

**See My Skills:**

**How to land your**

**dream job!**

**Conference**

**Summary Report**

**26th March 2022**

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# **About Us**

**Vision Foundation**

We are a leading sight loss charity, founded in 1921, focused on transforming the lives of people facing or living with sight loss by campaigning for systemic change, and funding projects which inform, empower and include the visually impaired community. Through expert grant-making, advocacy, and capacity building, we help remove the biggest barriers facing blind and partially sighted people. Since our inception, over £31 million has been distributed in communities across London.

Blind and partially sighted people tell us that improved employment outcomes would be the single biggest change needed for them to live equally. Through a comprehensive programme of work launched in 2020, the Vision Foundation has committed to being a catalyst for change for blind and partially sighted people, through our ongoing investment in the employment landscape.

**Connect with us:**

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LinkedIn: [Vision Foundation](https://www.linkedin.com/company/visionfoundation/)

YouTube: [Vision Foundation](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpW22AxFWfYuoQ2uDRaW-3A)

**LOOK UK**

LOOK UK supports blind and visually impaired young people and their families to thrive.

LOOK’s tailored peer-mentoring service for visually impaired young people connects VI students with a trained VI graduate mentor to offer advice, support and guidance on subjects such as school, further & Higher Education, careers, opportunities and independent living, based on the mentor’s own experiences.

LOOK’s topical online and offline events for young people, parent/carers and professionals empower the visually impaired community with information, community and connection. LOOK’s events include peer-support groups, youth forums, parent support groups, events for professionals and informative webinars.

From these events a catalogue of resources such as podcasts, webinar recordings and accessible documents on a range of topics including assistive tech, remote learning and VI student Q&A’s is created and housed on the LOOK website.

**Additional details and links to our service:**  
Telephone: 07464 351958  
Email: [info@look-uk.org](mailto:info@look-uk.org)  
Website: [www.look-uk.org](http://www.look-uk.org/)

Like us on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/looknational>

Follow us on Twitter: [@Look\_UK https://twitter.com/look\_UK](mailto:@Look_UK%20https://twitter.com/look_UK)

Instagram: [@Look\_UK](mailto:@Look_UK)

# **Foreword**

If you’re a blind or partially sighted adult of working age in the UK, there is only a 1 in 4 chance that you’re working. If you’re severely sight impaired, that drops to just a 1 in 10 chance.

In 2021, the Vision Foundation commissioned research to understand the barriers to employment for visually impaired people, and how to knock them down. We shared our findings through our **See My Skills Report**, which set out how visually impaired children and young people are missing out on the opportunities of their sighted peers in multiple ways:

* they are much less likely to secure work experience placements
* they have limited opportunities to meet visually impaired peers and role models, particularly if learning in a mainstream environment
* there is inconsistent support and poorly defined careers provision at school, college, and local authority level across the country
* recruitment portals and interview processes are frequently inaccessible
* specialist tech training is scarce
* awareness of the government scheme Access to Work is poor
* companies assume that the employment of a visually impaired person will be difficult or impossible.

Alongside a comprehensive programme of work to address these barriers, the Vision Foundation and Look UK decided to partner up to deliver the very first Youth Employment Conference aimed at raising the aspirations and practical knowhow of visually impaired young people. The event was sponsored by the Insurance Industry Charitable Foundation (IICF) and delivered virtually enabling visually impaired people to attend from across the UK.

This Report sets out the key themes and learnings from the conference. It is aimed primarily at young jobs seekers with a visual impairment, capturing key challenges and very practical tips on navigating barriers. It is also intended to be a useful reference for educators, employers, recruitment agencies and other inclusive employment stakeholders working to address barriers to employment for visually impaired people.

We are committed to applying the learning from the conference as we continue to champion inclusive employment and advocate for the rights of blind and partially sighted talent.

