The benefits of employing someone with a learning disability in your workplace

Are you committed to equal opportunities?

77% of the public think more highly of companies that make an extra effort to employ people with a disability.¹

Do you lack the first-hand knowledge to reach your disabled customer base?

Your customer base will appreciate the efforts you are making to be an equal opportunities employer. Many of your actual and potential customers are people with a learning disability. Your organisation will be more representative of the community.

Do you want your staff to be more aware of disability issues?

Your staff will overcome any misconceptions about learning disability by getting to know a colleague with a learning disability.

Would your managers benefit from the challenge of supporting a diverse team?

Your staff are likely to respond well to a more diverse team, particularly if they are given the chance to 'buddy' or line manage the person.

Does your team lack morale? Is there a high rate of sickness?

Many people with a learning disability have been excluded from the workplace for a long time, and are very keen to work hard. Their enthusiasm can be infectious. Team dynamics and overall performance have been known to improve as a result of employing someone with a learning disability.

Do you have trouble recruiting for certain positions?

If you have jobs that are hard to recruit to, or tasks that your staff struggle to fit in to their workload, you may find that a candidate with a learning disability would perform these tasks willingly and very well.

Do you need to recruit and retain loyal, hard-working staff?

There is evidence to suggest that employees with a learning disability stay with one employer for a longer time than most other employees, and take less time off work.

Do you want the right person for the job?

By welcoming candidates with a learning disability, you will be accessing a part of the workforce that you are unlikely to have reached before. You are more likely to recruit the right person to the right job if you are not excluding anybody.

There is a clear business case for diversity in the workplace. It is hugely beneficial to have a workforce which is representative of our customer base. We are committed to employing more people with a learning disability within the organisation.

Helen Webb, retail human resources director Sainsbury's plc

The rewards are amazing. It changes the dynamics of your team. We've got a business to run, targets to meet. This doesn't stop us. It helps rather than gets in the way. ??

Janette Garlick, customer services manager London Borough of Sutton

In our experience, people with a learning disability are reliable and committed members of staff and contribute a huge amount to the team. With Mencap's support, we are looking to employ more people with a learning disability.

Ian Branch, general manager UK and Ireland service delivery, Xerox Global Services

About Mencap and learning disability

A learning disability is caused by the way the brain develops. There are many different types and most develop before a baby is born, during birth or because of a serious illness in early childhood. A learning disability is lifelong and usually has a significant impact on a person's life.

Learning disability is not mental illness or dyslexia.

People with a learning disability find it harder than others to learn, understand and communicate. People with profound and multiple learning disabilities need full-time help with every aspect of their lives – including eating, drinking, washing, dressing and toileting.

There are 1.5 million people with a learning disability in the UK. Most are treated as 'different'. They do not have the same control over their own lives as the rest of our society.

That's why Mencap is here. We work with people with a learning disability to change laws and services, challenge prejudice and directly support thousands of people to live their lives as they choose.

What can you expect from someone with a learning disability in your workplace?

If someone has a learning disability, it doesn't mean that they can't learn. In fact, although a person with a learning disability will learn more slowly than some people, they will often learn more carefully and may perform tasks better than others over time.

People with a learning disability often need support to learn new tasks or to understand new situations. It may be possible for a member of your team to provide this support, taking on a 'buddy' role until the person has settled in. Supported employment agencies, such as Mencap Pathway, can also provide a job coach to help the person learn their role and to troubleshoot if things go wrong.

The vast majority of people with a learning disability have little or no experience of paid work. They may lack confidence and need a little extra attention at the start. It might be wise to let your team know that you have a person with a learning disability joining you, and make sure that everyone is positive and welcoming.

What kind of work can a person with a learning disability do?

People with a learning disability are all individuals with different skills so they will be able to do many different kinds of jobs. While we would encourage you to keep an open mind about what each individual can offer, there are some general guidelines about the sort of jobs you might be able to open up to candidates with a learning disability.

The types of jobs that could most easily be made accessible to people with a learning disability include:

- jobs that require practical skills that can be learned through practice and repetition
- · jobs that do not require high level qualifications
- jobs that do not require a driving licence
- jobs that have fixed elements and only require a little multitasking
- jobs within teams where tasks can be shared and support can be offered.

One approach which often proves helpful in employing people with a learning disability is called job carving. Instead of fitting a person into a rigid job description, it can be much more effective to identify different tasks that a person with a learning disability can do, and 'carve' out a job from these different tasks.

