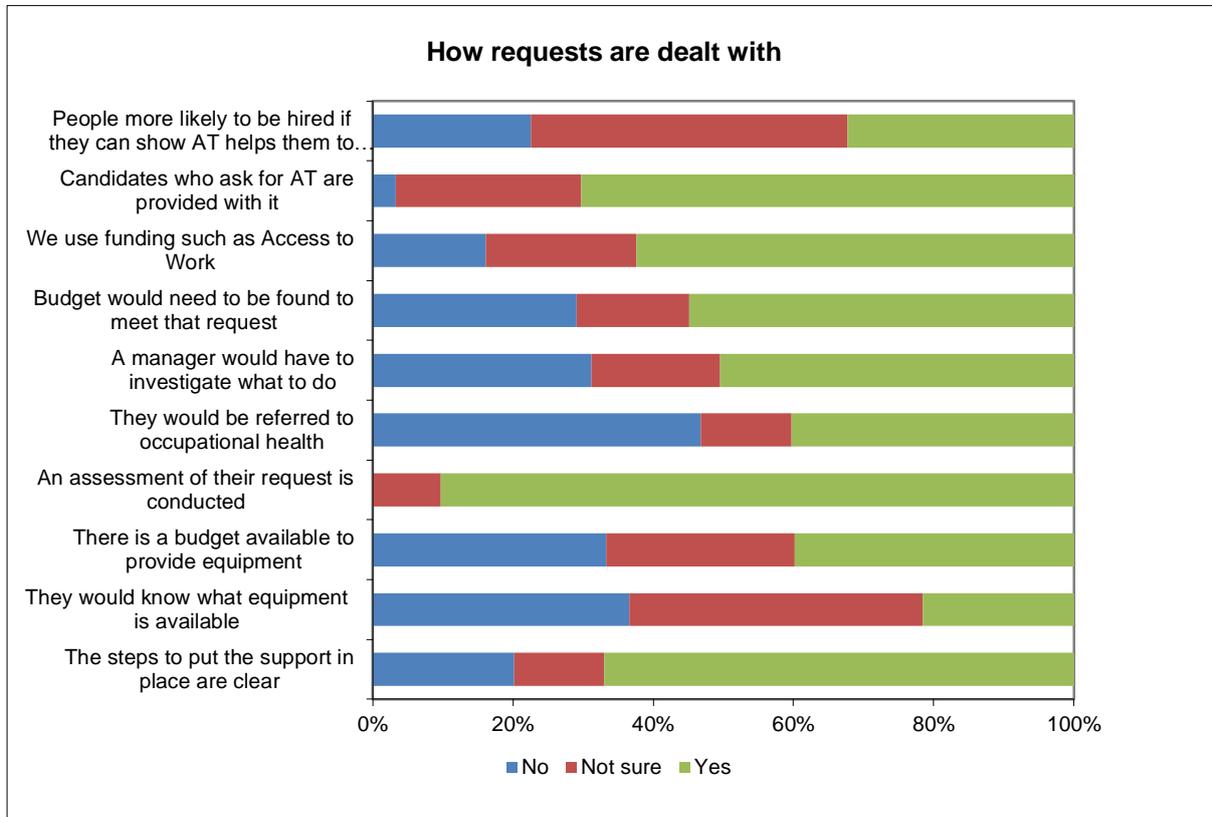


Nearly half of employers are applying AT to support employees on a case-by-case basis when asked to do so by the employee. Less than 40% are in organisations that have a procedure in place which is also known to the manager.

When asked what they thought about in relation to AT provision, an overwhelming majority (98%) put support for the employee as their primary consideration. However, 87% either agreed or strongly agreed that where to get that support was another key consideration.

