USDA NRCS
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Making Teams Accessible For People With Disabilities

"Don't let what you can't do keep you from doing what you can do."

USDA Association for People with Disabilities

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Introduction

Today, 20 percent of people in the U.S. have a disability. Because of advances in education and technology, people with disabilities are entering the workforce in ever increasing numbers. Are you ready? What do you need to do to get ready?

How can you, as a team leader or facilitator, make sure the environment you create is accessible for everyone — including people with disabilities? Read on!

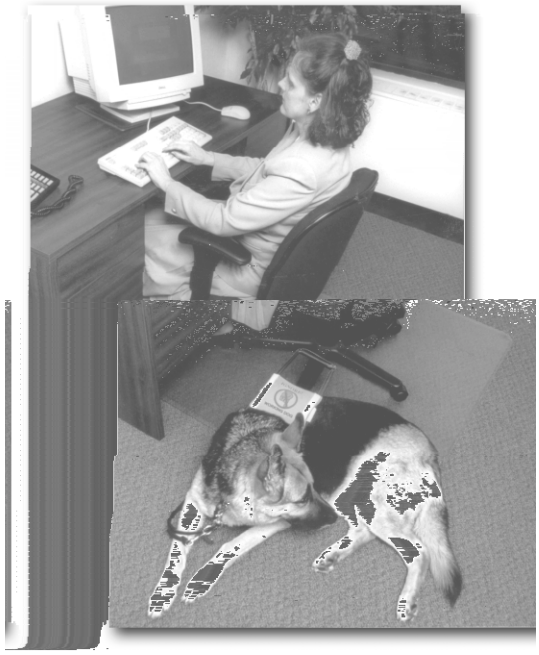
"Problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them."

— Albert Einstein

Objectives

In the following pages, you will learn:

- How to ensure that your team environment is truly accessible for people with disabilities.
- Twelve interaction tips to communicate effectively with people with disabilities.
- Five national sources for information and guidance and how each is unique.



Defining Disabilities

"You touch people by realizing that they want what everyone wants: recognition, respect, and to feel as if they matter."

— Anonymous

What is a disability? A disability is a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits life's activities, such as seeing, hearing, speaking, walking, working, learning, breathing, performing manual tasks and caring for oneself. The legal definition also includes people who have a history of such impairments or who are regarded as having such impairments. Included as well are people who are discriminated against because of their association with, or responsibility for, people with disabilities.

More people have disabilities than we commonly realize. Many disabilities are "hidden" or not apparent -– such as epilepsy, arthritis, diabetes, or minimal hearing, vision, mental or mobility impairments. These disabilities contribute to the size of the advocacy population, as do friends, relatives and co-workers.

Modern technological advances permit all people, including those with disabilities, to live longer than ever before. We also get more disabled as we age.

Who are people with disabilities? How do you recognize someone with a disability? How can you recognize those with hidden disabilities? Here's how:

- Approximately 54 million Americans have some degree of disability. That means 1 in every 6 people, both within our Nation and worldwide, has some degree of disability.

- Seventy percent of disabilities occur after birth. Many people with disabilities attended at least some college.

- 1 in 3 adults with a disability is African-American or Hispanic. People with disabilities from culturally diverse backgrounds experience twice the amount of discrimination as those who are not culturally diverse. There are usually fewer educational opportunities; and less affordable and inadequate transportation and housing in disadvantaged communities can intensify the barriers.

Watch Your Language

Words can hurt. The way we describe people shapes our perceptions. Our perceptions are subconscious; we may not even realize we have them. However, they can impact how we treat people with disabilities. Just as our language should reflect positive perceptions of women and members of ethnic and racial minorities, so too should it reflect valuing of people with disabilities. Here are some communication guidelines:

- Do you use adjectives as nouns? Don't say: "the disabled." That's dehumanizing and stereotyping. Use nouns such as, "employees," and "people."

- Are you using outdated terms like "crippled," "afflicted," "deaf and dumb," "blind?" You need to know that people with disabilities regard these terms as derogatory.

- Are you linking the disability to the person? You probably don't have to identify the disability, so why do it? Unless you want to demonstrate that people with disabilities are employed in a variety of occupations, identification of the disability is not appropriate. Respect the person's confidentiality by discussing the situation with them.

- Are you using the legal definition or speaking generally? If you are referring to laws and regulations, "handicapped" is the appropriate term because it is used in legal documents and is defined there. For more general purposes, "disabled" is appropriate.

