

Survive & Thrive at work: Help for Disabled Students and Graduates

Careers & Employability Service

www.mmu.ac.uk/careers/guides



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How to Survive and Thrive at Work

Starting work as an impaired/disabled person can throw up some unique issues which other new members of staff do not have to contend with. Learning how to communicate your needs is not easy and this handout is written to help you deal with such circumstances if they arise and features the strategies that other impaired/disabled workers have used.

Be Flexible

It is useful to have a number of different approaches in your repertoire as you will meet many different situations throughout your working life. For example the strategy you use with an employer which has a HR department well versed with the DDA and with company policies on diversity will change if your next employer does not have such a company ethos.

You may also find that you need to adopt different communication strategies within the same company. The HR department may well be well versed with the DDA but your actual line manager may have limited knowledge and experience of impairment /disability and may not feel confident to ask you about your needs. It is important that you take control and manage your impairment/disability.

There are a complex range of strategies, both formal and informal that you can adopt to get the most out of working life and these are outlined below:

Disclosure

You may have already disclosed your impairment/disability during the application process and so your new employer is aware that you may require adjustments to the workplace or working day. If you have not yet disclosed and feel that your impairment/disability will have an impact on the way you do your job then you can disclose this to your line manager or the HR department.

Changes to your working environment

Some people are happy and confident to ask for changes to be made from day one (and others with visible impairments have no choice in the matter). If you are not so confident then one strategy

to adopt is to take things slowly by taking the time to understand the work context and culture and to build up workplace relations before asking for changes; if you feel that you would prefer to operate in this way then it is important that you adopt a **gradual** but **planned** strategy for change.

How to communicate your requirements

Try and be open about your impairment, disability or barriers at work. Although this may be difficult it is important as it allows a full understanding of any work place challenges. You may feel confident enough to have these discussions with all your colleagues but if not try and be open with your line manager. If you are uncomfortable about talking about personal health issues remember you need only talk about the **effect** rather than the **cause**; for example, that you need to take regular toilet breaks rather than the reason why you need them.

How to ask for what you need

If you are in a situation where your needs are not being met, then you need to ask for what you need to enable you to do your job effectively. This does not mean that you are being pushy, you are just asking for your rights as a worker to be met. Be assertive!

Asking for what you need does not mean being aggressive, (work is not the place to stand on a soap box and shout about inequality), nor does it mean being the passive victim of other people's attitudes about disability. Assertiveness means empowering yourself, so don't wait for equality to be given to you – assert it in a positive way by asking for what you need.

Progression

Progression through your career is as important as getting a job. Many impaired /disabled people remain at the lower levels of their career because they have not learnt to ask for what they need. Sometimes your employer's business plans may change causing job roles to alter. By keeping abreast of your work environment, management styles, personnel changes and corporate priorities you will be able to ask for change or adaptations that are within the business plan throughout your working life. This method is also useful if your impairment changes over time.

Using information and communication technology

It is a good idea to keep up to date with current accessible technology as it is constantly evolving. Charity websites such as RNIB, Scope, RNID and the Dyslexia Institute etc are a good place to start.

The presence of other disabled workers

Increasingly employers are setting up disability forums in response to the Equality Duty or because they hold the 'Two Tick' symbol. Usually chaired by the HR department, these forums enable disabled colleagues to meet and discuss mutual issues and to generate solutions. Research has found that empathy and acceptance of difference is very important to disabled workers; this type of environment is most commonly found amongst other disabled colleagues, so disability forums are a positive event to get involved in.

Access to Work

This is formal support operated by Jobcentre Plus. There may be differences in speed and consistency of provision around the UK but this support is vital as it provides adaptations to be made to the workplace paid for by the government and not your employer. For more information contact your local Jobcentre Plus office.

Support outside work

Some disabled workers look outside of work for help and advice. This ranges from moral support from friends and family to seeking ergonomic, technological, medical and psychological support from outside agencies and support groups.

Instigating cultural change

Ask colleagues:

- Not to make assumptions about disabled workers
- To be supportive NOT over bearing
- To attend disability equality training

Ask your employer/manger to:

- Recognise that disabled people are not a 'special case'
- Ask disabled workers if their needs are being met
- Be aware of and allow flexible working

- Encourage mutual respect amongst workers
- Be well informed about support options
- Set up disability forums

Final Recommendations

- Be assertive not aggressive
- Accept yourself for who you are
- Be confident in asking for support
- Be informed about your rights
- Be open and upfront