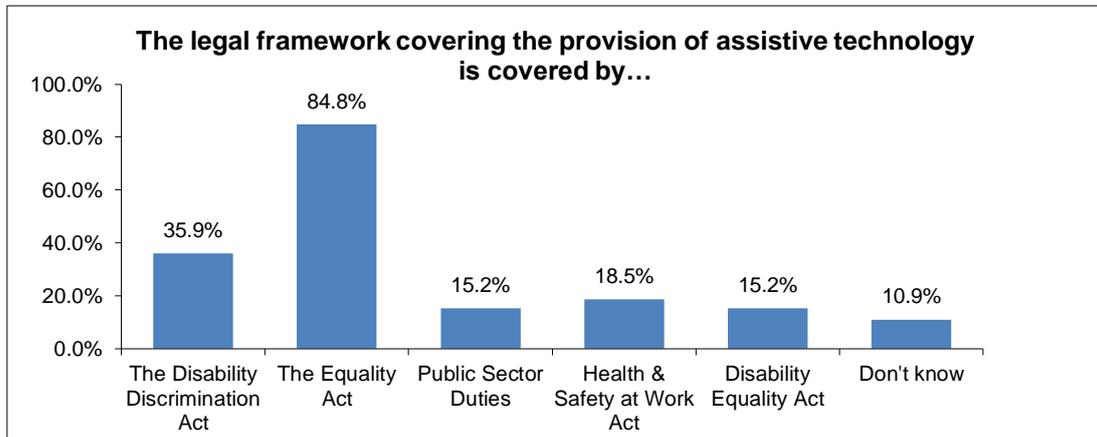


When employers were asked about access to AT, 78% said that their employees would not know what support was available to them, were they to ask for it.

