



Deep dive: the effectiveness and outcomes of the This-Ability in-work support model

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Evaluation of the This-Ability programme

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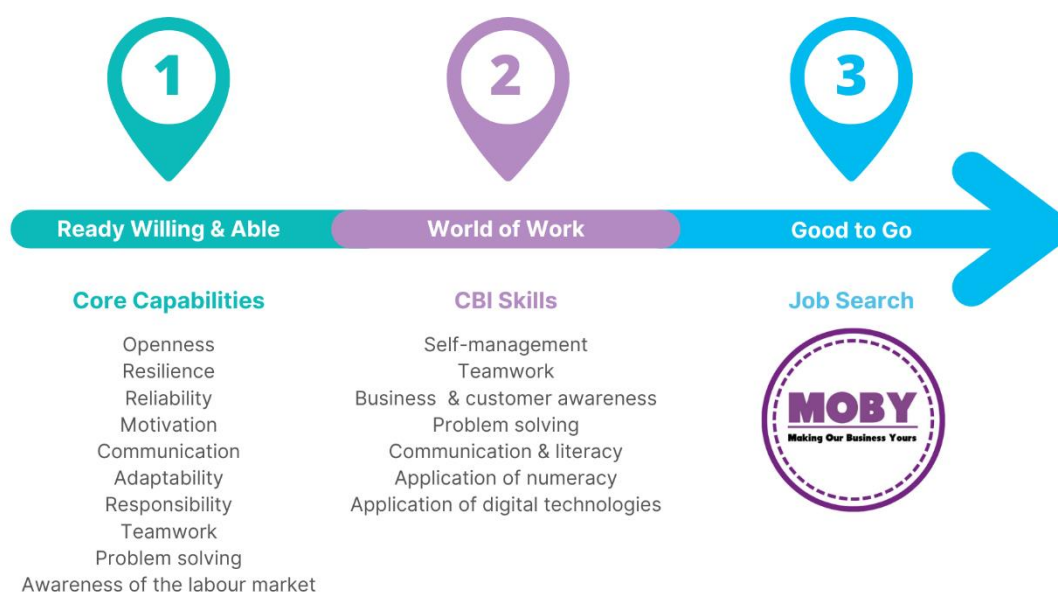
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Introduction

This-Ability is a five-year programme funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. Led by Humber Learning Consortium (HLC), the programme aims to support young people (aged 18-29) with a disability, learning disability/difficulty, long term health condition or mental health condition, to enter and sustain employment. Young people living in Hull and East Riding are eligible to access programme provision.

This report is based on co-produced research undertaken in Autumn-Winter 2023 by researchers from Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) and peer researchers (trained by SHU) – This-Ability staff and learners. **Focussing on the effectiveness and outcomes of This-Ability’s in-work support model (called MOBY – Making Our Business Yours)**, the views and experiences of This-Ability learners, mentors, programme staff, and employers informed the research. MOBY (explained in detail later) is a mentoring package for employers who take on young people from This-Ability as employees.



The diagram below shows the key stages of the This-Ability programme and the stages when the MOBY in-work support model operates.

The stages of the This-Ability programme are:

- 1. Ready, Willing and Able:** During this stage the focus is on learners on This-Ability **developing the ten core capabilities, having increased from six core capabilities, these include:** openness, resilience, reliability, motivation, teamwork, communication, adaptability, responsibility, problem solving and awareness of the labour market. Learners are introduced to the MOBY team at this early stage to encourage familiarity with staff and the service – representing a departure from the initial programme model which is explained later in the report.
- 2. World of Work:** Having completed the first stage, **learners gain sector specific employability skills** during this stage with This-Ability providers of training/work experience. The providers are from different sectors across Hull, including: the creative and digital sector; health and social care (and broader jobs in this sector); retail, catering and hospitality; and the sports sector.
- 3. Good to Go:** Moving onto the final stage, learners work with This-Ability's Job Club to search for jobs, writing CVs and or covering letters, completing job applications, practising their interview skills and techniques, and attending interviews. Learners can access support from MOBY mentors at this stage with job search, CV writing, interview preparation and so on, but importantly, they can access **in-work support** from this service.

Focusing on the outcomes and effectiveness of the in-work support model for the deep dive, the following themes were explored with research participants:

- How has the in-work support model (MOBY) evolved since its inception in 2017, and why?
- What have been the impacts and outcomes of MOBY for learners and employers?
- What has MOBY learnt and taught others over the last ten years?

This report draws on interview and focus group data, using direct quotes specifically to amplify the voices of young people with learning disabilities/difficulties and or long-term conditions – a group seldom heard in research and evaluation activities. Quotes are used extensively to accurately reflect the experiences and views of all research participants and pseudonyms (false names) or broad titles such as Employer 1, 2, 3 etc., are used to protect their anonymity.

Methodology

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During Autumn-Winter 2023, an evaluative **deep dive** was undertaken by a researcher from Sheffield Hallam University and peer researcher(s) from the Humber Learning Consortium. The deep dive method involves using various research methods to explore a specific subject to gain a fine-grained understanding of it. For the purposes of this deep dive, researchers focused on the outcomes and effectiveness of the in-work support model – interchangeably referred to as MOBY in this report.

The following methods were used for the deep dive:

- Face-to-face in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews with nine young people recently or currently involved in the This-Ability programme as learners. All interviews were conducted in-person on This-Ability or Provider premises – public places that the young people were familiar and comfortable with. One young person opted to provide a written response to the interview questions, supported by a parent.
- Qualitative semi-structured interviews over Zoom with two This-Ability Mentors. This virtual platform allowed interviews to occur at a mutually convenient time for the researchers and mentors whose busy schedules might otherwise have delayed the research.
- Face-to-face in-depth qualitative interviews over Zoom/Teams with five employers working with the This-Ability programme.
- A focus group discussion with three senior managers of the This-Ability programme. This was conducted virtually using Zoom.

This primary research captured the experiences and or views of twenty research participants in total. Consistent with SHU's research ethics guidelines, all participants were given participant information sheets in advance of their interviews / focus group and informed consent (written or verbal) was taken before starting the research. With prior permission, all the interviews and the focus group discussion were recorded using a password protected digital recorder and then saved on SHU's secure drive.

