



Accessible Employment and Energy-Limiting Chronic Illness

A CASE STUDY

A look at what happens when a business taps into an **overlooked talent pool** & provides **meaningful employment** to people with **energy-limiting chronic illness**

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Summary

CONTEXT

In the UK, around 4.7 million people live with energy-limiting chronic illnesses (ELCI)¹. Yet, despite their skills and qualifications, many face significant barriers to work. Over 2.8 million working-age adults are out of employment due to long-term sickness², costing the economy an estimated £132 billion annually³.

At the heart of this issue is not ability, but **accessibility**. Many people with ELCI are excluded not by the work itself, but by rigid workplace practices, inflexible hours, and inaccessible recruitment processes. It should also be acknowledged that not everyone living with a chronic illness will be able to, or will wish to, participate in paid employment.

BEARHUGS' EXPERIENCE

In BearHugs' study, **more than 50% of staff identified as living with an ELCI**. By offering remote, flexible, and reduced-hour roles, **sick leave rates were lower than the national average**.

BearHugs' staff retention rate was **88%**, supported by a culture of openness and trust.

Adjustments proved to be **low-cost or free**, while improving wellbeing, productivity, and loyalty.

KEY INSIGHTS

Flexibility can reduce absence and increase retention.

Inclusive recruitment unlocks a **large, motivated talent pool** currently overlooked.

Supportive culture fosters confidence, wellbeing, and innovation.

Many adaptations are inexpensive but deliver significant organisational benefits.

THE CASE FOR CHANGE

Accessible employment is both a **moral responsibility and a business advantage**.

Employers who embrace flexibility, inclusivity, and accessible recruitment can not only close the disability employment gap, but also strengthen their workforce.

This report shares BearHugs' journey, the lessons learned, and **actionable steps** any employer can take to make work more accessible for people with energy-limiting chronic illness.

**FOR ACTIONABLE TIPS
AND SUGGESTIONS
SEE PAGE 22**

A Note From BearHugs' Founder, Faye Savory

Flexible, accessible employment is something that's incredibly important to me. When I fell ill with an energy-limiting chronic illness, I was desperate to find a way to work but found myself excluded from the majority of workplaces, not due to my abilities, but due to an inflexibility in workplace practices and environments.

I started BearHugs to create an accessible employment opportunity for myself and then made it my goal to offer accessible opportunities to others too.

Each time BearHugs has advertised a post highlighting that applications are encouraged from those with lived experience of chronic illness or disability, the sheer number and quality of applications we have received has blown me away. It really is proof that there's a huge demand for work from capable, talented people with long-term health conditions.

It's brought me immense pride to have been part of a team equally committed to ensuring that our workplace is as flexible and accessible as possible. I've felt prouder still of the positive and supportive working environment this created.



The benefits of flexible working haven't just impacted me personally, or my staff as individuals, but they've helped BearHugs as an organisation in carrying out its work too.

In recent years, we've seen how possible it is for the world to stay connected remotely. Hopefully we can use these lessons as a springboard to help make the workplace more accessible for everyone in future.

Although BearHugs is a relatively small business, our experiences show that even modest adjustments can unlock talent and create positive cultural change in organisations of all sizes. We by no means got everything right, but I hope that by sharing our experiences, we can contribute positively to the conversation.



Introduction to BearHugs

Based in Sheffield, BearHugs offers hug in a box gift hampers which can be ordered online and delivered directly to a loved one's door.

BearHugs is best known for Thinking of You and Sympathy gifts but also offers gifts for a whole host of other occasions such as Birthdays and Christmas.

Every BearHugs gift box, or BearHug, is delivered in BearHugs' signature 'hug' packaging, revealing outstretched paws upon opening.

BearHugs was founded by Chief Sender of Hugs, Faye Savory, in 2015. After leaving her job as a Speech and Language Therapist due to energy-limiting chronic illness, Faye was unable to work a regular 9-5 office-based job. After receiving a thoughtful gift package from a friend on a particularly poorly day, the idea for BearHugs was planted in Faye's mind.

With the help of the King's Trust, Faye launched BearHugs. From day one, BearHugs' goal was to develop and advocate for more flexible, accessible and inclusive employment models. In addition to this, BearHugs has partnered with a number of charities and organisations to donate BearHugs to those impacted by disability and chronic illness.