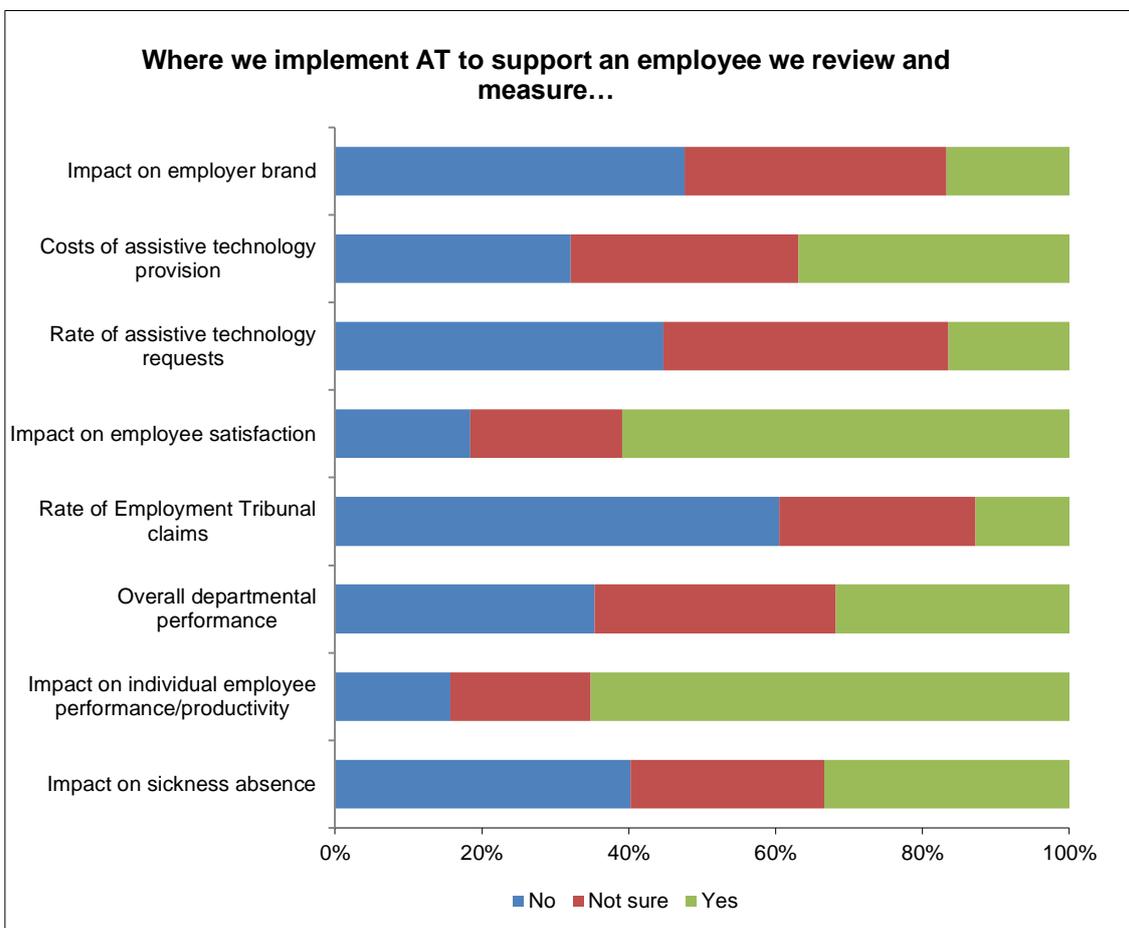


So far as knowledge of the law is concerned, 85% of employers know that the Equality Act 2010 covers the provision of AT in the workplace, but, two years on, 36% still believe its predecessor, the Disability Discrimination Act, is the legal framework covering AT provision.

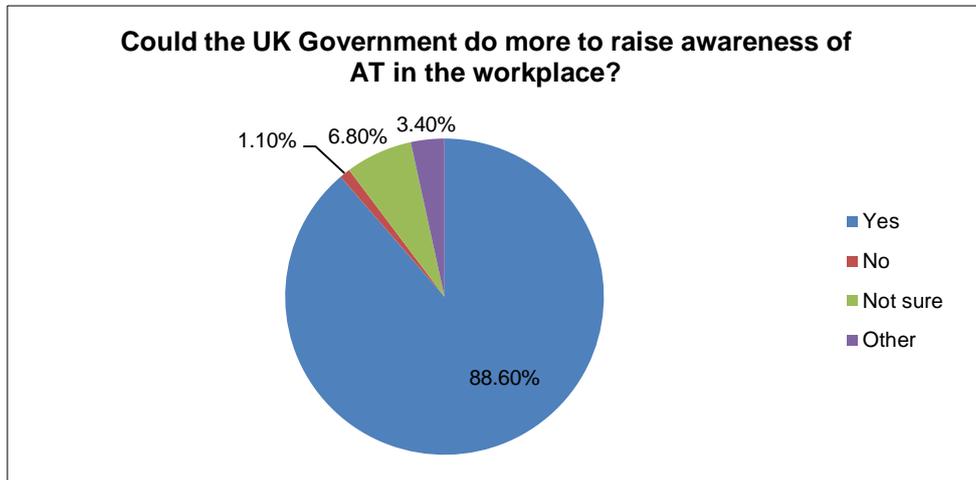
Perhaps more striking was that just 15% know about public sector duties and the disability equalities duty and only 18% know that the Health and Safety at Work Act covers AT provision. Even though 75% of employers know that provision of AT in the workplace is a legal obligation, 28% either did not know, or thought that this provision was not applicable to them.



Where AT is provided, employers were asked what impacts they measure. Only 17% measured impact on employer brand, 60% either were not sure or did not measure impact on sickness absence, and 68% did not measure the impact on performance.



When asked if government should do more to promote the use of AT in the workplace, 99% agreed. While this is understandable – and the Government certainly does have a key role to play – lack of such action does not reduce the current legal responsibilities on employers to ensure the appropriate use of AT in their organisations.



V. Conclusions based on survey findings

While these survey figures should be treated with caution, given the small sample size, it may be considered surprising that the level of awareness and provision of AT is not higher, given the likely bias in the sample. This suggests that a wider survey of those in the private and public sectors with no current involvement with the AT sector or an existing strong commitment to disability awareness may show an even lower level of knowledge of an employer's legal obligations in relation to AT in the workplace and much less appreciation of its positive impact.