This might involve freeing up the receptionist from doing the mail distribution or freeing up the office manager from stuffing envelopes and data entry. All of the tasks should be genuine business needs for the employer that the employee with a learning disability could usefully do. **There should also be opportunities for progression.**

We job carved a role for Camilla based on the everyday tasks that needed doing around the office. Camilla started off by doing an eight-week work placement with us and had support from a job coach for about four hours a week. She got on brilliantly. The role we carved out for Camilla really plays to her strengths and we were delighted to be able to offer her the job on a permanent basis. ??

Sandra Hammersley, business support manager Suffolk county council

Where a new member of staff may be expected to perform a variety of tasks from day one, it is often more appropriate to stagger progression for people with a learning disability. Once they are confident performing one task, they can go on to learn the next.

Many people with a learning disability will have little or no experience of paid work, but a work setting where they can perform practical, hands-on tasks is often the best environment for them. Once the individual has developed their skills in a number of particular areas, they can then be supported to gain promotion and extend those skills.

In an office or administrative setting, examples of tasks which could be carved out of existing jobs might include:

- sending out pay slips
- · compiling information packs
- handing out the post
- · photocopying for large mail-outs
- putting labels onto envelopes
- answering the phone and taking messages.

In a retail setting, examples of tasks which could be carved out of existing jobs might include:

- · stock replenishment
- helping shoppers find goods
- facing up stock
- pricing goods
- warehouse/stock control.

These responsibilities could form a role for someone who would take great pride in performing them. Your business would run more efficiently, with fewer tasks being left to the last minute.

Remember: everyone with a learning disability is an individual, and will bring different skills and talents to the workplace. A learning disability can be mild, moderate or severe – so some people with a learning disability can do more complex tasks while others will need more basic responsibilities. Job carving will not be necessary for every person with a learning disability.

Supported employment agencies, such as Mencap Pathway, can guide employers further and can help to match the right person to the right job.

- I was looking for work for five years. I really wanted to get a job and felt so frustrated and in despair. Then I found out about Mencap Pathway. They set up a work placement for me at Sutton council. My placement went really well and I was offered the job. I was elated!
- I work in the clerical support department at Sutton council and have been there for two years. I get to work with all sorts of people and I like the fact that I don't just work with other disabled people. I really like the routine of what I'm doing, the focus of my day and earning money for myself. I feel like my life has a purpose now and I have a reason to get up in the morning.

What support is available to employers who take on a person with a learning disability?

There are a number of support mechanisms available to employers who want to employ someone with a learning disability. These range from government initiatives like as Access to Work, to practical support in the workplace from agencies such as Mencap Pathway or other supported employment services.

Access to Work

Access to Work is a discretionary government grant. Jobcentre Plus pays a grant to employers, through Access to Work, towards any extra employment costs that result from a person's disability.

Access to Work can pay for things like aids and adaptations, transport costs, a communicator at a job interview, a support worker and job coaches. It can cover 100% of the costs of aids and adaptations for a new employee with a learning disability.

To find out more, you should contact your local disability employment adviser (DEA) through your nearest Jobcentre Plus office. The DEA will put you in touch with an Access to Work adviser who will be able to tell you more and advise on your particular circumstances.

It is important to remember that Access to Work does not replace the normal responsibilities of the employer to implement health and safety regulations or replace the responsibilities required by the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). For details on the DDA, see the 'Workplace adjustments for people with a learning disability' factsheet (number five in this pack).

Supported employment services

Supported employment services (such as Mencap Pathway or the Shaw Trust) provide specialised employment help for people with a disability. In particular, they will put employers in touch with candidates with a disability and can support those candidates through the recruitment process and beyond. A supported employment agency will work with both the individual and the employer to ensure success.

Some supported employment services, including Mencap Pathway, are specifically aimed at supporting people with a learning disability into paid work. For details of supported employment agencies in the UK see the 'Further information and advice' factsheet (number nine in this pack).

Jobcentre Plus

Jobcentre Plus is a Department for Work and Pensions agency. There are Jobcentre Plus offices throughout the country. Jobcentre Plus staff will advise on benefits and employment and can provide employers with disabled candidates.

Disability employment advisers (DEAs), based in Jobcentre Plus offices, are dedicated to supporting disabled people who want to find work, and employers who wish to employ someone with a disability. DEAs can also advise employers on specialist support services in the area.

To speak to your DEA, contact your local Jobcentre Plus office.

Disability awareness training

Organisations such as Mencap can provide disability awareness training to your staff, with a particular focus on learning disability.

Contact 01709 830 956 to find out more about Mencap's learning disability awareness training.

Equality and Human Rights Commission

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) can give advice and information to employers to help them meet their duties and promote equality in the workplace.

