

Workplace adjustments for visually impaired adults

There are just over 84,000 registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in the UK. People with a visual impairment (VI) are successful in jobs across most employment sectors. However, they are still underrepresented in the workplace.

Being registered as blind does not always mean a person has no sight at all. Many have some useful sight which means workplace adaptations can often be very simple. Advances in technology also help overcome barriers to work. Through schemes like Access to Work, many of the costs for such adaptations can be met by the Government.

Verbal communication

- Ask if and how the individual may need help but avoid asking personal and medical questions unless essential for the job. Find time to discuss if they need something done differently or need any adjustments.
- Always introduce yourself when speaking to the VI employee. They can't see who you are and may get embarrassed when they can't recognise who they are speaking to.
- Acknowledge a VI employee when you pass them. Often VI people feel left out as they can't see people who they pass.
- Tell people when you leave so the VI employee doesn't continue speaking to someone who isn't there and saves them from being embarrassed.
- A VI employee may not be able to see facial expressions or body language so be clear with anything you say.
- Don't try to change your language around the VI employee. You can use words such as 'see' and 'look'. A VI person still uses these words, but they may use their senses differently.
- If you're worried about how to ask about their condition visit: www.rnib.org.uk/thingsnottosay

Written communication

- Discuss with the person what format they need. They may prefer computer-based documents or large print; they may also need a larger font. Try to give their documents in advance, VI people may take longer to read documents and therefore need more time.
- Send an electronic copy to the employee, most VI employees prefer this method. This allows them to print it themselves or read from the computer using assistive technology.
- Advise all employees who work with the VI employee on the best way to provide them with documents. This avoids time-wasting and embarrassment.

Practical adjustments

- Ensure a comprehensive, person-centred work place assessment is carried out by an appropriate specialist. This can be provided through the Access to Work scheme.

Lighting

- Lighting can have a significant impact on VI people. Some need brighter environments, but some need dimmer lighting. Every VI person is different.
- The source of light can also make a difference. Most people find natural lighting best, so windows or lamps with a daylight bulb are often best. However, glare from windows, lamps, and overhead strip lighting should be avoided.
- Lamps should be shielded properly, and bulbs replaced before they start to flicker.
- The best way to work out what the VI employee needs, is to simply ask them. If changes are needed call in a specialist if necessary.

Mobility and navigation

- Arrange a tour of the workplace but take more time and pay attention to detail so the VI employee can work out where everything is.
- Ensure that clutter is tidied up to avoid trip hazards, consider where bins are placed and ensure drawers are shut. Do not move anything without discussing it with the employee first.
- Mark the edges of any steps or corners with a contrasting stripe so the VI employee can distinguish where there is a change in the environment.
- Ensure the VI employee knows the route from their workstation to a fire exit and help them to navigate the route if they need it.

How to guide a VI employee

- Introduce yourself, communicate clearly and listen to their response.
- Ask the employee if they want assistance, don't just assume they need it.
- Ask where and how they would like to be guided. Let them take your arm rather than you taking theirs.
- Point out any kerbs and hazards as you approach them and tell them whether they go up or down.
- If guiding an employee to a seat, place their hand on the seat so they can orientate themselves before sitting down.
- Tell them when you have finished guiding them and are leaving them. Ensure they know which way they are facing.
- If you want more information on how to guide a VI employee visit: www.rnib.org.uk/guiding

Guide dogs

- Most VI employees will not have a guide dog, but some will. It is important to create a safe space for the dog along with the employee.
- The dog needs a place to rest, access to water, and a toilet area.
- Guide dogs are highly trained and will sit quietly next to or under their owner's desk.
- Guide dogs are trained not to interact with or disturb other employees, this must work both ways. Ensure other employees know not to pet the dog when they are working and only with the owner's permission.
- If you need professional assistance, you can get more help at www.guidedogs.org.uk

Access to work

- Access to Work can help identify what support and technology a VI employee needs. They can assess needs over the phone or as a work-based assessment.
- They can help train a support worker for the VI employee. A support worker can be someone already in the organisation or recruited specifically for this position and will take on tasks such as driving, data management and checking documentation. Ensure all employees know to include support workers into emails and update them on any changes.
- Access to Work also support funding and training in assistive technology.
- Many VI employees use assistive technology such as screen readers to assist their work. Talk with your IT support team to help install and maintain the software.

Further information

Comprehensive guidance around supporting VI employees can be found here:

www.rnib.org.uk/sites/default/files/Working%20with%20blind%20and%20partially%20sighted%20colleagues.pdf