



BLINDNESS AND VISION IMPAIRMENT

The term 'blindness' doesn't describe all visually-impaired individuals. Only a small percentage of people with vision impairments are actually totally blind. The term blindness should be reserved for a complete loss of functional sight. It is rare for someone to be completely blind; rather their ability to see exists anywhere along a continuum from partially sighted to completely blind. In addition, amount of usable sight varies from person to person, and visual acuity may change under differing light conditions.

- Vision is measured in terms of how much can be seen (peripheral field of vision), and how clearly it can be seen (visual acuity).
- Legal Blindness means having between 0 and 10% of normal visual acuity in both eyes (20/200 vision or less), and/or 20% or less of normal peripheral vision in both eyes. In other words this person, while wearing glasses, can see less at 20 feet than a person with normal vision can see at 200 feet.
- Low Vision or Partially Sighted means having visual acuity and/or field of vision that is less than normal, or having a visual limitation in only one eye.
- Tunnel Vision is described as vision that is limited to a narrow angle in the center of the field of vision.
- Other Vision Impairments include Learning Disabilities that interfere with the perception of visual or written information.

A major challenge facing people who are visually impaired is the mass of printed material they encounter on a daily basis. By the time that a person who is blind reaches employment (unless newly blinded), they have probably developed various methods for dealing with the volumes of visual materials. There are several successful accommodations that individuals can incorporate into their daily and work lives. Employers are often quite surprised with the degree of independence many people who are blind exhibit.

Persons with Vision Impairment In The Workplace

Technology and Adaptive Devices

There are four simple options that make written materials available to employees with vision impairments depending upon personal choice and amount of residual sight:

1. Written materials are recorded onto AUDIO-CASSETTES.
2. Regular print is converted into LARGE PRINT via enlarged copies or closed circuit TV.
3. Written materials are transcribed into BRAILLE.
4. A VOICE SYNTHESIZER is used with computers and calculators to read the information aloud.

There are two basic difficulties that a person with low vision is confronted with that the person who is blind is not. First, the person who has low vision is sometimes viewed by employers and co-workers as "faking it." Because most people who have low vision do not



use white canes for travel and because most are able to get around without much difficulty, sighted people have trouble believing that the person needs to use adaptive methods when reading printed materials.

Another difficulty that someone who is partially sighted must deal with is the reaction from others toward their handwritten communications. Often letters must be written large for the person to see their own writing, and frequently the writing is not neat, almost child-like in appearance. It is important to be aware of and sensitive to these judgments and their affect on the employee with the disability and their co-workers.

Questions To Consider in the Job Accommodation Process

The following provides basic information regarding questions that might be considered when determining accommodations for individuals with vision impairments. An accommodation is any modification or adjustment to a job, work environment, or the way things are usually done that enables a qualified individual with a disability to enjoy an equal employment opportunity. JAN views accommodations as a way to bridge the distance between the maximum ability of the individual and the essential functions of the job. In seeking the answers to accommodation questions, it is essential to obtain input from the individual with the disability to achieve a successful accommodation outcome.

1. What Type Of Vision Loss Is The Individual Experiencing?

No vision; low vision, vision in one eye, no peripheral vision or central vision, color vision deficiency

If Low Vision:

- Does the individual benefit from magnification?
- Does the individual use corrective lenses or assistive devices?
- Does the individual use a cane, navigational aid or animal to assist with mobility?
- Is the person's condition progressive or stable?

If No Vision:

- Does the individual read Braille?
- Does the individual use any devices or animals to assist with mobility?

2. What Occupation Is The Person Involved In And What Is Their Career Status?

- Clerical, laborer, sales, professional, medical, teaching, etc.
- Job seeking, new hire, long time employee, etc.

3. What Job Tasks Are Performed And Which Of The Tasks Are Difficult As A Result Of The Vision Impairment?

- Difficulty accessing information on a computer
- Difficulty reading printed materials
- Difficulty accessing a telephone
- Difficulty accessing the work-site
- Travel to and from work or to perform essential functions
- Difficulty distinguishing colors



4. What Specific Computer Equipment Is Being Used In The Work Environment?

- Is the computer screen too small?
- What software options can you access?

5. Does The Individual Need Equipment Or Devices To Perform The Functions Of The Job?

6. How Is The Environment Lit?

- Low light
- Bright light
- Fluorescent light
- Natural light

7. What Are The Potential Workplace Hazards?

- Protruding objects
- Unclear paths of travel

8. Is Education Of Supervisory Personnel And Perhaps Co-Workers Necessary?

General education about disability and factors affecting an individual's ability to do the job may make for a better work environment. Such education should not be used to single the person with the disability out. An overall, disability awareness initiative is best.

General Accommodations for Individuals With Visual Impairments

Improving Interactions with An Individual With Blindness Or Low Vision

- Develop a positive attitude about blindness.
- To guide a person who is blind, let him take your arm. When encountering steps, curbs or other obstacles, identify them.
- When giving directions, be as clear and specific as possible including distance and obvious obstacles.
- Speak to the person in a normal tone and speed.
- It's okay to touch a blind person on the arm or shoulder to convey communication.
- Don't touch or play with a working guide dog.
- Ask the person how much vision she has and what communication modality she is most comfortable using.
- When leaving a room, say so.
- Keep pathways clear and raise low-hanging signs or lights.
- Use large letter signs and add Braille labels to all signs.
- Keep doors closed or wide open; half open doors are hazardous.
- Have adaptive equipment available so people who are blind can be full program participants (i.e., talking computer, Braille, etc.).
- Make oral announcements; don't depend on a bulletin board.
- Add raised or Braille lettering to elevator control buttons, and install entrance indicators at doorways.



- Utilize radio and the newsletters of organizations serving the blind for announcements and advertising.
- Make optical magnifiers and aids available for people with visual impairments

Personal Interactions

- Announce your presence and who you are in a normal tone of voice. When you leave a person's presence, say so.
- Offer assistance in filling out forms, and be prepared to read aloud any information that is written, if requested. Many people with vision impairments can fill out forms and sign their names if the appropriate spaces are indicated to them.
- It is not necessary to speak more loudly when conversing with someone with a vision impairment. However, you should not stop talking when a blind person is approaching you because they rely on the sound of your voice for orientation.
- When giving directions, use descriptive words such as straight, forward, left. Be specific and avoid use of vague terms such as "over there." Feel free to use words like "see" or "look" when speaking to a blind person.
- If you are walking with a blind person, let them take your arm from behind just above the elbow and walk in a relaxed manner. In this position, the person can usually follow the motion of your body.
- When you take their arm, the person does not have the advantage of following your movements.
- Be sure to provide visual cues such as stairs and other obstacles in their path. If there are others in a room that you enter, the blind person may not be aware of this.
- Introduce each person by name and indicate where they are in the room relative to where the blind person is located.
- Guide dogs are working animals. There is a special relationship between the person who is blind and their dog. When working, it can be hazardous for the vision impaired person if the dog is distracted. NEVER pet or touch the dog without obtaining permission.

This information was compiled by Open Door Group to assist BC businesses to have successful working relationship with persons with disabilities in our communities.

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