

An employer's guide to understanding disabilities in the workplace



Embracing diversity: Nurturing a supportive and inclusive work environment



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Understanding the needs of colleagues with disabilities is essential in all workplaces. In this guide, we'll explore some of the most common questions surrounding disability in the workplace, including talking about disability at work, who is considered disabled, when to talk about disability, using the right language and what to consider if a disability is new.

Disability inclusion is a shared responsibility that involves everyone, including those with disabilities. Every person's experience and perspective are crucial in fostering a genuinely inclusive environment.

Talking about disability at work

Talking about disability at work can be a sensitive topic. It's important to acknowledge that disabilities come in many forms, and through the diversity of abilities in the workforce, there is a range of experiences that we should be mindful of. So, how can we start a conversation about disability in the workplace?

Creating an open and inclusive dialogue means making sure all employees, including those with disabilities, feel safe and encouraged to share their experiences and suggestions. By fostering an environment where everyone can speak openly, you make sure that all voices are heard and valued. Leaders should ask for opinions and create opportunities for everyone to share their views. Setting up affinity groups or employee forums can create peer support, ownership and give those with lived experience a voice. Engagement surveys can capture views and suggestions and also ask for optional information on demographics including health conditions and disability status (as long as this does not affect anonymity) to better understand any disparities and needs for additional support.

Let's walk through some important points together:

- **Promote open communication:** Encourage an open dialogue about disabilities in your workplace. This can help individuals feel more comfortable discussing their needs and experiences.
- **Educate yourself and others:** Understand the diverse range of disabilities that can affect people in your workplace. Learning about these disabilities can help you empathise with your colleagues and provide appropriate support to those who need it.
- **Be respectful and mindful:** Always use respectful language when discussing disabilities. Be mindful of how you engage with your colleagues, as some may prefer not to discuss their disabilities openly.
- **Be supportive:** If a colleague opens up about their disability, be supportive. Listen to their needs and offer help where appropriate. Remember, a supportive workplace fosters a more inclusive and productive environment.

Who is considered disabled?

According to the World Health Organization, 1 in 7 people has a disability worldwide, and in the UK, this number is nearly 14 million. Many disabilities are invisible, including chronic illnesses, mental health conditions, and hearing or sight impairments. These disabilities are no less legitimate or debilitating than physical disabilities. It's important not to make assumptions about someone's disability status. Instead, assume everyone is capable of contributing to the workplace and offer support if they need it.

When to talk about disability

Make sure there are no barriers and actively seek to create opportunities so it is easy for individuals to talk about a disability throughout the employee lifecycle and on a regular basis, because health status can change. If and when an individual decides to talk about their disability, if any support is needed it is a legal requirement to make reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act.

A disabled employee can choose when and how to share information about their disability. Whether they would prefer a private conversation or a scheduled meeting, it's entirely up to them. It's important to make sure that as their employer you are giving them the opportunity to share their disability.

Using the right language around disability

The language you choose to use is essential in conversations about disability. Some terminology can be outdated or derogative towards people with disabilities. It's best to use person-first language, where you put the employee before their disability. Use language recommended by Disability Rights UK, to capture the shared experience of anyone affected by impairments, which is "Disabled Person". Encourage employees to engage in dialogue with those with lived experience in their workplace about what language makes people feel most comfortable.

Ask employees to identify if they have a preferred way to speak about their disability. This will help everyone feel more comfortable.

Talking with someone about their disability

Employees should be in control of conversations about their health. Create opportunities and always be ready to listen, offer support and make reasonable adjustments. It is important not to pry or force people to talk about their health, but if ever you have concerns do be proactive and remind people that support is available. Using a wellness action plan template can be a great tool to make it easier to have supportive conversations and understand what help and support (if any) would be beneficial.

Disclose information about your disability when you feel ready. Maintaining control over how and when you share personal health details can help you feel safe and respected in the workplace.

What to consider if a disability is new

If an employee discloses to you that they have a new disability, be understanding. It can be challenging to navigate the workplace with a new disability for the individual and the employer. Be sure to ask them what accommodations they need in their work environment. It's essential to recognise that people who are newly disabled may also be dealing with emotional and psychological challenges and may need some time to adjust to their new reality.

Providing ongoing support and checking in regularly can help ease this transition for your colleagues.

Disability inclusion in the workplace benefits all employees. It leads to happier and more productive employees, improves morale, increases innovation, and improves overall business outcomes. We hope that this guide has provided practical insights into dealing with disability in the workplace and will facilitate better dialogue and understanding between colleagues.

Take the opportunity to ask employees to speak up and identify what needs they have. Their voice and experiences are vital in shaping a truly inclusive workplace.

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