

WORKING INCLUSIVELY WITH COLLEAGUES WITH A DISABILITY



Do you have a colleague or member of staff with a disability? Do you know how to talk to them about their disability, what help they may need in the workplace, and what you personally can do to ensure they feel an inclusive part of the team?

The first thing to remember is that the person with a disability is a person first and their disability is just one aspect of their overall make-up / personality, **always put the person first and respect their independence as far as their disability allows.**

In general terms we know that no two people are the same and that applies equally whether you have a disability or not.

Therefore, when writing a document about how to work inclusively with colleagues with a disability, it would be impossible to cover all possible challenges and options.

There is a plethora of guidance and advice available online for specific disabilities. However, almost without fail, if you need expert advice about a specific disability (and it is appropriate to ask), then the best place to find it is by talking directly to your colleagues / member of staff.



This document is intended to be thought provoking and provide pointers and general guidelines.

If you have a friend or family member with the same disability as your colleague, **do not assume that you know how your colleague's disability affects them.** Remember the underlying principle that no two people are the same.



DISABILITY TERMINOLOGY

As a general principle, always put the person first, for example using the phrase “person with a disability” rather than “disabled person”. How you refer to specific disabilities and conditions does tend to change over time and individuals will have their own preferences so the best option is to ask the person with the disability how they prefer it to be referred to.

There are however some terms that should never be used, including “handicapped,” “differently-abled,” “cripple,” “crippled,” “spastic,” “victim,” “retarded,” “stricken,” “poor,” “unfortunate,” or “special needs.” Another example, when referring to a wheelchair user, do not imply the user is “wheelchair bound”.

Many individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing prefer not to have their disability defined as a “hearing impairment”. A person who has no sight will always use the term blind and this term may be the preference of individuals with very low vision or who meet the legal definition. Colleagues with limited sight loss may refer to themselves as partially sighted or visually impaired.

You may hear the term “neurodiverse” used to refer to people on the Autistic Spectrum or with conditions such as Dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or Tourette Syndrome, and they may refer to the general population as “neurotypical”.

It is important that you only use these terms if you are sure they will not be offensive in the context of, or to the individual, you are talking to / about.



PHYSICAL AND SENSORY DISABILITIES

A physical disability is one that affects mobility, physical capacity, stamina, or dexterity.

There are a vast number of different physical disabilities including brain or spinal cord injuries, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, and respiratory disorders (e.g. cystic fibrosis). Within each category, there will be a wide spectrum of severity and how each person is affected on a day-to-day basis. For example, some but not all people with cerebral palsy will have a speech impediment, and some but not all people with multiple sclerosis will need to use a wheelchair all or part of the time. Some people with disabilities may have other related health conditions.

Usually if a colleague has a physical disability some part of their disability will be visible to colleagues, but they may face challenges that are not as obvious.

Sensory disabilities are those affecting sight, hearing, smell, touch or taste. Some sensory disabilities will be obvious to colleagues, but this will not always be the case, especially if a colleague is hard of hearing.

Because these disabilities are often visible or apparent to colleagues, in many cases the person with the disability will be happy to talk about it in general, and specifically about how it affects them. It is important to be sensitive about how and when you ask; always in a private one-on-one setting, and if somebody prefers not to tell you more, then you need to respect their privacy.



If you see somebody struggling physically with a task (e.g. carrying something) then it is okay to ask if they would like assistance, in the same way you would offer help to any other colleague. However, do not assume that they need or want the help and do not dive in without asking first. Use phrases such as “I can see you’re struggling with, would you like some assistance?”

There may be situations where there have been specific adaptations made to the workplace to accommodate the needs of the person with a disability. This applies to all disabilities, but in the case of physical disabilities often these adaptations may be helpful to other member of staff. Remember that the person with the disability has priority and do not abuse the equipment. This includes disabled toilets – you may enjoy the privacy and space of a disabled toilet facility, but if you are able to use the standard facilities then respect those people who are unable to do so. Remember that somebody with a hidden disability may also need to make use of that facility.