**Dr Olivia Curno Charlotte Carson Wendy Wilder**

**CEO, Vision Foundation CEO, LOOK UK Executive Director, IICF**

# **Introduction**

Hosted online by LOOK UK and Vision Foundation, this was the very first youth employment conference targeted at young visually impaired people. Attendees were aged between 16 – 24 years and were either in school and considering their future career, or already in work and wanting to find out more about the types of support available.

According to the UK Government’s youth employment statistics (March 2022), there are just under ½ million young people aged 16-24 years who are unemployed. Even with a slight increase in the number of people returning to work after lockdown, many young people are faced with unsecure jobs and zero hours contracts. There are also predictions that the UK is faced with a drastic fall in household income in the next five years, the worse since the mid-1970s, with overall inequality expected to increase as a result of a myriad of factors including global conflict and the impact of the pandemic, compounding an already unequal environment for blind and partially sighted job seekers.

Unemployment contributes to the £2.7bn cost of sight loss in London, £28bn nationwide, with one in four visually impaired people of working age out of work. Such stark statistics motivated the Vision Foundation to commission research to assess the contributing factors to employment outcomes for the visually impaired community. Findings were published in July 2021 as the See My Skills Report.

Led by The Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (VICTAR) at the University of Birmingham, the study highlighted the need for early intervention in order to raise aspirations of visually impaired people, and the creation of more work opportunities to attract talent within the working age visually impaired community. It also found that there is inadequate career advice in schools and a disabling job market, failing many visually impaired young people.

With only 27% of people registered blind or partially sighted currently employed, the conference presented an opportunity to actively engage visually impaired young people at an early stage in their career journey to address some of the key barriers they currently or could face in accessing jobs.

Holding the conference virtually enabled visually impaired people from across the UK to attend and ensured that travel accessibility and costs were not barriers to attendance.

The programme was designed to:

* Raise aspirations and give practical information about the world of work to visually impaired young people
* Create a national awareness raising campaign, about career options and employment for VI people
* Create new networks of peer support between young people
* Connect young people with organisations which could support them in their career journey

We were keen to ensure that the conference was fully responsive to the key issues that visually impaired young people face when looking for jobs. So, LOOK UK facilitated surveys with their mentors, mentees and parents/carers to identify the most pressing challenges.

The workshops therefore addressed a range of topics such as Access to Work, career mentoring, confidence, well-being, guidance on how to identify and secure work placements and the importance of self-advocacy. We listened to the need for us to strike the right balance between the practical realities of job seeking for visually impaired young people and aspirational stories of resilience and success. This was reflected in the content and tone of the programme.

This Report is aimed at primarily at young jobs seekers with a visual impairment. It is also a useful reference for educators, employers, recruitment agencies and other inclusive employment stakeholders. It presents a summary of the discussions and issues raised on the day, in addition to tangible tips for young people to empower their job search. It is complemented by a suite of video clips highlighting key points in all sessions, in addition to a range of links to relevant resources for each workshop.

1 The Living Standards Outlook (2022) Resolution Foundation

2 Slade (2019), Labour Force Survey 2018: comparison of people with sight loss to the rest of the population

# **Summary of Discussions**

## **Introduction**

We were joined by 75 participants including 27 speakers, 23 of whom had a visual impairment, bringing with them invaluable and nuanced lived experience and knowledge to the diverse range of issues discussed. Of our target participants aged 16-24 years, 49% were at school, 10% were at university and 20% were in work.

Host charity Chief Executives Charlotte Carson and Olivia Curno set the tone for the day with a warm and enthusiastic welcome before handing over to our guest speakers.

## **Lucy Edwards in conversation with Chris McCausland**

Vlogger and influencer Lucy Edwards kicked off the conference with a fascinating introduction to stand-up comedian and actor, Chris McCausland. As was expected, Chris gave a humorous recount on how he got into comedy. He and Lucy reflected on how their visual impairment potentially opened doors and created opportunities which might have been out of their reach otherwise. Chris gave a poignant caution on the importance of adapting, and the ways in which he has needed to adapt to varying degrees, especially when working within a very visual world such as television. He stressed the importance of getting the right support at the right time and being armed with enough information to better understand and navigate different environments.

