



Health and Safety for Workers with Disabilities



The word *disabled* means many different things to different people. People frequently picture wheelchairs, guide dogs, and other more obvious examples of disabilities. However disabilities often cannot be seen just by looking at a worker. Not all workers with mobility issues require a wheelchair, and not all visually impaired workers are completely blind. Other medical conditions can also be disabilities. For instance, people with occupational asthma may be completely free of symptoms as long as they work in an area with no irritants.

Employers have a responsibility to provide a safe workplace to *all* their workers. For workers with a disability, employers may have to take extra steps to meet this responsibility. Just as the employer has a duty to accommodate the particular needs of a worker with a disability (for example, by modifying their workspace or equipment) the employer is also required to ensure that the workplace health and safety program accommodates the needs of that worker as well. The fact is, planning and implementing a health and safety program for workers with disabilities will result in a greater level of safety *for all* workers.

If you are a worker with a disability

If you are a worker with a disability, you may need to tell your employer about how your disability causes work limitations. If your disability could affect the health and safety of you or your coworkers while working, many jurisdictions require you by law to disclose this information to your employer.

Also, coworkers may not be aware of how changes in the workplace can affect a particular disability, or how certain conditions can create hazards for someone with a disability. As such, once identified, employers and employee representatives should always seek the input of members with disabilities so they can play an active role in workplace planning.

There is help

It can be hard to talk about a disability with your employer. Many people fear losing their job or suffering harassment. Remember, your union's local health and safety representative can provide assistance. If you feel uncomfortable talking to your supervisor alone, you can insist that your steward or a health and safety representative accompany

you at meetings. It may be easier if you and your staff representative develop simple solutions to propose before meeting with your employer.

Once you have informed your supervisor, your health and safety committee should work with you and your employer to perform a hazard assessment to determine where and how the workplace should be altered to make it safer for you.

Hazard assessment

A hazard assessment is performed by a assessment team made up of employer and worker representatives (usually in conjunction with the health and safety committee). The assessment team examines the workplace for potential hazards and determines how people could be hurt. There are five things a hazard assessment team should do during an assessment:

1. **Find out what could hurt people by determining the hazards.** The health and safety committee should go to all work areas and determine what hazards exist. They should consider different jobs, the individual tasks and steps involved in that job, as well as the work environment and work schedule. The assessment team should examine work equipment and tools, including chemicals, and how the work has been organized.
2. **Determine how workers could be hurt by identified hazards.** This step is particularly important when working with workers with a disability. The worker with a disability should participate as much as possible, as the assessment team may not fully understand how hazards can affect the worker.
3. **Determine what steps must be taken to make the work healthy and safe.** The plan should consider the needs of the worker with a disability, including any relevant assistive devices or technologies that would ensure a greater level of safety for the worker. The plan should also involve all the workers who will be affected by the change. The assessment team should consider the need for any extra training.
4. **Make changes to make work safer.** Some relatively simple changes could include building access ramps and automatic doors, the addition of extra lighting, redesigning machinery, lowering a shelf, or modifying a mail cart. Job organizational factors, like job reassignment, altering hours of work, and flexible work schedules can also be considered. The assessment team should also consider the effects of work modification on other staff, and prepare a plan to avoid workplace harassment or bullying. Remember, it is your employer's obligation to ensure a workplace that is free of harassment and bullying.

5. **Follow-up on the changes.** Any changes to the workplace should be reviewed to determine how they are working for all parties involved. Also, as time passes new people, equipment or work processes may be introduced to the work environment. The result of these changes could require a new risk assessment and additional changes.

Accommodating a worker with a disability may require additional planning to reduce a hazard. For example, a person with limited hearing may not hear some alarms, so to reduce the hazard, the employer could install a flashing light.

The input of a worker with a disability is invaluable. Like other workers who know the hazards of their job, a worker with a disability understands how he or she is affected by different work environments. As mentioned, when possible a worker with a disability should accompany the hazard assessment team, or at least offer feedback on proposed solutions before those solutions are implemented.

What can be done to make the workplace safer?

Here are some examples of disabilities some workers experience, and a few suggestions to change the workplace and make it safer. This is not an exhaustive list, and each change must be evaluated to ensure it meets individual needs before it is implemented.

Mobility. As mentioned, not all people with mobility issues need a wheelchair. Some people use canes, crutches or walkers, while others may not require aids, but are still unable to move quickly. Removing thick carpet and ensuring proper cleaning can help workers with mobility issues. Doorways that open automatically or with a button reduce complications when moving between rooms. Doorways (especially emergency exits) should be at least 36 inches wide.

Hearing limitations. A flashing light alarm should be installed in work areas, including bathrooms, for alarms and announcements. Where a flashing alarm system is not practical, a coworker should be assigned to ensure that anyone with hearing impairments is made aware of what is happening in the workplace.

Vision impairment. Installing tactile ground surface indicators can help guide people through the workplace. When approaching stairs or doorways, a slight modification or change in the terrain (for example, a change from carpet to tile, or from tile to dimpled tile) or brightly coloured tape helps workers identify where they are and what to expect.

Emergency preparedness. While most of these design changes can help in day-to-day operations, it is crucial that emergency and evacuation plans take the abilities of all workers into account. If necessary, a buddy system can be included in evacuation protocols, so that at least two other workers are assigned to guiding and assisting workers who require assistance during an emergency.

Evacuation procedures should be evaluated and discussed with all workers, as they will know best what assistance, equipment and adjustments they require. People who are in charge during an emergency (such as fire wardens) should be aware of any worker with a disability that may reduce his or her ability to flee, should the need arise.

Keys to success

The best way to ensure the successful inclusion and integration of a worker with a disability is communication. Management should be clearly informed as to the needs of the worker, but they should not press to know more information than is needed. They must also be careful to avoid discrimination or harassment.

Other workers whose jobs will be affected should be brought into the discussion as well, however the privacy rights of workers with a disability must be protected at all times. Good communication between the worker, union representatives and management will ensure that any required changes can be implemented with few conflicts.

The solution to health and safety issues will be unique to your situation. CUPE has a collection of fact sheets and guidelines that can help you make your workplace safer for all workers, including those with a disability.

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Showing our mettle



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