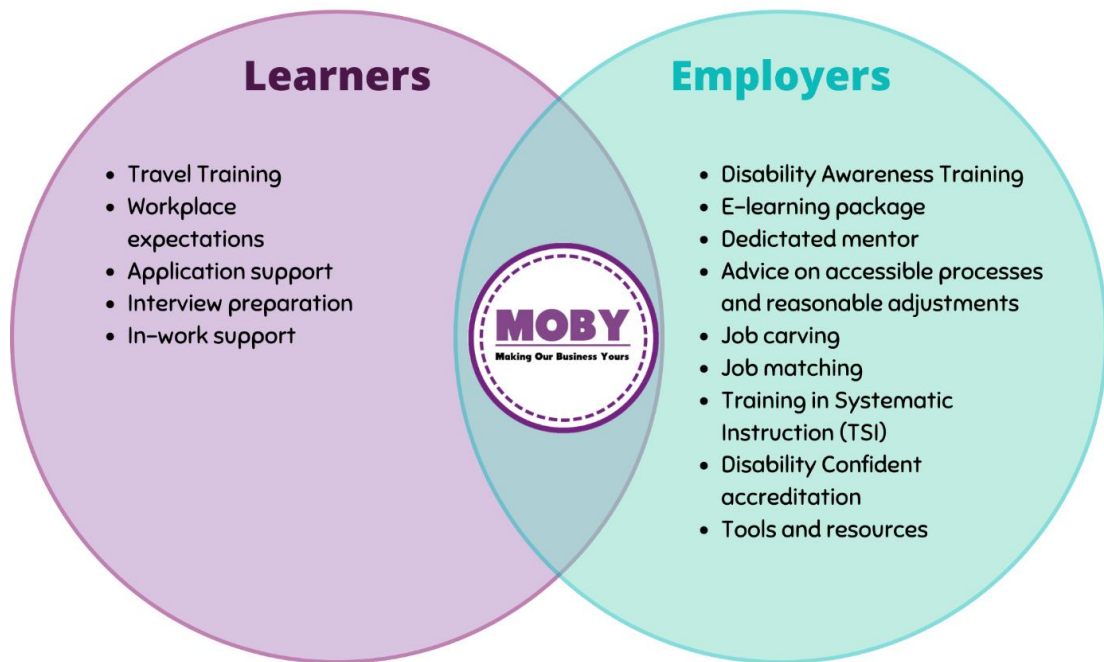
The interviews and the focus group discussion were transcribed verbatim (word-for-word), coded to themes, and then analysed in-depth. Central themes on the effectiveness of the in-work support model as well as the impacts and outcomes for learners and employers involved in the This-Ability programme were explored. These are discussed in the following chapters, but before doing so, we begin with an introduction to This-Ability's in-work support model – MOBY.

What is MOBY and what service(s) does it provide?

MOBY (Making Our Business Yours), an integral part of the This-Ability programme, is a bespoke mentoring package available free of charge to employers who provide job opportunities for young people with learning disabilities/difficulties and or long-term health conditions from the This-Ability programme. **A dedicated mentor helps bridge any gaps in understanding (and needs) between the employer and young person accessing work.** The approach taken by MOBY is very much employer-focused and tailored to respond to the different job roles, sectors, and perspectives of employers – supporting them to become disability confident. Equally, employers are made aware of the specific needs of the young people they have employed to ensure that their potential is achieved.

Established during the HLC's first employment programme (Talent Match), MOBY was borne out of examining why young people with learning disabilities, and or long-term health conditions were unemployed and why they found it more difficult than their peers to look for work, secure and sustain a job. Evidence revealed that whilst a UK-wide Disability Confident employer scheme provided guidance for employers on recruiting and retaining disabled people / those with health conditions, **a significant gap in direct support for employers existed.** To address this gap, MOBY was established to provide in-work support, working closely with employers to help them to better understand the needs, and realise the benefits of employing young people with learning disabilities and or long-term health conditions. According to the needs of both the employer and employee mentors might learn the employee role, train the employer on disability awareness and support them to make reasonable adjustments. MOBY staff performed two types of engagement with employers: **reactive engagement** for example, in a case where a learner was in the process of applying for a job and the MOBY team contacted the prospective employer to tell them about their in-work support package; and **proactive engagement** with employers before a learner went to work for them, for instance, providing disability awareness training upfront and advice and guidance on accessibility and recruitment. This in-work support model was carried forward to HLC's second employment programme.

The diagram below shows the types of support provided by MOBY:



Findings

4.1. How has the in-work support model (MOBY) evolved since its inception and why?

The in-work support model was first developed for the Humber Learning Consortium's Talent Match programme in 2014 and later became a “*more structured*” model of support for the This-Ability programme due to the new funding covering a more comprehensive package of mentors. This included, classroom mentors who delivered the core capabilities to learners, provider mentors supporting learners Confederation of British Industry (CBI) employability skills, and employer support MOBY mentors who primarily acted as an intermediary between This-Ability learners and employers. Additionally, they were able to provide disability awareness training either face-to-face or online to businesses – enhancing earlier training provision during Talent Match (only online) and widening their offer to employers. Despite this change, MOBY staff maintained a holistic and business-centred approach to working with each employer as they had done previously. As MOBY evolved, parts of the disability awareness training were adapted to suit the distinct business needs of employers.

Developed by a previous MOBY mentor with This-Ability's young people's co-production group (People's Awareness of Disability Discrimination, PADD), the Disability Awareness training was initially comprehensive, but then streamlined during the last two years of programme delivery, with the content adapted to meet individual business needs. This-Ability Manager 1 reported that team leaders, managers and human resource professionals usually preferred to focus on inclusive recruitment and inclusive training, whereas frontline workers often required more general disability awareness training.

We found that **as gaps in provision emerged, This-Ability managers were responsive in addressing them** whilst the programme was running. Recognising that the providers (of work placements/experience) at times lacked the capacity to offer learners intensive support because of their commitments to multiple contracts, the option to refer learners back to This-Ability for intensive one-to-one support was given. For example, This-Ability Manager 1 explained that as each cohort of learners completed stage two of the programme, more staff were required to meet the individual support needs of learners all moving onto stage three at the same time. The flexible nature of National Lottery funding allowed capacity (at the third stage of This-Ability) to be increased through the recruitment of an Employment Engagement Officer (EEO) and an additional MOBY mentor to bridge the gap in staffing.

