



Disability inclusion in the workplace

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Workplace
Health and Wellbeing **Academy**

Introduction

Creating an accessible and inclusive workplace can help employees thrive at work. This guide provides some tips and advice to support disabled colleagues at work.

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What is a disability?

Disability in the workplace

Create an inclusive culture



What is a disability?

There are 16 million disabled people in the UK, that's 1 in 4 people.¹ According to the Equality Act 2010, disability is any long-term physical or mental condition. It has a major impact on your ability to do daily activities. People with long-term conditions are likely to have them for at least 12 months. They may have them for life.²

There are many types of impairments and conditions, including:³

- long-term pain
- mental health conditions
- learning conditions
- sensory impairments such as hearing loss
- physical impairments such as needing to use a mobility aid
- long-term health condition such as diabetes

The following impairments and conditions are also included in the **Equality Act**, if they've been diagnosed:^{3,4}

- cancer
- visual impairment such as being blind
- multiple sclerosis
- HIV

A disfigurement such as severe facial burns can also be considered a disability.

You might have heard the term 'registered disabled'. But there is no national register of disabled people.⁵ There is a national register for visual impairment, which is voluntary.



Social model of disability

The social model of disability is more inclusive than the legal definition. The social model says people have impairments or conditions, but the way society is structured disables them.⁶ Barriers that disable people include:

- physical and environmental barriers
- attitudes and discrimination
- digital and content accessibility

Most disabled people are not born with their impairment or condition. Anyone can develop an impairment or condition at any point in their life. People can also have more than one impairment or condition. They may experience these at different stages of their life.

This is why the social model of disability is more inclusive. Working with colleagues to remove barriers creates more inclusive workplaces.

Non-visible impairments and conditions

Not all impairments and conditions are visible, which means you might not be able to see them. These include:

- mental health conditions
- learning conditions
- neurodivergent conditions
- long-term pain⁷

A disability may not always be obvious. This may be because someone has a non-visible impairment.

Long-term health conditions

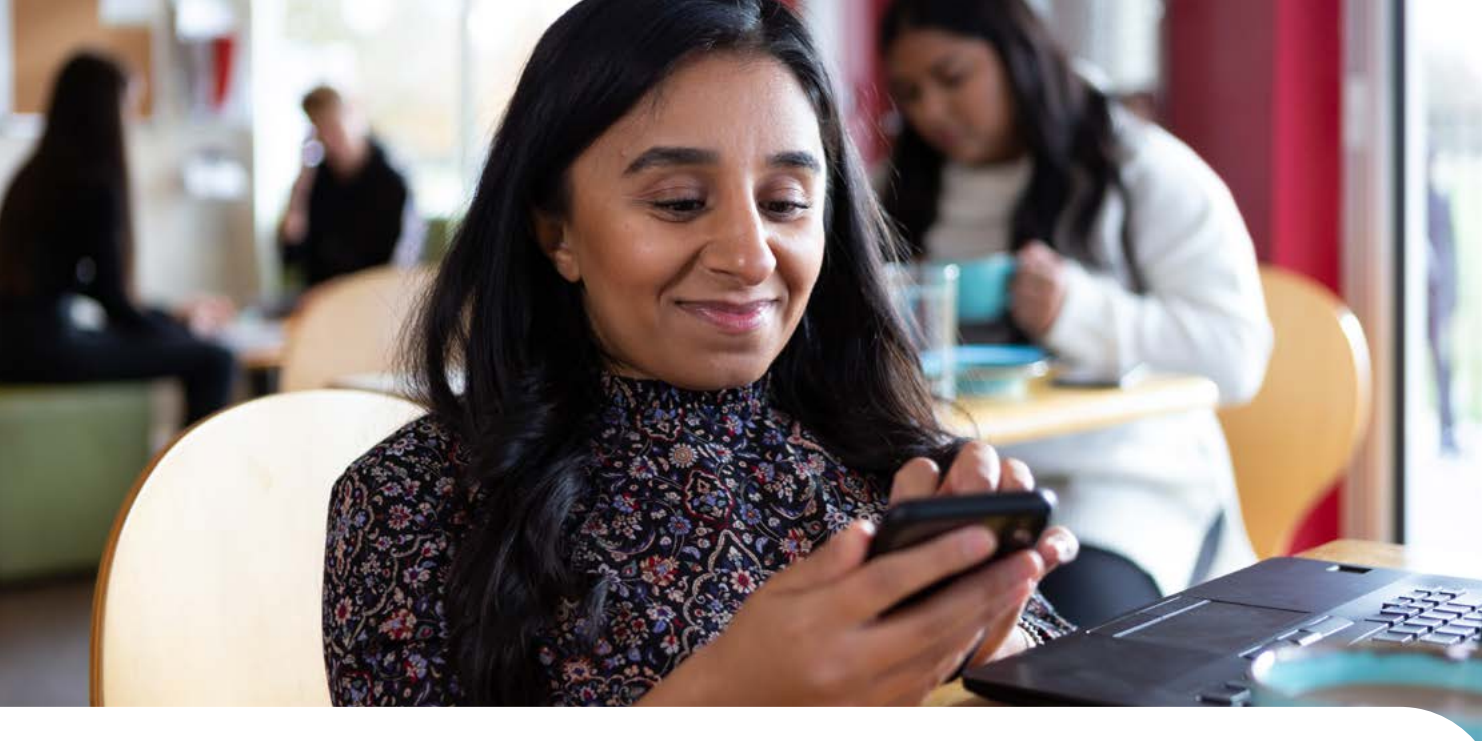
More than 15 million people in the England have a long-term health condition.^{8,9}

This is sometimes referred to as chronic.

