



# Disability inclusion in the workplace.

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Workplace  
Health and Wellbeing **Academy**

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# Introduction.

Creating an accessible and inclusive workplace can help disabled employees thrive at work. Here, we suggest some tips and advice to effectively support disabled members of your team.



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What is a disability?

Disability in the workplace

Create an inclusive culture





## What is a disability?

Around 1 in every 5 people has a disability. According to the Equality Act 2010, a disability is any long-term physical or mental condition that has a substantial impact on your ability to do daily activities. People with long-term health conditions are likely to have them for at least 12 months, and they may have them for the rest of their life.

### There are many types of disability, including:

- chronic (long-term) pain
- mental health conditions
- learning difficulties
- sensory impairments such as hearing loss
- physical impairments such as needing a wheelchair
- chronic health conditions such as diabetes

### The Equality Act also automatically counts some specific conditions as disabilities as soon as somebody is diagnosed. These are:

- cancer
- a visual impairment such as being blind
- multiple sclerosis (MS)
- HIV
- a disfigurement such as severe facial burns

Most disabled people were not born with their disability, and anyone can become disabled at any point in their life. Not everyone who legally has a disability will consider themselves to have a disability.

You might have heard the phrase “registered disabled”. But there is no national register of disabled people. And a person doesn’t have to be registered with their local authority to access any benefits they might be entitled to.

### **Non-visible disabilities**

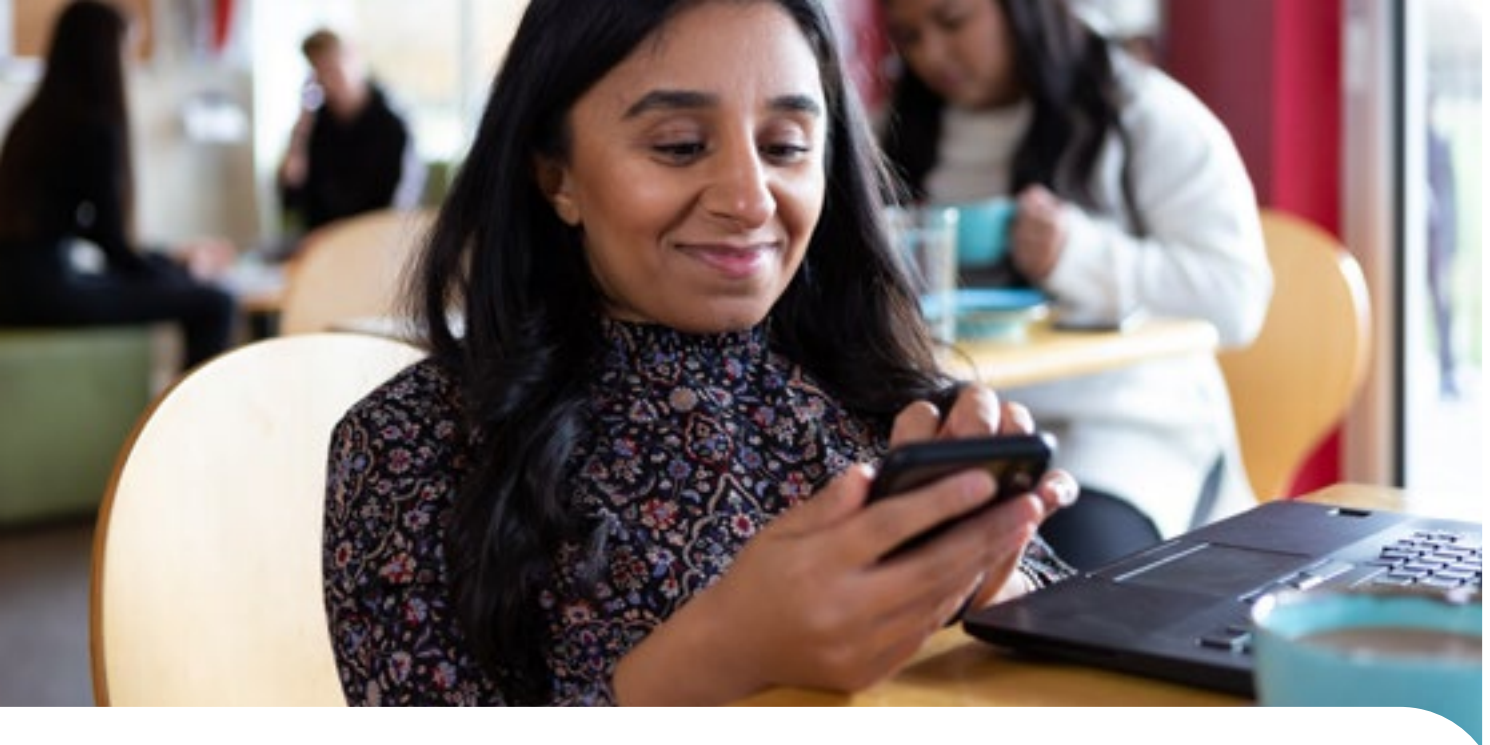
Not all disabilities are visible, which means you might not be able to see them. For example, some conditions will cause symptoms such as pain, fatigue, and problems with memory. Because of this, it’s not always obvious that somebody with an invisible disability is disabled.