As the years progressed, Team BearHugs grew, reaching a size of over twenty part-time, flexible staff. Some of these worked at The BearHub in Sheffield, but the majority worked remotely.

Over time, the team at BearHugs worked on developing flexible working practices that aimed to benefit not just staff, but customers and the business as a whole too. This report is a summary of the learnings that came from this.

BEARHUGS HAS BEEN RECOGNISED IN VARIOUS WAYS, INCLUDING:

NatWest Prince's Trust Enterprise Award

Duke of York Young Entrepreneur Award

HELLO! #HelloToKindness Award

University of Sheffield Distinguished Alumni Award

Faye named on the Shaw Trust Disability Power List 100

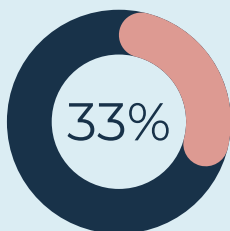
BearHugs asked to attend Disability Confident Employer Roundtable at 10 Downing Street

Context: Chronic Illness & The Disability Employment Gap

Faye's personal experience is far from unique. The employment rate for disabled people of working age is only 51.3%, compared to 81.2% for those with no health condition³.

Astriid's 2021 report *Employment and Long-Term Illness: The Invisible Talent Pool* highlights that, despite being highly motivated and well-qualified, many people with long-term conditions struggle to secure suitable work. The main barriers are a lack of flexible and inclusive opportunities, along with inaccessible recruitment processes.⁶ For those who do find employment, difficulties in obtaining reasonable adjustments are common. Working without these adjustments, while also managing their health, often places a heavy burden on mental wellbeing and work-life balance.

Many also report negative attitudes of managers and colleagues to be a barrier, not only impacting the reasonable adjustments that are made available but the environment in which these were sought and negotiated.⁴



According to a report from University of East Anglia, only 33% of people in employment with a long-term health condition have discussed it with their employer⁸.



In recent years, the extent to which people have been excluded from work has become more and more apparent.

In 2019, there were around 2 million people in the UK not working because of long-term sickness. By 2024, the Office for National Statistics was reporting the figure as 2.8 million.

There is a clear need not just to create accessible pathways into work for those with long-term health conditions, but also the need to curate positive working environments where staff feel able to discuss their conditions and access the support that will enable them to carry out their work.

Terminology: Energy-Limiting Chronic Illness (ELCI)

WHAT IS ELCI?

The term **energy-limiting chronic illness (ELCI)** was developed through the **Chronic Illness Inclusion Project (CIIP)**, a participatory research initiative involving over 2,000 people with lived experience of chronic illness⁴.

ELCI describes a **distinct subgroup of disability**. It is not simply “feeling tired” or a single symptom like fatigue, but a recognised **impairment in both physical and cognitive energy**. This impairment is often accompanied by pain and other symptoms and has a **profound, fluctuating effect on daily life and the capacity to work**.

Common conditions where energy impairment is central include **Long Covid, ME/CFS, fibromyalgia, lupus, neurological and autoimmune disorders, respiratory and gastrointestinal conditions**.

IMPACT ON WORK

- The **amount**, not the type, of work is the main barrier.
- Even small tasks can exhaust available energy.
- Standard access adjustments (like equipment) may not be sufficient.

WHY IT MATTERS

- Around **4.7 million people in the UK** live with an energy-limiting condition.¹
- About **1 in 3 disabled working-age adults** are affected.¹
- **98% of people with ELCI** cite fatigue/energy as their main barrier to work.¹

KEY FEATURES

Energy Impairment



A fundamental, fluctuating limitation in energy available for tasks.

Cognitive Effects



Including fatigue, brain fog, and difficulties with concentration or memory.

Unpredictability



Symptoms often fluctuate daily or even hourly, making consistent patterns of work difficult.

“Payback”



A worsening of symptoms after physical, cognitive, or social activity.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

This report uses ELCI to reflect the terminology developed by disabled people through participatory research. Not everyone with a chronic illness will identify with this term or be able to, or wish to work.

Accessible Recruitment

Many disabled applicants face barriers before employment even begins. Traditional applications and interviews assume a non-disabled candidate and can exclude talented people unnecessarily.



