



Employment Accommodations for People with Vision Loss or Blindness

People with vision loss or blindness can undertake most jobs and, with training and support, can demonstrate the same employment potential as anyone else. Once someone with vision loss has been offered a job, you may need to put in some reasonable accommodations to ensure they can perform to their highest capability. Once someone has been offered a job, begin getting the required accommodations in place as it may take some time. Consult the individual and make sure that the employee's manager or supervisor understands the agreed accommodations. Disability awareness training, that includes vision loss awareness, may be especially useful for the candidate's team.

Build in regular reviews of accommodations, for example at the end of the probationary period, in supervision sessions and appraisals to ensure that the accommodations are still effective. Ensure that you take the same approach to accommodations when an employee with vision loss or blindness applies for promotion, again not making assumptions about what the employee can or cannot do.

Orientation and Training:

Disability and the need to make accommodations should be embedded in all policies, for example, policies on sickness, training, and appraisals. New recruits should be made aware of these policies during the orientation procedure.

It is important that your standard orientation and training program is accessible, so that someone with vision loss or blindness can gain the same information about, for example, the company profile and office procedures:

- allow more time and greater flexibility for orientation and training
- ensure that training material and job instructions are available in the appropriate format, e.g. large print, Braille, audio on tape, disk or computer intranet
- avoid red ink on flip charts in training sessions
- brief the workgroup on basic 'disability communication' – this will help to ensure the person with vision loss or blindness can fully participate in any training as well as others, e.g. people who have other

disabilities. It should also generally improve communication between colleagues

- allow the employee to organise their work area, in a way that suits them
- assign a colleague to help the employee find their way around the work area during the early days of employment. This can phase out at the employee's request.
- ensure employees with vision loss or blindness also have equal access to further in-house and external training, meetings and career development opportunities.

Working Accommodations to Retain Employees:

- labelling using brightly coloured labels, thick pens with good contrast with the background colour, or dots or tactile marks. There are also electronic barcode devices that enable a recorded message to be read out when it is passed over a label
- designate a colleague to read mail and other non-standardized literature.
- adjustments will also help you to retain those who develop vision loss, keeping an employee's skills and experience and saving the cost of recruiting and training a replacement, and possibly the cost of early retirement.
- sometimes employees who develop vision loss, which begins to affect their ability to do the job, are often unwilling or unable to admit, sometimes even to themselves, the seriousness of what is happening. It may be helpful to build into your annual appraisal system a mechanism for identifying and resolving disability-related challenges.
- an employee may well need a period of disability leave to adjust to changes caused by the development of vision loss, for example to obtain a guide dog and/or develop new ways of working and living independently.

Physical Space:

The design of the work site can place someone with vision loss or blindness at a substantial disadvantage in accessing employer's premises. Simple adjustments can enable an employee with vision loss, as well as others, to navigate a building more easily. These include:

- a tactile strip, at the top of a staircase, to indicate a descending staircase and potential hazard
- colour contrasting key features, such as doors and permanent features such as columns



- tactile indicators on the underside of stair rails to denote the floor level
- a floor announcer, as well as a visual signal, to indicate the arrival of an elevator
- matte finishing on signs to avoid reflections and improve visibility.
- ensure that someone with vision loss has time to become familiarized with the building, including any changes to the layout of the workplace. Once familiar with surroundings, a person with vision loss will usually be able to get round safely by using their memory of the surroundings and any remaining vision they have.
- ask the employee with vision loss or blindness if there are changes to the building or workspace layout that would be helpful for them
- ensure that staff know simple health and safety practices to prevent hazards which can be particularly dangerous for someone with vision loss. *for example*: making sure filing cabinets are closed when not in use, and not leaving boxes and general clutter around the office.

Equipment:

There is a wide range of equipment to enable people with vision loss or blindness to have independence and to work effectively. These include:

- large screens increase image size
- large print key top stickers
- large display calculators
- magnification software increases the size of text or graphics on a computer screen
- screen readers speak the information from the screen, including reading web pages. These can also produce a Braille readout of the text
- electronic Braille displays enable a visually impaired person to 'read' the screen via a strip of electronically controlled pins connected to the computer
- scanners convert text on a page to text on a screen which can then be magnified or spoken back or read by a Braille system
- big button telephones and talking caller ID (announcing the caller's number when the telephone rings)
- closed circuit televisions (CCTVs) magnify printed material and enable a person with useable vision to read documents.
- many computer adjustments that can aid accessibility are free. For example, placing a screen away from glare and window light can make an immediate difference to its visibility.
- other options are available, as a standard, through the computer's control panel or within programs. These include:
 - changing the colour and size of the mouse pointer



- o changing colour options (many people with sight problems can see some colour combinations better than others).

Health and Safety:

With reasonable adjustments there is no reason why someone with vision loss should be at greater health and safety risk than anyone else.

In limited circumstances, for example where an employee has acquired a new vision loss through an accident or degenerative condition, it may be necessary to conduct an individual risk assessment. This risk assessment will help the employer to determine whether the individual's vision loss presents any increased risks either to themselves or others. Such risk assessments must always be specific to the particular individual, job-role and working environment concerned.

All employees, including those with vision loss, must know about emergency evacuation procedures. Sometimes a 'buddy' is assigned to help a person with vision loss or blindness in an evacuation or other emergency situation.

Following is a brief list of useful resource links for employers wishing to increase their capacity to recruit, employ, and retain employees with vision loss or blindness:

accessWORKS: <http://www.accessworks.ca>

ASICS – Access for Sight Impaired Consumers: <http://www.asic.bc.cx/>

CNIB – Canadian National Institute for the Blind:
<http://www.cnib.ca/en/services/accessibilities/Default.aspx>

Assistive Technology:

Aroga Group: <http://www.aroga.com/>

The Braille Bookstore: <http://www.braillebookstore.com>

Enhanced Vision: <http://www.enhancedvision.com>

Independent Living Aids: <http://www.independentliving.com/>

Neil Squire Solutions (workplace accommodations & assistive technology):
<http://solutions.neilsquire.ca/>

