

ORC Global Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

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Visual Impairments in the Workplace: A Primer

A primer on issues faced by the visually impaired and how these can be accommodated in the workplace

Only about 10-15 percent of people with visual impairments are totally blind. The rest have what is known as low vision. Exactly what they can and cannot see varies widely. Some can see clearly only through a small central field or only peripherally. Others can see a little bit across a wide field. They may be able to discern light, shapes, or colors. For some, the degree of vision may vary from day to day.

Every person with a visual impairment adapts a little differently, depending on his particular needs, training, and preferences. For example, not everyone with a visual impairment uses a cane or dog guide. Those who do not are sometimes suspected of feigning their disability. Some prefer to read with devices that enhance the size of print, others use braille, others need devices that convert print to speech.

Sighted people often react with unconscious prejudices to visually impaired people. Because people with low vision may have large handwriting, some people assume that the content of their writing will be immature. When a blind person goes places holding the arm of a companion, she will often find herself treated as an incompetent. Waiters may ask her companion for her order; sales clerks will talk about her in the third person. The companion should politely but firmly refer these people to the blind individual.

People with visual impairments appreciate help when they lose an object or become disoriented. But well-meaning folks sometimes frighten and even endanger blind people trying to lead them in the right direction. Imagine if you were walking down a dark street, unable to see, and someone suddenly grabbed you and started dragging you away.

Guidelines for Interacting with People with Visual Impairments

1. Orient the person to a new or changed area and explain where the furniture is located
2. Keep doors fully open or fully closed
3. When you guide someone, let her take your arm just above your elbow. Walk at a natural pace, but keep alert and give a warning when you are approaching a step or other obstacle.
4. Make verbal directions specific. It's often useful to refer to positions of the clock (e.g., your desk is at 3 o'clock.) When referring to "right" or "left", do so from the perspective of the other person.
5. Announce yourself when you arrive. Your blind coworker may not recognize your voice every time he hears it. Let him know when you leave the room.

6. Do not speak to or pet or otherwise distract a dog guide, even if it does not appear to be working at the moment, unless its master gives you express permission. Its owner's life quite literally depends on the dog being alert and focused on its master.

Job Accommodations

Computer technology can help many visually impaired people perform their jobs. All sorts of equipment and software are available: special keyboards, glare guards, screen magnifiers, voice recognition, dictation programs that allow users to speak information into a word processing program document scanning, talking caller ID, and so forth. Cell phones can be a problem; those with speech output or screens that can be read by those with low vision are difficult to find and require special software. The AFB web site includes a list of cell phone manufacturers, service providers, and third-party software providers that offer assistive cell phone technology at <http://www.afb.org/Section.asp?SectionID=4&TopicID=327&DocumentID=3594>.

But not all accommodations need to be high tech or expensive. Solutions may be as simple as providing a different type of lighting, applying Braille labels to equipment, or arranging for an employee with a visual impairment to swap certain job functions with someone. When determining what accommodations will help an employee with a visual impairment, remember that accommodations will vary depending on the job, the degree and type of visual impairment, and the way in which each individual best adapts to his or her impairment. The following guidelines will help companies and employees find the best solutions:

- Analyze the essential functions of the job and evaluate any modifications that might be made to the job and/or assistive technology that might be available
- Involve the disabled worker in the accommodation process
- Provide basic training for the employee, supervisor, and coworkers about the accommodations required
- Continuously re-evaluate the accommodation, especially as regards computer technology
- Find out how other companies have accommodated employees in similar positions. See, for example, the SOAR (Searchable Online Accommodation Resource) database on the Job Accommodation Network site, <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/>.

Resources for Employers

In the US:

- The American Federation for the Blind, www.afb.org
- US Department of Labor's Job Accommodations Network, <http://www.jan.wvu.edu> including SOAR, the Searchable Online Accommodations Resource
- Cornell University Access Guide, <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/edi/accessforall/index.htm>

- Special Needs Ontario Window (SNOW), a listing of available adaptive technologies with product descriptions, links to manufacturers web sites, FAQs, et al.
http://snow.utoronto.ca/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=236&Itemid=126

In the UK and Europe:

- Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)
105 Judd Street
London
WC1H 9NE
Tel: 020 7388 1266
Fax: 020 7388 2034
<http://www.rnib.org.uk>
- European Blind Union (EBU/Union européenne des Aveugles (UEA)
58 Avenue Bosquet
F - 75007 PARIS
Tel. : + 33/1/47.05.38.20
Fax : + 33/1/47.05.38.21
Website : www.euroblind.org

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