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The influence of trade union Disability Champions on employer disability policy and practice

Abstract

Disability Champions are a new type of lay workplace trade union activist, whose role is to encourage employers to audit and improve disability policies and offer independent advice and guidance on disability issues to employees. Drawing on a survey of the population of Disability Champions, this paper assesses Disability Champion influence on employer disability policy and practice. While the majority of Disability Champions report having had a positive impact, they report greater influence on employer willingness to conduct disability audits and to amend and improve employer equal opportunities practices with regard to disability than employer willingness to make reasonable adjustments. The analysis also identifies several factors that are likely to be important in improving Disability Champion effectiveness. Overall, the results suggest Disability Champions have the potential to enhance the ability of unions to represent disabled people and help manage disability issues within the workplace. The article makes a theoretical contribution to disability champion roles that develops further the ‘activity-support-characteristic’ framework which seeks to understand the impact of unions and can inform policy, practice and outcomes.

Keywords

Disability, Disability Champions, equal opportunities, trade unions

Introduction

There is significant evidence pointing to the labour market disadvantage experienced by disabled people. The 2012 Labour Force Survey estimated the UK employment rate for the working-age disabled to be 46% compared with 76% for the working-age non-disabled (Office for Disability Issues, 2013). Disabled people are over-represented in low-skilled and low-status jobs (Riddell et al, 2010), are paid almost a pound an hour less than the non-disabled (ibid.), have poorer access to career progression and training opportunities, and are more likely to work in jobs for which they are overqualified (Meager and Higgins, 2011).

At the same time, however, there remains a continued paucity of employer HR practices aimed at managing disability, despite initial hopes that the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) would engender positive change (Bruyère and James, 1997: 5). As demonstrated by the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey, almost a decade after the DDA only 23% of workplaces monitored recruitment and selection and 9% monitored

promotions by disability, while only 19% reviewed recruitment and selection procedures, 10% reviewed promotion procedures and 4% reviewed relative pay rates by disability (Kersley et al, 2006: 241-2, 248). In addition, Williams et al. (2008) argue that employers often fail to make inexpensive adjustments to keep disabled people in work, and disabled people often remain reluctant to disclose their disability and request adjustments for fear of discrimination.

In light of these apparent shortcomings in disability practice, it should perhaps be viewed as positive that trade unions have recently demonstrated greater willingness to support disabled people within the workplace. Although union approaches to disability have been typified historically by what Humphrey (1998: 588) describes as ‘a political and cultural forgetfulness’, in recent years unions have placed greater emphasis on representing disabled people, having identified and initiated claims under the DDA (TUC, 2011), represented workers with mental health problems (TUC, 2008), tackled disability discrimination in sickness absence procedures (TUC, 2013a) and campaigned to protect the Public Sector Equality Duty (TUC, 2013b). This might be deemed important in light of Dickens’ (1999) three-pronged approach, within which the joint regulation of employer equality policy via union representation is viewed as one of three prongs for promoting equality, alongside unilateral employer action and legal regulation.

A further important recent union initiative regarding disability has been the establishment of the union Disability Champion role. Disability Champions are a new type of lay workplace union activist, whose role, after undertaking a five-day Trades Union Congress-sponsored training course, is to offer independent advice and guidance on disability issues to employees and encourage employers to audit and improve disability policies. Department of Trade and Industry funding in 2003 helped recruit and train the first Disability Champions. There are now more than 500 Disability Champions in place, and the EHRC

(2012: 47) claims they provide an important vehicle by which unions can develop specialist disability expertise to support disabled people and their employers. They may well, therefore, provide an important mechanism by which the joint regulation element of Dickens' (1999) three-pronged approach can be given substance for disabled people.

No research has been conducted to date, however, into the impact of Disability Champions in terms of engendering workplace-level improvements. As such, this paper has two aims. The first is to assess how effective Disability Champions have been in encouraging employers to amend and improve disability policy and practice. The second is to assess the factors associated with Disability Champion reports of their effectiveness. The findings have the potential to inform both theoretical and practical understanding of the potential for Disability Champions (and the joint regulation element of Dickens' (1999) three-pronged approach more broadly) to promote greater disability equality.

Unions, Disability Champions and employer disability policy and practice

With regard to the paper's first aim (to assess the effectiveness of Disability Champions in encouraging employers to amend and improve disability policy and practice), a useful theoretical starting point is Freeman and Medoff's (1984) collective voice/institutional response model. According to this model, positive union effects may result where unions provide a direct voice channel. This might, as suggested by Dickens (1999), involve formal negotiation and equality bargaining. Beyond this, however, it might also involve informal dialogue with managers in which disabled members' concerns are brought to the attention of management, who may then respond by improving disability policies (ILO, 2009; Labropoulou and Soumeli, 2001; Schurman et al, 1998). One might expect Disability Champions to amplify such voice effects given their specific focus and expertise in representing disabled employees. Also important might be whether this dialogue is

formalised via Disability Champion participation on equality or disability committees. Such committees typically oversee initiatives and monitor progress on equality issues (Kalev et al, 2006: 593) and scrutinise managers' compliance with requests for reasonable adjustments, often suggesting a broader range of adjustments than may otherwise be considered (Bruyère, 2001). Hence, they may provide Disability Champions with a formal voice channel by which they can influence employer disability policy.