3 in 5
disabled applicants
won't apply if flexible
hours aren't
mentioned in a job
advert

Astriid found that:

- **67%** of people with long-term health conditions said **flexible** hours in job adverts encouraged them to apply.
- **42%** mentioned home working, **34%** part-time or reduced hours, and **13%** less physical labour.
- Conversely, strict hours, lack of flexibility, and heavy physical tasks discourage applicants.

BARRIERS IN RECRUITMENT PRACTISES

Barriers might include:

- Job adverts focusing narrowly on rigid hours or physical requirements.
- Online systems that don't allow candidates to disclose access needs.
- Inflexible interviews: one-time, high-pressure, no breaks.
- The act of job searching itself can feel demoralising due to lack of options.

What Inclusive Recruitment Can Look Like

Job Adverts



Focusing on **skills and attributes**, not just past work experience.

Explicitly **encouraging applications** from people with chronic illness/disability.

Being clear if **flexible, remote, or reduced-hours** options are available.

Application processes



Offering **alternatives** to long written applications (e.g., video applications).

Providing space for candidates to share their **access needs at every stage**.

Using clear, **supportive language** to set an inclusive tone.

Interviews



Offering **remote** interviews.

Sharing questions and plans in advance.

Allowing **breaks** and flexible pacing.

Considering **tasks** that can be completed remotely in place of high-pressure, one-off interviews.






Case Study: Flexible Employment at BearHugs Gifts

In 2018, BearHugs welcomed its first employees with lived experience of chronic illness or disability into the team in part-time, flexible, home-based roles. The roles were administrative in nature, supporting the day to day running of the business and BearHugs' donations project.

By drawing on Faye's own experiences and teaming up with BearHugs' initial employees who had energy-limiting chronic illness, the team was able to preliminarily identify common experiences and themes for reasonable adjustments.

Three main pillars of adjustments were highlighted to allow employees to contribute their valuable skills effectively and for both the individual and business to benefit accordingly.

Home-Working 	Reduced Hours 	Flexibility & Autonomy 
<p>Reduces energy required to travel to workplace.</p> <p>Reduces sensory demands.</p> <p>Allows for effective rest breaks.</p>	<p>Allows employee to contribute skills within the energy they have available.</p> <p>Allows for sustainable work with enough rest to support health.</p>	<p>Allows employee to offer their best contributions when they're able around fluctuating symptoms.</p> <p>Allows for effective pacing and rest.</p>

From the perspective of a startup, all of the above were not only **beneficial for the individuals but also for the business in its infancy**. Reduced hour roles (4 hours per week to begin with) allowed the business to bring in skilled employees at a time when budget was limited, while remote working reduced overhead costs.

In Practice: The Customer Care Flexi- Shift Model

The Customer Care team at BearHugs was introduced in 2020, using a “flexi-shift” employment model.

Prior to the introduction of the Customer Care team, existing team members responsible for picking and packing orders would monitor incoming customer service queries while they worked. This was found to be ineffective.

Four new members of staff were brought in to make up the Customer Care team, to help streamline customers’ experience of interacting with BearHugs.

Key responsibilities for this team included handling customer queries, monitoring social media, and liaising with staff packing gift boxes to ensure that customers’ queries were dealt with in the requested fashion.

A tailored flexible working model was needed for the Customer Care team to ensure consistent daily coverage and timely handling of tasks.

BearHugs has always recognized that to provide the best opportunities, and to show other employers that flexible work is not only the right thing to do for accessibility but also a strong business advantage, its employment model must be both sustainable and beneficial for employees and the business.

BearHugs’ Customer Care Team model was developed to marry business need with flexibility and accessibility.

The first step in designing the new team was to identify the outcomes the business needed from the Customer Care team.

BUSINESS NEED

Initially BearHugs required:

1. Approx 3 hours of Customer Care cover per day

2. The Customer Service inbox to have been monitored and actioned at three intervals throughout the day:

- Early morning
- Lunch-time
- Afternoon (prior to final dispatch of orders at the end of the day)

Approx 1 hour per session.

3. Effective & efficient communication re: customer order amendments with staff picking and packing orders

Since customer service workloads vary, with some days having more enquiries than others, a flexible task list was drawn up to set clear targets and make the most of available shift time, regardless of how busy or quiet any given day might be. This task list prioritised actions for each shift and included additional administrative tasks for quieter days.