Aside to the EEO and MOBY mentor, by **recruiting additional This-Ability staff solely dedicated to the programme** whilst situated with providers, the benefits of a “*joined up approach*” (This-Ability Manager 2) were realised - **opening communication through regular meetings, allowing information to be shared** about, or with, learners. A This-Ability manager explained that the job opportunities available through MOBY, for example, were shared more effectively with providers by having dedicated This-Ability staff based with them:

If we've got roles through our contacts and our networks that we can't fill we can push it out and they can do the same, so it creates more opportunities, having that person in there that is on the ground and listening to conversations and sees what's going on. (This-Ability Manager 1)

This-Ability managers agreed that this dedicated resource introduced only recently (Autumn 2022) should have been implemented from the outset of This-Ability, to raise awareness of MOBY services and opportunities during all three stages of learner journeys and to embed the wider programme aims and interests in provider organisations for continuity for learners and opening lines of communication on learner interests and needs – necessary for preparing their next steps.

Additionally, our research uncovered that initially, learners were not introduced to MOBY at stage one, and this created problems for some of them as they failed to see themselves as part of the bigger project This-Ability, and consequently did not realise that stage three, including MOBY was part of This-Ability – a vital component of the programme. In response, during 2021 MOBY was embedded in the This-Ability programme from start to finish. Mentor three explained how a MOBY *Good to Go Introduction* made learners aware of their service at stage one: “*I do that the first day they're [the learners] there in the afternoon, so they know who we are, they know the expectations, they see the run of their journey and what it's going to look like and then they come to me*”. Arguably, this understanding helped learners to know what to expect, and this was perhaps beneficial for those with certain learning disabilities – helping them to manage change, which might have otherwise proved unsettling.

During week three of stage one, the MOBY team ran a further session for learners on setting realistic and achievable short-term job goals using real life examples to convey the importance of building employability skills – usually, starting in low skilled work to climb the ladder to higher skilled and more senior positions. Additionally, learners were introduced to, or made aware of, the roles of other This-Ability staff.

When asked whether any changes had been made to the employment support model, This-Ability Manager 1 **reported very little change in working with employers** due to MOBY providing support to employers on an individual basis, This-Ability Manager 1 explained, “*the employer support element is really fluid because it has to be because the roles are different, the sectors are different, the views are different, the wants and the needs from the employers' perspective are really different.*” Conversely, the data revealed that the nature of MOBY employment support **had changed for learners** in response to factors outside the control of the This-Ability programme. Changes in the labour market, and consequently learners taking on different job roles to those they had done previously reduced the need for Training in Systematic Instruction (TSI) – a key offering by MOBY evidenced in previous evaluative research (Bashir and Forsyth, 2018). Instead, MOBY mentors reported having to carefully support and guide learners to job search, write CVs and covering letters, navigate the application process, prepare for interviews, attend initial interviews and check on learners once in work. Although not within MOBY's initial remit, much of the responsibilities of the Job Club were assumed by MOBY as the programme recommenced face-to-face delivery after lockdown. Continuity of support for learners and the knowledge/skills of MOBY mentors were driving factors behind this decision.

Evidently, the flexibility provided by the funder allowed This-Ability to evolve and respond to external and internal factors: to plug gaps in staff shortages as the programme neared completion; and to address the additional challenges brought about by the global pandemic which resulted in a change in the labour market (a loss of jobs in retail and hospitality) and heightened anxiety amongst learners who feared going to work. A strong underlying theme concerned with the adaptability and flexibility of This-Ability staff emerged from the data, whereby new and emergent situations were accommodated by staff, who demonstrated a team spirit, taking on multiple / changing roles to ensure a seamless delivery of provision – a point stressed by This-Ability Manager 2 when questioned about funder flexibility:

If we wasn't [sic] able to recruit staff when we needed to recruit staff, change the model, change things as quickly as we needed to to fill the gaps that we saw we wouldn't be in the position we're in now

The longevity of funding was stressed as being important for the programme, but also for MOBY, who had to unexpectedly respond to the pandemic and ensuing fear that had led to a hesitancy in young people to leave their homes. In addition to dealing with barriers experienced by learners related to their disabilities and long-term conditions, the This-Ability team found themselves responding to multiple barriers. A one-year extension from the funder of their four-year programme allowed the This-Ability team to take stock of an unprecedented situation that had caused “*heightened anxiety*”, to find solutions, and then proceed with the programme.

Notably, changes in the labour market after Brexit and post-lockdown were accommodated by This-Ability due to the longevity and flexibility of National Lottery funding. The MOBY team reported “*supporting employers to help them fill their roles*” (This-Ability Manager 1) during lockdown – a period when there were many jobs but a reluctance from young people to pursue them. Prior to lockdown, most learners on This-Ability had wanted to enter retail and hospitality, however, these sectors were hit most severely by the pandemic, and subsequently, the manufacturing sector (packing goods) became a more feasible job option for young people on the programme. It was a different sector to the one MOBY anticipated supporting learners into and therefore, staff had to learn how best to support them into “*something totally different*” (This-Ability Manager 2), whilst simultaneously addressing barriers for learners that had stemmed from the pandemic. Further challenges arising from the cost-of-living crisis led to funding being approved for essential food and toiletries for learners – again, the flexibility of the funder was stressed as aiding the This-Ability programme.

4.2. What have been the impacts and outcomes of MOBY for learners and employers?

Before exploring the impacts and outcomes of MOBY for learners, we begin by contextualising the circumstances of This-Ability learners in terms of their disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties and or health conditions, their work histories, and challenges finding and or securing employment.

This-Ability learners interviewed for the evaluation disclosed a variety of disabilities (for example, visual/hearing impairments, injuries) developmental disorders (such as Autism Spectrum Disorder) and mental health issues including depression, and anxiety. Most learners interviewed reported having more than one disability or health problem. Four of the ten learners reported some form of mental ill health, thus reflecting the complex needs of participants on the programme due to the multiple conditions experienced.



Almost all the learners interviewed had little or no work experience prior to joining the This-Ability programme. Several learners had joined the programme straight after leaving college and had no work experience at all. Others had work experience but not in the sector they were looking for employment in. Wes, for example, had been forced to leave his previous employment on a production line due to an injury, while Amber's experience on a health and social care placement had confirmed "it wasn't for [her]" (Amber). The challenges faced by This-Ability learners were summed up by Mentor 3:

Some of our guys have degrees... some of them have master's but no work experience... but a lot of them are on the entry level road as well... so very little work experience or just volunteering... it's either lots of support for somebody who's exceptionally intelligent or people come with very, very little experience.

