



STAMMERING AT WORK

Issue 1
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SUPPORT & GUIDANCE FROM STAMMA FOR TRADE UNIONS & THEIR MEMBERS

WELCOME! to Stammering At Work. This is a quarterly newsletter with information and resources related to stammering and the work of your union.

STAMMA is a UK charity. We work with people who stammer and with those whose jobs bring them into contact with staff, customers and service users who stammer.

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STAMMERING & THE UNIONS

Gary Clark

My name is Gary Clark and many of you will know that I am CWU Scotland No.2 Branch secretary. I've been in this role for the last 7 years and you will have seen me speaking at national conferences or national briefings over a number of years.

I have been in the CWU for the last 27 years but prior to that I was in SOGAT and active there. I was also in the TGWU and was a branch secretary there too and was dismissed for my union activities.

You probably see me as a confident speaker who does not need any support regarding his stammer. But this has not always been the case. You will not have seen me in 1985, aged 17, first getting involved in the trade union movement. Like many people who stammer, I was standing in the background, unwilling to put myself forward. I'd not long left school where I'd dealt with what a lot of kids had to deal with at school when other kids and sometime teachers believed it was ok to mimic and bully people who stammer. Unlike many other disabilities, I believe this ridicule and bullying can still happen today.

I was probably representative as a person of my generation. Living through the time of a Thatcher government and after the year long miners' strike, I decided to push

myself forward. It was not easy. I learned how to try and control my stammer by using a technique called word avoidance where I'm always thinking ahead and trying to avoid words which I think I might stammer on. 38 years later I still sometimes do that.

Recently I have got involved with STAMMA – the national stammering charity. I volunteer in their employment support team and I have been opening up a link between the unions and the support and activities STAMMA provide. It's also opened my eyes up to think about how we operate in the union and how we can help and assist members and activists who stammer or have family members who stammer.

Think about when you might have spoken at your first union event, when you prepared your contribution, when you had to time your speech for a set amount of time, when you saw on the platform the green, amber, and red lights, and everybody looking at you. Imagine if you had a stammer how that would make you feel, the pressure that would put you under, how unwelcome you might feel as someone who stammers. There must be a better way we can operate so we can encourage people who stammer to get more



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involved in trade unions. This also applies to how we run our committee meetings and our training courses, how we do round-the-table introductions – have we ever thought about how we can do these in ways that allow people who stammer to get truly involved?

I am here because I am sure STAMMA can work closely with the CWU and the wider trade union movement to help us support our members, their families, and our activists.

I am very proud of the link I have been trying to build up over the last few months which has seen STAMMA at the TUC disability conference and launching this quarterly newsletter for unions. I am likely to be retiring shortly and I hope that this work I have started will grow and continue over the coming months and years.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gary".

STAMMA

SPOTLIGHT ON REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

Stammering & Telephone Work

Some people who stammer are very happy talking on the phone, while others find speaking on the phone a real challenge.

For those who do struggle and whose job role involves telephone work, there are a wide range of reasonable adjustments that can make things easier. As with all reasonable adjustments, they need to be tailored to the individual and to the particular challenge. See below for some inspiration!

Challenge	Suggested Adjustments
I find it harder to focus on my caller when I am stammering and have an 'audience' of colleagues, watching and listening to me	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The availability of a more private space to make and receive phonecalls
I find it harder to speak or to work through moments of stammering when I'm in noisy surroundings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The availability of a more private space to make and receive phonecalls
There's a standard phrase, greeting or company name that I have to say at the start of calls and it's really difficult for me to say because of my stammer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Flexibility to not use the standard phrase, greeting or company name▪ Option to play a pre-recording of the standard phrase, greeting or company name to get the call started
I find it much easier when the other person in the call already knows that I stammer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Pre-arranged time for calls so both parties know who is calling and when
I manage phonecalls much better when I can prepare for them rather than not knowing when they are going to come in or what the topic will be	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Pre-arranged time for calls so both parties know who is calling, when and what the topic will be
I don't feel I can work effectively if I have to speak on the telephone OR I get so anxious about phonecalls, it's having a detrimental effect on my health or my work	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Option to use the UK Relay service (relayuk.bt.com) for telephone work▪ Flexible options to meet face-to-face, via videocall or use email

And remember – this list isn't exhaustive. Once you've worked out what the specific challenge or barrier is, that will often lead you to ideas for an appropriate, simple, useful adjustment!

LESSONS FROM EMPLOYMENT TRIBUNALS

Employment Tribunal 'M' v Manchester Rusk Co

Case

This disability discrimination claim related to stammering, and much of the decision centred around whether the claimant's stammer was a disability under the Equality Act.