In addition to voice effects, theoretical understanding of the impact of joint regulation on equality outcomes might also be informed by what Budd and Mumford (2004) refer to as 'facilitation effects'. This involves unions operating with 'government mandate' (Schurman et al, 1998: 123) to help implement equality legislation (by disseminating information to disabled people about their legal rights and enforcing statutory regulations, for example). It might also involve providing advice, guidance and representation within grievance procedures. This may increase the likelihood of disabled people who believe they have faced discrimination initiating formal grievance proceedings, thereby bringing disability-related problems to the employer's attention and thus encouraging them to improve disability policy (Bruyère, 2000). Such facilitation effects may be dampened, however, should disabled employees who feel discriminated against be reluctant to seek union advice for fear of escalating problems (Foster and Fosh, 2010: 568). Despite this, there is evidence that unions in Britain have influenced employer disability policy recently via this route, having (as mentioned earlier) identified and initiated claims under the DDA, with employers often responding by reviewing their disability policies (Meager et al, 1999). Such facilitation effects will arguably be stronger where a Disability Champion is present, given the specific role they might play in providing information, advice and guidance to disabled members.

In addition to such 'hard' facilitation effects, unions (and Disability Champions) may also engender 'soft' facilitation effects. This might involve working alongside multi-

disciplinary teams including managers and occupational health practitioners to facilitate reasonable adjustments or an effective return to work. In such cases, unions may help reduce workers' anxieties concerning placement into inappropriate jobs and provide reassurance concerning terms and conditions (Bruyère and James, 1997: 12). One might expect such 'soft' facilitation effects to be more prevalent where a Disability Champion is present.

There are theoretical grounds, therefore, to argue that Disability Champions have the potential to augment the 'joint regulation' element of Dickens' (1999) three-pronged approach to equality via the enhancement of both voice effects (Freeman and Medoff, 1984) and hard/soft facilitation effects (Budd and Mumford, 2004), thereby exerting a significant positive impact on employer disability policy and practice. The paper's first aim is to evaluate how far this is the case.

Factors associated with Disability Champion effectiveness – the 'Activity-Support-Characteristics' framework

The paper's second aim is to assess the factors associated with Disability Champion effectiveness. As suggested elsewhere, one might argue that the key determinants of union representative effectiveness (Disability Champion or otherwise) are: the activities they engage in; the support they receive; and their characteristics. This 'Activity-Support-Characteristics' (ASC) theoretical framework – previously applied to the study of Union Learning Representatives (Bacon and Hoque, 2011) and Union Equality Representatives (Bacon and Hoque, 2012) – is developed further below and applied to the area of disability equality to explore the potential correlates of Disability Champion effectiveness.

Disability Champion activity

Arguably, the impact of Disability Champions on employer disability policy and practice will be particularly evident in instances where they engage in activities that enhance the voice and facilitation effects outlined above. Where voice effects are concerned, this might involve the establishment of regular dialogue with managers on disability matters and Disability Champion involvement in equality committee activities. With regard to facilitation effects, Disability Champions may report greater influence where they provide information, advice and guidance to disabled people and represent them within grievance procedures (Bruyère, 2000; Budd and Mumford, 2004). As outlined above, this might bring disability-related problems to the employer's attention, thereby encouraging them to make improvements. The paper will therefore seek to identify the extent to which Disability Champion effectiveness is associated with these types of activity.

It is unlikely, however, that Disability Champions will have an impact via either the voice or facilitation routes unless they spend sufficient time performing their duties. This is a crucial factor for union representative effectiveness in general (ACAS, 2008), and may be of particular concern to Disability Champions given they lack statutory rights to time off. This paper will therefore assess the association between Disability Champion effectiveness and the number of hours they are able to spend on the role.

Support given to Disability Champions

A further factor that might influence Disability Champion effectiveness concerns the support they receive from their union, from employers and from the broader bargaining environment. Where union support is concerned, support for new types of representatives such as Disability Champions might involve negotiating formal agreements for time off and facilities (Hollinrake et al, 2008). However, given the somewhat patchy history of unions in relation to disability (Humphrey, 1998), it is debatable whether such support will be offered. Where

employer support is concerned, several elements might prove important (Jodoin and Harder, 2004; Shrey et al, 2006; Williams-Whitt, 2007). For example, given that Disability Champions do not have statutory rights to office facilities they may depend on employer willingness to make such facilities available. They also depend on employers to provide the information they need to play the role effectively. Previous research, however, has cast doubt on whether HR managers value input from union representatives in dealing with statutory disability legislation (Bruyère et al, 2004: 36). Given this, it is perhaps debatable whether management support for Disability Champions will be forthcoming.