The participants reported significant barriers both in their ability to look for work and the types of work they could do. Regular epileptic seizures meant Amber was unable to drive or use a computer for long periods. The injury Wes had sustained to his collarbone prevented him from undertaking any heavy lifting. Several learners related problems with literacy and communication skills due to dyslexia, Autism Spectrum Disorder or learning disabilities which impacted on their ability to complete applications and understand instructions. Mental ill-health led some participants to take a break from job searching as they could no longer cope.

Leo described how online job applications presented a barrier for him due to his autism as he spent significantly longer completing a form than a neurotypical applicant. Online forms set to automatically refresh the page after a set period of time would cause him to lose his work, leading to frustration. Leo commented:

I think the entire nature of job applications is broken; it doesn't work for most people on the [autism] spectrum at all.... I think a lot of that isn't just to do with on work support, but to do with the application process in general. It feels almost targeted to preventing people on the spectrum from getting a job.

The accounts revealed that participants felt potential employers would not take them on due to their disabilities, even though they could not be certain this was the case. The following testimony from Amber conceivably suggests discriminatory practice by the employer concerned, raising questions about learner awareness of their rights, and the responsibilities of employers regarding the Disability Discrimination Act:

When I told them about my hearing, she went there's a lot of noise in the city centre... the machines for like the hot drinks going off, would I still be able to hear the customers, so I think that's what put it off, but I'm not 100% sure.

Evidently, difficulty in finding employment impacted on the wellbeing of those interviewed. Participants expressed frustration at the lack of feedback received from employers, which meant they were unable to learn from their experiences - not knowing why they had failed. This, in turn, affected levels of confidence and resilience, for example, Amber shared, “*half the time I felt like giving up, but I didn’t, I kept trying*”. Barney related how lack of interview and work experience led to social anxiety and fear of social interactions with new people and the possibility these might not go well:

When you don’t know what something is going to be like... I find that a lot of people are more worried of the worst possible situation, not really knowing how to deal with that and I can be like that as well.

Leo recounted how his search for freelance employment in the creative and digital sector, combined with pressure to keep job searching from his job centre work coaches led to severe anxiety and panic attacks:

I would no longer function at doing basic tasks... leaving the house became something I had to plan and do, I couldn’t just walk out the door any more... cos the feeling I got whenever I would have a panic attack, it felt like I was going to die kind of thing, it felt like there wasn’t going to be a moment past the moment where I was panicking.

This led to Leo’s decision to look for more stable employment in a different sector, with support from his This-Ability provider to address his mental ill-health. However, accessing a different sector presented new barriers as his previous experience and qualifications meant he was perceived as over-qualified:

My qualifications became a burden, they were in the way of me getting jobs that people would consider lower skill[ed]. To me I don’t consider them lower skill[ed] because in my head a lot of these are much harder for me to get good at. Customer service stuff is a skill I don’t feel innately talented at, it’s something I’ve had to get better at through customer service in volunteering (Leo).

This section underscored the multiple and complex disabilities, learning disabilities / difficulties and or long-term health conditions that learners on the programme were struggling with when joining This-Ability and how these impacted on their ability to gain employment. Employer attitudes and procedures were conveyed as impeding the efforts of young people encountering such challenges when attempting to secure work. Next, we reveal **how young people were involved in This-Ability** and delve into **their experiences of work placement(s)** whilst on the programme.

The participants reported learning about the workplace environment, raising their awareness of the local labour market, developing interview skills as well as activities intended to build confidence and motivation. We found that the This-Ability programme enabled young people to develop new skills and explore different labour market sectors through a variety of volunteering and work placements, as shown in the illustration below.

Administration
Retail
Customer Service
Hospitality
Catering Sports

Supported job search provided tailored job opportunities for learners to apply for alongside their own, independent, job searching. Moreover, data suggested that MOBY mentors brokered work placements and employment opportunities with employers by matching the skills and experience of individual learners with the right opportunities. In many cases learners were accompanied and supported with job interviews and inductions. In some instances, the interviews revealed that learners bypassed the usual interview process and went straight into a placement where they were shown how to do a job. Presumably, this informal process proved less intimidating for learners with little interview experience, who might have otherwise struggled to communicate effectively and sell themselves in a more formal setting. In other examples, where learners applied for and gained work independently outside of the This-Ability programme, mentors approached the employer on behalf of the learner to offer in-work support.

Work placements functioned as working interviews, with learners aware from the beginning of the placement that there would be a permanent role for them if the placement went well. In some cases, placements allowed learners to succeed in securing a position where previous applications had not been successful:

*A good example is the job I'm currently working at... when I got that job I needed to sign onto their system... they found I already had an account and not only that I'd already applied for the exact job that I'd just earned through this placement.
(Leo)*

Evidently, the placement allowed the employer to see the skills and capabilities that Leo struggled to express in a written (online) application. When applying for roles at the end of the placement, the experience and training gained had put him in a strong position, as relayed by Employer 3:

Basically they introduced me to them by the agency and then they came to me, they were doing eight hours a week, Tuesday to Friday, to gain experience... and then at the end of it there was a live application and then they had to apply for that role themselves because it was open to everybody, but obviously they were in an ideal position, they were fully trained and I'd be stupid not to take those people on.

In another example, the relationships created during Amber's work placement meant that when a suitable position became available at a later time, the employer recalled her participation and offered her the role. The experience gained during the placement enabled her to skip the induction process and start work immediately.



Amber and Barney at their work placements

The evidence suggested that learners on work placement undertook the same duties and training as any other employee, thus suggesting that the placements were not tokenistic, but provided a realistic and structured experience for participants – for some of them representing their first venture into the world of work. The participants conveyed the placements as having been a positive experience, although some of them had initially feared making the transition to the workplace, for example, Amber commented:

At first I was nervous and scared cos I was going somewhere new and it was big and a bit far. I had a bit of a breakdown before work, a few hours, I said to mam I don't want to do it... I rang my mam once my shift was finished and said I'd really enjoyed it, I want to come back, and she went I told you didn't I.