**Top Tips:**

* People are keen to ensure diversity and inclusion, so be brave and vocal enough to challenge any assumptions and preconceptions about you and ask for what you need.
* Get a bedrock – be that a degree, qualifications, or any other route that enables you to get a back-up career plan and for life experience.
* Don’t be put off by your own preconceptions of what certain jobs are like. Learn about the job you want, the environment and adapt.

## **Breakout Room 1: Writing the perfect CV and honing interview skills.**

**Facilitator:** Jurgen Donaldson, Talent Acquisition and Recruitment Specialist.

**Panellists:** Naqi Rizvi, Banker | Ussud Ali, Student.

**Objectives of the session were to:**

* Provide tangible insight into experience of building marketable CVs
* Provide practical tips for interview skills

**Key Issues:**

The panel addressed a wide range of practical challenges that visually impaired young people face when looking for a job, irrespective of where they find themselves on their career journey. These include:

* Standing out from the crowd: how visually impaired jobseekers can attract attention in an already competitive market. The profile section at the top of a CV can be used as an effective tool for highlighting key strengths, goals and vision so the recruiter has a sense of who you are as a person and your aspirations. Photos can even be included!
* The art of being prepared: preparation before an interview is crucial. Use the time to find out as much information as possible about the organisation and the role. Look up the interviewer (if known) on LinkedIn or even Instagram. Practice answering questions with family and friends before interviews. There are a few useful tools including the STAR+L technique to answer competency-based questions – Situation, Task, Action, Result + Learning. Other techniques can be used, and whichever you chose, try and focus 70% of the response on the actions taken to address any given challenge.
* Disclosure: choosing when to disclose a disability can cause anxiety for a lot of people. Although disclosure is largely a personal choice, the panellists were agreed that it was better to do this ahead of an interview so that the recruiter can make any necessary adjustments to accommodate your specific needed. If included in a CV, it was advised to position the disclosure in relation to an achievement, for example, in a sport or other hobby.

**Top Tips:**

* It is estimated that most recruiters will spend only 6 seconds looking at a CV so tailor your CV and profile specifically to the job you’re applying for. There are several useful tools online to help you build your CV.
* At interviews, be mindful not to rush into answering a question. Make sure you’ve heard the full question and take a little time, if needed, to structure your response before speaking. If the question is a long one, check in with the recruiter at the end of your answer that you have answered it adequately.
* Make sure you have questions to ask at interview – demonstrates you have a genuine interest in the role and the organisation and have done your research.
* Although rejection can be painful, try to seek feedback and use it constructively to improve your next application.
* Be honest and be yourself!

## **Breakout Room 2: Navigating Access to Work (AtW)**

**Objectives of the session were to:**

* Create a better understanding of AtW
* Provide a step-by-step guide to accessing the grant

**Facilitator:** Charlotte Carson, CEO – LOOK UK

**Panellists:** Jim Benstead, Assistive Technology Trainer and Consultant |

Callum Russell, Founder – Crystal Eyes | Thomas Norton, RNIB CYPF Support Officer

**Key issues:**

According to Government guidelines, AtW is a publicly funded employment support programme that works to enable more disabled people start or stay in work or move into self-employment. It provides practical and financial support for people with a disability or long-term physical or mental health condition. The grant received depends on individual circumstances and does not have to be paid back and does not affect other benefits.