After establishing the desired outcomes to align with the business goals and needs, the team then focused on incorporating the three identified pillars of adjustment (remote work, reduced hours, flexibility) into the new job roles to improve accessibility for people with energy-limiting chronic illnesses.

REMOTE, HOME-WORKING

With team communication software such as **Slack**, **Zoom** and **Google Meet** to quickly and effectively get in touch with staff in the Sheffield-based BearHub and shipping & fulfilment software such as **Shipstation** that allows for customer service notes to be assigned to particular orders, there was no reason this role could not be fulfilled by home-working employees.



REDUCED HOURS

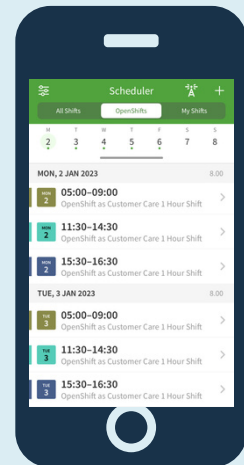
The initial requirement of just three hours per day of Customer Care created an opportunity to offer reduced-hour roles from the outset. However, the team wanted to ensure that these opportunities would remain available as the business grew.

To begin with, and to reach a wider pool of talented individuals, BearHugs introduced an **“opt-in” bank staff model**, offering three one-hour shifts each day.

Using the **“Open Shift”** feature in the scheduling software **WhenIWork**, team members could download an app and sign up for the shifts that suited them best.

Using scheduling software in this way not only automated shift management and simplified payroll reporting but also allowed employees to swap or reassign shifts within set timeframes.

This system provided extra flexibility without requiring additional managerial intervention. It also meant that as the business required more than three hours of cover per day, additional flexible reduced-hour shifts could be easily coordinated.



FLEXIBILITY & AUTONOMY

Flexibility and autonomy were further enhanced through the introduction of “**flexi-shifts.**”

Unlike fixed shifts, these were not tied to a specific start time.

Instead, each flexi-shift was allocated a set amount of work to be completed within a defined timeframe.

Available flexi-shifts were published in WhenIWork, and staff could opt in by choosing the shifts and days that best suited their availability.

FLEXI-SHIFT SCHEDULE EXAMPLE

5am	1 hour shift
6am	
7am	
9am	
10am	1 hour shift
11am	
12pm	
1pm	
2pm	1 hour shift
3pm	
4pm	
5pm	

For example, a midday flexi-shift might require one hour of work to be completed between 11.30am and 2:30pm. A team member could choose to complete this hour between 1:30pm and 2:30pm, or spread the work out in smaller segments across several hours, depending on their health and energy levels.



Employee Story: Lauren's Experience

Lauren was an employee at BearHugs for two years, working remotely from her home in the West Midlands. She was part of BearHugs' brilliant Customer Care Team, managing customer queries and providing essential support to our gift box packers.

In 2023, Lauren kindly offered to be interviewed as part of this report.



How does the shift based model work for the Customer Care Team?

In the Customer Care Assistant role, the shifts are allocated into time windows. I have the opportunity to work during three time windows. However, during busier periods there are four allocated time windows. During weekdays, the time windows are between 5am and 9am, 11:30am and 2:30pm, 3:30pm and 4:30pm (during busier periods there is an evening shift from 6pm to midnight). During the weekend, there is normally one shift from 6am until midday on a Saturday and two shifts on a Sunday, which are 6am until midday and 6pm to midnight.

I work a total of one hour during each of the time windows. I have the option to complete the one hour of work in smaller manageable chunks or as a one hour block.

The only shift which has to be completed within one whole hour as a block is the 3:30 - 4:30pm slot. The main purpose of this shift is to ensure required hugs are ready to be sent by the end of the day. All booked shifts can be canceled with little notice or they can be swapped with another team member. There are no expectations to do a shift if you are feeling too unwell to do so on the day.

What do you do during your shifts as Customer Care Assistant?

Due to my role being shift based, on every shift I follow a priority set task list which I work my way down until my one hour shift has been completed. I love the diversity of what tasks I am given as it relates to many other aspects of BearHugs and to the wider team.

My main priority is to ensure that all customer enquiries via email and social media are dealt with as soon as possible.

Other tasks include ensuring all the hugs are perfect before they leave the BearHub.