Conversely, Wes described his employment working at the till in a small retail store as, “kind of annoying to be honest, because I would like to get off onto the floor”. However, his shoulder injury meant he was unable to do any heavy lifting, potentially making such work unsuitable. Initially, Wes’ frustration raised questions within the research team about whether some learners on the programme understood their own disabilities and limitations. However, deeper exploration into Wes’ case revealed that he had bypassed the Core Capabilities stage which undoubtedly would have enabled him to better understand his limitations.

When exploring learner understanding of MOBY, we found there was little recognition of the name MOBY (as a brand) among the participants interviewed. However, they did recognise MOBY’s functions of providing application support, CV Building, interview preparation and support, and in-work support as part of the This-Ability programme. In some cases, learners understood MOBY to be Job Club or stage three of the programme.

Learners recalled the support they received from individual mentors or the This-Ability programme as a whole. Leo recognised the name of the Business Relations Officer managing the MOBY element of the This-Ability programme, acknowledging that she was the driving force behind his placement:

I feel really bad, but I've only met her a couple of times, but from what I know she's the person behind this whole contact relationship between XXXX [the provider] and XXXX [the employer] (Leo).

The limited awareness of MOBY as a brand may indicate the need to further embed MOBY into the first two stages of any future employability programmes. However, as a specific service aimed at employers, the MOBY brand may be less relevant for learners to grasp. Arguably, if the intended outcomes of sustained employment are realised, it is perhaps of less importance that learners recognise the MOBY brand.

Previous research undertaken for the This-Ability programme (Bashir and Richards, 2022) highlighted that a smooth transition from one stage of the programme to the next with continuity of support was important for learners. Testimonials from various employers during current research reiterated this as being a key function of MOBY mentors, who matched and placed individuals to work placements through a detailed understanding of both learner and business needs to ensure a smooth transition to work. The following account from an employer during a focus group discussion is a case in point:

This is more in-depth, this is having a look at what their needs are and their requirements are rather than just turning up, looking at a work experience model and doing it... she's [MOBY mentor] been very active in looking for people to fit into this environment and said no, I can't put that person in because it's too noisy or it's too busy where we've then looked at Penelope's [pseudonym for colleague] area and gone actually that's still too busy, too vibrant for them, but it's finding the right person otherwise we're not giving that service really back to the learner to help them grow (Employer 5).

This was echoed by a MOBY mentor, who described their role as a neutral party: “so they're there for both parties and if they can bring those parties together” (Mentor 3). When asked if anyone else within the business could fulfil the same role, they explained how better Equality & Diversity training, more fully embedded in an organisation could empower individuals within it to take on the same role, “a buddy system, if you like, then there's no need for a mentor then” (Mentor 3).

When discussing **employer attitudes and or support** as part of our research, we learnt that the existing organisational culture of employers had a significant impact on the success of both the relationship between employers and the MOBY mentors, and the work placement / employment experience of learners. Several of the employers interviewed reported an inclusive culture of mentoring in their workplace. Both Employer 3 and Employer 2 routinely paired all new members of staff with more experienced employees for help and advice, lessening the need for MOBY Mentor presence.

Learners placed with these employers through the This-Ability programme recalled their workplaces as supportive environments, where their employers were understanding of their disabilities and needs. Barney relayed how his employer arranged his shifts so that he could continue to access other services which supported him with his disabilities. Jade recounted how her line manager (who had dyslexia herself) was able to support her, offering advice that allowed her to take customer orders more easily:

She [the line manager] said when we're taking orders, she said you don't have to spell it out... like if they [customers] want fish and chips like a medium haddock just put MH and then C and she said if you understand what it is than writing it fully out and that was a lot easier (Jade).

When asked if he felt whether the benefits of being in work would have happened without the understanding and support of his employer, Leo compared his positive experience on the This-Ability placement to a previous work placement from the Job Centre. He explained how lack of information regarding the job he would be doing, not

knowing the people he was travelling with and the expectation that he would stay in a strange hotel overnight led to severe anxiety for him, to the point that he had to ask his mother to pick him from a motorway service station and take him home:

in terms of accommodations from them it was non-existent, very little was explained, I was never even asked about my Asperger's, I was immediately put in conditions that were bad for my Asperger's... People with Aspergers tend to deal much better with routine and information... Without that my anxiety starts to come up with things that are going to go wrong immediately and that will lead to what happened on that day, is just horrible anxiety reactions where physically I was tensing up and causing myself pain... it was becoming physical pain and cramps in my legs to the point where I needed to leave before the journey was done, I couldn't even make it to the place we were driving to (Leo)

In contrast, MOBY mentors related instances where employer management and colleagues were less supportive and “*there was almost a bit of a huff and a bluff [sic] about who's actually next in line to support the learner*” (Mentor 2). Mentor 2 recalled a learner employed on a till in a small retail store, where there was only ever one member of staff on the shop floor with them and a manager based in a back office. He reported, “*the support could have been better*” as the shop floor staff were not always nearby to answer questions and support the learner. There were instances where the learner was criticised for not trying to solve problems for themselves before calling for assistance from the manager, and conversely instances where they were criticised when attempting to find solutions for themselves. Mentor 2 shared his learning from the experience:

I felt like, looking back at it, if I was going to learn again, I probably would of put somebody in a work experience environment first before going into that... not being paid for but learning without any expectations... for me, I'd probably needed to dig a little bit deeper of how many people are going to be operating on any one day, and seeing if there's, certainly for somebody who has no retail experience, do a bit of work experience for four to six weeks, experience it, and then, they can then go into that role.

Wes recalled a previous role in production where he did not receive any in-work support, where “*sometimes they [the employer] didn't really care*” about supporting him with his shoulder injury. Despite this, he did state the employer would try to assign him to other tasks or allow him to leave the shift early when he was unable to continue. However, over time they stopped offering him shifts and so he returned to the This-Ability programme to find other work.

Mentor 1 recalled a *Kickstart* placement (a government funded work placement scheme) in a branch of a national chain of retail stores. She described an initial lack of understanding around the needs of the learner employed there. This was attributed to the employer agreeing to limited Disability Awareness Training for staff - “*I was only allowed to do in their dinner half hour and not as a session*” (Mentor 1). Despite this the learner was making progress, to the point where the mentor began to withdraw support “*and that's when things started going a little wrong*” (Mentor 1). The buddy that had been assigned to the learner moved on and was not replaced as the employer did not have the staff available. The mentor relayed unreasonable expectations from store management regarding the learner's performance and being asked to return to the store to support them. Ultimately, when the kickstart placement came to an end, the learner was not taken on.

