

Workplace information sheet – working with employees with visible differences

More than a million people in the UK have a condition, injury, illness, mark or paralysis which affects the appearance of their face or body (“visible difference”). Adults with a visible difference can face challenges in the workplace.

Visible differences, or disfigurement, is one of the protected characteristics recognised in the Equality Act 2010 which states that ‘severe disfigurement’ should be considered as if it were a disability. The Act provides legal rights for people with severe disfigurements and protects them from appearance-related discrimination. However, many employers remain unaware of what this can mean in practice. This brief guide offers some useful information for employers.

Bias

Many people hold an unconscious bias against people with a visible difference. Unconscious bias refers to a bias that we are unaware of, and which happens outside of our control. It happens automatically and is triggered by our brain making quick judgments and assessments of people and situations, which are influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences. It might mean people look or stare as they haven’t met anyone with a visible difference before.

Implicit bias refers to the same area but questions the level to which these biases are unconscious, especially as we are being made increasingly aware of them. We all need to recognise and acknowledge our biases and find ways to mitigate their impact on our behaviour and decisions. Encourage your employees to take the implicit bias test. <https://www.changingfaces.org.uk/campaign/face-equality/take-the-face-equality-test> Once people in the workplace understand and become aware of their bias, steps can be taken to challenge and change this.

Dealing with questions and curiosity

Questions and curiosity are natural but can be difficult for an individual with a visible difference to deal with. One of the best things you can do is model positive responses to this curiosity

- Only ask questions which have a direct impact on their ability to do the job
- Be guided by the words used by your employee when discussing their condition.
- The employee does not have to discuss their condition with anybody. It is their personal situation and can choose whether to share it.
- Some individuals with a visible difference find it helpful to have a discussion with colleagues to put an end to curiosity or concerns. Talk with your employee and see how comfortable they are with colleagues knowing about their situation.
- If the employee has a condition that is mostly hidden, they may feel anxious about changes in season (short sleeves could make skin conditions more visible). If you employ a strict uniform, talk with the employee on how to compromise (this could be allowing them to continue wearing long sleeves and providing them with a fan), so they always feel comfortable in the workplace.

- If the employee feels uncomfortable or upset, take this seriously. If someone has made a comment to the individual, this can have a serious effect on their mental health and their work life. Ensure you do a full investigation into why the employee feels uncomfortable and resolve the situation.

Managing doctors' appointments with work

Not all employees with a visible difference require ongoing medical treatment. Some may however have a condition that has an impact on their physical or mental health and may need to attend hospital appointments.

- It is not always possible to arrange appointments outside of work hours so you should allow the employee time off to attend their appointments.
- Support your employee if they are having ongoing treatment. Your employee has the right to reasonable adjustments, take the time to talk with your employee to find out if they need reduced hours or lighter work activities for a while, or even time off.

Top tips

- Think carefully about the words you use. Use factual, not judgemental language - for example, it's better to say someone "has a medical condition" rather than "suffers from..." or "is a victim of". It can be acceptable to use the word 'disfigurement' particularly in policies or legal documents. Be aware that many people with visible difference prefer to simply use the name of their condition. Avoid words like deformity, abnormality, and defect.
- Reduce unconscious and implicit bias in the workplace through bias awareness raising.
- Ensure the employee has the same opportunities as their colleagues to progress and gain promotions. The employee may have to attend hospital appointments or take time off but if they successfully complete their work to a high standard, they must be offered the same opportunity to be promoted.
- Ensure your workplace has a strong anti-bullying policy in place alongside policies to promote physical and emotional wellbeing
- Consider raising awareness and promote inclusion throughout the workplace. Encourage employees to celebrate their differences and appreciate each other's. Consider holding fundraising days for charities that celebrate differences.

Getting the right support

It is important for the employee and the employer to be involved in making sure that the workplace is a supportive and safe environment for an employee with a visible difference. Changing Faces produces extensive guidance for employers around supporting adults with a visible difference. This document is based on their materials and is intended as a brief introduction. Comprehensive guidance around supporting employees with a visible difference can be found here:

<https://www.changingfaces.org.uk/adviceandsupport/self-help/work/a-guide-for-employers>

Changing Faces Helpline 0300 012 0275