If you have a colleague with reduced mobility, be aware of where their pinch points may be in or around the building and make sure that you do your bit to keep these areas clear and safe. This includes ensuring that lifts are fully accessible (and not left full of furniture or files).



HIDDEN DISABILITIES

Hidden or Non-Visible Disabilities refer to disabilities which may not be visible at a glance but can have a major impact on people's lives. They can arise from conditions such as epilepsy, autism, diabetes, chronic pain conditions and acquired brain injuries. This also covers the whole spectrum of disabilities or challenges that are primarily neurological in nature.

If somebody has a hidden disability they may decide not to disclose it to colleagues or even managers, especially if it has minimal impact on their working day. Many people live with and manage their hidden disabilities without requiring any external non-medical support or intervention.

If you have a colleague that you think may have a hidden disability then it is important you respect their privacy, especially if it does not have any impact on you or your role. Equally a colleague who has additional sick leave or works flexibly will be discussing this directly with their line manager and you should respect their privacy unless they offer the information.

If there is a direct impact on you or your work then how you address it will depend on your relationship with that colleague. It may be more appropriate to speak to your, or their, line manager in the first instance.

EVENTS AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Also applicable to sensory and hidden disabilities, when arranging team events, work related or social, it's important to take into account any additional requirements of staff with disabilities.

For work related events, it is the responsibility of the organiser or the individual's line manager to ensure the appropriate provision, for example booking an accessible room for anybody with limited mobility or a room with an induction loop for anybody wearing a hearing aid.

For social events, this is a more sensitive area as it may not always be possible to include everybody and attendance is optional anyway. For example, if your team has an annual bowling event and you have a new colleague with a physical disability, the best option would be to talk directly to them, explain and if they are not able to participate, involve them as a spectator or in the planning/ organising side if they want to. If you have an active social calendar in the team, make sure that there are a range of activities suitable for all ages, abilities, and interests. Your colleagues without disabilities will thank you too.

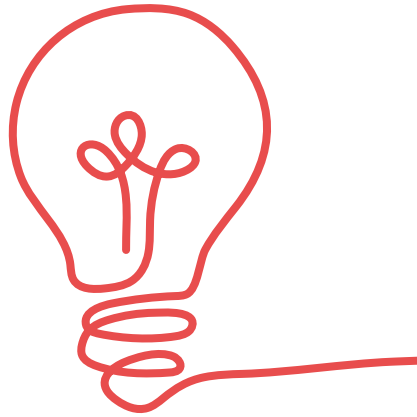


MANAGERIAL RESPONSIBILITY

As a manager you have a level of responsibility for and commitment to the health and wellbeing of all staff and to ensure that you are making any reasonable adaptations that a person with a disability may be legally entitled to. Ensuring that inductions, regular one-to-ones, and annual reviews include discussions with all staff about issues that may be affecting them in the workplace is key to meeting this responsibility.

Some staff members may be very open about their disability and what they require from you, others may be more reluctant to discuss it. You cannot force a member of staff to disclose their disability, but you should give them the space and confidence to do so. Once you are aware of a disability, you should be prepared to discuss it openly with your staff member and work to assist them in the workplace, taking advice from Human Resources if appropriate to ensure that you work within legal regulation and local policies.

As outlined in this document, if you need more advice about a specific disability that affects a member of your staff then it is best to talk to them directly about it. However, do not rely on the member of staff to tell you what your responsibility is, or to always be the one to find the correct policy, available resources, or support.



FURTHER READING AND GUIDANCE

Employing people with disabilities and health conditions: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/employing-disabled-people-and-people-with-health-conditions/employing-disabled-people-and-people-with-health-conditions>

Disability at work (Acas). Comprehensive advice for employers and managers on supporting disabled employees, workplace accessibility, reasonable adjustments, disability-related absence and creating an inclusive workplace culture. <https://www.acas.org.uk/disability-at-work>

Recruiting, managing and developing disabled people: [A practical guide for managers \(Disability Confident/CIPD\)](#)

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