A further element of support is whether the Disability Champion is operating in an environment that offers scope for joint regulation of disability policy via either consultation or negotiation (Dickens, 2007; Hoque and Bacon, 2014). Where consultation is concerned, good practice guidance encourages employers to consult with union representatives on equality and disability issues (EHRC, 2011: para. 17.3), and Woodhams and Corby (2007: 568) suggest employers have become more willing to do so recently. With regard to negotiation, this may give Disability Champions the scope to influence employer disability policy indirectly by encouraging union negotiating officers to prioritise bargaining on disability matters or by working with them to develop a bargaining position on disability. Whether this happens, however, is dependent in part on union willingness to include disability on the bargaining agenda. This might not necessarily happen should, for example, claims for reasonable adjustments potentially affect non-disabled employees adversely through the re-organisation of job roles or by cutting across existing job classifications and seniority provisions in negotiated agreements (Balser, 2002: 142).

Disability Champion characteristics

A number of individual characteristics might influence Disability Champion effectiveness. First, prior experience of union representative roles may be important, given that new activists may lack the skills and experience necessary to persuade employers to amend disability policy and make reasonable adjustments (Foster and Fosh, 2010: 570). That said, new activists may be attracted to the Disability Champion role because of a specific interest in disability, and may therefore play the role with particular vigour.

Second, longevity in the Disability Champion role itself may be important, given that over time they may accumulate the skills and experience necessary to understand the needs of people with a wide range of impairments. As the role is relatively new, many incumbents may not have sufficient longevity for this to have happened.

A third potentially important characteristic is whether the Disability Champion also holds another union role (shop steward for example). Arguably, such ‘hybrid’ representatives will focus less than ‘dedicated’ Disability Champions on disability matters as their other representative roles may crowd out their Disability Champion duties. Against this, however, the additional union role(s) played by ‘hybrid’ representatives may provide them with access to broader union networks and support in performing the Disability Champion role (Moore and Wright, 2010). Hybrid reps may also be better placed to prevent disability issues from becoming marginalised into separatist organising and representation in union governance and internal structures. Additionally, given that Disability Champions lack statutory rights to time off, it may be difficult to play the role meaningfully unless they also have another union role that accords such rights, and they use a proportion of this time in which to conduct their Disability Champion duties.

A final characteristic that relates to the notion of self-organisation and activism by disadvantaged groups is whether the Disability Champion has a long-term illness, health problem or disability. Ninety percent of the first 94 Disability Champions trained were

themselves disabled (Dryden and Garner, 2004: 64). As Dickens (2007: 484) argues, female and ethnic minority union representatives may be more likely than their male/white counterparts to seek to promote gender/ race equality. Similarly, Disability Champions with personal experience of a long-term illness, health problem or disability may play the role with particular vigour.

In relation to the paper's second aim, therefore, the analysis draws on the ASC theoretical framework outlined above to explore the extent to which Disability Champion effectiveness is associated with a range of factors relating to the activities they engage in, the support they receive and their characteristics.

Data and method

The data are drawn from an independent survey distributed between June and November 2010 to all Disability Champions who attended the Trades Union Congress-sponsored Disability Champion training course. Representatives must undergo this training before becoming Disability Champions, hence the whole population was surveyed. The survey was conducted online with a link to the survey being emailed to participants. Hard copies or alternative formats were offered to respondents on request. The link was distributed to 497 Disability Champions, of whom 159 replied (a response rate of 32%). 116 responses were used once respondents who undertook the training but did not subsequently adopt the role and observations with missing data were excluded. Respondents were informed that their responses would be analysed confidentially, with the authors being solely responsible for the survey design, analysis and interpretation of the findings.

The paper's aims were tested as follows. The first aim (to estimate Disability Champion effectiveness in encouraging employers to amend and improve disability policy and practice) was addressed using self-report measures of the respondents' impact on the

employer's: willingness to conduct disability audits of documents, buildings or procedures; willingness to make reasonable adjustments for disabled employees; and equal opportunities practices with regard to disability (on a four-point scale where 1=none and 4=a lot). Analyses using self-report measures are common in both surveys and interviews for assessing the impact of new types of union representatives, and have produced similar results to analyses using non-self-report measures (Bacon and Hoque, 2011; Hollinrake et al, 2008; Hoque and Bacon, 2008), suggesting that self-report measures provide reliable estimates of impact.

The paper's second aim (to assess the factors associated with Disability Champion reports of their effectiveness) was tested in three equations that treated the self-report measures of Disability Champion effectiveness described above as the dependent variables and a series of variables relating to the Activity-Support-Characteristics factors as the independent variables (listed in the Appendix table). Observable characteristics relating to both demographic and workplace characteristics were controlled for (see Appendix table). Given the categorical nature of the dependent variables, ordered probit maximum likelihood was used. To indicate the magnitude of the significant effects, post-estimation average predicted probabilities were calculated.

