



MOBILITY DISABILITIES

People use wheelchairs for a variety of reasons, most commonly being paralysis from spinal cord injuries. Current estimates indicate there are 250,000 to 400,000 individuals living with a spinal cord injury or spinal dysfunction with eighty-two percent of these individuals being male. The highest per capita rate of injury occurs between ages 16 and 30. Therefore, many individuals with spinal cord injuries are just entering the workforce when they start using wheelchairs. Unfortunately, statistics show that only 34.4% of individuals with paraplegia and 24.3% for quadriplegia are currently employed.

Reasonable accommodations can improve the employment rate of individuals who use wheelchairs and can assist employers in hiring and retaining qualified employees. Some employers believe that it is expensive and difficult to accommodate people who use wheelchairs. However, this is not necessarily true. Accommodations can be low cost and easy to implement. Data collected by the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) show that more than half of all accommodations cost less than \$500. Further, JAN statistics show that most employers report financial benefits from providing accommodations due to a reduction in the cost of training new employees, a reduction in the cost of insurance, and an increase in worker productivity. Also, funding may be available to purchase necessary equipment to effectively reduce such barriers to employment.

When considering accommodations for individuals who use wheelchairs, the process must be conducted on a case-by-case basis with input from the person with the disability. Each individual who uses a wheelchair has different abilities and limitations that may require consideration. Also, essential job functions may vary from office to office so they need to be defined with potentially problematic job tasks identified.

Because people who use wheelchairs have a wide variety of abilities and limitations, it is difficult to generalize possible accommodation needs. However, the following pages provide a good starting point by giving useful questions to consider, basic information about common limitations, accommodation possibilities, and ergonomics for people who use wheelchairs. The information is only a sample of the many accommodation possibilities available; numerous other accommodation solutions may exist.

The term "mobility impairment" refers to a broad range of disabilities that may cause students to rely on assistive devices, such as wheelchairs, scooters, crutches, canes, or artificial limbs. Disabilities affecting mobility can result from spinal cord injury, multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, cerebral palsy, and other disabling conditions. Stairs, heavy doors, lack of elevators, and narrow walkways may present barriers.

Many people with mobility impairments may face difficulties, such as impaired eye-hand coordination, decreased writing ability due to weakness or paralysis, and decreased physical



stamina. A student with mobility impairment may be unable to sit in one position for a sustained length of time.

Persons with Mobility Disabilities In The Workplace

Technology and Adaptive Devices

There are plenty of technological devices available for individuals with mobility disabilities:

- Alternative computer input devices come in a variety of shapes and sizes to accommodate a wide range of limitations. They replace the traditional keyboard and mouse, and allow the user to manipulate the computer in a variety of ways, through using head, feet, eye, mouth, breath, or a finger. Expanded keyboards, pen tablets, systems, and one-handed keyboards are examples of alternative computer devices.
- Keyguards are molded plastic overlays with holes that isolate each key. Keyguards provide keying control and accuracy for individuals who use pointing sticks or other typing aids.
- Speech recognition technology: Software allows individuals to create and edit a variety of documents.
- Accessible workstations: Workstations that can be simply adjusted to fit an individual.
- Gripping aids: Includes tools such as page-turners, book holders, and writing aids. They allow manual task to be completed in a much easier fashion.
- Automatic door openers, wheelchair lifts, ramps

Workplace Accommodations

- Consider the workplace's exterior when designing for accessibility and adaptability.
- Putting a shelf or shelves next to an entry door to set packages on is handy and inexpensive.
- Guardrails should be installed on both sides of wheelchair ramps.
- Wide walkways so that car doors and sliding doors on passenger vans can be fully opened with enough space left for a wheelchair to maneuver around easily.
- Surfaces should have non-skid finishes to prevent slipping.
- Workplace halls need a wide radius to allow a wheelchair user to maneuver comfortably.
- Elevators and well-constructed and maintained ramps allow for independent use by persons who use wheelchairs or scooters and by others who cannot use stairs. They are also used by the general public, easing the way for those with children in strollers or with shopping carts.

Other considerations:

- Flexible scheduling so a person who cannot drive can access public transportation
- Accessible restrooms, lunchroom, break room, etc.
- An accessible route of travel to the person's workstation, including from the parkade
- Work from home if transportation to work is not available

Workstation



People who use wheelchairs may encounter a variety of obstacles at their workstations depending on their limitations. The following are examples of these obstacles and possible accommodations:

- Height adjustable desk or table so a person who uses a wheelchair can work comfortably
- Accessible filing system for a person who cannot reach upper and lower file drawers in a vertical file cabinet
- Office supplies and frequently used materials on most accessible shelves or drawers for a person who cannot reach upper and lower shelves and drawers
- Page turners and book holders for a person who cannot manipulate paper
- Writing aids for a person who cannot grip a writing tool
- Accessible office machines, such as copiers and faxes, so a person using a wheelchair can access them from a seated position
- Voice activated speaker phone, large button phone, automatic dialing system, voice mail system, and/or headset, depending on the person's limitations and preferences
- Alternative access for computers such as speech recognition, Morse code entry, trackballs, keyguards, alternative keyboards, and/or mouthsticks, depending on the person's limitations and preferences

Other Accommodation Considerations

Etiquette:

- **Talk Face-to-Face:** Be sure to face a person with a disability when talking to them. Carrying on a conversation with someone from behind, especially if you're standing over them, isn't very respectful.
- **Direct Eye Contact:** Quite often people who use wheelchairs have to look up at the person who is talking to them. This puts a strain on the person who is forced to look up at the person talking. This may also communicate an unequal status. Try to establish level eye contact by getting a chair and sitting down.
- **Empathetic Mumbo Jumbo:** Don't feel compelled to communicate your empathic impressions of what it must be like to use a wheelchair.
- **General advice:** Having had a temporary-disability, or having known a relative who used a wheelchair, may give you an experience with using a wheelchair or knowing someone who did; however, it does not tell you about someone else's experience. Each person's experience is different. There are people who would say being in a wheelchair is the best thing that ever happened to them. There are other people who wouldn't agree. If you're trying to bridge any social distance that you might feel, talk about something that you both have in common like work, recreation, sports, etc. rather than potentially unsuitable "personal experience" stories.

Activities Of Daily Living

People who use wheelchairs may need assistance with personal care while at work. Although an employer is not responsible for providing the personal care, an employer may be responsible for certain accommodations to enable an employee who uses a wheelchair to



meet his/her personal care needs. The following are examples of some of these personal care needs and possible accommodations:

- Allowing the person to have a personal attendant at work to assist with toileting, grooming, and eating
- Allowing the person to take periodic rest breaks for repositioning, toileting, or grooming needs
- Flexible scheduling
- Use of sick leave for medical care
- Allowing the person to bring a service animal into the workplace

Travel

People who use wheelchairs may encounter many obstacles while traveling for work. The following are examples of these obstacles:

- Accessible transportation, lodging, meeting and training sites
- Medical supplies/wheelchair repair at travel destination
- Personal attendant care

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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