

# Communicating With Co-workers Who Have A Disability

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More individuals with disabilities are entering or re-entering the workplace everyday. As with any employee these individuals want to gain and use their skills and knowledge and make a contribution that benefits the organization. An important component of performing effectively in the workplace includes being able to build relationships with co-worker. And a key component of building relationships includes establishing effective lines of communication. For individuals with a disability and their co-workers communication can be a barrier to workplace relationships and performance.

Most of your employees will want to work effectively with their colleagues. However when an individual has a disability a lack of knowledge, awareness and understanding about disability can make building relationships more challenging. Educating your employees about disabilities in general can help breakdown misconceptions. Providing your employees with training on communication strategies can be a useful way to build workplace relationships.

## **Understanding Communication Barriers**

Disability can impact communication in a multitude of ways.

- Employees may have disabilities that add a physical barrier to communication impacting either or both receptive or expressive communications (receptive refers to receiving information and expressive refers to sharing information). Commonly these can include:
  1. a communication disorder that impacts the ability to speak or form words properly. This can include a physical problem in how words are formed and expressed.
  2. Different levels of ability in audio or hearing processing
  3. Different levels of ability with visual or sight processing. Your employees may not at first consider sight a component of a communication barrier but as so much information is communicated through visual cues it is important to understand that sight is an important component of communications.

- Other disabilities that may impact communications include the ability to process information for example:
  1. Learning disabilities (I.e. Dysfluency)
  2. Behavioural disabilities (i.e. ADD/ADHD, Autism)
  3. Mental health and psychological disabilities (i.e. Depression, Schizophrenia)

While some employees may fail to consider these disabilities a component of a communication barrier once they think about it they come to understand that it may be.

### **Challenges of Communication when Disability Is Present**

Communication is about sharing your message with other people. When barriers are present and no adaptation is available communication can suffer and then so can the work. The more you enable employees to share information clearly with one another the better the organization functions.

Although disability can pose a challenge for effective communications it is useful to note that the same common courtesy's that are part of everyday communication such as communicating to customers can make communication when disability is in the equation less of a barrier. In Ontario the AODA (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act) requires organizations to put in place communication supports to enable a barrier free and smooth experience in communications.

### **Options for Improving Communications**

- ***The first and best approach is increasing first awareness and then knowledge:*** Awareness refers to an understanding that there is a barrier and what it is and knowledge refers to understanding how the barrier impact or can impact disability. One of the best ways to develop awareness and knowledge is to ask the individual with the communication barrier what challenges he/she has experienced and what strategies can be useful. You should not put the pressure to solve the communication barrier on the employee but provide the opportunity for input.
- ***Identify resources including adaptive devices:*** Most of the time adaptive devices are not necessary and if they are necessary they are inexpensive. Software that enables an individual with a learning or processing disability can help ensure that written communications are clear. Other tools are commonly known and include
  - TTY phones
  - communication display boards
  - electrolarynges
  - speech generating devices
  - voice amplifiers
  - voice restoration and speaking valves
  - writing aids
  - adaptive devices to help people access writing and speech aids
- Many of these devices will be eligible for financial assistance in many Provinces. Having a tablet available to facilitate communication and loading onto it some apps to help correct written information or translate text to speech or speech to text can be
- ***Multiple Avenues of Communication:*** Among the best methods of ensuring communication is to provide communications in multiple formats with a process that includes confirmation of understanding in multiple formats. At the basic level this means supporting written communication with verbal communication and verbal with written. Verbal communication that is conducted in-person is often useful. However for some individuals with mental health or behavioural

disabilities the stress of in-person communications can mean that electronic including phone or SKYPE communications may actually be superior. A SKYPE call or similar communication method can enable communication by providing audio and visual information including screen sharing and text chatting. The advantage of this technique is that you do not need to identify a specific individual for different communication or indicate why you can make it a practice to ask employees what type of communication methods work best for them and then support them by enabling a process to use multiple forms of communication.

Communication barriers really need not hamper workplace relationships. Most co-workers when they are aware of a need of a co-worker will choose to adjust to work effectively with a co-worker. The challenge is frequently one of awareness and understanding for both the problem and how to address the problem. Opening up the dialogue about communication generally and individual needs specifically can open the doors to better workplace communications.