- Don't use stereotypes. Many people with hearing impairments can speak and have some degree of hearing. Don't use, "Confined to a wheelchair." The wheelchair provides mobility; people would be confined, if they did not have one.

- Instead say: Hearing impaired or disabled, visually impaired or disabled, and people who use wheelchairs. It's okay to say impaired.

"If we don't change our direction, we are likely to end up where we are headed."
— Old Chinese Proverb

How To Have Accessible Meetings and Training Activities

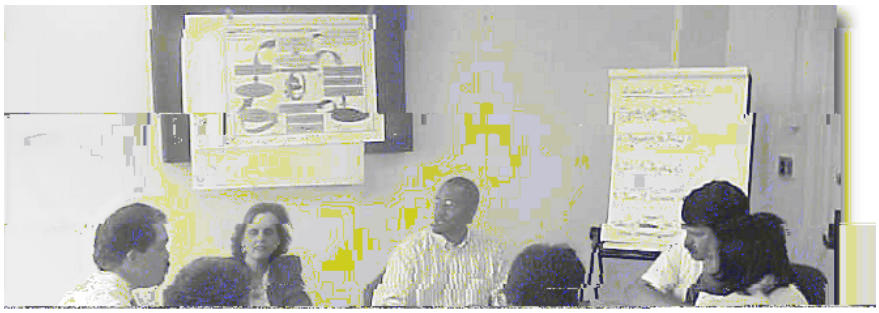
"Challenge yourself and change the world."
— Mobility International

How can you make your meetings and training activities accessible for people with disabilities?

- Think ahead! Plan long before you enter the room on the first day of the meeting or workshop. It's too late when you find people with disabilities trying to attend.

- Make sure that your meeting location is accessible to people using wheelchairs. Are there steps or a ramp at the front door? Do you need to go up steps to get to your meeting room? Is there an elevator? Is the room itself accessible? Are the doors and aisles wide enough for the easy passage of a wheelchair? Are the restrooms accessible? What about transportation? Are restaurant or cafeteria facilities easily accessible?

- Make sure your meeting is accessible for people who are visually impaired or disabled. You may need to provide accessible formats for written information such as: braille, cassette tape, computer disk, and/or large print, depending on the visual acuity of the individual. Whenever possible, try to work with the vision-impaired attendee(s) ahead of time, so you can find out which format they prefer and possibly give them extra time to review written materials. The first day of the meeting or workshop, offer a brief description and tour of the site. If you write on a flipchart or show an overhead transparency, read aloud for anyone who cannot see.



- To make your meeting accessible for people with hearing impairments, find out if you need a sign language interpreter. Not all people with hearing impairments use sign language. Some read lips; others hear well enough if they sit near the speaker. If someone is reading your lips, look at them when you speak. If a sign language interpreter is present, spell or write any unusual words or names. Someone who is hearing impaired cannot take notes and watch an interpreter at the same time. Perhaps someone else could share their notes. Be sure that any videotapes you show are captioned.

- Dog guides and other service animals are becoming a common part of our culture; there might be one or two in your workshop or meeting. Welcome them, but respect the important job they do. Don't pet or feed a dog guide without asking the owner's permission.

- Include these access issues in your post-meeting or training evaluation. Also, if your training locations or programs are accessible, let people know – advertise it. If you have a telecommunications device to communicate with people with hearing impairments, advertise this. If you do not have one, consider getting one; these devices are low-cost.

To Help Or Not To Help

"You must be the change you wish to see in the world."

— Ghandi

Here are a few more tips you can use to improve your interaction with people with disabilities:

- Ask before providing any help. Help only if the person asks for it, or if you see danger. Remember, everyone, including people with disabilities, wants to be treated with respect.
- To guide someone who is visually impaired, let them hold your arm. Never guide by pulling a white cane or a guide dog's harness. When showing a chair to someone who doesn't see, put their hand on the back of the chair. It's ok to say, "see you later" or ask if someone "saw" a show on TV. These phrases are part of our language and you will generally not offend a person with a visual disability by using them.
- Sit when talking to someone who uses a wheelchair. Keep the area free of obstacles. Never push someone's wheel-chair unless they ask you to.
- Someone with a hearing impairment may want to read your lips. Speak slowly and carefully. Try to learn some sign language; it's a courtesy. Remember, you can also use a pen and paper.
- If someone has a speech impairment, don't be afraid to ask them to repeat. Be flexible with your language; if one word doesn't work, try another.
- People with mental impairments can respond to questions and follow directions. Speak in a normal voice. Don't use complex sentences.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions. It's the only way to learn. People with disabilities are generally used to questions and don't mind answering them.

