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BRITISH WORKERS FEAR JOB LOSS WITH ONSET OF DISABILITY

More than a quarter of British workers believe their boss would be unlikely to help them keep their job if they become disabled, a report reveals today.

A MORI poll for the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) found that 28% of non disabled workers felt their employers would not make adjustments to help them stay in work following a serious accident .

The poll found that people working in the small business sector were more pessimistic about their job prospects than those working for larger companies. Thirty eight per cent of workers in companies of less than 25 staff felt it unlikely they would keep their job if they became disabled compared to 26% of those employed in companies with 250 or more employees.

The poll's findings provide an interesting contrast between workers and bosses' attitudes. A DRC survey of 1,000 small employers found that the majority (85%) said they would be flexible about hours or minor parts of the job if the employee had the right skills and enthusiasm.

The MORI poll and employer survey are published as part of a DRC campaign aimed at Britain's small business owners to dispel some of the myths around retaining disabled staff. The campaign follows the introduction of new laws for small employers in October 2004 which lifted the exemption of small firms from the Disability Discrimination Act.

Bert Massie, Chairman of the Disability Rights Commission said:

"Getting the message across that employers are prepared to make adjustments for disabled workers will give much needed confidence to all staff. Most people are not born with their impairment, they become disabled or develop a long term health condition during their working life. The findings should not only encourage disabled people in work but also those who will become disabled."

"Smart businesses realise that providing support to workers rather than showing them the door makes good business sense. And it sends a clear message that the company values all their staff. But it also makes sense, cost wise, to make small improvements that have minimal outlay rather than incur the increased expense of redundancy and recruitment.

"Thousands of Britain's small businessmen and women are successfully employing someone with a disability or health condition - in fact over half a million such people work for a small business."

Stephen Alambritis, Head of Parliamentary Affairs at The Federation of Small Businesses says: "Small employers want to embrace diversity because of the strong business case for retaining suitably skilled disabled people. The Federation of Small Businesses supports this important DRC campaign."

Sir Digby Jones, Director General of the Confederation of British Industry is backing the DRC's initiative. He comments: "Many good employers recognise the benefits of meeting the needs of

disabled employees and retaining individuals in their business. And what's good for all staff is - in the long run - good for customers and business."

The DRC has found many small businesses around the country successfully employing disabled people and those with long term health conditions. For example, Conquest Plants is a specialist nursery in Cheshire owned by Anthony Norman. He employs three staff, including 30-year-old Gregory Lewis who has a visual impairment. Gregory has worked at the nursery for two years and was employed because of his passion for plants. Anthony Norman has made some changes to ensure Gregory can work efficiently and says: "Over the last two years we've had staff stability because of Gregory's commitment to his job. And Gregory has brought business with him - his neighbours and friends regularly visit the nursery."

The DRC's employment campaign aims to increase confidence among small employers of the benefits of retaining disabled staff and those with long term health conditions, and to explode some popular myths about the additional costs and bureaucracy required. The campaign will involve:

- national and regional radio advertising in March 2005;
- advice and information for small employers, including 'Top Tips for Small Businesses' available from www.drc-gb.org/employment;
- business briefings for small employer advisers.

Stories and contacts of successful small businesses employing disabled staff are available from the DRC press office.