
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:** Use “People First Language”—person with a disability, person who is blind, person who uses a wheelchair, person who experiences hearing loss.
- **NOT DISABLED PERSONS:** When you speak to individuals that have disabilities or, speak or write about them, use **persons with disabilities**, not disabled persons.
- **NOT VICTIMS:** Refrain from using words such as people with disabilities are victims of, afflicted with, suffer from, are pitiful, crippled, handicapped, or wheelchair bound or “in” a wheelchair. A person who uses a wheelchair does not live in the chair; they use a wheelchair to provide mobility to have the freedom to move from one place to the other.
- **SPECIAL NEEDS ARE FOR CHILDREN:** When talking about assistance needed by adults with disabilities (Project SEARCH Interns are young adults)

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”. **The “R” word is looked upon with great disdain within the disability community.**
- **DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY:** The category of people that are identified as having “developmental disabilities” is a broad one including any person with a disability from birth to 22 years of age. For example, a child at birth who had no disability but who was injured in an auto accident at age 8 and diagnosed with traumatic brain injury could be identified as a person with a developmental disability.
- **INVISIBLE--NON-APPARENT DISABILITIES:** When people speak of invisible, non-apparent disabilities, or individuals with chronic health conditions, they would be referring to hundreds of conditions including people that have mental illness, learning disabilities, diabetes, epilepsy or other seizure disorders, multiple sclerosis, cardio vascular disease, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), cancer, arthritis and many more.

- **MENTAL ILLNESS:** When referring to people that have a mental illness; never use the words “crazy,” “nuts,” or “off the wall.” Consider the fact that more than 20 million people in the US become so depressed that they see a doctor. Mental illnesses include a wide range of disorders from depression, seasonal affective disorder to bi-polar to schizophrenia.
- **AUTISM:** “Autism spectrum” replaces the term “autism”. Autism spectrum includes a wide range of disabilities that may involve severe social interaction challenges and language deficits. People with Asperger Syndrome do not necessarily have language deficits but could have challenges interacting in some social situations or in a professional context.

COLLEAGUES AND CUSTOMERS – MEET AND GREET

- **JUST LIKE YOU:** Treat people with disabilities just like anyone else.
- **SMILE:** Remember to smile. Smiles are important during the meeting and greeting process.
- **MAKE EYE CONTACT:** Making eye contact is fundamental to both you and the person with a disability. Even with people who are blind, they can hear where your voice is coming from and know if you are directly facing them.
- **SHAKE HANDS:** Shake hands with a person who has a prosthetic hand or arm. Shake a prosthetic hand as you would do with anyone else. When meeting a person who is blind, you could say “I would like to shake your hand” in order to offer an auditory cue. If a person is unable to shake hands you could gently touch that individual on their arm during an introduction while smiling, speaking and looking directly at the person. Shake hands with your left hand with someone that does not have a right hand.
- **WRITE DOWN WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY:** If someone who experiences hearing loss requires sign language and no sign language interpreter is present, offer your business card and find paper and pen and write down what you would like to say. Reinforce what you say by directly facing the person in case they can lip read.
- **PLACEMENT OF AN INTERPRETER:** A person who uses a sign language interpreter should be the one to request where the interpreter sits or stands. If you are introduced to someone who uses a sign language interpreter speak directly to the person with hearing loss as you move your eyes and face in the direction of that person. Do not direct your conversation to the interpreter. Your