Some of the independent variable means reported in the Appendix table are notable in their own right, given how little is known about Disability Champions. First, where Disability Champion activities are concerned, only 22% report spending 5 hours or more a week performing the role, while nearly a quarter report spending less than one hour a week performing the role. This in itself might suggest that statutory rights to time off for Disability Champions are needed to help increase the time they can spend on their duties. That said, most Disability Champions are playing the role actively, with only 13% neither having provided information to/assisted disabled employees to help them overcome problems at work in the past year, nor having represented disabled employees suffering discrimination

and harassment. This is notable given the high inactivity levels identified among other types of new union representatives (Bacon and Hoque, 2009; Hollinrake et al, 2008).

Where union support for Disability Champions is concerned, it is positive that more than 70% believe the union to be supportive/strongly supportive of their role (though not reported in the table, only 6% believe the union to be unsupportive). There are no grounds to believe, therefore, that a lack of union support will undermine their effectiveness. By contrast, employer support for Disability Champions is less forthcoming, with 34% of Disability Champions reporting managers at their workplace do not value their activities, and fewer than 3 in 10 believing managers support their role. Also noteworthy, however, is that a majority of Disability Champions operate in an environment with some scope for joint regulation, with 40% reporting managers normally consult union representatives when deciding disability policies and practices, and 20% reporting managers normally negotiate.

Turning to Disability Champion characteristics, 93% of Disability Champions previously held another union post, suggesting the position is being used to expand the roles of existing union representatives with specific disability interests rather than to bring new activists into lay union representation. Also reflecting this, 88% of Disability Champions are ‘hybrid’ representatives with another union role. This might also be seen as unsurprising given that Disability Champions do not have statutory rights to time off – as argued earlier it may only be possible for representatives to adopt the Disability Champion role if they have another role that accords them such rights, and they use a proportion of this time to conduct their Disability Champion duties. Finally, the majority (72%) of Disability Champions themselves have a long-term illness, health problem or disability. Personal experience in this regard may be a key motivating factor in the decision to become a Disability Champion.

Finally, it is notable that Disability Champions are located predominantly in large organisations (only 12% are in organisations with fewer than 1000 employees). Although this

suggests a paucity of Disability Champions in small and medium-sized enterprises, it also suggests their influence may extend across large numbers of employees, given the size of organisations they are located in.

Results

Disability Champions' perceptions of their effectiveness

The paper's first aim is to estimate how effective Disability Champions have been in terms of encouraging employers to amend and improve disability policy and practice. The results in Table 1 show that Disability Champions report greater success in influencing some elements of employer disability policy and practice than others. In particular, 71% report 'a lot' or 'some' influence on employer willingness to conduct disability audits of documents, buildings or procedures, while only 14% report no influence on this outcome. Concerning their impact on employer equal opportunities practices with regard to disability, 57% report 'a lot' or 'some' influence, with 21% reporting no influence. However, only 47% report 'a lot' or 'some' influence on employer willingness to make reasonable adjustments, while 29% report no influence.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Further analysis was also undertaken to identify the proportion of Disability Champions reporting a positive effect on at least one of the three measures. This analysis demonstrates that 11% report no impact on any of the measures, while a further 14% report only 'a little' impact on the measures they have influenced. While this suggests that approximately a quarter of Disability Champions perceive their impact to have been non-existent or limited at best, it is nevertheless encouraging that the majority (approximately

three-quarters) report a positive effect (defined as ‘some’ or ‘a lot’ of impact) on at least one measure.

Factors associated with Disability Champion perceived effectiveness

The paper’s second aim is to identify the ‘Activity-Support-Characteristics’ (ASC) factors associated with Disability Champion effectiveness. The results are presented in table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Activity. Where activities likely to enhance voice effects (Freeman and Medoff, 1984) are concerned, there is only weak evidence pointing to the importance of informal dialogue with management. Disability champions who had contact at least monthly with any level of management in the last 12 months reported slightly greater influence (at the 10% level) on the employer’s equal opportunities practices with regard to disability than those that have not been in contact or have been in contact just once. There is, however, stronger evidence that Disability Champions report greater influence on employer willingness to make reasonable adjustments in instances where they regularly attend an equality/disability committee. The predicted probability¹ that they report ‘a lot’ of influence on employer willingness to make reasonable adjustments is 0.123 in such instances, but only 0.050 where a committee exists but they do not regularly attend, and 0.049 where no committee exists.

There is also some evidence pointing to the importance of activity that enhances facilitation effects, with the predicted probability that Disability Champions report ‘a lot’ of influence on employer willingness to conduct disability audits being 0.318 where they have represented disabled employees suffering discrimination and harassment, 0.323 where they have not represented disabled employees but have provided information/assistance to

disabled employees, but only 0.117 where they have neither provided information/assistance, nor represented disabled employees.

The final issue concerning Disability Champion activity relates to the hours-per-week spent on the role, this being associated with their impact on employer willingness to conduct disability audits and willingness to make reasonable adjustments. The effect sizes are notable, with the predicted probability of Disability Champions reporting ‘a lot’ of influence on employer willingness to conduct disability audits being 0.416 where they spend 5 hours or more a week on the role but only 0.146 where they spend less than one hour on the role. Similarly, the predicted probability that Disability Champions report ‘a lot’ of influence on employer willingness to make reasonable adjustments is 0.131 where they spend 5 hours or more a week on the role, but only 0.020 where they spend less than one hour on the role.

