

5.9 Disability Etiquette



People Who Use Service Animals

Some people who are deaf, blind or have reduced vision or who have a traumatic brain injury, a seizure disorder or a range of other disabilities may use a service animal to assist them with daily living.

Do not touch the service animal without permission.

The animal may be adorable, but it is on the job! In some instances, the service animal may not display information identifying it as such.

Within a business, this means that a “no animal” policy would need to be modified to allow the person to enter with a service animal.

Inclusive workplaces will have **designated spaces for service animals**.

People Who Use Wheelchairs or Other Mobility Devices

People who use wheelchairs have varying disabilities and abilities. Some can use their arms and hands, and some can walk for short distances.

Unless the person has asked you to assist or has consented to your offer to help, do not touch or push a person’s wheelchair; it is part of their personal space.

In the Workplace:

Keep ramps and doors accessible, unblocked by barriers such as snow.

When talking with a person who uses a wheelchair, get a chair that allows you to sit at their level. If that’s not possible, stand at a slight distance so that the other person does not need to strain their neck to make eye contact.

Always ask before offering help.

Even with good intentions, pushing open a door from behind or unexpectedly opening a door may cause a person with a mobility issue to fall.

People who have limited mobility may lean on a door for support as they open it. Ask The Person (ATP) before helping.

For example, people who use canes or crutches need their arms for balance!

Never grab a mobility device.

People With Non-Visible Disabilities

Not all disabilities are visible. A person may make a request or behave in a way that seems strange to you, and you may not understand why. Their request or behavior may be disability-related.

For example, you may give someone simple verbal directions, but the person may ask you to write down the information.

This person might be hard of hearing or have a learning disability that makes it easier to understand written communications.

People Who Look Different

A different issue confronts people who may not be limited in their daily activities, but who are treated as if they have a disability because of their appearance.

For example, people with facial differences, cleft lips or skin conditions often find others staring at them or looking away.

Avoid contributing to the stigmatization and discrimination against peoples' appearances. **Be part of the change!**

Persons of Short Stature

There are 200 diagnosed types of growth-related disorders that result in short stature or dwarfism (a person less than 1.47 meters in height; 4 feet 10 inches or less).

For an adult, being treated as cute and childlike because of their height is a tough obstacle. Communication may be easier when people are at the same level. Persons of short stature have different preferences; some may prefer that you kneel or sit to be at their level or that you stand back in order to make eye contact without anyone needing to strain their neck.

(A T P) Ask the Person's preference.

People With Speech Disabilities

People with speech disabilities are those who use a voice prosthesis, are deaf, have a stammer, or who have had a stroke may be difficult to understand.

Don't finish their sentences or fill in their words.

If you have trouble understanding, don't just nod! Politely ask the person to repeat what they said. In most cases, the person will not mind and will appreciate your efforts to understand what they have to say.

If you are not sure whether you have understood, simply repeat their remarks back to them for verification. If you still cannot understand them, ask them to write down their remarks or to suggest another way of communicating.

Don't tease or laugh at a person with a speech disability. Communicating effectively is important to all of us.

People Who Are Deaf or Have Hearing Loss

The wide range of communication preferences and styles among people with hearing loss cannot be fully covered in this toolkit.

The following **generalizations** are provided for the sole purpose of helping readers to better understand the nuances associated with this range of disabilities.

People who are deaf (completely)

- Often use different sign languages, such as: American Sign Language (ASL), Pidgin Signed English (PSE), Signed Exact English (SEE).
- Find out how you should be communicating- should you use sign language, gesturing, writing or speaking?
- American Sign Language is an entirely different language from English, with its own unique syntax.
- Let the person know if you have trouble understanding their speech.
- Lip reading is difficult for people who are deaf if their language is American Sign Language; simply because it's difficult to lip read a second language!
- When talking, face the person.
- The most effective way to communicate with a person who uses sign language is through a qualified sign language interpreter.
- For simple interactions, consider using text messages; writing back and forth is usually OK.

People who have some hearing loss

- Lip read at different levels of accuracy. May use some form of hearing aid to increase volume.
- Find out how you should be communicating... using sign language, gesturing, writing or speaking?
- People who experienced hearing loss as adults do not commonly use sign language.
- Let the person know if you have trouble understanding their speech.
- Speak clearly. Avoid chewing gum or hiding your mouth with your hand while speaking. There is no need to shout; when someone uses a hearing aid, it will be set to an appropriate volume.
- When talking, face the person.
- Adults may use writing and assistive listening devices such as teletypewriter (TTY) or video relay service (VRS) to help with communication.
- For simple interactions, consider using text messages; writing back and forth is usually OK.

When a sign language interpreter is present, look directly at the person who is deaf and maintain eye contact as you would when talking with anyone else. Ask questions directly to the person rather than asking the interpreter. Technology makes texting easy. Smart phones can be connected to speech readers and dictation devices.