One important point that emerged was that AT solutions appear to be much more likely to be offered to employees as a result of individual requests for support than because they are embedded in the culture and procedures of an organisation. It was also clear that, even in this sample, there is a lack of knowledge about AT, both in terms of what it can do and where to obtain it. As only 21% of employers in this survey say they proactively promote AT availability for employees, this suggests that, in the business community overall, the percentage is likely to be even lower.

The research indicates that employees are generally reluctant to declare a disability at work. Whatever the reasons for this – fear of losing a job, being passed over for promotion or feeling stigmatised – it is clear that an essential pre-requisite to the wider and more effective use of AT is a management culture within which an employee is offered or feels comfortable enough to ask for support to identify, provide, and maintain whatever AT they need. The creation of the right culture is all the more important given that a high proportion of disabilities are so-called hidden disabilities, such as dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties, or are partial visual or hearing impairments which often go undetected, or are handled as best they can by the person affected, without the employer being involved, with the increases in stress and loss of productivity that this may mean.

The positive results reported by employees on sickness absence, motivation, etc. would, if validated by employer monitoring, translate into economic savings which would impact on any business's productivity and profits. Yet, according to the survey, less than half of employers measured whether provision of AT had any effect on these key indicators.

VI. Implications for employing organisations, the AT sector, and policy makers

The findings in this report show that while there is a good level of awareness of what assistive technology is, the rate of take-up in the workplace is still low, even in this possibly biased sample. We estimate that, based on survey rates of disability declaration and actual support delivered, in around 50% of cases in this survey, provision is not being made, with the attendant adverse effects for the individuals and businesses involved. Awareness alone, it appears, is not enough to increase the effective use of AT by employees. We note the positive responses from those who are benefiting from using AT, but also the reluctance on the part of others to ask for AT, and the low level of impact measurement by employers on the use of AT.

There is clearly work to be done to educate and inform employees about AT and about what they are entitled to expect from an employer but there is also more that needs to be done to equip employers to play their part, with improvement needed as well on the AT advice and supply side.

The first requirement is for the culture in any employing organisation to be proactive in fostering a positive non-discriminatory attitude in all staff to anyone with any level of disability or impairment. The Equality Act (and other legislation) provides the framework within which this should happen. In addition, management and human resources systems should be geared to initiate as well as to respond to AT requests for provision, not just because that is required by law, but because it makes good business sense.

In the case of both new employees and those already employed who declare a disability or impairment, there are then questions of what sort of AT is needed, who will provide it, who will train the user, who will maintain it, and how best to keep its use under review. Some of the employee comments showed awareness of their own needs but this was coupled with a lack of understanding of how to identify what would be best for them and how to set about obtaining it. This lack of confidence about how to proceed appeared to be shared by some employers. This points to issues to do with the ease with which employers and employees can find objective information about AT, which the AT sector needs to address.

Employers' lack of knowledge of what is available and how to set about getting it, coupled with the apparent paucity of set procedures, may be reinforcing employees' perceptions that they would not find support for a request for AT, when that might not, in fact, be the case, though it does suggest a general lack of commitment across organisations towards staff with support needs.

In addition, there is the issue of employees not realising that their stress levels could be reduced and their productivity increased were they to be using appropriate AT, the existence of which they and their employers may be entirely unaware because of the fast changing and increasing sophistication of current technology.

Most of these things could be addressed were there to be more and better disability training, with an increased emphasis on the role of AT and the personal and productivity benefits AT could

provide. For that to be effective, there would need to be a specific module on AT, provided by AT suppliers and/or advisers, to ensure that the information used was sufficiently up-to-date.