Support. Turning to support for Disability Champions, there is only weak evidence for the importance of union support, with those stating the union is ‘very supportive’ reporting only slightly greater impact (at the 10% level) on the employer’s equal opportunities practices with regard to disability.

Where employer support is concerned, there is no evidence that Disability Champion effectiveness is influenced by whether the employer provides sufficient office space or communication equipment, or whether managers value the role. Only a slightly greater impact (at the 10% level) is reported on employer willingness to conduct disability audits and on equal opportunities practices with regard to disability where Disability Champions believe the employer provides adequate information.

There is, however, greater evidence pointing to the importance of a bargaining environment that is supportive of joint regulation. In instances where disability policy is subject to negotiation, the predicted probability that Disability Champions report ‘a lot’ of

influence on employer willingness to make reasonable adjustments is 0.122 where negotiation occurs, but only 0.030 where management do not involve union representatives. Disability Champions also report slightly greater impact (at the 10% level) on employer willingness to conduct disability audits where negotiation occurs. Where consultation with unions over disability policies and practices occurs, Disability Champions report greater influence on employer willingness to conduct disability audits (the predicted probability that Disability Champions report ‘a lot’ of influence is 0.475 where consultation occurs but only 0.201 where managers do not involve union representatives), and employer equality practices with regard to disability (the predicted probability that they report ‘a lot’ of influence is 0.283 where consultation occurs but only 0.098 where management do not involve union representatives). They also report slightly greater impact (at the 10% level) on employer willingness to make reasonable adjustments.

Characteristics. Turning to characteristics, there is some evidence pointing to the importance of Disability Champions’ longevity in the role, with the predicted probability that they report ‘a lot’ of influence on employer willingness to make reasonable adjustments being 0.253 where they have been in role for 5 or more years, but only 0.061 where in role for less than one year. Also, those in role for 5 or more years report slightly greater influence (at the 10% level) on employer willingness to conduct disability audits and equal opportunities practices with regard to disability.

Controls. Some of the control variable coefficients are noteworthy. First, Disability Champions in large organisations report greater influence on employer willingness to conduct disability audits, and a slightly more positive influence on employer equal opportunities practices with regard to disability than do those in small organisations. It is thus perhaps

encouraging that those reporting the greatest influence are located in workplaces where they will potentially affect large numbers of disabled employees. Second, Disability Champions in health and social work report less influence on employer disability policy and practice than do those in other industrial sectors. This may reflect over-cautious approaches to health and safety in this sector which often ‘debar(s) disabled people unfairly from particular ... professions’ (DWP, 2011: 47). Third, Disability Champion influence is no greater in the public sector than in the private or not-for-profit sectors, suggesting that public sector preparations for the introduction of the Equality Duty (which came into force in April 2011) did not provide them with additional leverage.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper sought to address two main aims. The first was to assess how effective Disability Champions have been in encouraging employers to amend and improve disability policy and practice. The second was to identify the factors associated with Disability Champion effectiveness. In the event, the analysis revealed some notable results.

With regard to the paper’s first aim, the majority (approximately three-quarters) of Disability Champions report a positive impact on at least one of the three elements of employer disability policy and practice assessed. This suggests support for the EHRC’s (2012: 47) view that the Disability Champion initiative has the potential to help unions develop specialist expertise to support disabled people and their employers, and that the role complements the greater emphasis unions have placed in recent years on representing disabled people (TUC, 2008, 2011, 2013a,b). It would appear, therefore, that Disability Champions have significant potential to enhance the ‘joint regulation’ element of Dickens’ (1999) three-pronged approach concerning the impact of unions on employer disability practice.

Notable, however, is that although Disability Champions report considerable success in encouraging employers to audit and improve disability policy and practice, they report more limited impact on employer willingness to make reasonable adjustments. The likelihood of reasonable adjustments being made is partly dependent on whether managers and other employees support and understand the need for them (EHRC, 2012). The difficulties Disability Champions report concerning adjustments may reflect a continued absence of such support and understanding in many workplaces (Williams et al., 2008), despite initial hopes the DDA would engender this (Bruyère and James, 1997: 5).

With regard to the paper's second aim (identifying the factors associated with Disability Champions' reports of their effectiveness), a number of 'Activity-Support-Characteristics' (ASC) factors were found to be important. Turning first to the 'activity' element of the framework, there was some evidence for the importance of activities that enhance voice effects (Freeman and Medoff, 1984), with there being a positive association between Disability Champion attendance at workplace equality/disability committees and employer willingness to make reasonable adjustments. Only 33% of Disability Champions attend workplace equality/disability committees (see Appendix table), and they do not exist at all in 47% of the workplaces in which Disability Champions are located. This suggests the more widespread establishment of such committees in which Disability Champions participate may help increase employer responsiveness and understanding of the requirements of disabled people. Future research may usefully explore whether such findings concerning the impact of equality committees hold for other disadvantaged groups, and if so whether this impact is dependent on a joint-problem solving approach being taken, and/or the authority such committees command (Bruyère, 2001; Kalev et al, 2006: 593).

