



How to support people with sensory impairments in employment

**Guidance for employers and Jobcentre
Plus**

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Introduction

As many employers know, recruiting and retaining the best talent in an organisation is essential to create a relevant and successful workplace.

With 20% of the working population defined as disabled, and 80% of disabled people acquiring a disability during their working lives, the contribution disabled people can make to the workplace is significant and should not be overlooked.

Understandably, some employers may be unclear about the best way to support disabled people in employment. But finding the right support is essential to creating an inclusive workplace that has the best people in the right roles – which will ultimately only benefit businesses and customers. There is also financial support available from the government's Access to Work scheme (see page 10), to support employers with recruiting and retaining talented disabled people.

Disabled people have an estimated £80 billion in spending power – and if businesses have a greater understanding of disability they will be able to serve a broader range of customers and increase their customer base.

Explaining sensory impairments

When someone has sensory impairments this means that there has been a loss or change in their senses that impacts on their daily life. It must commonly refers to changes in vision and hearing. Sensory impairments can be from birth or acquired during someone's lifetime.

With the right support and working environment, people with sensory impairments can succeed in a wide variety of jobs.

Visual impairment

This refers to people whose eyesight is compromised in some way, and so includes blind and partially sighted people.

There are over 84,000 blind and partially sighted people of working age in the UK, and acquired sight loss in the workplace, whether from disability, age-related reasons or an accident in the workplace, can be a main reason for not continuing work. Three in ten (30%) of registered blind or partially sighted people who have worked believe they could have continued in their role if they had received the right support.¹

Hearing impairment

This refers to a partial or total inability to hear, and includes d/Deaf² and those with hearing loss.

There are more than 11 million people in the UK, or one in six of the population, with some form of hearing loss. More than 900,000 are severely or profoundly deaf.³

Combined vision and hearing impairment (deafblind)

¹ RNIB, Guide for employing professionals: www.rnib.org.uk/services-we-offer-advice-professionals/employment-professionals

² d/Deaf recognises that some people with hearing impairments identify with the Deaf community, whereas others may identify with the hearing community. A fuller discussion of this difference can be found here: www.ageukhearingaids.co.uk/hearing-aid-news/what-are-big-d-and-little-d

³ Action on Hearing Loss statistics: www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/your-hearing/about-deafness-and-hearing-loss/statistics.aspx

Deafblindness is a “combined sight and hearing impairment [which] causes difficulties with communication, access to information and mobility”.⁴

It is important to recognise that deafblindness is not just a deaf person who cannot see, or a blind person who cannot hear. The two impairments combine to increase the effects of each.

Many people believe ‘deafblind’ means an individual will have no sight or hearing. This is true for some individuals but most people who are deafblind will have some sight and/or hearing that they can use.

There are approximately 358,000 people who are deafblind in the UK; 222,000 aged 70 and over, 115,000 aged 20 – 69, and 22,000 children under the age of 19.⁵

Legal requirements for employers

The Equality Act (2010) legally protects people with protected characteristics from discrimination in the workplace. Protected characteristics include, but are not limited to, disability, age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and religion.

Under the Equality Act employers are required to make reasonable adjustments for people with protected characteristics. This means employers must take positive steps to ensure disabled people can fully participate in employment, including in recruitment practices.

The requirement for reasonable adjustments recognises that some disabled people may need extra support so that they can be on equal footing with non-disabled candidates. Many reasonable adjustments are inexpensive and relatively straightforward to make. It is about ensuring disabled people have the right tools to do a job – just like any other worker.

For example, someone who has visual impairment may need:

- adjustments to be made at an interview such as changes to lighting

⁴ Think Dual Sensory, Department of Health, 1995

⁵ <https://www.sense.org.uk/content/how-many-people-who-are-deafblind-are-there>

- group activities to be adjusted so that they can showcase their skills and talents as a non-disabled person could in the interview environment
- adjustments to allow a guide dog at work

What do sensory impairments mean for employment

People with sensory impairments have a wide range of skills and talents to offer in the workplace. It is important to understand the best way to support a person with sensory impairments so that employers get the most out of their employees, and employees develop in the workplace.

Important considerations for employers and managers

Here are some important considerations and reasonable adjustments for people with sensory impairments who are applying for a job, or are already employed:

The recruitment process

Accessible recruitment processes mean that employers can find the best person for the job. People with sensory impairments will sometimes need alterations to the employment process so that they can showcase their skills and talents.

