



How to make your workplace more accessible for visually impaired employees

Did you know that in the UK there are more than 2 million people living with sight loss in the UK? 1 in 4 of those are of working age but unfortunately only a quarter of these people are in employment. That's a large pool of potentially untapped talent. Studies show that people who start to lose their sight whilst employed were reluctant to tell their employers. Having a strong desire to stay in work and not be defined by their visual impairment. It's important to acknowledge that there can be a number of barriers and difficulties that visually impaired people face in the workplace. Equally, as an employer, there are many things you can do to remove these to make your workplace more accessible for visually impaired employees.

It all starts with positive attitudes

Positive attitudes from employers make a significant difference in visually impaired people being able to stay in work. Simple things such as not making assumptions about a visually impaired employee's capabilities or expecting them to be less productive than their colleagues are crucial. Recognising the benefits that person can bring to your team and not defining them by their visual impairment is a solid starting point.

Effective communication underpins access

An environment where staff can feel comfortable engaging with open and honest dialogue about how they are getting on, what's working well and areas which may be challenging is important to ensure that everyone's

access needs are met. Simple things such as making time in 1:1s to always ask how people are and showing genuine interest in this can make a big difference. It's essential that line managers feel equipped to have conversations with their visually impaired staff about any reasonable adjustments they may require. Disability awareness training is key, as is knowledge of legal responsibilities under the Equality Act (2010) and clear policies and procedures regarding what the line managers should do when an employee discloses that they are disabled.

Tweaks to the physical environment

Spend a little time in your office and reflect upon how accessible it is for someone who is visually impaired. As a starting point consider the following factors:

- How clear is your signage? Do the signs visually contrast against their background so they can be seen easier? Are they in visible places where you would expect to find them? Is the font large enough and clear? Do you have any tactile signage?
- Do your lifts have audio announcements to alert someone to what floor they are on? Are the lift call buttons easy to see and find?
- Are your corridors and walkways clear of any obstacles and trip hazards?
- Is your office tidy? Are items that people need to use regularly easy to find and where you would expect?
- Is your lighting sufficient? Light intensity is measured in lux - the amount of lumens (the unit of measure used to quantify the amount of visible light the human eye can see) falling onto a square meter of a surface. Lux levels can easily be measured using a lux meter or apps that are available. As a guide the recommended light levels at computer workstations are 300 – 500 lux.

People who are visually impaired generally require brighter lighting – task lighting can be effective at providing this.

- Being able to control the levels of natural light can be helpful for many people who are visually impaired. Do all windows have vertical blinds so the amount of natural light can be easily adjusted?

Make sure that you allow time for new visually impaired employees to become familiar with their work environment and allocate time for walk throughs if necessary. Alert existing visually impaired staff to any changes in the office environment. Most importantly ask staff if there are any areas they find difficult to navigate and have a discussion around what you can do to support them with this. Often, it's small changes that can make a big difference.

Access to Work and work-based assessments

The Access to Work Scheme can pay for a range of support for visually impaired staff in the workplace. Examples of support the scheme may pay for include assistive technology and equipment, support workers, additional travel costs such as taxis and awareness training for colleagues. The visually impaired person must apply themselves and ATW may provide a free work place assessment to make recommendations of the support required. Awareness of the Access to Work scheme is low and many people who would be entitled to assistance do not know about it. Promote the scheme within your workplace and encourage staff to apply.

Accessible websites

Intranets, staff portals, message boards and any other sites that employees need to be able to access to do their work must be accessible to people who are visually impaired. Ensure that all sites have been checked for accessibility ideally by visually impaired people themselves including people who use screen reader software.

Written information

It's important that any written information is created with accessibility in mind. You can find more information on this by having a look at our free 'How to Make your word documents more accessible resource' and follow the principles on there. Let everyone know that should they need any written information in alternative formats, for example large font that you can provide that.

Accessible Meetings

It's important that you discuss with your staff members what they require in order to be able to fully access and participate in both in person and virtual meetings.

Common requests include:

- Providing an agenda, slide decks and any other relevant information in advance
- Briefly describing the layout of the meeting room to visually impaired staff when they arrive if they are unfamiliar with it.
- Ensuring everyone introduces themselves at the start of the meeting.
- Checking in advance of the meeting with your visually impaired staff member whether it's useful for staff members to say their name each time they speak.
- Limiting the use of chat during online meetings. It can be very distracting for people using screen reader technology as it will read the message aloud as soon as a message is posted.
- When sharing your screen or documents describe what you are sharing so everyone has access to that information.

Training

When new workplace or IT systems are rolled out, it's important that people who are visually impaired can request or are offered individualised training when needed. This could be because they need additional time to include keyboard commands within the training, for example.

Allowing Guide Dogs at Work

If safe to do so (this would be determined by Guide dogs for the Blind personnel), you must allow someone to bring their guide dog to work with them. It may be necessary to make small changes to ensure this is a good experience for both your staff member and their dog.

Examples are:

- Moving their desk to a quieter area of the office if needed
- Ensuring there is plenty of room for the dog bed
- Allocating outdoor space (when available) for toileting
- Allowing breaks so the dog can be taken outside to toilet.
- Ensuring staff know how they should interact with guide dogs

Flexible working

People who are visually impaired mainly rely on public transport to travel to and from work. Traveling during rush hour can be especially daunting and difficult for disabled people and if they require assistance when travelling on trains for example this can be difficult to book at peak times. Where possible allow visually impaired employees to either start early or finish late so that they can travel at a time which is suitable for them. Hybrid working and being able to work from home is beneficial to most people as we know. If travelling to the office is problematic for someone who is visually impaired this should be discussed and offered as an option where possible.

Additional time off

It may be that your visually impaired employee needs a little extra time off because of their disability. This could be for example to attend medical appointments or for guide dog training. It's important that you allow them this time off if it's directly related to their impairment.

Knowing how many people you could be excluding from your workplace by not making it accessible to visually impaired people, bear these points in mind. Make the small changes in your workplace to make it a more inclusive. Establish positive dialogues to make people with visual impairments comfortable to discuss their access requirements and set yourself on the correct path to being a more inclusive employer.