### **Chronic (long-term) health conditions**

Around 15 million people in England have a chronic (long-term) health condition. Some examples of chronic health conditions are high blood pressure, epilepsy, and asthma. It might also include long-COVID. For some people, having a chronic illness will mean they are disabled.

Others might not be disabled because of their health condition, but it may still have an impact on their life, including at work.





## Disability in the workplace

More than 4.5 million disabled people are in work. The most common disabilities in working-age adults are mental health conditions and problems with mobility.

**There are lots of benefits to employing disabled people, including:**

- creating a more diverse workforce that makes your team relatable to clients, customers and your community
- a greater number of perspectives in your team, which benefits creative thinking
- the possibility of extra skills being brought into the workplace, such as a knowledge of British Sign Language (BSL)



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## Disability discrimination

Discrimination or prejudice against disabled people is called ableism. It can happen everywhere, including in the workplace. For example, around 1 in 3 people think disabled people are less productive than non-disabled people.

Ableism can be both intentional and unintentional. This means you may do or say ableist things without realising, and without meaning to upset anybody. Ableism also exists culturally. Cultural ableism is the harmful ways that society views or treats disabled people. This includes a lack of accessibility for disabled people in public places and negative depictions of disabled people in the media.



**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 is disabled, or becomes disabled, they don't have to tell you. But if they do tell you then you must help them to access any support they might need.

It's important to know that, in the UK, people are legally protected from discrimination by the Equality Act 2010. This includes disabled people in the workplace. For example, you can't:

- withdraw a job offer when you learn about somebody's disability
- fire somebody for being off work for reasons related to their disability
- refuse to provide workplace adjustments to help a disabled person do their job

## Workplace adjustments

As a manager, you might have questions about what employing a disabled person means for you. For example, you might wonder how you can adjust your workplace to make it accessible. The changes you make to support a disabled person to start or continue working are called workplace adjustments (also known as reasonable adjustments). These could include changes such as:

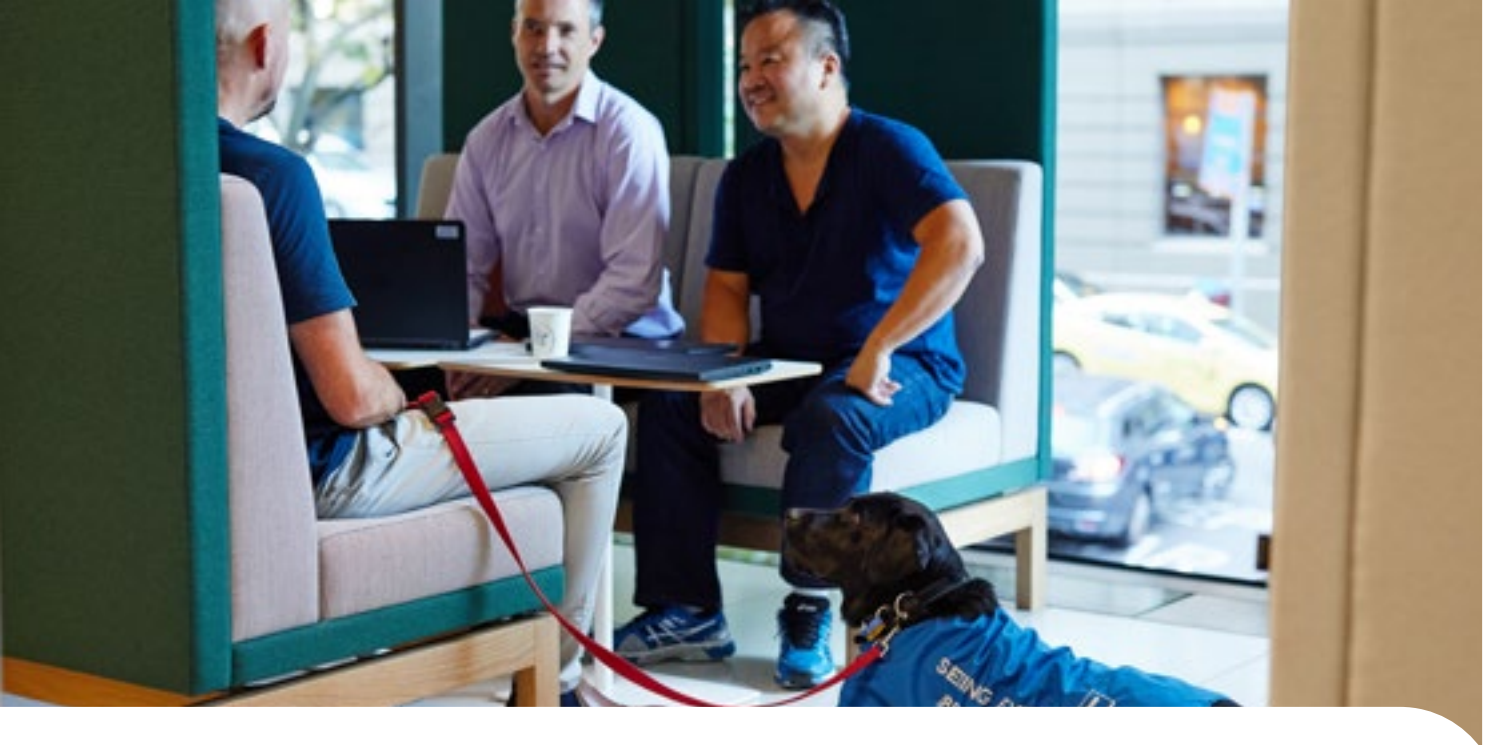
- installing ramps to help wheelchair users access your workplace
- providing an adapted chair or desk
- allowing somebody to work from home full time or part of the time

