

Supporting disabled people at work

Talking about disability

Nobody has to tell their employer they're disabled. But when they do, the employer has a legal responsibility to support them.

Employers should do all they reasonably can to create an environment where people feel safe and comfortable to talk about disability. This can help towards:

- making sure disabled people get support and are not put at a disadvantage or treated less favourably
- recognising the benefits of an inclusive and diverse workforce that does not exclude disabled people
- recruiting and retaining staff who often have more resilience and problem-solving skills through developing ways of living with a disability
- avoiding situations where an employer does not know someone is disabled and just thinks they cannot do their job
- improving wellbeing and productivity for everyone

Employers also have a responsibility to consider whether anyone might have a disability that puts them at a disadvantage at work. This does not mean asking intrusive questions. Employers should focus on the support they can give.

Who is considered to be disabled

The Equality Act 2010 sets out when someone is considered to be disabled.

The law says someone is disabled if both of these apply:

- they have a 'physical or mental impairment'
- the impairment 'has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'

A small number of conditions and impairments are automatically classed as a disability.

[Find out more about what disability means by law](#)

When to talk about disability

By law, nobody has to tell their employer they're disabled. But someone should talk with their manager if:

- they need support
- there's a health and safety risk to them or other people
- they feel that telling them now might prevent problems later

It's up to the person to decide when they want to tell their employer. Some people might choose to do this when something changes, for example their condition starts affecting them much more than it used to.

In some cases this might be the first time the employer realises the person is disabled. For example, if it's a hidden disability where the manager could not reasonably be expected to know the person is disabled.

Once an employer knows someone is disabled, they have a legal responsibility to:

- support them, including making reasonable adjustments
- protect them from disability discrimination, including harassment and victimisation

An employer has the same legal responsibility if they could reasonably be expected to know someone is disabled, even if the person has not told them.

Find out more about:

- [how an employer should support disabled people](#) – including making reasonable adjustments
- [disability discrimination](#)

Example of talking about disability

An employer notices someone in their team has difficulty with spelling and remembering instructions. They also take longer to read things. It's reasonable for the employer to consider whether the person might have a disability.

The employer should talk to the person about what they've noticed and ask what adjustments might help.

The employer should not ask directly "do you have a disability like dyslexia?" The employer should not try and diagnose someone – only a medical professional can do that.

When an employer can ask about a disability by law

By law, an employer can only ask an employee whether they have a disability if it's for specific reasons. For example to:

- prevent health and safety risks
- avoid disability discrimination
- monitor the number of disabled people in the organisation

In some circumstances, employers might need to ask their employees to do a health check for a role. To avoid discrimination, employers must ask everyone who does the role to do the health check – not just disabled people.

In recruitment

You might be able to ask questions about disability in some circumstances during recruitment.

[Find out more about following discrimination law throughout recruitment](#)

Using the right language

Use appropriate language when talking about disability. Language can affect how people feel and cause distress.

Ableist language is not acceptable. This means language that's inappropriate, offensive or negative towards disabled people, including things some might consider as 'banter' or jokes.

Be sensitive in the terms you use. Do not use words that are offensive or negative, for example handicapped, crippled or wheelchair-bound.

Other terms can depend on people's preferences and experiences. For example, individual people might prefer to say:

- "I'm disabled"
- "I have a disability"
- something different, for example "I'm deaf", "I'm autistic" or "I have cancer"

Employers should talk with disabled staff about how they feel about these terms and others. Language and preferences can also change over time.

For more advice, read [inclusive language guidance on GOV.UK](#).

Example of not using the right language

A trainer asks "does anyone have special needs?" during a course. This could make disabled people feel they're seen as a problem, and that the trainer has drawn unwanted attention to them. It's not appropriate to ask this.

The trainer should have asked before the course took place if anyone needs reasonable adjustments. This language moves the focus from the person to the things that could be disabling for them.

If someone uses inappropriate or offensive language

If a manager or colleague says something inappropriate or offensive, it might be enough for someone to explain how it makes them feel or why they would prefer different terms. It might be that the person who said it did not realise and is happy to learn.

Inappropriate, offensive or ableist language, however, can be disability discrimination.

[Find out more about disability discrimination and how to report it](#)

Talking with someone about their disability

When someone's talking with their manager about their disability, the manager should take the lead from the disabled person. It's up to the person how much they share.

The manager should:

- listen to the person
- try to understand how their disability affects them – for some people the effects might fluctuate or change at different times
- consider the person's specific situation – everyone is different
- not make assumptions about what someone can and cannot do
- talk with the person about the support they need
- ask before helping – some people might not want or need help
- ask how they would like their disability to be referred to or talked about
- understand they might have their own coping strategies and ways of managing their disability

Employers and employees should work together to build the best working environment.

Managers and colleagues should also:

- communicate with someone directly rather than through a support worker, for example a sign language interpreter or job coach
- speak to the person in the same way as anyone else, unless they've asked people to communicate in a different way – if it's difficult to understand each other, ask if there's a way of communicating that works better for them

- not touch someone's mobility or assistance aids without their permission, for example their wheelchair, walker, cane or assistance dog – these are part of someone's personal space
- consider sitting down when talking for a longer time with someone using a wheelchair

If a disability is new

Be sensitive when talking with someone who's been diagnosed recently. They might:

- be struggling to come to terms with their diagnosis, as well as the effects of their condition or impairment
- experience a mental health problem
- be worried that people will treat them differently if they know they're disabled
- not feel ready to ask for support, or not know what they need yet

Have regular catch-ups to check:

- how the person is feeling
- what support they need – this might change over time

Someone might find it particularly difficult or distressing to talk about:

- a progressive condition – this means it will get worse over time
- a condition that's terminal or life-threatening

Find out about:

- [managing a disability that gets worse over time](#)
- [more support for managing disability at work](#)
- [supporting mental health at work](#)

Confidentiality

An employer should keep someone's disability confidential, unless the person is happy for it to be shared.

If information is going to be shared, the disabled person should agree with their employer:

- what they want to share
- who to share it with
- whether they want to tell people themselves or would like their employer to do it

It can be helpful to put in writing what's been agreed, for example in a letter or email.

When confidentiality might not be possible

Confidentiality is not always possible when there are obvious signs of a disability, for example if someone uses a wheelchair or has an assistance dog.

Keeping something confidential might be limited in other circumstances too, such as:

- if someone needs specific support – for example they need information presented in a certain way
- health and safety reasons – for example if someone cannot operate certain equipment
- people at work need to be aware – for example what to do if someone with epilepsy has a seizure

Sharing experiences with others

If someone is comfortable talking about how their disability affects them, they might want to tell other people at work. This might help to:

- increase people's understanding of disability
- create an open, inclusive and accessible work environment

Managers and colleagues might be curious and ask questions. It should always be the disabled person's choice who they tell and how much they share.

Some organisations might have more formal ways of sharing experiences, for example:

- as part of a staff induction programme
- through a group like a disability network