During the breakout session, it transpired during the session that few participants were aware of AtW, which highlighted the importance of events like this to help raise awareness of the scheme. Some of the key messages included:

* AtW can provide invaluable support to blind and partially sighted people through grants that enable a diverse range of services, for example the recruitment of a support worker, communication assistance during interviews, or software training.
* The scheme is nuanced to individual needs, so it is important to know what support you need, and to be prepared to have to educate your assessor in regards of your personal circumstance, especially where the assessor might have limited experience of the needs of visually impaired people.
* It is advisable to have proof of disability and use examples of existing support, for example annual reviews, letter from a GP or occupational therapist which outline the types of support received to date. The support you receive at school or college can often inform the support you can request when you enter the workplace.
* Charities offer information and support on accessing the scheme, e.g., RNIB employment services, Crystal Eyes, the Employment Advisory Support Services). All speakers are happy to offer advice.

**Top Tips:**

This includes any suggestions from panelists or attendees of how visually impaired people can stand out from the crowd.

* Know your needs and be able to advocate for yourself so spend the first few years of your career journey to identify the support you need.
* This is not special treatment; this is what the law says you are entitled to.
* It is not about what you want, it is about what you need; don’t be too proud to ask for what you need.

## **Breakout Room 3: Building Tech Skills**

**Objectives of the session were to:**

* Outline the importance of tech skills in finding work
* Highlight what skills are needed and when, and the skills needed for specific goals

**Facilitator:** Ben Mustill-Rose, Software Engineer - BBC

**Panellists:** Sidney May – Mentor Project Officer – LOOK UK | Matt Johnson, Data Privacy and IT Lawyer | John Paul Anderson - Senclude

**Key issues:**

All panellists were agreed that technology is central in today’s workplace environment, so learning tech skills from an early age is critical. Assistive technology has the potential to massively aid independence. Some of the important elements of using technology in order to be able to compete with sighted employees include:

* Strengthening web skills to a high standard.
* Developing your CV and knowing how to stand out in the best way: do the fonts and indentation line up etc, all of which are dependent on being able to use Microsoft Word. Few work environments use Mac so learn how to use Windows, and JAWS!
* As a visually impaired employee, you have to be clear on what you need. This might mean having to do the research to bring together Access to Work, a scripting partner and line manager to make your job accessible. Your employer will be dependent on you to guide them with confidence.
* In addition, there is a lot of software that is not accessible, and you want the ability to script it. It is possible to build a bridge between inaccessible software and JAWS, however, it is up to you to know how to script it.
* First interviews are usually virtual, so you need to make sure do you have Ms Teams, Zoom or other platforms such as WebEx. Do you know how to enter and exit platforms? Does the mute button work? First impressions are everything so ensure you get the tech right.
* When you are in the job/interview: keep in mind, your employer is thinking, are you going to be more of a problem for me compared to everyone else? Or will you make me money? Essentially, most employers want to know how you are going to do the job, so it is useful to pre-empt their concerns by inviting questions on how you can do the job as a visually impaired candidate. Some employers really appreciate this, and it leaves a great impression.

**Top Tips:**

* Learn how to touch type from an early age. Stand out from the crowd by being at an advanced level over sighted peers in the workplace. It is possible to learn how to type 10 times faster. Research ‘doorway online’, a free online learning tool.
* Computer skills are fundamental. With such skills in your locker already, you become more employable.
* Learn how to use Outlook emails. Shortcuts are much more accessible compared to the web.
* Self-advocacy: people will assume what you need. But you need to make it your business to find out what you need, and advocate for what you want to learn.

## **Breakout Room 4: Organising Work Experience, Volunteering and Careers Advice**

**Objectives of the session were to:**

* Offer advice on where to find work experience
* Discuss developing advocacy skills and building confidence

**Facilitator:** Charlotte Carson, CEO – LOOK UK

**Panellists:** Callum Russell, Founder – Crystal Eyes | Saima Akhtar, Employment Coach | Tara Chattaway, Head of Education – Thomas Pocklington Trust | Jess Clements – Blind in Business

**Key issues:**

Some of the points highlighted by the panellists include:

* The Catch 22 of needing to demonstrate previous work experience but faced with reluctance by employers to give opportunities to visually impaired candidates, based largely on fear and lack of knowledge of being able to provide adequate support.
* Lack of support at schools and universities to support VIPs to work experience/volunteering. Mainstream schools do not offer volunteering opportunities and most universities are unaware of assisted working so visually impaired students are often left to work harder to find work experience opportunities.
* Not all work experience opportunities are positive, and you tend to learn more from the experiences that don’t go well. So, keep an open mind.
* Build confidence and advocate for various opportunities. There is support out there and work experience can be as simple as shadowing.
* You are not alone, and there are organisations out there to support and offer careers advice, e.g., Thomas Pocklington Trust, Blind in Business and others Do not be afraid to ask for advice and talk to your SENCO, and QTVI (Qualified Teacher of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment).

**Top tips:**

* Utilise the power of the network: reach out to Facebook groups/charity organisations. Do not close any doors out there.
* Taking a vocational course to get work experience, to better understand what path you want to take is really helpful.
* If you are at school or college and unsure about a career advisor, ask your QTVI or the institution themselves to plan a meeting with the career advisor, and be organized for this meeting. Alternatively, national career service is a great resource.

## **Breakout Room 5: A foot in the door with disability placement schemes**

**Objectives of the session were to:**

* Provide clarity on what is a Disability Confident scheme and what it takes to be a DC employer.
* Hear panellists speaking about their personal experiences of different access schemes including Change100, BBC, Kickstarter.

**Facilitator:** Steph Cutler, CEO – Making Lemonade (inclusive employment consultancy)

**Panellists:** Elin Williams, Volunteer Development Coordinator | Kevin Satizabal, Production Trainee - BBC

Undoubtedly, a visual impairment can make it harder to find work experience. It’s often a challenge even finding work in a bar or café, let alone placement schemes which are highly competitive. Some of the issues flagged by our panellists include:

* There are a lot of different types of work experience out there for people at different stages of their career journey. Looking for such opportunities can be daunting, and often there is difficulty knowing where to look.
* The process of applying for Access to Work can take a long time making it tricky to arrange reasonable adjustments if the placement is only a short one.
* It’s really important to focus on the positives, even with all the challenges in securing work experience. However, these schemes (particularly those aimed at people with disabilities) are there for visually impaired jobseekers giving valuable experience and a significant foot in the door.
* You can never know too many people. Build up a good network, talk to people about their work experience. Use social media, as lots of work experience are often advertised there. Don’t be afraid to ask about these things. Talk to people and test the waters.
* Most employers will listen if you communicate clearly. Make sure you know what you want, and if you need adjustments, don’t be afraid to ask. Remember, some placements are specifically aimed at you, and may not be for a long time, so make sure you go into it in the best position possible. Don’t be afraid to ask for support.

**Top tips:**

* Role models can be really important and can help you to pursue and achieve what you want.
* Don’t worry if you don’t know what you want to do. Have a look around, apply to lots of things, and try things out.
* Remember that work placements can really help you to get your foot in the door in terms of experience, but also potentially longer-term employment.

## **Closing Plenary: Self-Advocacy - Real life experiences**

**Facilitator:** Peter White, Broadcast Journalist

**Panellists:** Saima Akhtar, Employment Coach | Umar Kayani, Senior Software Engineer | Victoria Oruwari, Opera Singer | Michael Smith, Lawyer

**Objectives of the session were to:**

* Highlight positive stories and showcase diverse stories.
* Hear from people who have overcome challenges.

The final plenary presented a brilliant opportunity to consolidate some of themes that emerged from the other sessions, especially the importance of self-advocacy. Coming from diverse perspectives and experiences, panellists highlighted a few constraints including:

* Some employers will not be aware of visual impairment…they may not know anybody who is visually impaired, and they may make assumptions.
* It’s sometimes challenging to know how to balance making employers aware of your impairment, without placing too much emphasis on it where it becomes a barrier. It was suggested that a balanced approach was the most effective. People usually want to help, so talk to them, educate them.