Team Selection Matrix

You can use this matrix to create strong, diverse teams. List potential team members down the left side of a page. Check the columns across as they apply. Review the list to ensure that all categories have adequate representation:

"People with disabilities are a part of the team."
— Easter Seals

Potential Team Member	Process Owner	Supplier to Process	Internal Customer	External Customer	Workforce Diversity	Geographic Diversity	Other

Resources You Can Use

"Don't let what you can't do keep you from doing what you can do."
— USDA Association for People with Disabilities

Where can you get more information? Many disability-related organizations are listed in your telephone directory. Here's an additional list:

Architectural and Transportation Access Board,
Washington, D.C., (202) 245-1802;
Association of Higher Education and Disability,
Columbus, Ohio, (614) 488-4972;
Department of Veterans Affairs,
Washington, D.C., (800) 827-1000;
Gallaudet University,
Washington, D.C., (202) 651-5000;
Goodwill Industries International,
Rockville, Maryland, (301) 530-6500;
Howard University Research and Training Center,
Washington, D.C., (202) 806-8086;
President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities,
Washington, D.C., (800) 232-9675;
Seeing Eye Inc.,
Morristown, New Jersey, (800) 539-4425;
State Governors' Disability Committees,
http://www.pcepd.gov/state.htm (Internet)

Steps You Can Take

- Learn more and align yourself with people with disabilities, their friends and advocates. Believe in opportunity for all and work to bring it about;

- Change attitudes. Help to educate others. Take and give sensitivity training and awareness sessions for staff;

- Rethink how we usually perceive people with disabilities and how we traditionally do business. Reach out and involve people with disabilities in your organization's programs;

- Use local recruiting sources and disability related organizations to identify qualified job applicants with disabilities, including those from culturally diverse backgrounds. Include minorities with disabilities in job coaching and upward mobility training programs;

- Make a commitment to tell the story. Publicize your successes.

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single footstep."

— Lao Tse

Sample Case Studies

The following cases have been prepared to offer some practice in the concepts just presented. Consider each case in turn and answer the questions for each.

1. Ann is sight impaired and has applied for a job as a trainer with a small consulting firm which conducts quality management training courses. At the job interview, the interviewer asks her, "How will you use audiovisuals to train?"

   A. Is this an appropriate question under the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act?
   B. What kinds of questions could the interviewer ask?
   C. What kinds of questions should the interviewer not ask?

2. Jack is applying for a position as a quality coordinator in a large federal agency. He uses a wheelchair. His recommendations and qualifications are impressive. He is clearly a qualified applicant for the position.

   A. How could Jack's job best be accommodated? Describe the duties that Jack will perform and explain how each duty could be accommodated.
   B. Are there any accommodations to Jack's job which could not be made? Explain.

3. You want to conduct training at a university building which is rather old and in which there is no elevator.

   A. Can you hold your course in this building? Explain.
   B. How will you ensure full access for all participants, including those with disabilities? Can you make any recommendations to the university for the future?

4. Carrie has a profound hearing impairment and is meeting with you, her Quality Coordinator, to select training courses in quality management. Her primary language is American Sign Language.

   A. What steps should you take to communicate with Carrie?
   B. Would lip reading be an option? Why or why not?

5. Gus is a hard working guide dog with many years of experience. His owner has been asked to conduct a workshop in which several of the participants are afraid of dogs. The suggestion has been made that Gus be left in a separate room while the workshop is being held.

   A. Should this suggestion be followed? Explain.
   B. Are there any other options? Explain.

Disability Quiz

The answers to the following questions are found in the preceeding pages. Please fill in the blank in the questions below:

1. In the United States today, _____ million Americans are people with disabilities.

2. The biggest barrier that people with disabilities face today is _____.

3. Employment cannot be denied on the basis of a_____. Explain.

4. Training can be made accessible for people with disabilities by ensuring _____.

Please answer true or false to the following questions by circling T or F:

5. People with disabilities feel pain and frustration over having a disability. T F

6. Most disabilities occur at birth. T F

7. When assisting someone with a disability, ask first before you help. T F

8. It's okay to use words like "crippled." T F

9. I shouldn't have to be concerned about disability issues if I don't work with someone who has a disability. T F

10. Diverse team members strengthen a team. T F Explain.

Thank you for taking this quiz!