As this report shows, AT is currently seen by most respondents as the right thing to do and as a fair and equitable way to support performance for those who need it. The findings also support the argument that there is a strong business case for AT provision being used as a strategy to improve overall organisational performance. Understanding the cost benefits of AT should be not only an integral part of the culture of any ethical, socially responsible organisation but at the heart of any business's competitive strategy. Rather than being viewed as a necessary cost in isolated cases – a welfare measure, done out of compassion rather than for business reasons – AT should be seen by every employer as a way to reduce costs and improve performance.

But a far more proactive approach is required to realise the true value that AT can bring to an organisation. For this to become a reality, there needs to be a cultural shift in the perception of AT. All employers, whatever the size of their business, and all employees, whether disabled or not, should regard AT as part of the appropriate tools for the job normally provided to staff and no more remarkable in a modern workplace than ergonomically designed chairs, suitable lighting and heating levels, and the IT software and hardware the organisation requires to function effectively.

Increased awareness, knowledge and understanding of AT, leading to such changes in attitude and practices, would benefit far more than the individual AT user. AT would then be seen as another business tool, a way to reduce costs and improve productivity by unlocking potential and ensuring valuable experience and knowledge is not lost.

The other strong and clear benefits that emerge from the survey include: reduced sickness absences (reported by 30% of employees); increased job satisfaction (64% of employees); greater motivation (50% of employees); and increased loyalty and greater staff retention (55% of employees). These key performance indicators are widely regarded by HR professionals as good predictors of increased productivity and lower staff turnover which suggests that, taken together and over the longer term, what is gained by an organisation through the provision of AT has the potential to far outweigh the costs of assessment, provision, training and maintenance.

However, further research is needed to verify these findings - to demonstrate in hard cash terms how AT costs are offset by longer-term gains - but this survey suggests that there could well be a much higher economic as well as social return on investment in AT than businesses currently realise.

In other words: when AT is needed, and the right kit provided, both employee and employer gain, and so does the UK.

VII. Recommendations for action

We think that **employers** could make some key changes to improve the lives and productivity of disabled people in the workplace if they:

- have in place clear procedures for identifying employees whose performance may be enhanced through the use of assistive technology;
- ensure that all employees are aware of what to do if they or someone they manage appears to be in need of assistive technology;
- proactively educate and inform staff to ensure there is no discrimination against users of assistive technology or anyone with any disability or impairment, whether declared or not;
- ensure that managers, HR professionals and others are aware of the legal requirements with regard to the provision of AT;
- include information about AT in disability awareness training and enable HR professionals and managers to be kept up-to-date on technological advances;
- collect data on the way performance is affected by the provision of AT to feed into longer term cost/benefit analysis research.

We think that the **AT sector** needs to make some changes to the way it operates:

- work together more effectively to raise awareness and understanding of the benefits of AT;
- address the need for easily accessible source of objective information and advice about AT;
- ensure that whenever AT kit is supplied, the importance of the training required to obtain maximum benefit from it is offered and its importance emphasised;
- develop better ways of demonstrating the effectiveness of AT to individuals and organisations;
- support the development and continuous updating of AT modules for HR training and disability awareness courses for managers and employees.

It is notable that 99% of those who responded thought Government should do more to increase the use of AT and, while that is an easy response to make, some of the comments we received, together with further analysis of the data and our members' experience and knowledge, do suggest some further specific steps worth taking.