The results also highlight the importance of activities that enhance facilitation effects. In line with Meager et al. (1999), Disability Champions providing information/advice and

representing disabled employees within grievance procedures report a greater impact on employer willingness to conduct disability audits. Notable, however, is that they do not report greater impact on employer willingness to make reasonable adjustments. One potential explanation for this is that union intervention of this nature may come at too late a stage after disadvantage has occurred, and may therefore risk escalating problems (Foster and Fosh, 2010: 568) and entrenching management views rather than encouraging a positive response. Set alongside the results highlighting the positive impact of Disability Champion participation in equality/disability committees, this suggests that for unions to increase the likelihood of reasonable adjustments being made, joint-working between managers and union reps that facilitates early intervention is necessary.

Also concerning activity, the findings support previous work suggesting that the impact of new specialised union representatives depends on the number of hours per week they spend on the role (Bacon and Hoque, 2011, 2012). Only 22% of Disability Champions report spending five or more hours a week on the role, suggesting their effectiveness might be enhanced considerably by statutory rights to time off. Indeed, it is arguably only with statutory backing of this nature that joint regulation approaches to equality (Dickens 1999) are likely to fulfil their potential in the current context of general union weakness.

Turning to the ‘support’ element of the ASC framework, the results further highlight the importance of union voice effects (Freeman and Medoff 1984). Concurring with prior research (Dickens, 2007; Hoque and Bacon, 2014), the analysis finds Disability Champion reports of their effectiveness to be more positive in environments that are supportive of consultation or negotiation over equality. However, consultation and negotiation may influence different types of equality action in different ways, the findings suggesting that formal consultation with unions may encourage employers to conduct disability audits and reassess equality practices with regard to disability, whereas negotiation may be required to

increase employer willingness to make reasonable adjustments. Future research may usefully seek to identify the equality practices best advanced by consultation and those which require negotiation/equality bargaining.

With regard to the ‘characteristics’ element of the ASC framework, the results suggest that Disability Champions with greater longevity in the role report greater success in encouraging employers to make reasonable adjustments. This suggests it takes time to learn about and understand the needs of people with a wide range of impairments and persuade employers to make appropriate adjustments (Foster and Fosh, 2010). This in turn suggests the impact of Disability Champions may increase in future as the current Disability Champion cohort develops greater expertise. It also suggests that the retention of union reps with equality expertise is an important issue. In reaching this conclusion, however, one must keep in mind the possibility of reverse causation, given that longevity in the role might also be a consequence of, as well as a cause of, influence. Nevertheless, future research may usefully explore further the relationship between union rep longevity and their effectiveness in achieving equality outcomes.

The results presented here have some potentially important implications for unions, employers and government. Where unions are concerned, some of the ASC factors associated with Disability Champions’ reports of their effectiveness (ensuring Disability Champion retention, for example) might be best viewed as their responsibility. However, other factors (advocating joint regulation with regard to disability decision-making, the adoption of workplace disability or equality committees and rights to time off, for example) require employer and state action. It is debatable, however, whether state intervention will be forthcoming in the immediate future given statutory rights to time off were not accorded to Equality Representatives in the Equality Act 2010. This might be viewed with a certain irony given current government plans to move 1 million of the 2.63 people currently on disability

benefits into employment (National Audit Office, 2010). Were the state and employers willing to provide such support, thereby enhancing the ability of Disability Champions to influence employer receptiveness to disabled people, this might have the potential to make an important contribution to the achievement of this policy goal.

Finally, it is necessary to highlight several caveats concerning the results reported here. First, it is not possible to draw clear causal inferences between the ASC factors and Disability Champion reports of their effectiveness given the potential for reverse causality and common method bias. Second, the paper relies on Disability Champions' self-reports of their impact. This may lead them to over-estimate their impact (to maintain self-esteem), or under-estimate their impact (should they have high expectations concerning their level of influence). To address these caveats, further research exploring Disability Champions might adopt longitudinal designs and/or collect matched data from Disability Champions and employers or disabled employees to enable the dependent and independent variables to be derived from different data sources. In addition, qualitative research might usefully explore in greater detail the precise nature of Disability Champion impact, and also provide a nuanced explanation of the manner in which the ASC factors influence Disability Champion effectiveness. Finally, future research might also account for the fact that disability discrimination is often closely related to age, gender and ethnicity discrimination, hence it might usefully seek to look beyond a single-strand focus and seek to explore issues of intersectionality. Should future research that takes these issues into consideration replicate the results achieved here, this will bolster further the argument that Disability Champions have the potential to play an important role in enhancing the joint regulation element of Dickens' (1999) three-pronged approach, and also in assisting HR managers in managing disability issues within the workplace.

Notes

1. The predicted probabilities reported throughout the results section are not reported in the tables for the sake of brevity.