I make sure that all personal touches and details are included so that the BearHug is extra special for the customers' loved ones, such as adding personal messages. I assist customers with tracking down where their hug is on its journey and help with arranging the redelivery of their hugs. I also reply to our customers' feedback and messages on social media channels. I direct emails to the appropriate team member in the wider team. I check and reallocate stock levels to ensure that all items are available to buy on platforms such as 'Not On The High Street'.

I thoroughly enjoy my job role as a Customer Care Assistant, as it allows me to genuinely get to know our lovely customers and venture into other areas of the business.

How do you choose which shifts to pick up?

When I choose my shifts, there are many factors I have to take into consideration before I commit to working a shift. The main element I have to consider is my energy levels and the severity of my symptoms. I have to evaluate how much energy I will need to function and to do my role competently. I also have to consider my personal commitments and activities of daily living.

I personally prefer to work either in the morning or early evening as my energy levels and symptoms are more manageable at this time. I normally spread my shifts over the course of a week to ensure I am pacing and giving myself enough recovery time between each. I can work any day of the week - I am not restricted to working set days or hours, therefore, it is more convenient for me to spread my working hours evenly across the week.

How does the shift based working model support you in being able to work?

I believe that my well-being is at the centre of this working model due to its flexible nature.

For example, I have the option to work remotely from home, which enables me to use less energy by traveling to and from work. **The whole working model helps me conserve energy for use in other areas of my life**, such as my hobbies. It enables me to plan and choose when it is best to work for me, for example choosing shifts which are not on the same day as appointments and other commitments.

Being able to plan, prioritise and get 'proper rest' helps to prevent "crashes" and symptomatic days and there is no expectation for me to work a shift if I feel too unwell on the day. Personally, this helps me tremendously, as I suffer from a health condition where the symptoms can fluctuate from hour to hour. Being able to swap shifts with other team members is very beneficial too. This working model supports me during my shift as I am able to pace, take rest breaks and have a more manageable workload, which prevents a negative impact on my health and makes me more productive and efficient.

What adaptations have made working from home more accessible for you?

I work remotely from my home. I am very fortunate to have my own study/ office room at home which allows me to fully immerse myself in all things BearHugs during shift times. Following a Display Screen Equipment (DSE) assessment, I have been provided with some equipment to ensure my working environment is as safe and I work as ergonomically as possible. The DSE assessment has been adapted to ensure that it is inclusive for all employee working environments, as some employees may not be able to sit at a desk in front of their computer for some of their shifts.

My desk is located in an area of the room which is away from the window, to prevent light glare from the outside. I have curtains and a blind to also help with any harsh lighting or glare. Some additional equipment I use to help maintain a good working environment and good posture are as follows; **a foot rest, a wireless mouse and keyboard, a wrist and forearm support, a supportive and adjustable chair, adjustable laptop stand** to ensure my eye level is where it needs to be and supportive cushions (if needed).

Are there any other accessible practices within the business that you find helpful as an employee?

Firstly, I have informal “catch-up cuppas”, as and when I need them. These “catch-up cuppas” are regular check ins, where I am given time to talk about how I am progressing and I am also asked if there is anything else that BearHugs can do to help with my access needs. **As someone who suffers from a chronic illness, my needs will vary from time to time and the “catch-up cuppas” are a relaxed and safe environment to talk about these more personal matters.** With the use of a communication app (Slack), Faye, Chief Sender of Hugs, and other senior members of the team are always readily available if I need to chat or need help during a shift.

Secondly, **all meetings are arranged well in advance and at the beginning of every meeting, myself and my colleagues are offered a set rest break during the meeting.** There is also a consideration of how we are all individually feeling on that particular day and a focus is always made in regards to light and sound, due to some team members suffering from light and sound sensitivities. All meetings are staggered over weeks so that meetings are not in one week and the duration is no longer than one hour. There is no expectation to have your camera switched on during any of the meetings.

Thirdly, **all new information regarding new tasks or training are always given to team members in advance before they are implemented.** They are delivered in multiple formats (eg video, written) and are always sent in smaller more manageable chunks to prevent exacerbation of symptoms. Unlike other workplaces, we are not required to be online or contactable outside of working hours. I am not expected to reply to work related issues or emails outside of my one hour shift to ensure I am getting proper rest in between shifts.