For example, a person who is partially sighted may need any interview material printed for them in a larger font, or provided in electronic format so they can use software to magnify it. They may also need adjustments to lighting levels in a room, such as being able to sit facing towards or away from a window.

A person who is hearing impaired may need a sign language interpreter during the interview, or be able to arrange the room for the interview so they can more easily lip read. Someone who is deafblind may ask to have their working dog with them in the interview and they may need them to travel to the interview and navigate the building.

The key to approaching reasonable adjustments is to recognise that people's needs vary and that the best way to do this is simply to ask what someone needs. The interview should focus on people's abilities rather than their disabilities.

TIP: Ask about reasonable adjustments or disability related assistance as part of the application process. While there is no obligation for an applicant to declare their disability, this will help reassure candidates that these options are available for them, and aid open and frank conversations about the support that may be needed.

TIP: People with sensory impairments have varied support needs – don't assume how they should be supported. If an applicant declares their disability, always ask what they need in the interview process.

In the workplace

Within the workplace, people with sensory impairments may need adjustments or more comprehensive support to perform in their job.

While employers are required to offer reasonable adjustments, more complex and expensive support - such a technology and software - can be accessed through the Government's Access to Work scheme (see more details of this on page 8).

Environmental factors can make a significant difference to an employee with sensory impairments. For example, people who are deafblind may have better vision with brighter lighting, or be able to hear more in quieter environments. Discussing the set-up of the office and potential options, such as being able to work in a private office where the environment could be more controlled, will be helpful for supporting a person with sensory impairments.

Travelling to work

It can be challenging for people with sensory impairments to travel to and from work. Some public transport may not be very accessible and if someone has fluctuating needs this can also be an issue.

For example, some people who are deafblind suffer from night-blindness, which means they are unable to see well in darker conditions. This can make travelling in the evenings difficult, especially in the winter when it can get darker earlier.

Travelling can be made easier by using taxis funded by Access to Work.

Another option would be to allow people with sensory impairments to work flexible hours so that they can travel into the workplace after peak travel times, and perhaps work from home until then if possible.

TIP: Flexible shifts can make travel to and from work easier for people with sensory impairments and minimise their stress. If adjustments such as working from home at certain times of the day are possible they should be explored.

Communication

Understanding the communication needs of someone with sensory impairments will make the most of their skills and talents, and allow them to participate socially in the workplace. Being part of a team is often a key aspect of work.

Communication needs vary widely for people with sensory impairments, so support must be tailored to each individual's needs. Access to Work can provide specialist communication support where it is needed, including funding for technology which people with sensory impairments may use to help them communicate and complete certain tasks - such as screen reading software.

It is also important that team members, and those that work closely with a person with sensory impairments, are aware of how best to communicate with them and meet their needs. This can include simple adjustments, such as standing within the field of sight for a person with visual impairment. It is always best for managers and colleagues to ask the person with sensory impairments how they can make communication easier for them.

TIP: Specialist communication needs can be met through Access to Work, but it is also important that team members are very clear on how best to communicate with their colleagues with sensory impairments. This promotes an inclusive workplace where everybody can participate.

Support for employers

Access to Work

Access to Work is a government funded scheme which can provide support in a number of different ways. This includes, but is not limited to, conducting workplace assessments, providing funding for specialist technology and equipment, adaptations to existing equipment and funding training.

Typically, small businesses do not contribute to the costs of any recommendations made through Access to Work. However, medium and larger businesses may be asked to contribute toward the costs for existing employees. For new employees, Access to Work covers all costs.

Employees must apply for Access to Work, but should be supported by their employers when making the application. Access to Work will need information such as relevant contact details within the organisations (line manager and IT department for example) and copies of the job description.

For links to further information about Access to Work, please see page 10.

Specialist schemes

There are other schemes available that offer support for employers who want to make sure their organisations are inclusive and focused on equality. These include specialist recruitment websites that offer support to employers and disabled candidates, and schemes that offer support to employers when hiring a disabled candidate.

For more information about these schemes see page 14 of this information pack.

Case Studies

Eva

Eva is deafblind. She wears cochlear implants and uses special software to be able to read computer screens. She has always been interested in working in Information Technology (IT) and read a Masters in IT. She has recently found employment, after being unemployed for some years. However, while unemployed, she took part in volunteer work and made sure she kept her skills up-to-date on training courses.