Examples of long-term conditions include:

- high blood pressure⁸
- epilepsy⁸
- asthma¹⁰

Long-term conditions might also include long COVID.¹¹ Not everyone with a long-term impairment or condition will identify as disabled.⁴ But adjustments in the workplace may still be beneficial.



Disability at work

Around 4.9 million disabled people are in employment in the UK.¹² Mental health and mobility impairments are most common in disabled working age adults.¹³

There are lots of benefits to employing disabled people.

- It creates a more diverse workforce. This makes your team relatable to clients, customers, and your community¹⁴
- Greater number of perspectives in your team, which benefits creative thinking¹⁵
- Bringing extra skills into the workplace. or example, knowledge of British Sign Language (BSL)¹⁴



**More than
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Disability discrimination

Ableism can happen everywhere, including the workplace. Ableism is:

- discrimination towards disabled people, including direct and indirect discrimination
- prejudice against disabled people in favour of non-disabled people¹⁶

Ableism can be both intentional and unintentional. This means you do or say ableist things without realising.¹⁷

Ableism also exists culturally. Cultural ableism is the harmful ways that society views or treats disabled people. This includes:¹⁷

- a lack of accessibility in public places and employment
- negative depictions of disabled people in the media

As managers, it's important to identify and address any ableism and challenge it. This is whether it's in your own actions or those of others. Try signposting to resources to help your colleagues learn about ableism. For example, the charity Scope has lots of useful information on disability and equality.



As a manager it's important to recognise all forms of ableism and challenge it, both in your own behaviour and in people around you

Disability and the law

If somebody in your team has an impairment or condition, or develops one, they don't have to tell you. But if they do tell you, you must help them to access any support they might need.

In the UK, people are legally protected from discrimination in the Equality Act 2010.¹⁸ This includes disabled people in the workplace.¹⁹ For example, you can't:²⁰

- withdraw a job offer when you learn someone has an impairment or condition
- terminate employment for reasons related to their impairment or condition
- refuse to consider or provide reasonable workplace adjustments. Adjustments help a disabled person to do their job

Workplace adjustments

As a manager, you might wonder how you can make your workplace more accessible. One way of doing this is by making workplace adjustments (also known as reasonable adjustments). These allow disabled people to do their job.²¹ Workplace adjustments include changes such as:²²

- installing ramps to allow wheelchair users to access the workplace
- providing an adaptive chair or desk
- allowing someone to work from home full time or part time (flexible working)
- providing a quiet area for work
- supplying documents in accessible formats
- recording meetings

