
Tips for Supporting Individuals with Disabilities in the Workplace

Below are some tips that you may find useful when working with Interns and/or other persons with disabilities. The Program Coordinators and Skill Trainers/Job Coaches are always on hand to assist you and the interns with any questions that may arise regarding the information contained in this document. It is this proven team approach that will ultimately prepare our interns for positive and fulfilling, employment outcomes!

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Communicate Effectively: What Do I Say and Do?

Effective communication is essential for quality customer service and a productive workplace. Enhancing your ability for spontaneous conversation with interns, customers, or colleagues with disabilities can increase your comfort level and ensure positive, long term relationships.

Using a common sense approach!

PROJECT SEARCH INTERNS, COLLEAGUES AND CUSTOMERS – MOVING LANGUAGE INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

- **PEOPLE FIRST LANGUAGE:**

Speak in terms of adjustments, accommodations, or just assistance. Reserve the terminology “special needs” for children with disabilities.

- **FUNCTIONAL ACCESS:** When a person with a disability needs access to your store, workplace, website, etc. think about this in terms of functional access. Work towards removing barriers to physical, communication, and programmatic/employment access.
- **HEARING LOSS:** When communicating with people who experience hearing loss recognize that there is a wide range of hearing losses that result in mild hearing loss to total deafness. The means of communicating with people with hearing loss may require you to speak a little louder (if requested), face the person directly so they may lip read to reinforce what they may hear, utilize a sign language interpreter as well as communicating by writing comments on paper. Ask the person first on what you would need to do.
- **LOW VISION or BLIND:** When communicating about a person who has low vision or is blind remember that people who are legally blind have some limited low vision. Consequently, when a person states that they are “blind,” the employer, customer service representative or peer may be confused particularly if the person does not use a white cane or guide dog to assist them in their mobility. Some people who have low vision will carry a white cane but only use it in certain situations such as crossing a street or waiting for a bus. Some people with low vision also use a guide dog and can read 12 pt. font. They may have only a few degrees of central vision and have no peripheral vision on the sides of either eye, top or lower vision which is a significant level of vision loss.
- **INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY:** When communicating about someone with a significant cognitive disability use the words “intellectual disability”. Do not use the words “retarded” or “mentally retarded”.

facial expressions, gestures and expressions of animation and the intensity of your speech are important and will be noted by the person to whom you are speaking. Remember that a mustache can be a barrier if it hangs over the upper lips to someone who is a lip reader.

- **ACCENTS:** If you have an accent it may be difficult for people who experience hearing loss or intellectual disability to understand what you are saying. Be prepared to repeat what you say and possibly if requested spell a specific word that is not well understood.

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People with cosmetic disfigurements are covered by the ADA and included in the regulatory definition of impairment.

- **ASK THE PERSON:** Ultimately, if you are unsure about the success of your communication with a person who has a disability, ask the person.

COLLEAGUES – AT WORK IN GENERAL

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- **SPEECH IMPAIRMENT:** If the Intern has difficulty speaking, listen attentively and possibly move to a quieter area. Ask the intern to repeat as needed and if not understood try using paper and pen to have them write down the message or ask their job coach to help.

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