We think that in order to bring about the cultural and organisational changes required, **Government and other agencies** need to take action:

- Government Ministers and officials, especially those in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), the Department of Health (DoH), and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) – each of which has specific responsibilities which affect people with disabilities - should ensure that AT is specifically considered in their policy documents and action plans;
- Government should support work being done to increase awareness and the use of AT in education and training, so that people with disabilities are better prepared for future employment, and work with the AT sector to improve communication channels;
- Government should support and fund research into the economic and social returns on investment in AT in the workplace;
- DWP and BIS should commission guidance for all employers on the value and benefits of AT in the workplace, and the legal and economic risks of getting it wrong;
- Government should monitor the implementation of the Equality Act as applied in the workplace;
- Representative industry bodies (such as CBI, IoD, FSB), professional associations (such as CIPD) and trades unions should engage with Government, BATA and disability organisations to drive forward the inclusion of AT awareness and information in business and professional training, with best practice examples gathered and disseminated;
- Access to Work, described in the recent review by Liz Sayce, chief executive of Disability Rights UK, as “the Government’s best-kept secret” should be kept under review to check that it is delivering timely and effective assessment and provision of AT for both new employees and those already in work but newly in need of AT, and is facilitating mobility of labour and the recruitment of people with disabilities as well as increasing productivity and reducing welfare costs;
- DWP should monitor students who have received Disabled Students’ Allowances (DSA) when they enter the workplace to ensure that their AT needs continue to be met and to build up an evidence base for the impact this has on their working lives longer term;
- The Government should work with the AT sector, led by BATA, and including suppliers, assessors, employers, third sector disability organisations, education and healthcare professionals, users and carers, to identify how best to improve current levels of understanding of what AT can do, to simplify and improve ways of identifying what is needed and how to obtain it, and ensure adequate resources are available.

VIII. Comments from employees

“The company does not recognise AT equipment for its staff. I now use Dragon NaturallySpeaking and Texthelp software, however the company does not support the technical aspects of this software. I work in a (noisy) open plan office, therefore the technology struggles to understand the dictation. There are also technical problems with the network capability which causes frustration to the point of (my) not wanting to go to work. I have brought this to the attention of my line manager on many occasions but have not been supported by HR.”

“Sometimes people are provided with the AT but not given the back-up support or proper training required to get the most out of it. Surely that would be an advantage for the company as well as the AT user if the support and training were there?”

“It is not only up to the government to raise this type of awareness - it is the responsibility of every single person involved. It needs to become acceptable and understood by the average person on the street and the only way for that to happen is for disabled people to be involved with the general community as much as possible.”

“Assistive Software available on the network for everyone but making sure everyone knows where it is and removing the ‘assistive’ stigma are challenges.”

“I use Dragon Dictate but there is no quiet space for me and my use of it annoys other staff.”

“I am hearing impaired and have tried several assisted listening devices with my company’s telephones and all but one did not work. The one that did work performs poorly with intermittent connections and poor voice quality. My employer and the telephone vendor have been unresponsive and I cannot find assistance from state agencies in determining equipment that would be compatible with the phone system my employer uses.”

“I work flexible hours and can work from home when necessary to support on-going health conditions with access to office systems and communications. In addition I have Access to Work which assists with transport around the borough and provides a special chair to enable me to do my work.”

“Better trained management to understand and support disability - especially those affecting mental health.”

“Being able to declare it to someone who has awareness of disability and knowing that you will get the right responses as opposed to a roll of the eyes and a silent groan.”

“An open and inclusive culture; possibly a more understanding management.”

“Many disabled people (this doesn't include me) are frightened of informing their employer of their disability/impairment which can then result in them not asking for any AT which can then result in poor work performance, with the obvious results.”

“Having the technology available is only the first step. I think my organisation is not unique in prohibiting the installation of software on my work computer. When I had received the software I needed I then had to chase up and wait several weeks for it to be installed. Also because many documents are not in an accessible format my software sometimes does not work properly or at all.”

“I work flexible hours and can work from home when necessary with access to office systems and communications. In addition I have Access to Work which assists with transport around the borough to enable me to do my work and provide a 'special chair' for use at work”

“I received my adjustments quickly and management were very supportive. In a previous organisation I was able to take my equipment with me when I moved jobs within the organisation, and that was well organised especially when moving buildings.”

“Because of pain in my right hand I have been given a vertical mouse that has helped enormously. Others have Dragon software because their condition is worse than mine.”