The UK government's Access to Work scheme can help you to fund any adjustments that you need to make, such as buying new technology. It can also provide relevant training for you and other members or your team.

It can be hard to know what might count as a workplace adjustment, but an occupational health assessment can help you with this.

Gillian Cairns, Occupational Health Nurse:

**“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.”**



## Conversations about disability

It can be emotional and upsetting for people to ask for support at work. They might be worried about the outcome of the conversation and what it means for their career.

Almost half of disabled people say they've been worried about sharing information about their disability with their employer. Being open and approachable will help people feel more comfortable to speak to you about their disability and any support they might need.

As a manager there may be times you need to ask for more information to make workplace adjustments. For context, it's important to know that many disabled people are often asked inappropriate and upsetting questions. These include questions about how they 'became' disabled and about private details such as whether they can have children.

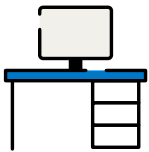
Try to make sure your conversations remain professional and respectful. You can do this in a few ways, such as:

- asking if they would like somebody to be in the room when they speak to you, such as another colleague
- asking if there are any solutions or ideas they have about how they could be better supported
- focusing your conversation on how you can make things better, instead of being negative
- reassuring them that these conversations will be kept confidential unless they want some or all of the information to be shared



# Creating a disability-friendly workplace culture

A good way to support disabled people where you work is creating a respectful and inclusive workplace culture. A supportive culture is key. You might be worried about making 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.



## 1. Highlight support

Make sure that everybody knows that support and adjustments are available to anybody who needs them. This might also include promoting flexible and hybrid ways of working. If your workplace has dedicated support services for employees, you should also make sure these are clearly signposted. This might include information about how to contact HR, details of your employee assistance programme (EAP) or details of relevant external organisations and charities.



## 2. Encourage peer support

Develop networks and opportunities for disabled colleagues to connect. This could include online groups or meetings inside and outside of work. You could also think about whether there are ways to encourage senior disabled members of staff to engage in mentoring.



## 3. Think holistically

Being consciously inclusive means that everyone can be their true selves at work. This goes beyond the office. Making your workplace accessible to all of your team members is required by law. But it's also important to think about inclusion in the wider sense.

You should consider your team members' needs when organising external meetings, training sessions, or social events, and even when writing communications.



## 4. Lead by example

As a manager, it's important that you try to lead by example. As well as making sure you're meeting legal requirements, try to champion disabled people in the workplace. Invest in training and learning for your team so that line managers feel confident when speaking about disability and in challenging discrimination.

# Find out more.

**Advice on supporting disabled employees at work from Acas.**

[www.acas.org.uk/disability-at-work](http://www.acas.org.uk/disability-at-work)

**Government guidance on the rights of disabled employees.**

[www.gov.uk/rights-disabled-person/employment](http://www.gov.uk/rights-disabled-person/employment)

**General information about disability from Scope.**

[www.scope.org.uk](http://www.scope.org.uk)

**Information about the UK government Access to Work scheme.**

[www.gov.uk/access-to-work](http://www.gov.uk/access-to-work)

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