In common with many disabilities, conditions, or differences, stammering is covered by the Equality Act in England, Scotland and Wales and by the Disability Discrimination Act in Northern Ireland. Unlike people who are blind or partially sighted, people who stammer are not *automatically* regarded as disabled within the law. It depends instead on the impact of the stammering, and whether stammering has more than a minor or trivial impact on the person's ability to carry out "normal, day-to-day activities".

In this case, the burden was on the claimant to prove that his stammer met the criteria for disability within the Equality Act.

Evidence

The claimant's limited evidence of his stammering and its impact included a report from the DWP from several years previously and documents confirming he attended a course of speech therapy some years ago. In his witness statement he talked about the impact of stammering in a range of situations and focused on examples such as interviews or other situations when he was under pressure.

However, in his evidence, the claimant did not address whether such activities should be regarded as "normal, day-to-day activities". The

claimant also didn't provide any evidence or witnesses to support the challenges he experienced; including shopping, phone calls and interviews. Nor was he able to provide dates or describe specific instances when these experiences had occurred.

During part of the tribunal, the court observed the claimant talking via video link from his home. The judge commented that the claimant appeared relaxed and that, even during his oral statements, stammering was only occasionally observed.



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Outcome

Combining their perception of generally fluent speech and the limited evidence presented, the tribunal did not feel the claimant's stammering met the criteria for disability under the Equality Act.

Surprisingly, although the claimant had repeatedly referenced difficulty speaking during interviews, the tribunal did not regard interviews as a “normal day-to-day activity”.

Recommendations

This case is interesting as it demonstrates several important points:

- The need to provide clear, documented evidence of the impact of stammering
- The need to explain and provide evidence if the stammering is not always observed by listeners, perhaps due to natural fluctuations

or the effects of minimising or hiding it as described above.

- As a required part of the process for getting most jobs, there is a good rationale for interviews being “normal, day-to-day activities”. This highlights the need to actively address the impact examples from witness statements to demonstrate that these are “normal, day-to-day activities”.

References

Stammering Law website, <https://www.stammeringlaw.org.uk/m-v-manchester-rusk-co/> (retrieved 11.09.2023).

Why you might not always see or hear stammering

It's very typical for stammering to fluctuate. Many people who stammer experience fluctuations from year-to-year, month-to-month, day-to-day or even moment-to-moment in how often they stammer or how long those moments of stammering last. So it's perfectly normal for someone to stammer lots on one day and not on another. Situational factors may also influence the extent of stammering. Lots of people report stammering more in some situations than in others.

Also, many people who stammer mask, hide or try to minimise their moments of stammering. This may be to avoid negative reactions from others, or to minimise their own physical or mental discomfort and frustration when they know exactly what they want to say but can't say the sound or word due to stammering. People may mask, hide or minimise stammering by strategies such as rehearsing before speaking, saying less, switching words, avoiding a situation or speaking in a different or special way to try to over-ride the stammering.

Just because you don't notice the pauses, the word-switching, the endless rehearsal or everything that's not being said, doesn't mean it's not there. The person still stammers.

STAMMA's Employment and Advocacy Services can assist with guidance around grievances and employment tribunals related to stammering. Please do contact us as early as possible in any dispute where support may be beneficial.

You can contact us at employmentsupport@stamma.org or call us on 0808 802 0002 and ask if a member of the Employment Service team can return your call.

WHAT IS STAMMERING?

Stammering is different to the occasional repetition or hesitation that everybody experiences. From a listener's perspective, stammering is when someone repeats, prolongs, or has silent pauses or blocks when they are trying to say sounds and words. There might be visible signs of effort or tension as the person works hard to get the word out. However, stammering tends to fluctuate so you might not always know that someone stammers if it's not happening much at that particular moment. Also, some people work hard to make their stammer less obvious some or all of the time to avoid negative, unhelpful reactions from others. So while you may not notice the pauses, the swapped words, the exhausting preparation in sounding fluent, or everything they are not saying, that person stammers.

WHAT STAMMA OFFERS

Our aim as part of the employment support service is to provide support to both individuals and organisations when it comes to thinking about stammering and the workplace.

If a member of your union is having an issue related to stammering at work, STAMMA's Employment Service offer free consultations to your union reps and the union member to discuss the issue and explore options including reasonable adjustments, advocacy work, and training and resources for the employing organisations.

We also work directly with organisations to review and provide guidance and resources ensuring the organisation's processes and procedures are accessible for union reps, union members, staff, service users and customers who stammer.



DO REACH OUT TO US FOR SUPPORT, INFORMATION, TRAINING & RESOURCES OR JUST TO CHAT.



employmentsupport@stamma.org

Drop us an email at a time convenient to you and one of our team will get back to you.



0808 802 0002

Give us a call and ask someone from the Employment Support Service to call you back.