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Table 1: Impact of Disability Champion activity on employer disability policy (percentages)

Since becoming a Disability Champion, what impact have you had on the following areas?

	A lot	Some	A little	None
Your employer's willingness to conduct disability audits of documents, buildings or procedures	30	41	16	14
Your employer's willingness to make reasonable adjustments for disabled employees	8	39	24	29
Your employer's equal opportunities practices with regard to disability	17	40	22	21

N=116

Table 2: Factors associated with Disability Champion effectiveness

	Disability champion impact on employer:					
	willingness to conduct disability audits		willingness to make reasonable adjustments		equal opportunities practices with regard to disability	
<u>Activity:</u>						
Hours per week spent on Disability Champion activity (reference category: <one hour):						
1 to <5 hours	1.014	(0.480)**	0.923	(0.480)*	0.685	(0.451)
>=5 hours	1.485	(0.633)**	1.359	(0.602)**	0.623	(0.572)
Contact with management in the last 12 months in Disability Champion role (reference category: Not at all/once a year):						
At least every six months	1.077	(0.508)**	0.910	(0.479)*	0.655	(0.477)
At least once a month	0.667	(0.429)	0.362	(0.408)	0.740	(0.417)*
Support provided to members (reference category: neither provided information nor assisted disabled employees to help them overcome problems they have faced at work, nor represented disabled employees suffering discrimination or harassment):						
Provided information/assisted disabled employees	1.300	(0.561)**	0.218	(0.510)	0.819	(0.520)
Represented disabled employees suffering discrimination or harassment	1.272	(0.592)**	0.445	(0.555)	0.705	(0.559)
Does the employer have an equality committee/forum that the Disability Champion regularly attends? (reference category: no committee/forum)						
Committee/forum the Disability Champion does not regularly attend	0.149	(0.458)	0.000	(0.425)	-0.555	(0.437)
Committee/forum the Disability Champion regularly attends	0.389	(0.409)	0.778	(0.391)**	-0.578	(0.383)
<u>Support:</u>						
How supportive is your union of your Disability Champion role? (reference category: Unsupportive/Neither supportive nor unsupportive)						
Supportive	-0.583	(0.418)	-0.171	(0.396)	-0.039	(0.376)
Strongly supportive	0.363	(0.413)	-0.217	(0.377)	0.736	(0.391)*
Arrangements for Disability Champions set out in a formal agreement	-0.466	(0.453)	0.526	(0.434)	-0.029	(0.427)
Employer provides adequate information	0.714	(0.393)*	0.364	(0.362)	0.648	(0.373)*
Employer provides (reference category: neither sufficient office space nor sufficient communication equipment (e.g. phone, email, internet))						
Sufficient communication equipment but not sufficient office space	-0.472	(0.478)	-0.194	(0.490)	-0.475	(0.468)
Sufficient office space and sufficient communication equipment	0.511	(0.503)	0.079	(0.472)	0.663	(0.477)
Agree/disagree that managers value your Disability Champion activities? (reference category: Disagree)						
Neither agree nor disagree	-0.592	(0.458)	-0.272	(0.450)	-0.311	(0.469)
Agree	0.164	(0.547)	0.325	(0.529)	0.312	(0.533)
When deciding disability policies and practices, managers here normally (reference category: Do not involve union representatives):						
Inform union representatives	0.477	(0.481)	-0.099	(0.482)	0.106	(0.469)
Consult union representatives	1.855	(0.491)***	0.813	(0.457)*	1.292	(0.462)***
Negotiate with union representatives	0.984	(0.534)*	1.041	(0.531)**	0.814	(0.526)

Characteristics:

Time spent as Disability Champion (reference category: <1 year):

1 to <2 years	0.086	(0.461)	-0.566	(0.472)	-0.272	(0.454)
2 to <5 years	0.732	(0.436)*	-0.165	(0.430)	0.606	(0.430)
>=5 years	1.027	(0.560)*	1.320	(0.553)**	0.950	(0.546)*

Previously held another union post	-0.144	(0.713)	-0.904	(0.691)	0.464	(0.724)
Other union post currently held	-0.234	(0.568)	0.209	(0.524)	-0.607	(0.540)
Long-term illness, health problem or disability	0.055	(0.379)	-0.440	(0.372)	0.204	(0.362)

Controls:

Sector (reference category: public sector)

Private sector	-0.182	(0.585)	-0.254	(0.519)	-0.163	(0.565)
Not-for-profit sector	0.148	(0.686)	-0.309	(0.618)	0.696	(0.641)

Organisation size (reference category: <=999 employees)

1000-4999	1.024	(0.582)*	0.565	(0.551)	0.776	(0.551)
5000-9999	0.117	(0.571)	-0.447	(0.564)	0.401	(0.548)
>=10000	1.464	(0.553)***	0.283	(0.531)	0.901	(0.538)*

Workplace size (reference category: <=50 employees)