**Top Tips:**

* Self-advocacy needs practice. Rehearse any situation. If it involves practicing walking confidently, for example, do this. Try to practice being your best and most confident self.
* Build your network. Whether it’s through speaking to colleagues or networking in other ways, you will learn so much from others. Listen to them, pick things up, let them help you.
* If you need a Support Worker / Assistant, make sure you find the right person for you. They will be working closely with you, so it’s important to find a good match.
* Self-advocating is the key. Communicate, put yourself out there, make those choices, try things out, speak up for yourself, know your worth.
* Self-advocating can be really tricky, especially if you’re new to something or you’re feeling nervous or unsure. So be communicative and know your entitlements. Know the law and know what you want. Only you can know what is best for you.

# **Conference Survey Results**

To ensure the voices of young visually impaired people were heard, we conducted pre-and post-conference surveys, in addition to polls during the conference to assess the levels of confidence in seeking employment.

Of those that completed the pre-conference survey, 60% said they didn’t feel confident about securing employment. Following the conference, 80% said they felt confident about securing employment.

Results from the in-session polls were even more encouraging with, 47% reporting not feeling confident at all before the breakouts, significantly decreasing to just 6% after the session. Overall, 94% of attendees reported feeling either confident (52%) or very confident at 42% after the breakout sessions.

The table below gives the breakdown of the levels of confidence as reported by attendees pre and post the breakout sessions:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Levels of confidence** | **Pre-breakout session** | **Post-breakout session** |
| Not confident at all | 47% | 6% |
| Confident | 39% | 52% |
| Very confident | 14% | 42% |

On the question of what employers can do to better attract blind and partially sighted people, the call was for employers to:

* Make the working environment more accessible
* Offer assurances that there is a fair recruiting process that focuses on skills rather than appearance or uniformity
* Get more training on sight loss
* Learn more about the Access to Work scheme and advertise if they are a Disability Confident employer
* Give visually impaired people an equal opportunity
* Be willing to ask questions and learn from VI people
* Listen

# **Conclusion**

The conference presented a fantastic opportunity to hear the voices of a diverse range of talented individuals with a visual impairment who are successfully navigating the workplace. It highlighted a few recurring themes including:

* Building confidence to speak out and ask for what you are entitled to.
* Being prepared with enough information and nurturing a solution-driven approach.
* The importance of resilience and adaptability and being prepared for rejection but not giving up.
* Building a network - you can’t know too many people!

In his closing remarks, and bringing his wealth of personal lived expertise, Peter White encapsulated the day by offering his own top 5 tips for success:

1. Do your research – be absolutely clear about what you want and why.
2. Pick your battles – some things are worth fighting for others less so. But once you know what it is you want to fight for don’t give an inch.
3. Talk to the right people (usually the boss) They are much more likely to make promises that people further down the chain won’t be confident enough to make.
4. Work out your line and argument, and make sure you know it by heart. Walk up and down in front of a mirror and rehearse it or if you’re blind a blank wall but either way rehearse it!
5. Check the law and know what you’re entitled to. You can ask for more than the law, but at least know the minimum of what you’re entitled to.

**Appendix**

**Conference Agenda**

**10:00am** – Welcome

**10:10am** – Q&A with Chris McCausland

**10:30am** – Breakout sessions:

Room 1 - Writing the perfect CV writing and honing interview skills.

Room 2 - Navigating Access to Work.

Room 3 - Building Tech Skills.

**11:10am** – Comfort break

**11:15am** – Breakout sessions:

Room 1 - Organising work experience, Volunteering and Careers Advice.

Room 2 - A foot in the door with disability placement schemes

**11:55am** – Comfort break

**12:00pm** – Plenary: Self Advocacy - real life experiences

**12:30pm** – Closing remarks

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