Understanding Disability

Disability is varied, and no single experience or definition describes everyone. This guide focuses on understanding, dignity and access at work.

Physical and sensory

Mobility, pain, hearing, vision and other physical or sensory access needs.

Cognitive and neurological

Differences involving memory, attention, processing, learning and neurological functioning.

Mental health and fluctuating needs

Some conditions change over time or affect daily functioning in less visible ways.

Individual experiences

People with the same condition may have very different strengths, barriers and preferences.

A helpful distinction

A condition or impairment does not tell us everything about a person. Workplace barriers may arise from buildings, systems, attitudes or expectations.

What assumptions about disability might be worth reconsidering?

What helps me understand someone’s access needs without making assumptions?

Ways of Understanding Disability

Different models highlight different aspects of disability. Neither replaces listening to an individual about their own experience.

Medical model

This model focuses on a person’s condition, impairment, diagnosis or treatment. Medical care may be important, but this perspective alone may overlook barriers in the environment.

Social model

This model draws attention to barriers created by environments, policies, communication and attitudes. Removing barriers can make participation more accessible.

Both perspectives have limits

People may value healthcare, personal support, accessible environments or a combination. Their preferred language and understanding of disability should be respected.

Which workplace barriers could be changed rather than expecting a person to adapt?

How could workplace decisions include the people affected?

Disability, Identity & Experience

Disability can be an important part of identity, but not everyone uses the same language or relates to their experiences in the same way.

Language and preferences

Some people prefer “disabled person”; others prefer “person with a disability”. Ask, rather than assume.

Visible and non-visible

Not every disability is apparent. Avoid asking someone to prove a need based on appearance.

Changing circumstances

Symptoms, capacity and access needs can fluctuate between days, tasks and environments.

Privacy and choice

People should have appropriate control over what personal or health information they share.

Respectful practice

Listen to what someone says helps them, use their preferred language where possible, and focus on the access need rather than assumptions about ability.

How can I make space for different preferences and experiences?

What might respectful, non-intrusive support look like at work?

Disability Rights & Responsibilities

UK workplace protections can apply to disabled employees and applicants. This page is a general introduction, not legal advice.

Equality Act 2010

The Act protects disabled people from unlawful discrimination in employment. Whether a person meets the legal definition depends on their circumstances.

Reasonable adjustments

Employers have duties to make reasonable adjustments in relevant circumstances to address substantial disadvantage.

Discrimination

Unlawful treatment can include direct or indirect discrimination and discrimination arising from disability.

Harassment

Unwanted conduct related to disability can amount to harassment when the legal test is met.

Victimisation

The law also protects against certain detrimental treatment linked to protected acts, such as raising a discrimination complaint.

Workplace responsibility

Accessibility is not solely the employee’s task. Employers should consider policies, equipment, working practices, recruitment and communication.

Which workplace systems or practices could be reviewed for accessibility?

Where could someone seek reliable guidance or support?

Creating an Inclusive Workplace

Meaningful inclusion involves everyday decisions, not simply statements of good intent.

Communication

Offer accessible formats, clear instructions, written follow-ups and ways to ask questions.

Recruitment

Consider accessible application processes, interview arrangements and fair assessment methods.

Workplace culture

Challenge stereotypes, protect confidentiality and respond constructively to concerns.

Shared decision-making

Involve disabled employees in decisions about changes that affect their participation.

Practical changes matter

A useful change removes a barrier in practice. Review whether adjustments are working, and remain open to changing needs.

What is already working well in my workplace?

What could be improved in communication, culture or access?

My Disability Inclusion Reflection

Use this space to capture learning and identify meaningful changes.
You do not need to complete every question.

What assumptions or ideas have I reconsidered?

How can environments and systems create or remove barriers?

What does respectful communication look like in practice?

What is one meaningful change I would like to encourage?

A final reminder

Inclusion means recognising different experiences, removing unnecessary barriers and sharing responsibility for accessible workplaces.