Lastly, I feel that being in a flexible working environment, where it is normalised to talk about access needs and health issues, has enabled me to gain confidence. I feel that this approach is very beneficial to all employees, whether they have a disability or not. It enables individuals to feel more comfortable and open to talk about how they feel, how they can become a better employee and feel a sense of trust and build rapport within the team. **This safe and open working environment makes me feel supported and valued as a worker and as a person.**

A Few Final Words from Lauren

Due to suffering from various health conditions, **flexible working has allowed me to begin working again** despite these challenges.

Without flexible working, I would find it difficult to manage my health/ well-being and continue working for an employer.

Feeling purposeful and making a difference in the world is very important to me. Since working with BearHugs and working flexibly, **it has enabled me to feel a sense of validity and that I am able to make a contribution to society.**

I am able to take part in aspects of society which I would have not been able to if this role was not flexible.

Working flexibly has allowed me to be productive and feel a sense of accomplishment.

This job role has enabled me to gain more independence and has provided me with opportunities and a feeling of being included.

Highlighted by Lauren

OPT-IN SHIFT MODEL

Employees choose their own shifts to plan energy expenditure and ensure proper rest.

INFORMAL CHECK-INS

Regular, relaxed meetings to discuss progress and access needs.

REMOTE WORKING

Home working without expectation of travel to minimise energy expenditure.

MEETING ADAPTATIONS

Meetings arranged in advance with rest breaks and consideration for sensitivities.

NON DESK BASED EQUIPMENT

Display screen equipment tailored to individual working set ups.

INFORMATION DELIVERY

New information provided in advance, in multiple formats, and in manageable chunks.

FLEXIBLE ENVIRONMENT

Normalised discussion of access needs fosters confidence and proactive work.

Lauren on Recruitment

How was the experience of applying for your role?

At the initial stages of the application process, the inclusive tone was set right away. The focus was primarily on myself and how BearHugs could support me during the process. There are lots of areas on the application form where you can talk about your access needs. This made me feel more confident and that it is okay to ask for help, rather than my access needs being the big elephant in the room. I felt I could be more open with what I could do and which areas may be more of a challenge. The application gave me time and space to talk more about how I can be supported whilst working at BearHugs. I had regular contact with Faye and she always kept me informed and updated about the process

What was the interview process like?

The interview process was staggered over the course of a month or so.

All information was given prior to the interview so that the retention of the information was less overwhelming.

Prior to the interview date, I was given lots of time to think about what I may need to support me during the interview process (eg: rest breaks) and I was given the interview plan and details well in advance.

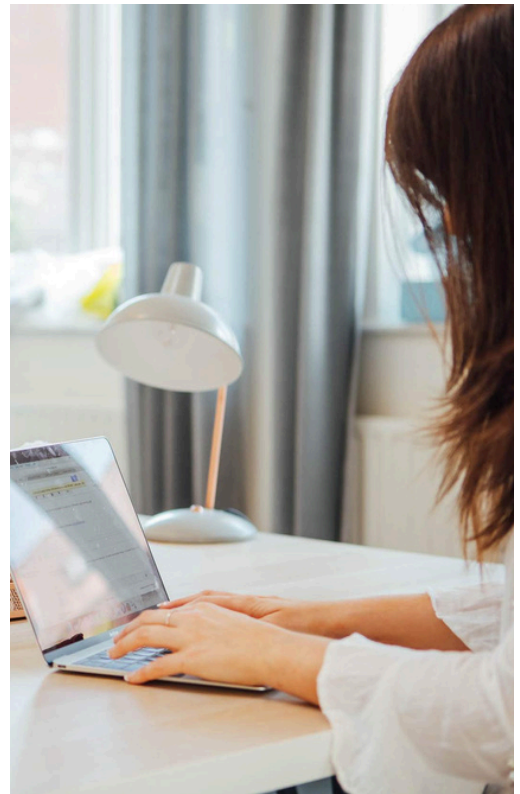
I was then able to read the information at my pace and ask questions prior to the interview if needed.

On the day of my interview, there was a technical issue meaning that we were unable to start the interview until we had worked out what to do and moved to another platform. Faye was very understanding about how this issue may have impacted me and how I was feeling, and offered to postpone the interview to another date.

“The focus was on how BearHugs could support me during the process, rather than my access needs being the elephant in the room.”

