

Disability Guide

Understanding non-visible disabilities



Introduction

This guide is part of our Disability Guide series. This series contains 10 in-depth documents to support employees with disabilities across all considerations of the employee experience.

These are:

- Colour blindness in the workplace
- Developing assistance dog policies
- Disability staff networks
- Inclusive communications
- Sensory impairment
- Supporting colleagues who acquire their impairment whilst in your employment
- Supporting colleagues with learning disabilities in the workplace
- Supporting colleagues with long term health conditions in the workplace
- Supporting colleagues with physical disabilities in the workplace
- Understanding non-visible disabilities

This particular guide focuses on supporting employees with non-visible disabilities. If you want to find out more information, or want to know how to bring this content to life in a meaningful way for your organisation, please speak to your account manager or email members@inclusiveemployers.co.uk.

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1. What is a non-visible disability?

A non-visible disability is a disability or health condition which cannot be easily seen and may not be immediately apparent. It is a misconception that non-visible disabilities only include neurological and mental conditions as they can also include physical and health conditions.

Language and Terminology

There are several terms used to describe disabilities that are not visually obvious. These include: non-visible disabilities; invisible disabilities; less-visible disabilities and hidden disabilities however the preferred term is non-visible disabilities. Those with a disability may self-identify in different ways. Concerns have been raised regarding some terminology such as:

- **'Invisible'** – erases the legitimacy of the disability or implies that the disability does not exist.
- **'Less visible'** – implies the disability is only partially visible and does not encompass those whose condition is completely non-visible.
- **'Hidden'** – implies a person is purposefully hiding their disability.

With non-visible disabilities, it is important to emphasise that even though the disability cannot be seen, it does not mean it does not exist.

Examples of non-visible conditions that are classified as disabilities include: severe asthma; autism; bipolar; diabetes; dyslexia; epilepsy; HIV/AIDS and insomnia. Conditions like insomnia may be classified as a disability, dependent on how severe the condition and its impact on a person's daily life.

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2. Creating a workspace culture that is inclusive of and for disabled people

Those with disabilities are significantly more likely to experience unfair treatment at work than non-disabled people. Those with non-visible disabilities can sometimes be reluctant to disclose they have a disability due to fear of stigmatisation or discrimination within the workplace.

While it is discrimination to make assumptions about the capability or suitability of others based on their disability, those living with disabilities still face daily prejudice on their competences, which impacts the likelihood of being offered a job, asked to do particular tasks, work on certain projects or offered a promotion. In addition, those with non-visible disabilities may also face perceptions that their disabilities are not as valid or real because they are not visible.

To alleviate the above, it is important to practice inclusive processes and create an inclusive culture for those with disabilities throughout the entire employee lifecycle. Here are our recommendations for making this happen:

During recruitment

- Think about how the organisation can make the application process as inclusive as possible. Highlight that the organisation is an inclusive employer (or on their inclusion and diversity journey) and that it is willing to take requests for reasonable adjustments and/or flexible working.
- Think about how the organisation can demonstrate or evidence this, perhaps via the website, social media channels, news articles or employee experiences.

- Reflect on the application process and how accessible this is for those with disabilities to be able to apply. Is the process accessible, user friendly and accommodating for all?
- Is the interview and any assessments suitable for those with physical and/or learning disabilities? Could you provide alternative formats?

Within the workplace

- Highlight as part of the induction process that the organisation is comfortable with requests for reasonable adjustments, especially to encourage those with non-visible disabilities to come forward for support. Deal with requests in a timely and respectable manner. Requests may include flexible working arrangements (for location, appointments, hours worked), adjustments to the physical environment, equipment and/or software.
- Collect and report on disability data. This allows for transparency across the organisation and may highlight areas for development and ways more support can be offered. Allow for the possibility of anonymous feedback.
- Create clear policies that support disabled employees and highlight any resources of internal/external support available in an accessible place for employees (internal intranet etc.).
- Create an inclusive culture – allow for open and honest conversations about disability within the workplace, celebrate awareness campaigns and give a voice for disabled staff to share lived experiences. Display “not every disability is visible” signs within the workplace, implement mandatory disability training for all employees to raise awareness and increase knowledge, have access to staff networking groups including peer support and mentoring schemes, which also allow for feedback via different channels.

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3. Implementing reasonable adjustments

By law, it is a requirement that an employer must consider making reasonable adjustments for any job applicant or employee they know to have a disability, has declared a disability and/or has made a request for reasonable adjustments to be made, to ensure the individual does not face a disadvantage in comparison to non-disabled people.

What is considered 'reasonable' will depend on a variety of factors such as the size of the employer, the type of organisation and the resources available to the organisation. The adjustments necessary will vary between different impairments and different individuals.

An inclusive employer does not assume that all people with a similar disability will require the same adjustments. Employers should investigate any adjustments thoroughly before deciding on whether they are deemed reasonable, as they are often easily implemented and inexpensive.

Both the employer and employee must work together to discuss the possible reasonable adjustment solutions. Multiple solutions must be considered and offered to the employee, who can then review all proposals and offer feedback to the employer.

Some examples of adjustments you may consider making as an employer of people with disabilities include (but are not limited to):

Environmental

- Noise (background, machinery, alarms)
- Temperature

- Lighting
- Conversations and language
- Covid 19 impact

Physical

- Workspace – office, home or elsewhere
- Access to workplace
- Technology and equipment

Emotional

- Personal support, including someone to listen to
- Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)
- Occupational Health
- Non-judgemental support
- Genuine caring
- Comfortable with emotions

Lifestyle support

- Flexible working
- Phased transition return
- Openness to change over time

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4. Top tips for non-visible disability inclusion

Here are some Inclusive Employers top tips to include people with non-visible disabilities:

Uniform/clothing

Some organisations allow people with non-visible disabilities to voluntarily wear a lanyard or pin to let others know about their disability.

External meetings

If meetings are being attended offsite, ensure the site is accessible as possible when deciding the location and make sure any reasonable adjustment or travel considerations are taken into account.

Away days/social events

If social events are being organised, have inclusion in mind at the point of design and make sure the activity and venue is inclusive and accessible to all. Ask everyone if they have any accessibility needs. When designing these events, consider ease of accessibility and travel options, making it as easy as possible for people to get to. If they can't attend in person, are there other options to participate?

Company vehicles

If your organisation has company vehicles, think about accessibility for different needs of passengers and drivers.

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5. Sources

- <https://www.highspeedtraining.co.uk/hub/invisible-disabilities-in-the-workplace>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dptac-position-on-non-visible-disabilities/dptac-position-statement-on-non-visible-disabilities>
- <https://disabilityunit.blog.gov.uk/2020/12/17/living-with-non-visible-disabilities/>
- <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/caring-employees-hidden-disabilities-dr-gonzalo-shoobridge>
- <https://www.cii.co.uk/media/10123153/achieving-an-inclusive-working-environment.pdf>
- <https://www.acas.org.uk/reasonable-adjustments>

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