

Self-Employed Yet? Yes!

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A couple of years ago, I gave a presentation at the Communication Matters National Symposium, entitled 'Employed, Self Employed, Unemployed?' Many people said to me afterwards that it was very interesting but a bit depressing. I agree, it was, and it was because, after trying to become an employee or a self employed person for years, the barriers to coming off welfare benefits and making the big leap appeared insurmountable. I am very glad to say that the balance has tipped sufficiently now for me to have made the leap and become self employed from 1 March 2004. This is because the government seems to be starting to recognise the barriers to people like me trying to work. I'd like to think that I played a small part in this by giving detailed breakdowns of my living expenses, and the systems which stopped me working, to government ministers responsible for employment policies. I still know that I am running a big risk, and won't know how successful I am for a year or two, but I feel that I am now truly testing the system.

In January 2004, I attended a conference at RAD A, the Royal Academy for Dramatic Art, in London, on 'Disability, Employment and Training'. The conference was exciting and informative, and many eminent actors, TV and film producers were there, as well as the principles of leading dance and drama academies. A result of the Disability Discrimination Act is that from 2004, all such educational establishments will have to be accessible to students with disabilities. Delegates were saying that they agreed with this, but many had never had an application from a disabled student.

The conclusion was that disabled role models were needed to give children the vision that whatever disability they may have, this should not bar them from becoming actors or dancers. Very few such positive disabled role models exist. I thought, "this is what I've been doing now already, for expenses only, for years."

I was not a presenter at this conference, but I think everyone there will remember



Alan Martin leading a dance workshop

me, partly because I was the only person using AAC there, and also because another delegate on the third tier of the balcony, in the conference hall, lost concentration for a moment, and let her large and heavy delegate pack fall onto the members below. As luck would have it, I was the one chosen to have it dropped on me, and although shaken, was not injured, nor was my communication aid, thank goodness! I just shouted a lot. This gave me a chance to get myself heard, and tell them all about myself and my work. I've sent a video of some of my work to a rep from the BBC.

When I got back home from London, I decided not to waste any more time, but to actually do what I'd been thinking of for years.

I attended an interview with a disability employment advisor at my local job centre. I'd done this two years earlier, but things went much better this time. She advised me about all the help that was available to people with disabilities coming off income support. I had not known about tax credits, and I thought 'Access

to Work' had ended. She even told me about a scheme where I could test trade for six months without losing any benefits, as long as I didn't spend any of my profits in those six months. I left my interview feeling very optimistic, and started to let friends know what I planned to do. The grapevine must have been buzzing because offers of work came pouring in at an embarrassing speed, and so I decided to forget the trial trading period and just go for it straight away. I am still having lots of form filling and administrative stuff to contend with but I hope this will lessen as I get things established.

Don't get the impression that this will be easy, I am under no illusions about it. To be successful I need many things to come together, which will need lots of planning. My equipment is all essential. My communication aid, electric wheelchair, van, and computer must all be in good order, and my personal assistants have to be very dependable.

Above all, my own health is crucial. I know I must build in rest periods but I'm so excited about all this that I find it hard to stop. My

office is also my living room, so every minute at home is spent planning, preparing and doing the books.

Many people who have attended the CM National Symposiums over the past six years will know me. I was lucky to be given the Distinguished AAC User Award one year, and I gave a dance workshop another year. I have given a presentation on Facilitated Communication training with Marion Stanton, as well as giving presentations on employment.

These opportunities at CM contributed to building up my confidence and experience. As well as presenting at CM, I have done work for numerous other organisations. I have given speeches at many conferences around the country, staged dance workshops at many schools and performed my music and dance at several public events.

My current CV is seven sheets long. I'm working on shortening it but haven't space here to tell you all that I have done. If you want to see my CV, look out for my new web site which should be live soon.

So, my work has many strands, but all are about improving the perception and inclusion of people with disabilities. My primary service is to give fully inclusive dance

workshops at the premises of my clients. These can be 'one off' or a series of sessions. I believe that everyone can dance, maybe 'dancing differently', but still dancing. I sometimes use Soundbeam, when working with people with very limited movements. I believe that I'm the only AAC using dance workshop leader in this country.

As well as workshops, I give performances of my own dancing, usually to music which I write for myself on the computer. So far this year, I will be performing in Kendal, Wirral, Warrington, York, Bromley, Clapham common, and Liverpool at art galleries, festivals, and in Colourscape.

When I am not working with dance, I will give presentations on request on a variety of subjects: independent living, educational inclusion, communication rights and disability equality issues. I can also facilitate smaller groups, for example, in schools in discussion related to my life experiences.

I have already been approached to give written reports on disability access issues. I can't call these 'access audits' as I'm not a qualified architect. However, I so often visit so called 'accessible premises' which had used 'expert' advice to make the place

more accessible, but had not consulted a wheelchair user or person with a sensory impairment. They get it wrong so very often. For example, I've seen Braille signs above doorways; lifts costing millions, where you have to be able to wheel sideways to get out; glass doors, wide and very attractive, but also too heavy to push open from a wheelchair; and external lifts on buildings open to the elements. I could go on! My reports should be used to complement, not instead of, a proper access audit, and hopefully prevent expensive mistakes.

Organisations wishing to use me will need to get in touch well in advance as my diary is quickly filling up. I am willing to work anywhere in the country, but if more than a two hour drive from the Wirral, (that is, close to Liverpool) I will need overnight accommodation for myself and my PA.

I am really looking forward to the future now. Obviously, as well as changing people's perceptions of what people with disabilities can do, I will be showing what a difference having a communication aid can make to a person's life. I didn't get my first aid until I was 31.1 wouldn't be doing what I am now without it. *

Alan Martin, *Mouse on the Move*