- We have greatly benefited from the advice and support that Mencap have given us over the years. We ran a placement programme in conjunction with Mencap and through this, Alison began a placement within our front of house team.
- We worked with Mencap to develop Alison in such a way that she would be able to apply for the position in the future. This happened last year and we were delighted that Alison was successful. Alison's bright and bubbly personality has meant she has fitted well into the team and the support which we both get from Mencap is tremendous.
- Alison's story is a great example of disability organisations and businesses working together to provide greater access to jobs for those with disabilities and in turn to enrich the customers' experience.

Judith Owens, front of house manager, Waterfront Hall, Northern Ireland

Workplace adjustments for people with a learning disability

The Disability Discrimination Act requires employers to make reasonable adjustments that will remove barriers to disabled people seeking to find and keep a job.

Most adjustments for disabled people are inexpensive – on average an adjustment costs only £75.1

People with a learning disability rarely need physical adjustments and the adjustments they do need often cost nothing at all. By making adjustments to your company's policies and procedures you will remove barriers for this group of job seekers, and you may well benefit others too.

These adjustments include:

- changes to your recruitment procedures you could consider allowing practical on-the-job interviews rather than formal interviews or written tests
- changes to standard procedures you could introduce colour-coded filing systems, change the way you deliver health and safety information or have more regular appraisals
- changes to job requirements you could consider whether a job really requires applicants to have a driver's licence or a high-level qualification
- changes to role specifications you could re-allocate tasks that may tie up your existing employees to carve out a suitable job for a candidate with a learning disability
- providing a supporter to help a person with a learning disability to learn their role this could be a member of your team who would respond well to some additional responsibility.

It is possible that you are unintentionally excluding people with a learning disability from your workforce. Most standard recruitment procedures are a barrier to people with a learning disability, equivalent to asking a wheelchair user to use a staircase.

Our experience of employing people with a learning disability has brought many benefits to the organisation. We know that people with a learning disability make highly valued employees – they just need the opportunity to prove it. ??

David Hilliard, site services supervisor, Pitney Bowes, Reuters Building

Alison's story

Mencap helped Alison to get a voluntary role at the Waterfront Hall, an arts, entertainment and conference centre. Alison's line manager arranged for her to shadow other members of staff so that she could build up her knowledge and develop her skills.

Alison's confidence grew and when the posts for front of house staff became available she decided she wanted to apply for the job. Mencap helped Alison to complete her application form and she was given an interview. The Waterfront Hall helped Alison prepare for interview by giving advice on the subject areas that might be covered.

Although Alison was very nervous, the interview went well. Within a week Alison heard that she had got the job and was delighted. She had prepared herself for the worst and did not want to dream that she could get a job like that.

Alison has now been working at the Waterfront Hall as a paid member of staff for four months. She feels this has made a huge difference to her and she is working for money for the first time in her life, at the age of 37. Alison feels she has come a long way and the difficulties she would have faced on her own have been made easier by the support from Mencap and her employer.

Public sector bodies

- how can you make a difference?

To treat people fairly, you have to treat people differently.

Susan Scott Parker, Employers' Forum on Disability

Since 2006, the Disability Equality Duty has required public sector bodies to promote equal opportunities for disabled people. Employing people with a learning disability is one way for public sector employers to promote equality, while enhancing your workforce at the same time.

If you are a public sector employer, you can reduce social exclusion by focusing your efforts and resources upon the most excluded groups in your community. Your workforce should reflect the community you are part of. One of the most effective ways to achieve this is to seek out people with a learning disability as potential employees.

People with a learning disability face exceptionally high unemployment rates. Therefore, it is recommended that public bodies prioritise employment opportunities for people with a learning disability. They should ensure that people with a learning disability are not substantially disadvantaged in their access to jobs.

There are many steps you can take to make people with a learning disability a priority within your drive to recruit disabled people.³

You can:

- engage with supported employment agencies who work with people with a learning disability⁴
- consider replacing the formal, competitive interview and replacing it with a period of work experience followed by a less formal interview when recruiting new staff
- be creative when looking at roles for your staff consider allocating parts of different jobs to a candidate with a learning disability
- ask a member of your team to be a 'buddy' to a person with a learning disability until they have learned the ropes
- arrange disability awareness training for your staff, making sure there is a strong focus on learning disability
- encourage the use of plain English throughout your organisation, both written and spoken
- adjust your standard procedures, such as inductions and health and safety demonstrations, and avoid too much written material
- encourage visible senior leadership don't restrict your strategy to human resources
- encourage 'champions' who have successfully employed candidates with a learning disability to speak to other departments
- speak to other public bodies that have successfully employed people with a learning disability.⁵

¹ 'Valuing People' white paper 2001, Department of Health

² See factsheet 7 in this pack for more details of reasonable adjustments and recruiting people with a learning disability

³ Mencap's WorkRight for Local Authorities DVD can provide further details

⁴ See factsheet 9 in this pack for a list of these agencies and their contact details

⁵ See 'Valued in Public', November 2005, CSIP

I work for the council in the parking services department.

