



# Vitality

An EFAP Article for Human Resource and Occupational Health Professionals, Program Administrators, Supervisors, and Key Personnel



## Supporting Employees with Disabilities

Over one billion people around the globe live with some form of disability.<sup>1</sup> Even so, not all businesses are equipped to support persons with disabilities which, in many instances, impedes their ability to thrive within existing environments. Employing people with different abilities has many benefits that aren't commonly known. For example, in a Forbes survey, 56 percent of companies with more than \$10 million in annual revenue strongly agree that diversity in your workforce drives innovation.<sup>2</sup>

This article should help you understand the myriad of disabilities that exist and how to make your workplace more accessible and accepting of different disabilities. We also look at where to find the best resources for accommodating individuals with disabilities.

### Types of disabilities

Multiple disabilities can affect a person; some are more common than others, and others are more consistently functional. Some of the following types of disabilities are recognized by the government, which help by providing benefits for specific types of disabilities.

### Intellectual or learning disabilities

An intellectual, learning or cognitive disability refers to a reduced capacity to understand tasks or process information and tends to be evident early on in a person's development.<sup>3</sup> Learning disabilities, including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), affect between 3 percent and 10 percent of the global population and make it difficult for individuals to receive information,



comprehend it, and communicate what they know. Intellectual and learning disabilities can cause a person to be challenged by reading, writing, or mathematics; yet, people with these disabilities are often intelligent, creative, and productive despite their intellectual difficulties.

## Psychiatric disabilities

A psychiatric disability, or mental illness<sup>4</sup> can present at any age of a person's development and can remain hidden from other people, even if the individual suspects a problem. Psychiatric disabilities are some of the most misunderstood, and peoples' attitudes may form due to prejudice and myth. Mental illnesses include stress and anxiety-related conditions, depression, bipolar disorder, as well as schizophrenia.

## Visual impairments

Visual impairments are commonly known; however, they remain misunderstood. At least 2.2 billion people<sup>5</sup> have a near or distance vision impairment globally, but only a portion of those individuals are entirely blind. There are differences between the needs of the visually impaired and those who are blind, and not all will require the same set of adaptive tools.

## Hearing impairments

Various factors can cause hearing loss throughout a person's life, including physical damage, disease during pregnancy, or exposure to loud noises,<sup>6</sup> and it doesn't always result in complete deafness. There is a distinction between the needs of people who have a hearing impairment and those who are deaf. For instance, those who experienced hearing up to the point when language begins to develop (about 3-years-old) can have comparatively good speech and lip-reading ability than those born deaf.

## Neurological disabilities

A neurological disability occurs due to damage to the nervous system, which can result in the loss of some physical or mental functions. A neurological disability may affect much of a person's capacity,<sup>7</sup> from using their hands to expressing feelings and processing information.

## Disabilities and their effect on mental health

The state of our mental and physical health are fundamentally linked, which means that those living with significant mental health issues are naturally at higher risk of experiencing one or more chronic physical conditions. Conversely, people living with a physical disability experience depression and anxiety at twice the general

population rate.<sup>8</sup> Co-existing mental and physical disorders can diminish the quality of life and lead to longer illness duration and worse health outcomes. Understanding the links between mind and body will help a company develop strategies to create conversations surrounding support, identifying a need, and building engagement.

## Creating an inclusive workplace

Creating an inclusive workplace that accommodates people with disabilities means increasing your talent pool, attracting high-skilled candidates, enhancing your team's performance, boosting productivity and becoming an employer of choice.<sup>9</sup>

- Ensure application forms and job descriptions are genuinely accessible, including providing documents in large print, Braille or accessible read versions. To take further steps, it would help to make sure any online forms are compatible with screen readers and magnify them.<sup>10</sup>
- Focus the job description on essential criteria rather than preferred attributes and characteristics. Small factors that seem ideal but aren't necessary to the job may inadvertently discriminate against those with disabilities because it sets standards that aren't required in the role and deter some candidates with disabilities from applying.
- Consider alternative methods for applying to the job, such as taster days or telephone interviews.
- Monitor the outcomes from the application process to review your policies. By doing so, you ensure that your current methods are effective in recruiting people with disabilities. Adapt and evolve those policies as needed.
- Think about any participation needs people with disabilities might have at the workplace, such as wheelchair accessibility, hearing loops or computer access.
- Modify your working arrangements. Consider providing natural lighting, noise-cancelling headphones and quiet spaces for those who are sensitive to noises and distractions.
- Assistive technologies, such as screen readers, transcription software, modified phones, and hearing loop systems can help hear and sight disabilities.

## Supportive practices and supportive policies for increasing awareness and promoting diversity in the workplace

With so many people living with various disabilities, it is vital to ensure you are actively recruiting and supporting employees and their needs. Employees and managers without disabilities may be unaware of the needs and support required for colleagues who may have a disability. That is alright because the situation can change.

By training employees on precisely what people with disabilities face at work, primarily when it affects some of the most mundane tasks, you stand a chance of opening eyes, minds, and compassionate hearts to things that require consideration.

- Provide unconscious bias training for all employees.
- Pay workers with disabilities equally.
- Arrange meetings and events at venues that are accessible for your employees with mobility issues.
- Training can be ongoing and informal; in fact, it can be peer-led.





## Workplace accommodations and resources

Beyond adjusting your workplace to accommodate the various types of disabilities that exist, think about ways for workers with disabilities to thrive at the office. The aim is to treat all employees fairly and pay employees with disabilities equally. As a result, the company's reputation as a diverse and inclusive employer should help to attract talent and create a more collaborative and engaged workforce.

Unfortunately, many people with disabilities feel like they should be grateful to be given a job at all, which is immoral and demotivating for employees with disabilities and inherently unfair. Here are a few resources for workplace accommodations that exist, especially for accommodating a more diverse workplace where disabilities are recognized and honoured:

- Use specific workplace accommodation resources that address the various needs of those with disabilities. For example, the Centre for ADHD awareness of Canada,<sup>11</sup> Canadian Hearing Services,<sup>12</sup> or Accessibilities for Ontarians with Disabilities Act.<sup>13</sup>
- Consult with a return to work professional, like an occupational therapist
- Consider assessment services

As an employer, manager or team leader, it is your job to make sure you provide great experiences for all employees, including those employees with disabilities. This issue

isn't just about making certain offices accessible; it's about knowing what's important, and designing experiences that are needed and wanted. As a result, it enables those with disabilities to thrive.

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