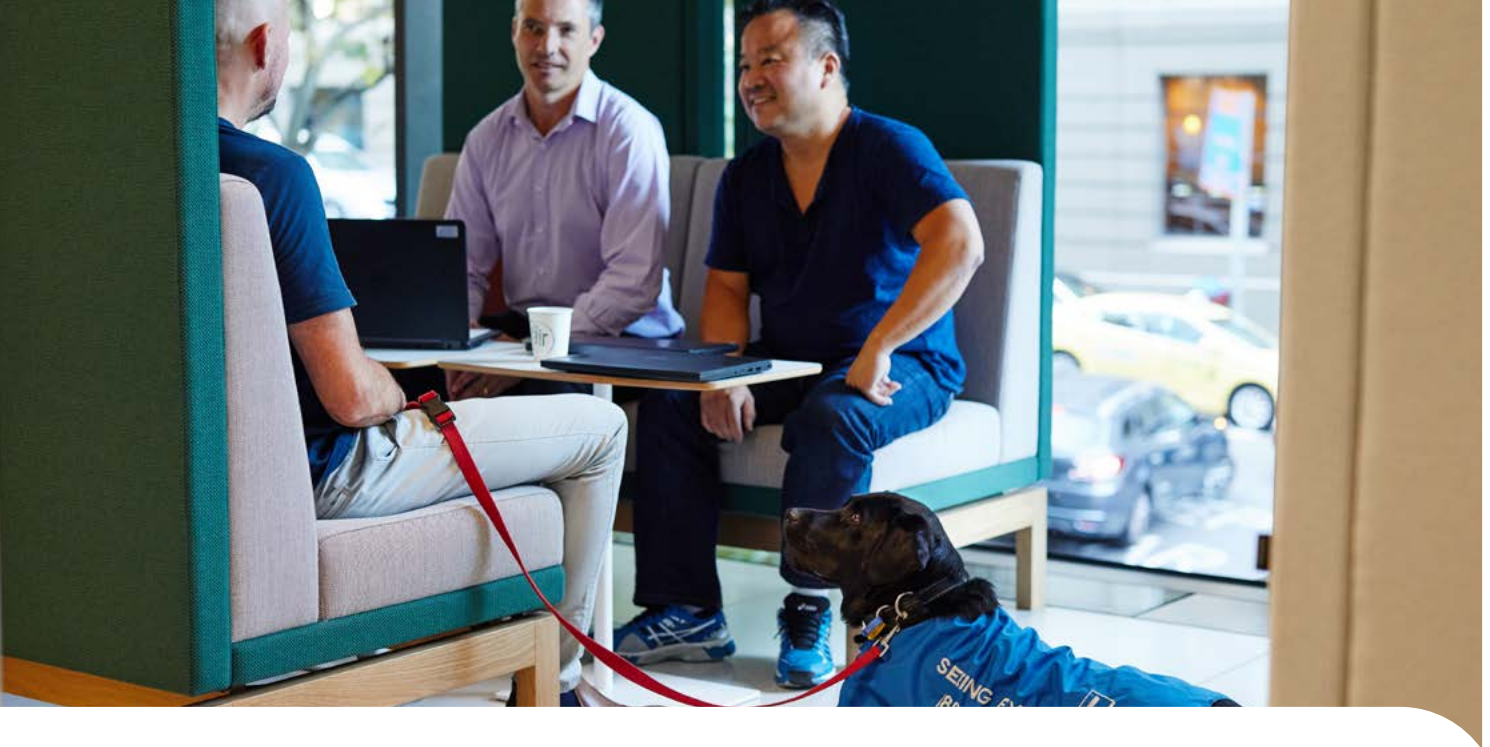
The UK Government's Access to Work scheme is a grant that employees can use to pay for things like new technology.²¹ It can also provide relevant training for you and other members of your team.²¹ It can't pay for reasonable adjustments, but it can help with assessment of them.²¹

Only the employee can apply for Access to Work, but we recommend you support them through the process.

It can be hard to know what counts as a workplace adjustment. And different impairments and conditions will need specific adjustments. An Access to Work or occupational health assessment can help you with this.

“An occupational health assessment can help employers understand more about an employee's impairment and how that impacts on their normal day to day function at home and at work. They can also provide the employer with guidance on possible workplace adjustments for the business to consider, and decide what they believe to be reasonable.”

Gillian Cairns, Occupational Health Nurse



Conversations about disability

Almost half of disabled people worry about sharing information about their impairment or condition.²³ Be open and approachable. Then, people may feel more comfortable speaking to you about the support they need.

Try to make sure your conversations remain professional, respectful, and positive.

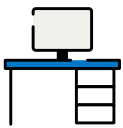
You can do this in a few ways, such as:

- focusing on how you can support them or make things more accessible, instead of asking what they can't do
- asking if they would like somebody in the room when they speak to you, such as another colleague²⁴
- asking if they have any solutions or ideas about how they could be better supported
- reassure them that conversations are confidential unless they want their information to be shared

Creating a disability-friendly workplace culture

To support disabled individuals at work, it's crucial to create a respectful and inclusive workplace culture. You might worry about mistakes or upsetting people if you get something wrong. This may happen, even if you do your best to avoid it. If it does, it's important to apologise, and you can learn from any feedback you receive.

Here are four ways to create a positive work environment for disabled colleagues.



1. Highlight support

Make sure everybody knows what support and adjustments are available.²³ This might include promoting flexible and hybrid ways of working.²³

You could signpost to dedicated support services for employees, such as:

- internal policies and guidance
- your employee assistance programme (EAP)
- relevant external organisations and charities²³
- disability staff networks or resource groups



3. Encourage peer support²³

Develop networks and opportunities for disabled colleagues to connect.²³ This could include online groups or meetings inside and outside of work. Consider encouraging senior disabled colleagues to engage in mentoring. Or more junior disabled colleagues could take part in reverse or reciprocal mentoring.²³



2. Think holistically

Being consciously inclusive means everyone can be their true selves at work. This goes beyond the office. By law, you must make your workplace accessible to your team members. But it's also important to think about inclusion in the wider sense. You should consider team members' needs when:

- organising internal and external meetings
- organising training sessions
- arranging social events
- writing communications



4. Lead by example

As a manager, it's important that you lead by example. As well as meeting legal requirements, aim to champion disabled people in the workplace. Invest in training and learning for your team. This can give people the confidence to speak about disability and challenge discrimination.²⁵

Find out more

Advice on supporting disabled employees at work from ACAS.

www.acas.org.uk/disability-at-work

Government guidance on the rights of disabled employees.

www.gov.uk/rights-disabled-person/employment

General information about disability from Scope.

www.scope.org.uk

Information about the UK government Access to Work scheme.

www.gov.uk/access-to-work

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