Before I got my job I did a lot of voluntary work, but my biggest dream was to earn money for myself and help my family too.

When I got the call to say that I had got the job I felt proud and excited and a bit nervous too. Now I really enjoy it. It has given me confidence and independence and I really like getting to meet new people. ??

Natasha Smith

Natasha has been with us for four months now. She is an excellent employee and a much valued member of the team. Before Natasha came on board we were outsourcing aspects of the department's work to an external organisation. Since Natasha joined us we no longer have to do this. We have not only gained a great member of staff, but have made a significant financial saving. ??

Jeanette Garlick, head of customer services, London borough of Sutton

How to approach the recruitment process

Very few people with a learning disability get through the initial recruitment stage. Here are some steps you can take to make sure you don't exclude people with a learning disability from your workforce.

Interviews

Formal interviews are daunting to most people. Interviews can be particularly difficult for a candidate with a learning disability because they often play to their weaknesses and give the candidate little or no opportunity to demonstrate their strengths.

Interviews are a superficial environment in which candidates are often asked hypothetical questions. This puts a candidate with a learning disability at a substantial disadvantage. Arguably, an interview is an unfair test of a person's ability to do a job, particularly if the job requires practical skills.

As a reasonable adjustment under the Disability Discrimination Act, you could waive the interview process altogether. Instead, you could:

- have a short, practical assessment in the workplace in which the candidate is shown
 the skills that the job requires and is asked to demonstrate their capacity to do the task
 you should encourage the candidate to bring a supporter along, if they need one
- offer a 'work trial' of up to eight weeks in which the person learns the job, proves their ability, and, if it works out, the job is theirs this is sometimes known as an 'on the job' interview.

If you must hold an interview, you could make the following adjustments so that the procedure is less of a barrier. You could:

- encourage the candidate to bring a supporter to the interview
- let the candidate know what to expect in advance. For example, how many people they
 will be meeting, how many questions they will be asked, the types of questions and how
 long the interview is likely to last
- make the interview as informal as possible consider whether you need a panel or whether the number of people interviewing could be reduced
- make sure the candidate and their supporter have time to prepare in advance, particularly if there is an aptitude test, and provide additional time to sit the test
- allow more time for the interview
- use plain English and make sure the person is following you it is fine to ask, "do you
 understand the question?" and to offer to rephrase it if necessary
- avoid hypothetical questions like, "what would you do if...?" and ask questions that relate
 to the person's direct experience instead like "can you tell me what you did at the library?"
- ask questions about the person's disability provided they relate to the person's ability to
 do the job, for example, 'can you read and write?' is acceptable for a job where literacy is
 essential.

Selection

When selecting candidates for a job, don't rule out candidates who have little or no paid work experience. Many candidates with a learning disability have difficulty with the recruitment process so often have a great deal of unpaid work experience but no paid experience.

Advertisements

If you are using advertisements to recruit, it is good practice to publicly welcome applications from people with disabilities. Make it clear that you can provide the vacancy information in an accessible format such as large print (which people with a learning disability will find easier to read) or with illustrations. If you place your advert with the disability employment adviser at Jobcentre Plus, you can guarantee that people with disabilities will see it. You can also mail your vacancy bulletins to your local Mencap Pathway service or another agency who specialise in supporting people with a learning disability into work.

Equal opportunities policy statements

Research shows that the employers most successful in attracting disabled people to work for them are those with a commitment to equal opportunities. It is crucial to state disability explicitly in any equal opportunities policy, to reassure any applicants with a learning disability or any other disability that their needs will be met. Regular checks should be made to ensure such policies are implemented.

Disability symbol



The disability symbol is a very visible way for employers to show that they are taking positive steps to employ disabled people. To find out more, please contact your disability employment adviser at Jobcentre Plus.

Application forms

Some people with a learning disability can fill in an application form by themselves but others will need help from a supporter. Where a supporter has filled the form in on someone's behalf, this should be stated at the time of application. In some cases, you might allow candidates to submit their application in different formats such as by telephone, by audio tape or by email. It is good practice to include a question on the application form to ask applicants if they would have any special requirements at interview.

Recruitment days

Jobcentre Plus or your local supported employment agency could help you to organise a recruitment day where you can welcome people with a learning disability or any disability to come and find out about working for your organisation. Make sure that your staff receive disability awareness training before any event you organise.