“I use a speech programme to give me access to computers - without this I simply couldn't do my job.”

“Yes, in my organisation there is a disability office, but their mechanisms are not clear nor are they transparent. So on the one hand there is support, but it is unclear how that operates.”

“(In my organisation) there needs to be awareness of who to ask for in different situation, and what it is reasonable to ask for. Assistive technology needs to be there as soon as somebody starts a job because if they need to wait for an assessment and the purchasing of equipment it could be years before they get the equipment they need to do their job.”

Appendix

Assistive Technology in the Workplace questionnaire

1) Are you completing this survey as an organisation employing people or as a user of assistive technology?

YOU ARE RESPONDING AS AN EMPLOYER

2) Please select which statement best reflects your understanding of the term 'assistive technology' (AT).

- We do not use the term 'assistive technology' in our organisation.
- Special equipment designed specifically for disabled people to help them perform in the workplace.
- AT is any product or service that maintains or improves the ability of individuals with disabilities or impairments to communicate, learn and live independent, fulfilling and productive lives.
- Equipment, software, ergonomic support available to all employees to support personal performance.
- AT helps people to do what they need or want to do more easily, independently, and better.
- AT gives some employees a better working environment than others.
- Other (please specify).

3) What percentage of your employees currently has assistive technology in place?

- 1%-5%.
- 6%-10%.
- 10%-20%.
- 20%+.
- I don't know.

4) We have a standard procedure in place for the assessment and provision of assistive technology.

- We do and I understand that procedure.
- We do but I don't understand that procedure.
- We tackle each request individually at the time it arises.
- We do not get requests for assistive technology.
- Other (please specify).

5) When I consider the term 'assistive technology' I think about...

- Cost implications.
- Infrastructure requirements.
- Support for the employee.
- Operational performance.
- Where to get support.
- What my obligations are.
- Availability of financial support (for example Access to Work).
- How to assess requests for AT.

- Technical integration issues.
- Legislative risks.
- Required resource vs. potential benefit.
- Other (please specify).

6) Please tell us how requests are dealt with.

- If an employee asked for equipment to support their performance in the workplace the steps to put the support in place are clear.
- If an employee asked for equipment to support their performance in the workplace they would know what equipment is available to help them.
- If an employee asked for equipment to support their performance in the workplace there is a budget available to provide the equipment.
- If an employee asked for equipment to support their performance in the workplace an assessment of their request is conducted.
- If an employee asked for equipment to support their performance in the workplace they would be referred to occupational health.
- If an employee asked for equipment to support their performance in the workplace their line manager would have to investigate what to do.
- If an employee asked for equipment to support their performance in the workplace budget would need to be found to support that request.
- If an employee asked for equipment to support their performance in the workplace the organisation uses available funding such as the Access to Work scheme.
- If a candidate asked for support requiring assistive technology during a recruitment process the organisation would provide it.
- The organisation would be more likely to employ a disabled person if the employee could demonstrate how assistive technology helps them to do the job.
- As an employing organisation we are legally required to provide assistive technology to support the maintenance and development of work based performance of disabled people where reasonable.

7) As an employing organisation we are legally required to provide assistive technology to support the maintenance and development of work based performance of disabled people where reasonable.

- Strongly disagree.
- Disagree.
- Not sure.
- Agree.
- Strongly Agree.

8) The legal framework covering the provision of assistive technology is covered by...

- The Disability Discrimination Act.
- The Equality Act 2010.
- Public Sector Duties.
- Health & Safety at Work Act.
- Disability Equalities Duty.
- None of these.
- I don't know.

9) Where we implement assistive technology to support an employee we review and measure...

- Impact on sickness absence
- Impact on individual employee performance/productivity
- Overall section/department/operation performance
- Rate of Employment Tribunal claims
- Impact on employee satisfaction
- Rate of assistive technology requests
- Costs of assistive technology provision
- Impact on employer brand
- Other (please specify)

10) Do you think that the UK government could do more to raise awareness of assistive technology services and support mechanisms in the workplace?