Misconceptions vs Reality

The contributions of Lauren and other members of the Customer Care team to BearHugs, both in their day-to-day customer care work and in shaping the business' culture, have been immeasurable. Many of the positive reviews BearHugs have received reference the warmth and helpfulness of its service, something that can be directly attributed to the Customer Care team's dedication. Lauren's story demonstrates not only the value of offering accessible employment, but also the way in which common employer concerns about flexible working are often unfounded.



Sick Leave

MISCONCEPTION

Hiring staff with health conditions will mean a high number of sick leave absences.

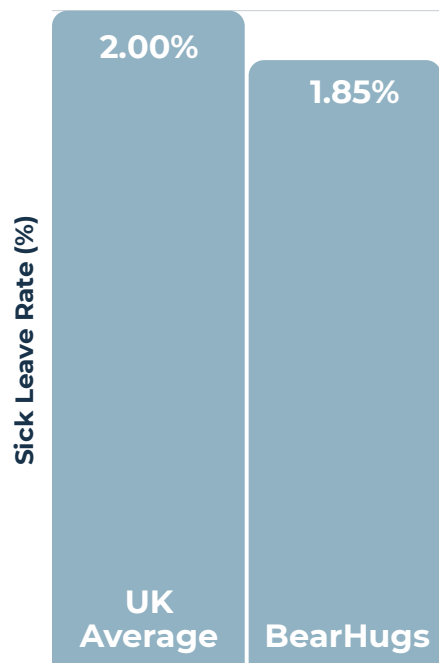
REALITY

In BearHugs' experience, by offering flexible working patterns, **BearHugs staff were actually less likely to take sick leave than the national average.**

The ONS (2025) reported the average UK sick leave rate to be 2% (4.4 days per year) whereas BearHugs' staff average sick leave rate was 1.85% (equivalent to 4.1 days per year).¹¹

By allowing staff to manage their work around their health, staff are able to curate a work-life balance that enables them to work, consistently to the best of their abilities.

Comparative Sick Leave Rates



Retention Rates

MISCONCEPTION

Staff with health conditions will be more likely to leave employment.

REALITY

BearHugs experience has been that in cultivating a supportive and accessible environment, staff feel valued and are less likely to seek alternative employment.

BEARHUGS EMPLOYEE RETENTION RATE

88% *

*At the time of compiling data for this report
(2021/2022)

Lauren spoke about how working flexibly allowed her to re-enter the workplace and remain in meaningful employment:

“Without flexible working, I would find it difficult to manage my health and continue working for an employer. Since working with BearHugs ... it has enabled me to feel a sense of validity and that I am able to make a contribution to society.”

This sense of purpose and inclusion contributes directly to high retention and loyalty within the team.

Financial Cost

MISCONCEPTION

Adjustments will be expensive.

REALITY

In reality, many of the most effective adjustments are **inexpensive, and often free.**

For example, flexibility where the role allows for it costs nothing, but can make a profound difference to staff wellbeing.

Having a flexible, accessible approach in mind is not dissimilar to the focus of standard Occupational Health questions when hiring new staff - it simply requires a broader follow-through for more staff, and a more individual focus for each member of staff, rather than a one-size fits all approach.

Far from being an expense, the flexible model has also reduced overheads for BearHugs by eliminating the need for a centralised office space.

Where equipment is required, schemes such as **Access to Work** can be drawn on to cover expenses.

Remote Working and Team Culture

MISCONCEPTION

Remote working undermines team culture.

REALITY

The team has developed a strong sense of connection through online platforms such as Slack and Google Meet, alongside informal practices like virtual “catch-up cuppas.”

These practices are not unusual post-2020, where remote socialising has become familiar across industries.

+6%

INCREASE
IN EMPLOYEE
WELLBEING
SCORES

A wellbeing study, The Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale, was carried out with the BearHugs team. Scores for ‘**relatedness and connection to others**’ **improved** over the course of employment, with overall wellbeing scores rising by an average of 6% during staff members’ time working at BearHugs.

Staffing Cover

MISCONCEPTION

A flexible shift based model runs the risk of no-one working and insufficient staff cover.

REALITY

In practice, BearHugs has not experienced this. **Staff have taken ownership of their shifts, communicate transparently about availability, and support each other to ensure continuity.**

Even during busy periods such as Christmas, shifts have been consistently covered. The system of short, opt-in shifts in fact reduces the risk of burnout, enabling staff to commit only to what is sustainably manageable.