Best practice in employing people with a learning disability

Unemployment among people with a learning disability is extremely high – it is estimated that up to 90% of people with a learning disability known to social services are out of work. For those who do work, many are poorly paid, excluded from opportunities for promotion, or in jobs that do not match their skills or support needs. Many work very few hours a week and do not get the opportunity to build up their hours. When things are done right, people with a learning disability thrive in the work environment. When things are done badly, a lot of potential and talent goes to waste.

Here is some best practice guidance for employing people with a learning disability.

Pay the going rate for the job

A candidate with a learning disability should be paid the same as other employees for the same work. It is not acceptable to pay less on the assumption that a person's output will be lower. The national minimum wage should be paid as a minimum, regardless of output.

Volunteering and work experience

Volunteering opportunities in not-for-profit organisations can be rewarding and valuable experience for people with a learning disability. However, people with a learning disability should not be volunteering indefinitely for commercial organisations. Good practice would dictate that such placements be temporary and should take the form of time-limited work experience placements, as a forerunner to paid work.

If a candidate with a learning disability starts work with you on a voluntary basis, the position should either end or progress to paid work. Paying a person for some of their work and treating the rest as 'volunteering' is never acceptable. Work experience placements should also end or lead to paid work.

Learning disability awareness training

Providing learning disability awareness training to the team that will be working alongside someone with a learning disability can make sure the person is brought into a welcoming and enlightened environment.

Bullying

Bullying should not be tolerated and should be treated very seriously if reported.

Reasonable adjustments

Reasonable adjustments should be provided and employers should take the initiative in asking an employee with a learning disability if there is anything that could help them to do the job. Examples of reasonable adjustments include provision of job coaches, supporters, buddies, accessible information, job carving and adjustments to recruitment procedures. None of these adjustments is costly and many of them would benefit existing employees.

The right person for the right job

Giving someone a job out of altruism or sympathy is unnecessary and unlikely to lead to a successful outcome. A supported employment agency will help you to match an appropriate employee to your business needs.

Chloe is 21 years-old. She approached Mencap in August 2007 for help with finding paid work. Chloe was really enthusiastic about the prospect of working and Mencap helped her to find a job in a residential care home. In the few months that she has been there, Chloe has developed hugely in confidence and thoroughly enjoys her job. Her manager said:

It became clear very early on that Chloe had a lot to offer the residents of the home. We have widened her job role in order for her to be able to use a wider range of skills and abilities and she is getting on brilliantly. She is a very valuable member of the team.

Carolyn Gibbins, housekeeping supervisor of Grove Court residential home

Further information and advice

Supported employment agencies

BASE are a UK network of supported employment agencies. You can find details of all the member organisations on the BASE website.

Website: www.base-uk.org

Mencap offers a range of education and employment services for people with a learning disability through all stages of training and development. There are a number of different services, including Mencap's supported employment service – **Mencap Pathway.** This provides employers with potential candidates matched to job requirements, and ongoing support from a job coach.

Website: www.mencap.org.uk Telephone: 01709 830 956

Mencap's WorkRight project is an employment scheme aimed at national coverage employers. If you are a local employer you should contact Mencap's education and employment service on 01709 830 956 – they will put you in touch with your local Mencap Pathway office.

Website: www.mencap.org.uk/workright

Telephone: 020 7696 5601

Remploy can refer disabled candidates to employers.

Website: www.remploy.co.uk Telephone: 0845 900 0031

Shaw Trust provide a supported employment service.

Website: www.shaw-trust.org.uk

Telephone: 01225 716 300

United Response provide a supported employment service.

Website: www.unitedresponse.org.uk

Telephone: 020 8246 5200

Advice and help

The Employers Forum on Disability can give guidance on reasonable adjustments for disabled people.

Website: www.employers-forum.co.uk

Jobcentre Plus can refer disabled employees and offer support through their employment programmes. Disability employment advisers can refer employers to the Access to Work programme.

Website: www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) can give advice and information to employers to help them meet their duties and promote equality.

Website: www.equalityhumanrights.com

Useful publications

'You can work it out – best practice in employment for people with a learning disability', published by CSIP 2006. You can download a copy from www.valuingpeople.gov.uk/dynamic/valuingpeople120.jsp

'Valued in Public – helping people with a learning disability to work in public bodies', published by CSIP 2005. You can download a copy from www.valuingpeople.gov.uk/dynamic/valuingpeople120.jsp

'Employment: A practical guide to the law and best practice for employers', published by the Disability Rights Commission. You can download a copy from www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publicationsandresources/Disability