

ODP People Stories – Samantha Chadburn’s Story

My name is Sam Chadburn and I want to tell you why, sometimes, “You look absolutely fantastic!” is the last thing you want to hear.

I am an Employment and Partnership Manager and I love my job helping other people to access DWP’s services and find work. However, it’s taken me a while to get to this point.

Back in January 2017, I woke up one morning feeling unwell. I had dizzy spells, head pain, and I even needed a rest and a lie down during the day at work. Visits to my GP didn’t help, so I just got on with my job as an Employer Adviser at the Job Centre and tried to ignore my symptoms.

Over the next few months the pain and the dizziness got worse and worse. Four months of stress and anxiety came to a head when I completely broke down at work one day as I could no longer cope with the pain. When I was referred to hospital for a brain scan in April, I discovered I had an aneurysm. My symptoms continued and I collapsed, a further brain scan identified a stroke and I learned that each of the dizzy spells had been mini-strokes.

I had a follow up scan three months later, just before I was due to go on holiday. I needed urgent life-saving surgery. One of the main arteries in my brain had torn, my one aneurysm had turned into two and they were causing the pain and strokes. At that point, I didn’t know if I could ever work again, or even if I wanted to. Here’s the thing: I’d undergone major brain surgery. Things don’t just go back to normal. I still have a brain condition that affects me, I have good days and bad days. Fatigue, anxiety, and memory issues.

After a long recovery, I returned to work in January 2018. Someone said, “You look absolutely fantastic Sam!” ... moments before I walked into a filing cabinet. At this point I started wondering whether I could retire.

My outlook and mindset completely changed when I heard about the Civil Service Future Leaders Academy. I’d long held promotion ambitions, and my manager encouraged me to apply.

It was the best decision I’ve ever made and a turning point in my life. I was placed in a team with other successful applicants and we were tasked with a joint project of our choosing. Here, I planted the seed for ‘Hidden Agenda’, a project to raise awareness of hidden disabilities and shine a light on an inclusive Civil Service. Getting the team’s agreement for this project gave me back my mojo and fired my passion for all things inclusion!

With the support of wonderful colleagues around me I worked tirelessly on this project. My proudest moment came when I emailed Senior Leaders to ask if DWP could adopt the Sunflower Lanyard scheme. The lanyard discreetly signals

that the wearer has hidden disabilities and may need extra support, giving them confidence and a voice. I jumped cartwheels when I learned last spring that DWP had given every Job Centre in the UK the opportunity to participate in the scheme. I also became a Membership Lead on the newly formed DWP Disability Network THRIVE.

I've come a long way. I'm so proud to be ODP and to have won the ODP Inclusion Award 2021, and I hope my story inspires others to keep going when things get tough, because they always get better.