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News

The Stannah worker denied a stairlift at company HQ

By ANDREW LEVY - [More by this author](#) » Last updated at 00:03am on 10th January 2007

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David Ratcliffe was laughed at by his Stannah Stairlifts manager when he asked the company to install one of its own stairlifts

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The name Stannah Stairlift has become a byword for making life easy for the elderly and infirm.

But when a disabled employee asked the company to install one of its devices at its head office to help him get to his second floor office, a manager laughed at the idea.

"Everyone would want to ride on it and no work would get done," he was told.

David Ratcliffe, 36, failed to see the joke and the company has now been ordered to pay £6,000 compensation by an employment tribunal for discriminating against him on the basis of his disability.

The married father-of-three, who has several collapsed discs in his back and walks using crutches, joined the firm's head office in Andover, Hampshire, as an IT designer in October last year.

But he had difficulty negotiating the stairs to his office and had to go to the first floor every time he needed the toilet.

When he approached line manager Alison Dickson the day after joining the firm to ask whether one of its own stairlifts could be installed, she ridiculed the suggestion.

Mr Ratcliffe told the tribunal: "She laughed and said if they did that, everyone would want to ride on it and no work would be done.

"I found her comment flippant as they have another disabled person who struggles with the stairs."

The former RAF logistics worker told the tribunal in Southampton that he ran into problems with his employer as soon as he began the job.

On his first day, he asked if there was anywhere safe to put store the prescription pain killers he has for his condition.

"Alison appeared to be annoyed when I told her about my medication needs as if I was giving her another problem to sort out," he said.

In a subsequent meeting, Mrs Dickson claimed Mr Ratcliffe had not explained the severity of his back problem, caused seven years ago when he lifted his daughter, Jessica, now eight, onto his shoulders.

"Alison Dickson and I had a meeting which she opened by telling me I had not told the truth about my disability and implied that I had lied to her on my interview," he said.

"I was totally shocked. I had told her everything about my condition and had been completely honest."

The situation deteriorated further when, on October 31, Mr Ratcliffe was ordered into a meeting with technical manager Phil Wheeler where he was told he "didn't fit in" and was immediately suspended.

The following day Mr Wheeler told him the company had grave concerns about his training and conduct and terminated his contract with immediate effect.

"The company at no time provided anything to say why I was suspended, proof of my inability to function as a designer, or the opportunity to defend myself fairly, which leads me to believe it is an issue about my disability," Mr Ratcliffe said.

Stannah Stairlifts, a family-owned British company that also makes lifts, told the tribunal in November that Mr Ratcliffe's concentration was affected by his medication.

But in a written judgement the tribunal ruled the company had failed to make "reasonable adjustments" for a disabled employee and this week awarded him compensation.

Mr Ratcliffe yesterday revealed he had been unable to find work since he was sacked.

"I can have a back operation which will cost £7,000 but I just can't afford that at the moment because I'm out of work," he said.

He said: "I feel let down by Stannah. Their money comes from disabled people and so to then turn around and do what they've done to me as a disabled person is not acceptable.

"I was employed by them after six years of being unemployed and having to retrain. To then have the rug pulled from under my feet was soul destroying."

The firm's slogan is "Trust Stannah to make things easier".

David Ratcliffe said yesterday: "I feel let down by Stannah. Their money comes from disabled people and so to then turn around and do what they've done to me as a disabled person is not acceptable.

"I was employed by them after six years of being unemployed and having to retrain. To then have the rug pulled from under my feet was soul destroying."

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You should bear in mind that such stair lifts are mainly suited to a domestic situation, they can not always be used at a place of work as they do not meet the requirements for emergency evacuation situations. There are also RRO and building regulation requirements before you think of such devices as a solution to this type problem. They are great at getting people in and out but not for emergency evacuation.

- Alan, Brighton

Highly embarrassing.

- Ryk, UK

There's probably more to this one than meets the eye.

- Nj Dotseth, Chicago, USA

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