Time and staff resources needed to support young people with learning disabilities or differences were cited by those interviewed as barriers to employers taking them on.

Other barriers included the cost of making reasonable adjustments and the fear of saying or doing the wrong thing that could lead to accusations of discrimination:

I think sometimes attitude and ignorance are the biggest barriers to this... every employee needs support, every employee needs help to succeed and to be set up to succeed (Employer 2).

Our interviews explored and revealed **the impact of work on learners** – highlighting multiple outcomes and benefits related to the personal, professional, and emotional development of individuals on the This-Ability programme.

Confidence emerged as a significant finding – several learners discussed feeling increased confidence as a result of their work placement or employment and a sense of pride in themselves and their achievements. Employers and This-Ability mentors reiterated that they were able to see increased confidence in the learners they were working with. Importantly, Robin relayed that his employment had enabled him to view his disability differently, no longer seeing it as a barrier to employment: “*it [learning disabilities] doesn't stop me getting a job*” (Robin).

Increased confidence also led to **increased independence in the workplace**, as learners sought less guidance from their managers and colleagues, for example, Tracey commented, “*I've got better at doing things myself, more than asking for help off anyone I can*”. Further, Jade initially found it difficult to ask for help, reporting, “*because I'm always worried they'd think oh you can't do it, asking for help just felt like it's a step back*”. Her time in employment had given her the confidence to ask for help when needed, and an understanding that this did not reflect poorly on her ability to do her job.

For Jez, who is visually impaired, increased confidence within the workplace also led to **increased confidence and independence in his social life**. He recalled that he became more comfortable and talkative as he got more used to the office environment and was able to pick out the voices of his different colleagues. This led to him doing more outside of work, whereas before he did not feel confident leaving the house on his own. During his interview he shared, “*I go to the gym now which I didn't before. I just feel a bit more confident in going out and doing stuff myself or with my friends or whatever*” (Jez).

Participants reported **increased financial independence**. For some this meant being able to help pay family bills as well as buying things for themselves, putting savings aside every month or moving out of their family home. Leo recounted how living on benefits had allowed him to pay for basic needs such as food and shelter but left him little money for anything beyond this. He anticipated that being in work would enable him to do more of the things he enjoyed and improve his mental health:

Like I felt like I was on the bare minimum of what I needed to do to continue feeling healthy and normal every month... it'll allow [me] to actually do things that make me happy and not just do things that keep me alive (Leo).

He went on to share other **benefits to his mental health** from the This-Ability placement, such as an improved work-life balance. He compared his experience on the placement to his previous experience working in the creative and digital sector where he felt unable to separate his home and work life and draw a line under completed projects. In contrast, working in the retail sector enabled him to ‘switch off’ at the end of his shift:

You're there for the four hours to do the process, not to finish some unfinishable task. You can never get all the shelves in a shop looking perfect cos another day's

going to happen so you get as much as you can at a pace that doesn't ruin your body and then come back the next day and just do that again. It's repetitive but the trade-off is it doesn't ruin your mental health (Leo).

The evidence suggested that **learners would not have entered and sustained work without the involvement and support of the This-Ability programme**, particularly **the in-work support offered by MOBY**. Jade related that she *"would just have struggled"* in her role without the in-work support provided by This-Ability, and presumably she would not have continued in the role. Learners reported being open to opportunities they would not previously have considered before joining the programme, having a **better understanding of job search** and **better preparation for interviews**.

When exploring **the impact of placements on employers**, several employers reported improved awareness of disabilities as a result of hosting work placements or employing This-Ability learners. This, in turn, had led to increased confidence to make reasonable adjustments where needed, not just within the workforce, but for clients and customers as well. Employer 1, who worked within the training department of a large public sector organisation, related the wider benefits of supporting a This-Ability learner. They admitted that the department had, perhaps, in the past paid lip service to reasonable adjustments for course delegates and would not have known what to do had someone made a request for them. They conveyed an increased awareness within the department because of supporting the learner who was reported as having, *"really broadened our minds and opened our eyes to what we might need to do for people in the future"* (Employer 1).

The employer went on to describe the sense of personal achievement they felt, having successfully supported the learner through a six-month paid work placement, despite difficulties encountered in making reasonable adjustments due to the large size and departmentalised nature of their wider organisation. They reflected on the problems encountered and how the placement had changed their perceptions of accessibility issues in the wider organisation:

It's made me aware of all the things we say we do that we don't, if that makes sense. You know, we are this and you know reasonable adjustments and it's like 'umm actually' - it's those easy fixes, yeah, where, you know, absolutely. But when it gets a bit tough and it requires a bit of effort, the [organisation] isn't great... if it was just dealing with stuff locally in this office, any day, but when you've got to get the wider organisation involved, that's when you encounter problems (Employer 1).

In another instance, Mentor 3 recalled a learner placed within a company with little experience of supporting people with disabilities, who was in danger of losing his job due to their lack of social skills and issues from home surfacing in the workplace. Management was ready to end the employment as they did not understand how the learner's disability contributed to these issues or know how to support him to resolve them. With the support of the MOBY team the managers were able to understand the reasons for, and meaning of, these behaviours and put support in place for the employee. Mentor 3 explained how her intervention had helped the learner to sustain his employment with the company:

So, they've been able to say okay you're making me think differently now and other reasons why this person might be behaving like this, and it's allowed me then to ask those questions and help that person problem solve, to where [the learner] has just passed his year anniversary of being in that workplace (Mentor 3).

Employer 4 had previously worked closely with a mental health charity and described their workforce as already quite diverse, with a positive attitude towards employing people with disabilities – “*it’s not something that they see as a barrier*” (Employer 4). They recalled that the support from the MOBY element of the This-Ability programme in providing a work placement had given the staff more confidence to make reasonable adjustments “*whereas before I think they’ve had to find their own feet and there’s been a bit of trial and error*” (Employer 4).