People With Low Vision

Providing written material in large print is an accommodation for people who have low vision.

Technology makes these workplace accommodations easy.

- Most people with low vision have an easier time reading bold white letters on a black background.
- Avoid using small Caps or all Caps, as this makes reading more difficult.
- Using a clear font with appropriate spacing is just as important as the font size.
- Labels and signs should be clearly lettered using contrasting colours.

Be sure to keep all walkways clear of obstructions. Inform your employees with low vision (and your customers) of any physical changes, such as rearranged furniture or moved equipment.

Important: Push chairs in at a table when you are done using them, this keeps them from being a tripping hazard.

People Who Are Blind

Even though they may use a cane or a guide dog, people who are blind know how to orient themselves and get around. They are most able to travel unassisted.

Never touch a blind person's guide dog; the dog is working and needs to concentrate.

A white cane is part of an individual's personal space. If the person puts the cane down, don't move it. Let the person know if the cane is in the way.

During an Interview:

- Remember that a person may have a visual disability that is not obvious.
- Identify yourself before you make any physical contact.
- Introduce yourself, and let the person know your role.
- Be sure to introduce the person to everyone else present.
- If you need to leave, let the person know you are leaving, and ask them if they need anything before you go.
- It is appropriate to guide a blind person's hand to the back of a chair so that they can sit down.

In the Workplace:

If the layout of the workplace changes (such as rearranged furniture), be sure to inform all staff and customers. If a person who is blind needs assistance, offer your arm; do not grab their arm. If the person has a guide dog, walk next to the person, on the side opposite the dog.

Hazards for people who are blind or have low vision include revolving doors, half-open filing cabinets, and protruding objects such as lamps or hanging plants.

People With Communication Differences (such as autism)

Some people communicate and interpret interpersonal communications differently. For example,

when engaging with individuals on the autism spectrum:

- Use clear and straightforward language. Try to avoid metaphors, figures of speech or sarcasm (if you do use sarcasm, be prepared to explain what you really mean if there is confusion).

Example: The question “Which colour, animal or shape do you associate yourself with?” makes **no sense** to someone on the autistic spectrum.

Individuals on the autism spectrum can have very linear thought patterns and deal most efficiently with sequential tasks.

Divide large multi-part questions into separate questions. Ask one question at a time, and obtain an answer before moving on to the next question. It is important that questions be tailored to individuals on the autism spectrum, simply because they tend to be precise and detail-oriented and may place a lot of emphasis on the literal meaning of words.

- Be clear about what types of answers you expect.

Example: Instead of asking a question such as “Tell me something about yourself”, try to be more specific. For example, you could ask, “Please share two things about your personal qualities or skills that relate to this job and its tasks.”

At times, interactions with a person with autism may challenge established social norms of communication.

Don’t assume that aloofness or awkwardness in an interview is a sign of disinterest. Some individuals use facial expressions differently, or have difficulty interpreting body language.

Allow candidates to write down their responses before they respond verbally.

Broaden your opportunities to hire the right talent for the job! You may well discover that successful interview skills are different from the skills needed on the job.

- Some individuals may not be able to communicate verbally. Instead, allow them to demonstrate their skills with a one-or-two hour “work demo”.

Mental Illness is an Invisible Disability

How to interact with people with mental illness during a job interview:

Etiquette

- Be mindful of language - Avoid using the term “crazy” or saying things like “I am so stressed out, I am going to kill myself.”
- Use “person-first” language - Example: Say “a person with schizophrenia” instead of “a schizophrenic person.”
- People with mental illness may have additional disabilities, such as physical mobility, learning disabilities, etc.
- Otherwise, there are no other specific accommodations regarding communication.

Hiring Process and Selection

- If candidates disclose during an interview that they have a mental illness, acceptance is important. Ask them what type of accommodations they may need to be successful in their work, and thank them for being honest and brave in disclosing.

- Individuals with mental health challenges may have gaps in their work history and may not have sequential educational histories.
- It is important to understand that these candidates want to work; this may help them to achieve success in the future.

Maintaining Successful Employment

- It is important to understand that employees with mental illnesses may go through cycles of wellness and illness. In this regard, the employer's support is crucial in reducing stigma.

Take the Challenge!

True or False

It is OK to pet a service animal.

False. Do not touch a service animal without permission. The animal may be adorable, but it is on the job.

People who are completely deaf usually lip read.

False. People who are completely deaf usually use sign language. Sign language is an entirely different language from English.

People with disabilities always need help.

False. Always ask the person before offering help. Pushing a door open from behind or unexpectedly opening a door may cause a person with a mobility issue to fall.

Source:

¹A Way with Words and Images: Suggestions for the Portrayal of People with Disabilities. Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. 2006. Retrieved from the Government of Canada Accessibility Resource Centre. https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/esdc-edsc/migration/documents/eng/disability/arc/way_with_words.pdf

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