- Yes.
- No.
- Not sure.

11) If you have any examples of how assistive technology has or has not worked in your organisation please tell us here.

YOU ARE ANSWERING THIS SURVEY AS A USER OF ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

12) Do you consider yourself to be disabled?

- Yes.
- No.
- Rather not say.

13) About your disability...

- Do you declare your disability to your employer?
- Is there anything that would further encourage you to declare your disability to your employer?
- Do you require assistive technology to support you in your day to day working activities?
- Does your employer currently provide you with assistive technology in the workplace?
- Please tell us if anything would encourage you to declare your disability.

14) How many employees does your organisation have?

- 1 to 10.
- 11 to 100.
- 101 to 500.
- 501 to 5,000.
- 5,000+.
- Not sure.

15) Where in the UK does your organisation operate?

- UK wide.
- England.
- Ireland.
- Wales.

- Scotland.
- Not sure.
- Other (please specify).

16) What is the legal set up of your organisation?

- Plc.
- Private Ltd.
- Public Sector.
- Charity/Social Enterprise/CIC.
- Not sure.

17) Please select which statement best reflects your understanding of the term 'assistive technology' (AT).

- We do not use the term 'assistive technology' in our organisation.
- Special equipment designed specifically for disabled people to help them perform in the workplace.
- AT is any product or service that maintains or improves the ability of individuals with disabilities or impairments to communicate, learn and live independent, fulfilling and productive lives.
- Equipment, software, ergonomic support available to all employees to support personal performance.
- AT helps people to do what they need or want to do more easily, independently, and better.
- AT gives some employees a better working environment than others.
- Other (please specify).

18) What percentage of the employees in your organisation currently have assistive technology in place?

- 1%-5%.
- 6%-10%.
- 10%-20%.
- 20%+.
- I don't know.

19) We have a standard procedure in place for the assessment and provision of assistive technology...

- We do and I understand that procedure.
- We do but I don't understand that procedure.
- We tackle each request individually at the time it arises.
- We do not get requests for assistive technology.
- Other (please specify).

20) Please tell us how technology requests are dealt with...

- If I needed equipment to support my performance in the workplace I would know who to ask.
- If I needed equipment to support my performance in the workplace I know that I would be supported.

- If I needed equipment to support my performance in the workplace I would expect to go through an assessment of my needs.
- My organisation has a catalogue of available assistive technology support.
- My organisation has an Occupational Health team who provide workplace support.
- As an employee, I am legally entitled to reasonable support from assistive technology in the workplace.
- It would help me if I could take my assistive technology support with me when I move jobs.

21) I have the use of assistive technology in my workplace and it has helped...

- Reduce my sickness absence.
- Improve my effectiveness at work.
- Improve my motivation to go to work.
- Increase my loyalty to employer.
- Improve my work satisfaction.
- Improved my relationship with colleagues.
- Improved my relationship with management.
- Improved my opinion of the company.

22) Do you think that more could be done to raise awareness of assistive technology services and support mechanisms in the workplace?

- No.
- Not Sure.
- Yes.
- Other (please comment below).

23) If you have any examples of how assistive technology has or has not worked in your organisation please tell us here.

24) Would you like us to email you a copy of the report which will follow this survey?

25) Tell us about yourself...

26) If you are happy to take part in future surveys please tick yes below.



IX. Contacting BATA

If you have any questions about the report, please email BATA at info@bataonline.org

Or write to us at our registered postal address BATA Online Ltd, PO Box 52, Oldham, OL3 5YY.

If you would like to know more about BATA, visit <http://www.bataonline.org/newsletter-signup>

Report written by BATA Council member John Lamb, BATA Executive Director, Barbara Phillips CBE, and members of the 2013-14 BATA Council, chaired by Mark McCusker.

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