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.
- **SIGNIFICANT INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY:** When meeting someone who may have a significant intellectual disability do what you would do when meeting anyone else but in your own assessment of the interaction, you may want to use shorter sentences and potentially easier to understand words.
- **AUTISM SPECTRUM:** When meeting someone with an autism spectrum disability you may not be aware of the disability. People with Asperger Syndrome do not necessarily have language deficits but could have challenges interacting in some social situations or in a professional context.
- **SIT DOWN & RELAX:** For longer conversations with a person who uses a wheelchair or, someone who does not stand for long periods of time, pull up a chair and sit down in order to conduct a conversation while at eye contact level.
 - ✓ Additional tips: Do not push, touch or lean on a person's wheelchair or ask them to carry your belongings.
- **UNABLE TO UNDERSTAND:** People with disabilities want you to hear, understand, and respond to them when they request assistance or when they are in a conversation with you. In order to understand a request for assistance or, what is being shared during a conversation, feel comfortable to state "I am unable to understand what you are saying, could you repeat what you have just said?" or "Let us move out to the other room where it is quieter." Ask the person what it is that they need in order for you to provide assistance if appropriate. Being honest makes you an effective communicator.
- **SPEECH IMPAIRMENT:** Do not act as if you understand what is being shared in a conversation with someone who has speech impairment when you do not understand. Inform the person you do not understand and try again. Do not finish the sentence or talk for someone that has speech impairment. Be patient. Communication preferences for people with hearing loss may also be preferred by people who have speech impairments.
- **COSMETIC DISFIGUREMENT:** When meeting a person with a cosmetic disfigurement, continue eye contact and act as you would with anyone else.

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.
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COLLEAGUES – AT WORK IN GENERAL

- **ABILITIES FIRST:** Focus on Abilities
- **ASK THE PERSON FIRST:** Ask the person first as you would anyone else. Do not make assumptions.
- **ADAPTIVE DEVICES AND ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY:** Adaptive devices are used by colleagues and customers with disabilities. These include such devices as hearing aids, hand held magnifying devices, speech synthesizers, screen reading programs on computers, magnification of the print on the monitor, induction loop, and increased volume on telephones. Assistive technologies provide opportunities for people with disabilities to compete and succeed in the workplace. For instance, a voice synthesizer may serve as the voice of a colleague or customer with a speech impairment or text messaging may become the voice of a person who experiences hearing loss.
- **COMMUNICATE DIRECTLY WITH AN INTERN OR COLLEAGUE WITH A DISABILITY:** If a colleague with a disability appears to need assistance and you are able to provide help, offer assistance verbally, “May I assist you?” and wait for a response. Do not be upset if your offer is declined. If an offer of assistance is accepted ask, “How would you like for me to assist you?” Do not touch or grab someone who is blind who may not know that you are present. This can frighten or distract a person while they are way finding in their surroundings and can result in you receiving a negative reaction.
- **SAFETY CONCERNS:** If there is an apparent safety concern and you need to verbalize caution and feel that you should intervene, let the person with a disability know what the potential danger is (steps, an elevator, uneven sidewalk, etc) and what you are doing to intervene. If there is time, discuss and assess the safety hazard with the person with the disability as she may already be aware and have developed strategies to keep out of harms way.
- **EYE CONTACT:** When speaking to a person with a hearing loss or who uses a personal attendant, look directly at the person with the disability.

- **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.
- **DISABILITY INFORMATION IS CONFIDENTIAL:** Do not inquire about any intern's disability unless the intern with the disability initiates this conversation. It is important that Project SEARCH interns gain an understanding of their disability and ask for accommodations if needed and this will be practiced and encouraged while participating in Project SEARCH.
- **GAINING ATTENTION OF INTERN WHO IS DEAF:** When you need to get the attention of an intern who is deaf, you may need to tap them on their shoulder, flash the light off and on or, wave you hand and ensure that you face them directly when you speak.
- **COMMUNICATION PREFERENCE:** If working with an intern at the worksite that has significant hearing loss ask them and then their job coach what is the best way (their preference) to communicate information to them if this has not already been explained.
- **FOLLOW UP FACE TO FACE:** If working with an intern with a significant intellectual disability speak directly to them; speak as slowly as needed in short sentences. Use words that are easy to understand and are direct. Follow up as necessary in person, and consider providing work instructions by using pictures instead of words. The job coach will assist in helping you understand the best method to use and develop any needed accommodations to help the intern learn the job.

Resources Used:

1. disAbility Resource Center, Fredericksburg, Virginia. <http://www.cildrc.org/>
2. disabilityworks, Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce. www.disabilityworks.org
3. Job Accommodation Network (JAN), <http://askjan.org/topics/disetiq.htm>
4. Pacer Center, Inc. <http://www.pacer.org/parent/php/php-c127.pdf>
5. United Spinal Association, Disability Etiquette Tips for Interacting with People with Disabilities, <http://www.unitedspinal.org/pdf/DisabilityEtiquette.pdf>