Eva is well supported in her current role – her employer was proactive with understanding her support needs, and arranged a meeting one month prior to her starting the role to discuss what reasonable adjustments would be needed. This allowed some time for adjustments to be made so that Eva was able to start her role from the beginning. Her employer has also scheduled regular meetings to discuss the adjustments, and they are aware that her needs could change depending on the job and her disability.

There is also awareness among her team of her communication needs, so that during meetings, colleagues will take notes for her in meetings or will arrange interpreters for meetings which require networking. Her employer has also set up a disability network so that disabled employees can meet regularly to discuss their experiences at work and support each other.

Eva also uses Access to Work, which includes taxi travel to and from her workplace, and has helped with technological adjustments needed such as a large screen monitor with high resolution, and specialist software for visual impairments.

Jo-Ann

Jo-Ann is a senior manager at a large company. She is deafblind and uses lip reading to understanding what people are saying. She has always worked and received good support from her employer. At work she requires certain adjustments, such as special computer software, and needs to sit in a certain position during meetings in order to lipread.

“I’ve been very fortunate in my career. I’ve been able to engage with employers and get them into a mindset to think of what I can do, as opposed to what I can’t do. And I think it is very important that everyone adopts this attitude. Not only does it help the sense of wellbeing, but it gives you the sense of empowerment and makes you feel good about what you can achieve in life. Whilst it is good to be aspirational, it is about managing expectations and finding a job where you can maximise your talents.

“The key to success for me is being open and honest about what I can do and what I can’t do. I am not shy to go into a meeting room and rearrange where everyone sits for me to get the maximum benefit of communication. We all have different needs and these just happen to be mine.

It is about working with your employer and changing the mentality of reasonable adjustments into a return on investments. When I talk to my line manager about the product they buy for me, I think it is right that I make a commitment on what I can offer back to the company.”

Simran

Simran has worked for a large company for a number of years, and was recently diagnosed with Usher Syndrome. Since being diagnosed, she has experienced loss of hearing and vision, including night-blindness. This has impacted on her ability to perform certain tasks related to her role, requiring her employer to make adjustments to support her.

Simran's adaption to her workplace post-diagnosis has been somewhat difficult for both herself and her employer. Usher syndrome⁶ is a rare condition with varying symptoms. For some people with Usher, including Simran, it can cause night-blindness, meaning her vision will fluctuate depending on lighting. Simran has found that explaining fluctuations to her employer has been difficult as both sides are in the process of learning what her condition means for her work.

However, her experience has been improved considerably by her line manager who has approached the situation with flexibility and understanding. As Simran's night-blindness progressed, she requested to only work shifts in the morning so that she could avoid travel in the dark. Though she has support from Access to Work, this currently only pays for taxis in the morning and so she cannot yet use the support to travel in the evening. Her line manager has arranged her shifts so that these requests are taken into account for both her required shifts and her overtime shifts.

Simran works together with her manager to understand which tasks she can safely do in her job, so that her role can be adapted. She worried that her diagnosis meant she would have to retire early from work, but she is determined that as she is able to work, she should.

⁶ For more information on Usher, please see: www.sense.org.uk/content/usher-syndrome

Useful resources

Further information on deafblindness and support available:

www.sense.org.uk/content/about-deafblindness

Recruitment website for disabled people and employers looking to recruit disabled people:

www.evenbreak.co.uk/

Further information on Access to Work:

www.gov.uk/access-to-work/overview

How to apply to Access to Work:

www.gov.uk/access-to-work

Access to Work fact sheet for employers:

www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/595236/employer-guide-access-to-work.pdf

Information on reasonable adjustments for disabled people:

www.gov.uk/reasonable-adjustments-for-disabled-workers

Contacting Jobcentre Plus:

www.gov.uk/contact-jobcentre-plus

Further information on employing people with sight impairments:

www.rnib.org.uk/employing-someone-sight-loss

Further information on employing people with hearing impairments:

www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/supporting-you/when-you-tell-your-employer-about-hearing-loss/guidance-for-employers.aspx

Employer consultancy and training for employing disabled graduates:

www.employ-ability.org.uk/employers/services

Service for workplace adjustments: **www.microlinkpc.com**