51-100	0.554	(0.634)	1.167	(0.620)*	-0.225	(0.600)
101-250	-0.462	(0.599)	-0.137	(0.559)	-0.408	(0.562)
251-500	-1.128	(0.610)*	-0.814	(0.597)	-0.216	(0.573)
501-1000	-1.290	(0.655)**	-0.485	(0.614)	-2.168	(0.684)***
>=1000	-0.935	(0.546)*	-0.206	(0.483)	-0.561	(0.489)

Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) major group (reference category: Public administration and defence)

Education	0.588	(0.646)	-0.420	(0.604)	0.349	(0.580)
Health and social work	-1.434	(0.594)**	-1.191	(0.610)*	-1.093	(0.575)*
Transport, storage and communications	-0.279	(0.516)	-0.547	(0.483)	0.012	(0.468)
Other community, social and personal services	-0.488	(0.538)	-0.293	(0.508)	0.091	(0.498)
Other industry group	-0.072	(0.586)	0.119	(0.503)	0.194	(0.528)

Occupational group represented (reference category: managers/professionals)

Non-management	0.682	(0.652)	-0.211	(0.645)	0.346	(0.620)
Mixed	0.628	(0.631)	-0.220	(0.622)	0.056	(0.589)

Representative age (<=29 years old)

30-39	-0.820	(0.447)*	0.229	(0.417)	-0.521	(0.420)
40-49	-1.588	(0.529)***	-0.757	(0.475)	-1.391	(0.487)***
50-59	-2.033	(0.557)***	-0.794	(0.530)	-1.739	(0.545)***
>=60 years old	-1.571	(0.608)***	-1.087	(0.563)*	-1.032	(0.569)*

Female	-0.541	(0.332)	0.084	(0.313)	-0.166	(0.313)
Ethnic minority	0.249	(0.472)	0.315	(0.443)	0.662	(0.474)

Pseudo R2	0.353		0.290		0.289	
N	116		116		116	

Notes:

Coefficients given, standard errors in brackets

***significant at 1% **significant at 5% *significant at 10%

Appendix Table: independent and control variables (percent)

	Percent
<u>Disability Champion Activity</u>	
Hours a week spent on the Disability Champion role, including both time spent at work or elsewhere	
<one hour	22.4
1 to <5 hours	56.0
>=5 hours	21.6
Contact with any level of management in the last 12 months in disability champion role	
Not at all/once a year	25.9
At least every six months	27.6
At least once a month	46.6
Neither provided information to/assisted disabled employees to help them overcome problems they have faced at work in the past year, nor represented disabled employees suffering discrimination or harassment (either in informal proceedings or in formal disciplinary or grievance procedures)	12.9
Provided information to/assisted disabled employees to help them overcome problems they have faced at work in the past year	38.8
Represented disabled employees suffering discrimination or harassment in the past year	48.3
Does the employer have an equality committee/forum that the Disability Champion regularly attends?	
No committee/forum	47.4
Committee/forum that the Disability Champion does not regularly attend	19.8
Committee/forum that the Disability Champion regularly attends	32.8
<u>Support for Disability Champions</u>	
Overall, how supportive is your union of your Disability Champion role?	
Unsupportive/neither supportive nor unsupportive	29.3
Supportive	37.9
Strongly supportive	32.8
Arrangements for Disability Champions in your workplace set out in a formal agreement	13.8
Employer provides adequate information to conduct the Disability Champion role	50.9
To help you conduct your Disability Champion role, the employer provides:	
Neither sufficient office space nor sufficient communication equipment (e.g. phone, email, internet)	29.3
Sufficient communication equipment only	15.5
Sufficient office space and sufficient communication equipment	55.2
Do you agree or disagree that managers at this workplace value your Disability Champion activities?:	
Disagree	33.6
Neither agree nor disagree	37.1
Agree	29.3
When deciding disability policies and practices managers normally:	
Do not involve union representatives	23.3
Inform union representatives	17.2
Consult union representatives	39.7
Negotiate with union representatives	19.8
<u>Disability Champion Characteristics</u>	
How long have you been a Disability Champion?	
<one year	16.4
1 to <2 years	18.1
2 to <5 years	49.1
>=5 years	16.4
Previously held another union post	93.1
Other union post currently held	87.9
Long-term illness, health problem or disability	72.4

Control variables

Public sector	73.3
Private sector	17.2
Not-for-profit/voluntary sector	9.5
Organisation size (employees):	
<=999	12.1
1000-4999	25.0
5000-9999	20.7
>=10000	42.2
Workplace size (employees):	
>=50	15.5
51-100	8.6
101-250	11.2
251-500	15.5
501-1000	12.9
>1000	36.2
SIC major group:	
Public administration and defence	30.2
Education	10.3
Health and Social Work	12.1
Transport, storage and communications	17.2
Other community, social and personal services	12.9
Other industry group	17.2
Occupational group represented:	
Managers/professionals	10.3
Non-management	30.2
Mixed	59.5
Rep age:	
<=29 years old	19.8
30-39 years old	29.3
40-49 years old	20.7
50-59 years old	15.5
>=60 years old	14.7
Female	37.1
Ethnic minority	10.3

N=116