



WORKING WITH THE DISABLED

Since Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, people who previously had limited or no access to public places now move about with a degree of ease in the workplace. While these people have their challenges with sight, hearing or movement, those who work with them are often confused about how to interact them with sensitivity and understanding.

Here are some of the issues to keep in mind.

When it is necessary to mention the disability, language should emphasize the person first, the disability second. Rather than referring to someone as an epileptic, say "person with epilepsy" or "John, who has epilepsy...."

Avoid words that have a negative tone. People who use wheelchairs are not "bound" or "confined" to their chairs. A person may have spastic muscles but should not be described as spastic.

Preferred language is simple. Instead of saying that a person is "crippled with arthritis," "suffering from MS," "afflicted with ALS," say, "John has epilepsy" or "Mary has MS."

Use the following terms:

"Congenital disability" rather than "birth defect."

"Non-disabled" rather than "normal," "healthy" or "able-bodied."

"Condition" rather than "disease" or "defect."

"Visually impaired" rather than "blind" unless a person is totally sightless.

"Deaf" or "hard of hearing" rather than "hearing impaired."

"Little person" or "dwarf" rather than "midget."

Words or phrases like "victim," "cripple," "unfortunate," "dumb," "deaf mute," "deformed" and "pitiful" are offensive.

Ask people with disabilities if they need or want help before trying to assist them. If they want assistance, ask for specific instructions on how you can be helpful.

Look directly at any person with a disability when talking even if the person has an interpreter or companion present.

Don't assume a speech impairment indicates that a person also has a hearing impairment or intellectual limitations.

Allow people with speech impairments to finish their own sentences. Don't talk for them or interrupt. Ask questions that permit short answers or a nod of the head. The other person always has the option of giving a longer response.

Speak calmly, slowly, and distinctly to a person who has a hearing problem or other difficulty understanding. Stand in front of the person and use gestures to aid communication.

When walking with a person who is visually impaired, allow that person to set the pace. If the person asks for or accepts your offer of help, don't grab his arm. It is easier for him to hold onto you.

Never start to push someone's wheelchair without first asking the occupant's permission.

Leaning on a wheelchair when talking to the person is inconsiderate.

If you will be having a long conversation with someone using a wheelchair, get a chair and sit at eye level with the person. You will both feel more comfortable.

Keep in mind that people with disabilities are just like everyone else with the exception of certain physical conditions. Treat them as the capable competent co-workers or colleagues they are.

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