



## Hidden or Invisible Disability in the Workplace

Did you know that according to the Department for Work and Pensions an estimated 19% of working age adults are disabled? That's approximately 1 in 5 and yet one of the most common statements we hear whilst delivering disability awareness training at Enhance the UK is 'we don't employ/work with someone who is disabled'. This is highly unlikely to be factually correct. It's much more likely that you have someone who works for/with you that has a hidden disability (sometimes called a nonvisible or invisible disability) and who hasn't disclosed this.

### **What is a hidden disability?**

Under the Equality Act (2010) someone is disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial, long term and negative affect on their ability to do normal daily activities. A hidden impairment simply means that the person has a disability or impairment that doesn't have any outwardly visible signs.

In fact, 80% of disabled people have hidden impairments. Examples include mental health conditions, sensory impairments, cognitive impairment, autism, autoimmune diseases, and neurological disorders. It's also important to remember that just because someone has a visible disability doesn't mean that they don't have other hidden disabilities too.

### **Reasonable adjustments – the legal context**

As an employer under the Equality Act (2010) there is a duty to provide reasonable adjustments to any elements of a job which places someone who meets the definition of disability at substantial disadvantage compared to a non-disabled person. This duty applies regardless of whether someone's impairment is visible or not. Reasonable adjustments

can mean changes to the way that you do things (your provisions, criteria, and practices), changes to the physical features of the premises or providing an auxiliary aid (specialist equipment or services) which removes the substantial disadvantage.

What is considered reasonable depends on a number of factors including:

- How practicable the changes are
- If the change would overcome the disadvantage that disabled people experience
- The size of the organisation
- How much money and resources are available
- The cost of making the changes
- If any changes have already been made

Many reasonable adjustments carry no costs at all and most cost less than £100. Where the cost is higher, financial assistance is often available from the Access to Work Scheme. If an employee with a hidden disability doesn't disclose their disability, this doesn't automatically mean that you don't have to make reasonable adjustments. An employer must demonstrate that they couldn't have reasonably known.

This means that it's essential that employers are:

- Asking questions regarding whether someone has any disabilities or health conditions during the onboarding process
- Asking about access requirements or adjustments that someone may require
- Creating an inclusive culture where employees feel happy to disclose their disability should they wish to

- Offering disability awareness training
- Providing peer support

## **How to encourage disability disclosure**

There are a number of ways in which you can encourage disability disclosure in the workplace.

A few simple ways are:

- Promote the definition of disability and the benefits of disclosure
- Be clear why you are asking for any data to help employees recognise the value of disclosing
- Promote a message of disability inclusiveness by representing disabled people/employees in both your internal and external communications
- Sign up as a disability confident employer
- Ensure that health and wellbeing feature in 1:1 meetings between staff and line managers

One of the most powerful things you can do is to continue to talk and ask about access requirements regardless of whether you know you whether someone is disabled or not. Employees can become disabled after they have started working with you and everyone's needs can fluctuate depending on how well they are feeling and the environment they are working in. When sending out meeting invites, for example, encourage people to let you know if they have any access requirements for the meeting.

Barriers in the workplace and some ways we may be able to overcome them

People with hidden impairments often face difficulties in the workplace which at times can be less obvious to staff than for those with more obvious disabilities. Whilst you don't have to legally pre-empt any reasonable adjustments that employees may have, identifying potential barriers in the workplace and doing your best to minimise and/or remove these when possible is good practice. We should do this regardless of whether we know if any of our staff members are disabled. It's important to recognise that an inclusive and accessible workplace is beneficial to all.

There are 4 main types of barriers.

#### *Attitudinal barriers*

Awareness of disability issues are frequently shaped by stereotypes in the media and a lack of understanding of the legal definition of disability. There is often an assumption that someone who has a hidden disability isn't 'really disabled' and this can lead to further negative beliefs such as someone is being lazy or problematic and lead to a lack of support, disbelief and even at times resentment. It's important that we avoid jumping to conclusions about colleagues and employees and remain open minded.

We can also:

- Display 'Not all disabilities are visible' signs
- Organise awareness raising days and events
- Provide disability awareness training

#### *Physical barriers*

It's vital to remember that the physical environment can be just as disabling to people with hidden disabilities. For example, people who are

neurodivergent (who may have conditions such as ADHD and Autism) or have sensory impairments can find open plan offices difficult to work in.

A few things we can easily consider are:

- Avoid highly stimulating colours within the office environment
- Have a quiet space available for people to work should they need it
- Have a discussion with employees at the onboarding stage regarding the position of their desk and what works best for them

### *Communication barriers*

It's important to recognise that for many people talking about disability is an uncomfortable experience and consequently many people simply don't. This is detrimental in lots of ways because disability becomes a taboo subject. It's understandable that we naturally have a fear of saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing, offending, or patronising. But it's important that we address these fears and step outside our comfort zones.

The following tips may help you:

- Consider why you need to raise someone's impairment – if it's to discuss whether someone requires any support or assistance then it is appropriate
- It's important to focus on access requirements and not the impairment itself
- Never assume someone will require any assistance and what that might be – always ask
- Listen – if someone tells you they do not need assistance then this should be respected. You can simply state that if this changes just to let you know

- Treat someone how you would like to be treated yourself

Communication barriers can also be down to the way we communicate. Attending a disability awareness course will assist you with learning techniques to improve your verbal communication. Ensuring you have a good understanding of plain English and accessible information can also be beneficial.

### *Organisational barriers*

Organisational barriers are the way that our policies, procedures, and processes can cause difficulties to disabled people. It's useful to reflect on the way that you do things as an organisation and look at what the barriers could be and how you could remove them. Just because it's the way that you have always done something doesn't mean it has to stay this way. Flexibility is key.

These could be simple things such as:

- Offering a video call or email service rather than just telephone.
- Allowing colleagues to provide information using voice notes rather than only written notes.
- Offering flexible working hours.
- Asking colleagues if there is a particular software for a virtual meeting that is more accessible to them.

## **Recognising everyone has a part to play**

Regardless of what role we are in, we all have a part to play in creating an inclusive culture where everyone feels valued. Remain open and non-judgemental with your colleagues and consider the potential impact of what you say. Quips about someone spending too much time in the toilet for example can be hurtful if someone has a condition such as an inflammatory bowel disease. Joking about having OCD just because you

like to keep things tidy, trivialises what is for many a very stressful condition. Teasing someone because they often look moody or sad when you don't know what's going on can make matters far worse. Remarks about someone getting away with things because they have flexible hours and so on. You get the idea! The truth is we often don't know our colleagues' reality. It should go without saying but kindness really can go a long way!

## Learn More

Enhance The UK has a range of free and paid for service that can help your organisation create a truly accessible and inclusive working environment.

Look at the options below and get in touch if we can be of further help.

- Sign up to the Free Resources section on our website.
- Book a free 20-minute consultation with one of our experts
- Try out some bite-size learning with our Lunch and Learn virtual meetings
- Enquire about our virtual or face-to face half and full day training sessions
- Search #EnhanceBSL online to find free basic British Sign Language videos
- Visit our website at [www.DisabilityAwareness.Training](http://www.DisabilityAwareness.Training)
- Follow us on LinkedIn and Twitter, search #EnhanceTheUK