When new team members joined, conversations were held about the approximate number of shifts they felt able to take on, with the focus placed on the lower end of their capacity. This approach helped prevent overstretching while leaving space for individuals to increase their contribution if they had the capacity.

Misconceptions vs Reality: What BearHugs' Experience Shows

Far from validating negative assumptions, BearHugs' experience of offering flexible employment demonstrates that:

Sick leave can be reduced when staff manage their own work-life balance.

Retention is strengthened through a culture of inclusion and trust.

Costs are minimal, sometimes even offset by savings elsewhere.

Remote working can foster, rather than hinder, positive culture.

Flexible shift models can create resilience, not gaps.

Together, these insights reinforce the case for accessible employment as both a moral and business imperative.





Actionable Tips & Takeaways

While BearHugs' model was shaped within a small, values-driven organisation, the practices described here can be adapted and scaled for companies and organisations of any size.

When it comes to cultivating a more accessible workplace, not everyone will be in a position to implement higher-level changes such as organisation-wide policies or HR-driven guidance. However, there are also many actions that individuals at all levels can take to improve workplace accessibility. Whether as a manager or a colleague, anyone with influence over workplace culture can contribute to creating a more supportive and inclusive environment.

Enabling Support

Making support visible and proactive helps staff feel comfortable accessing adjustments when they need them, rather than waiting until problems arise.



PRESENT OPTIONS

Rather than placing the full responsibility on individuals to identify their own adjustments, managers can help by offering clear examples of possible adaptations.



OFFER SUPPORT REGULARLY

Provide regular reminders that adaptations and support are available, so staff know they can request adjustments if their circumstances change.



PROVIDE INFO IN MULTIPLE FORMATS

Provide training and new information in multiple formats, such as videos, screenshots, or written guides, to suit different needs and preferences.

Working Environment

A well-designed workspace, whether at home or in the office, can make a huge difference to comfort, energy levels, and long-term wellbeing.



RELAXED DRESS CODE

Allow people to wear whatever is most comfortable. Perhaps for external interactions you might need to present a certain image, but internally, enabling staff to be the most physically comfortable as possible will help them to generate their best results.



ACCESS SUPPORT GRANTS

Signpost to schemes such as Access to Work which can pay for practical support to enable a disabled employee to start or stay in work.



COMFORTABLE HOME-WORKING

For staff working from home, one of the simplest but most powerful messages is that they can work wherever they are most comfortable - even from bed if needed. By prioritising comfort over formality, staff are better able to sustain their energy and contribute consistently.



DISPLAY SCREEN EQUIPMENT (DSE) & WORKSPACE ASSESSMENTS

Consider adapting DSE assessments for a variety of home-based set-ups including bed or soft seating. Encourage staff to think about how light, noise, posture when working might impact wellbeing.



Equipment that could be considered

- Ergonomic chair with neck support
- Foot stool
- Wrist support
- Tinted glasses for light sensitivity
- Laptop desk tray for bed
- Lumbar support for non desk based seating
- Ergonomic vertical or trackball mouse

Meetings

Meetings are often an overlooked area of accessibility. Simple adjustments can make them more inclusive and less draining.



AUTOMATIC CAPTIONS

Enable built-in captions on video calls to support real time processing of verbal information.



AGENDAS IN ADVANCE

Share guidance and expectations ahead of time so staff can prepare.



BUILT-IN BREAKS

Include short breaks in longer sessions to reduce fatigue.



OPTIONAL CAMERA USE

Make camera use optional so staff can participate without pressure to be visible.



POST MEETING SUMMARIES

Share meeting minutes and action summaries promptly after meetings.

Work Culture

Accessibility is also about culture. Everyday practices shape whether staff feel supported and included.



FLEXIBLE HOURS

Question how rigid working hours really need to be, and allow flexibility where exact start times are not critical.



LIGHT-TOUCH RESPONSES

Use emoji reactions on Slack/Teams so staff can acknowledge messages without extra effort.



INCLUSIVE VISIBILITY

Ensure remote staff are represented in social media, updates, and celebrations just as much as office staff.



ADVANCE NOTICE

Give early warning of workload or schedule changes so staff can plan their energy use.



OUT-OF-HOURS EXPECTATIONS

Make it clear staff are not expected to reply outside of working hours, and model this from the top.

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Get in Touch

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Further Reading

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