



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

8 September 2009

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST

Thank you for your request dated 11 August 2009, under the Freedom of Information Act. You asked that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) should disclose:

‘details of the scheme for which the FCO was shortlisted for the 2008 Rehabilitation First Award - Rehabilitation Initiative of the Year – Employer.’

I can confirm that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office does hold information relevant to your request.

In September 2007, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office launched a new service to provide expert professional advice and assistance to enable disabled staff to perform effectively in their jobs and to enable line managers to manage disabled staff effectively.

This involved working with two contractors - Disability Matters and Diverse Business Solutions. Disability Matters ceased trading on 31 July 2009. The FCO is currently in the process of retendering for this part of the contract. We have interim arrangements in place for staff.

Background

The Foreign and Commonwealth is committed to recruiting and developing the careers of disabled people. However, this ambition was not supported by the systems and processes in place, and led to a few people getting a high degree of assistance and the majority not getting enough or not getting it quickly enough. We recognised that it was inappropriate to encourage disabled staff to choose an FCO career and then fail to give them the adjustments they needed to work effectively.

And if we were to provide the appropriate level of support, we needed professional expertise. We identified 2 professional contractors who specialise in disability management, Disability Matters and Diverse Business Solutions through competitive tender. These contractors between them provided professional expertise in assessing and recommending reasonable adjustments, matching individuals to jobs, and training line managers and colleagues of disabled staff. They also provided an advisory service for line managers and disabled staff.

Objective measurement



The first stage of the new process involved the comprehensive measurement of the degree of match between an individual's skills, aptitudes and abilities to undertake tasks required of them. This assessment enabled reasonable adjustments to be identified for specific roles and the suitability of each role to be measured. The assessment identified particular training needs that any disabled officer may have in order to work more effectively in their current role. In addition, the line manager and colleagues are also considered for disability equality training so that they are equipped to deal effectively with their new colleague.

Academic foundation

The Ability Match software that is used by the contractors to determine reasonable adjustments was developed by bringing together the combined skills of medical experts, vocational case managers, occupational psychologists, ergonomists, software developers, educationalists, employers and over 250 people with disabilities or long-term health problems. It has been developed in partnership with occupational psychologists from the Department for Work and Pensions, ergonomists from the University of Loughborough and medical experts working with vocational case managers from the contractor Disability Matters Ltd. The software was tested amongst over 250 disabled people and was refined with the help of FCO disabled staff to be suitable for use within the FCO.

Cost-effective screening

The software operates as a screening tool to identify simple resolutions for the majority of disabled officers while at the same time signposting others with more complex needs to have a more comprehensive and appropriate professional intervention. It is cost effective to operate and is enabling the FCO to provide a professional service to its disabled officers.

Partnership

The FCO made a conscious decision to work in partnership with 2 different professional contractors. The first contractor (Disability Matters) conducted logical, objective and rational assessments using the software and interviewing skills to assess and make recommendations about reasonable adjustments and to advise the FCO on complex and difficult cases. This ranged from bringing in a neuro-diversity specialist to support officers with mental health issues, dyslexia, or who are on the autistic spectrum; to providing expert witness evidence in employment tribunal cases.

The second contractor (Diverse Business Solutions) brings different skills, for example, empathy, communication skills and acts as a source of advice and support to line managers and staff and also provides training to them.



FCO HR staff co-ordinate and manage the operation, facilitate dialogue between all parties to ensure continued learning and process improvement. Monitor the implementation of reasonable adjustments and manage the case conferences

Performance

Since the system went live, over 220 cases have been assessed. Reports are honest, objective and robust and have led to additional adjustments in 50% of cases. Tailored training has been provided in 20% of cases. A job matching system is now in place to give staff more information on how their impairment impacts on a particular job and whether reasonable adjustments can be provided. Management information on staff with declared disabilities has been checked and every member of staff has been contacted with the offer of an assessment.

Difficult cases where performance issues have become entwined with disability issues in an unhelpful way are now being managed through regular case conferences, and the benefit of having objective, professional advice on disability aspects have made it easier to separate out disability from performance and act appropriately.

Testimonials

The service has been praised by the FCO Employment Law Advisers for its professionalism and evidence based approach.