The employer went on to relate the benefits of improving diversity within the workforce, such as representing different viewpoints and reflecting the diversity of their customer base and described the opportunities for learning as staff and customers interacted with This-Ability learners while on work placement:

I think that changes the perception as well for people with disabilities. There are an awful lot of stereotypes, people jump to conclusions about what someone’s not capable of and don’t think about what they are capable of (Employer 4).

This was reiterated by Employer 2 who recalled that employing a This-Ability learner had created mentoring opportunities for other members of staff in their organisation. In another example, Employer 3 described the positive impact of employing This-Ability learners, “*it just brings that bit more togetherness within the team and they’re going to look out for them [the learners]*”. As a diverse organisation, Employer 4 conveyed the positive contribution to their public image of being seen to lead by example in providing work placements or employment for young people with disabilities:

So there are so many benefits, being the type of company that we are, I’d like to think there are other organisations that also look to us to do the right thing and I think that we have a responsibility to set the standard and to set the tone and to make sure opportunities are offered to everyone.

In a similar vein, Employer 5 related how offering work placements and employment to This-Ability learners enabled them to give back to the local community, demonstrating their commitment to the principles of corporate social responsibility:

Organisational benefits for us would be that we can take that risk. We have a lot of knowledge and wealth that we can share with these people [learners] and it also pulls into our ESG [environmental, social and governance] model where we’re giving back to the community as well, so it allows us to then have that story where we’re not just employing people but we’re giving back into the community as well to help others.

Disability Awareness Training offered by the MOBY team was found to have a significant impact on those employers that undertook the training. Employer 4 recalled how the knowledge gained from the session had enabled retail staff on the shop floor to make a reasonable adjustment for a customer who brought her son (with Autism Spectrum Disorder) into the store. This adjustment alleviated sensory overload for the customer’s son, enabling them both to comfortably return to the store and benefited the business with regular, repeat custom. Employer 4 relayed the following:

one of our sales assistants from our retail business said, ‘we have a lady that comes in with her son, her son has autism and he’s really bothered by the music in the shop so when she comes now, she gives us a little wave through the window and we turn the radio off for her’.

Evidently, the training had created a safe space where those present were able to discuss their own experiences of living with disabilities or learning differences. Mentor

3 recalled a training session with the senior management and HR department of a large national company, which gave one of the managers present the confidence to disclose his own battle with obsessive compulsive disorder, having tried to hide the condition for more than forty years. In another example, numerous staff members present at the training, including a company director, felt able to disclose their own experiences of mental ill-health and disabilities and of close family members. Mentor 3 reported:

So, it opened up this beautiful conversation and the team just, the cohesiveness was unbelievable and he said that absolutely just changed their company and how they work. So, we've been quite successful with them in placing people for employment, but the conversations, there was no barriers in our conversations then with the senior team, with the directors, there were just no barriers which was great.

Conceivably, breaking down barriers and enabling conversations about disability, learning disabilities/difficulties and or long-term health conditions in the training setting opened dialogue between existing and new employees more generally – leading to better understanding of sensitive issues and support within and outside teams. The long-term benefits of such progress might feasibly be a healthier (mentally) and a more productive workforce, with a lower staff turnover.

4.3. What has MOBY learnt and taught others over the last ten years?

The team behind MOBY, some of whom have been involved in the service since it began as part of Talent Match, continuously stressed their commitment (in ongoing evaluation) to learning from the very people that their services aimed to target. Through co-produced activities the ideas and needs of young people with learning disabilities /difficulties and or long-term health conditions were placed at the heart of the provision intended for them – letting them inform the design. As This-Ability Manager 1 recalled, when delivering their first employability programme (Talent Match) the team sought to explore:

the reasons why they (learners with disabilities/difficulties) are unemployed and why they're finding it extra difficult, more difficult than their peers to look for work and get a job and sustain a job.

Additionally, the issues and needs of businesses /employers were investigated. They found that inadequate support was available for employers in relation to taking on people with disabilities and learning disabilities/difficulties. The Disability Confident employer scheme did not go far enough to educate/train employers, particularly through **direct intervention** – a situation that has largely remained unchanged nationally during the lifetime of MOBY. Throughout its operation, the MOBY service fed into a cycle of continuous reflection, learning, and adaptation – core principles that any service might adopt to ensure that provision is closely aligned to needs.

Having established learner and employer needs, MOBY offered in-work support to both parties, for example, by learning the job role that the learner had secured, training the employer on disability awareness, and supporting them to make reasonable adjustments in some cases. Importantly, the MOBY team learnt that **some learners required intensive support and others required minimal support** such as accompanying them on their interview and attending work with them on their first day. On learning this, **MOBY support was provided on a case-by-case basis.**

Understanding the significance of **providing young people “honest feedback, help with...setting boundaries”** (This-Ability Manager 3), the MOBY team imparted this knowledge to employers, advising them to deal with learners as they would any other

employee through disciplining them in accordance with their employment policies, promoting appropriate workplace behaviour – **reflecting the reality of working** for learners on This-Ability. An example was cited of a young person whose precarious housing situation and problems at home had affected his attendance at work, which at first the MOBY team explained as extenuating circumstances to the employer. However, the young person's ongoing issues and the allowances made by the employer prompted MOBY to advise the employer to subject the young person to the same sanctions that any other employee would face for breaching workplace practices. MOBY's stance changed as they reflected on the implications for young people being excused for issues they repeatedly took into the workplace – the differential treatment was felt to be detrimental to their learners in the long run.

Additionally, during the course of delivery, the MOBY team learnt the importance of setting boundaries with both employers and learners undertaking work/work placements. At times, employers relied too heavily on MOBY to resolve a range of issues experienced by those learners placed with them, and sometimes the young people themselves demanded support that fell outside the scope of MOBY's remit and their capacity. This-Ability Manager 1 outlined the excessive level of involvement that some employers requested – a responsibility that MOBY could not feasibly take, which led to them setting boundaries:

they [employers] want us to sort out every single issue in that young person's life. So, we do have to set boundaries on our support for the business and our support for the young people. If there's too much wraparound in welfare and things that aren't employment related, we do end up doing all sorts of additional work that we really haven't got capacity to do, so we've had to be quite firm around that.

When commenting on the lessons that had been learnt that would certainly influence changes to any future programmes, This-Ability Manager 2 stressed **the importance of learners being given the opportunity to undertake voluntary roles** before embarking on work experience. **Work experience was described as a “harsh reality...a really big shock to the system, especially for those who have never, ever set foot in a workplace”** (This-Ability Manager 2). Instead, a few hours of volunteering (weekly) to prepare learners for the reality of work experience was proposed for future provision – **laying a foundation in basic skills**, which were deemed necessary for accessing work experience, which was otherwise reported as being difficult to secure. **Volunteering, coupled with gaining core capabilities** at the beginning of the employability programme were perceived as being the **best combination of skills to prepare learners for good quality work experience**. Additionally, during the core capabilities stage, This-Ability staff could gauge learner interests, their ability to cope in the workplace, attendance levels and so on. A key lesson to emerge from the This-Ability programme was that **learners who bypassed the core capabilities stage and progressed to stage three were not as work ready** as was perceived when they initially engaged with This-Ability. For example, some struggled to understand social conventions, such as manners in the workplace.

Indeed, during focus group discussion, when asked what intervention(s) as part of the employment support model had the most impact on the quality of outcomes for young people, This-Ability Manager 2 explained that the development of core capabilities had been most impactful. Notably, **when This-Ability staff had full involvement in delivering the programme, young people completing the programme were able to sustain employment** – perhaps indicating that those closest to the programme aims (as the lead organisation) were best placed to respond to learner needs through **a process reinforced by continuity in staff and intensive support**. The following comments by This-Ability Manager 2 underscored the importance of gaining core capabilities and receiving MOBY support towards the end of the programme for long-term outcomes:

there's core capabilities and if you look at the data for the back end, if you look at everyone that's gone into employment that has had MOBY intervention has sustained employment, everyone, so that hand holding, that employer support, that young person support has made a massive impact on people sustaining employment.

This-Ability Manager 1 who had extensive involvement in MOBY emphasised that a lesson had been learnt about the **importance of finding “supportive, meaningful work experience”** for learners on future programmes. The team identified the need for structured work placements monitored from the outset, with clear responsibilities for young people measured against key criteria - helping them to identify their strengths and development needs.

4.4. Key learning points

1. MOBY evolved in response to the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting changes in the labour market which led to a reduction of jobs in hospitality and retail and a growth in manufacturing immediately following the pandemic. Post-COVID the MOBY team increased their engagement with a sector they had worked less closely with whilst simultaneously working with young people to open their minds to a sector they had not previously considered. Soon after this period the labour market changed yet again – resembling some normality whereby hospitality and retail jobs became more readily available. **MOBY's adaptability helped learners to move towards employment during a time of uncertainty and instability.**
2. Disability Awareness Training co-produced by MOBY with their PADD group during lockdown expanded the MOBY offer to employers through live training in addition to online videos produced during the Talent Match programme. This online training became the basis for new face-to-face delivery post-lockdown, **encouraging interaction and dialogue amongst employees.** The numerous impacts of this training include: broader knowledge amongst employers and their workforce of the needs of employees with learning disabilities/difficulties; **increased employer confidence to make reasonable adjustments** and creating a more supportive environment between colleagues.
3. As face-to-face delivery resumed after lockdown **MOBY was embedded further into the earlier stages of the programme to improve continuity** and understanding of the programme for learners. The remit of MOBY expanded from in-work support to job search, application and interview support which generated benefits for the learners and MOBY mentors. On the one hand, **learners experienced consistency in support**, on the other hand the mentors were able to get to know learners better to support them more fully. Given the MOBY mentors understanding of the employers they worked with and the local labour market they were better placed to support learners with job search. In some instances, having supported learners with job applications the mentors could reactively engage with the relevant employers.
4. Looking across the research data for this study we found that **learners who experienced a comprehensive support package from MOBY expressed better job satisfaction and reported their workplaces as supportive environments.** Whereas those who gained jobs with employers who took up less of the MOBY offer expressed more frustration in their job roles and less supportive workplace environments.
5. The **in-work support bridged a gap in understanding between young people on This-Ability and employers**, helping employers to **simplify the**

application/interview process, make reasonable adjustments, and to respond appropriately to learner issues in the workplace. Notably, MOBY influenced employers to allow learners to bypass the traditional application/interview process and instead demonstrate their skills in a working interview. Further, employer narratives underscored that MOBY's involvement in their business(es) provided **access to a wider pool of potential employees**. They reported **more confidence taking on young people with disabilities and/or learning difficulties** knowing that they had access to support should they need it. Significantly, MOBY's involvement gave them **more confidence to make reasonable adjustments more broadly**, not only for employees but also customers and clients.

6. Looking across the ten interviews with young people, evidently, the range of challenges learners experienced were distinctly different, their circumstances, job interests and so on, calling for a **bespoke case-by-case response** rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, which is often adopted by service providers. Similarly, our research highlighted that employer needs were equally diverse, requiring bespoke support from the MOBY team.
7. Our interviews revealed a **limited understanding of MOBY as a brand amongst learners**. However, they did recognise MOBY's functions of providing support developing CVs, writing job applications, preparing for interviews and in-work support as part of the This-Ability programme. In some cases, learners understood MOBY to be Job Club or stage three of the programme. Conversely **employer narratives conveyed a better understanding of MOBY as a service** in its totality. Perhaps a service specifically aimed at employers is less important for learners to recognise, particularly if the intended outcomes of sustaining employment are achieved.
8. Additional benefits of employing learners from This-Ability recounted by employers include: becoming disability confident; creating mentoring roles and opportunities within their organisations for other employees; contributing to corporate social responsibility principles by giving back to the community and developing a diverse workforce that better reflects the customers/clients they serve.
9. Our research revealed that MOBY mentors carefully placed **the right person into the right role**, considering learner needs and the role/environment they would be going into. Mentors involved all parties (learners and employers) from the outset to ensure best outcomes.
10. A deeper interpretation of the data revealed a correlation between employer attitudes around inclusivity and maximising benefit from the MOBY offer. Those employers who described an inclusive workplace culture seemed to derive most benefit from the MOBY service by taking up more of the offer, such as the Disability Awareness Training, advice on making reasonable adjustments and maintaining communication with MOBY mentors. In some cases, the close relationship with MOBY resulted in the employer taking on more learners from the This-Ability programme. All of the employers interviewed perceived MOBY to be a valuable bridge in understanding between employers and young people with learning disabilities/differences regardless of how little or how much they used the MOBY service. **They articulated that without MOBY a significant gap in provision would exist.**

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