Briefing

Employment adjustments for people with sight loss



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Introduction

What is sight loss?

Over two million people in the UK are living with sight loss, with around 350,000 people registered as blind or partially sighted.[1] The number of people with sight loss in the UK is expected to double by 2050.

There are many causes of sight loss – some people are born with a visual loss, others inherit an eye condition and some lose their sight as a result of an accident, after illness, or through age.

One in five people aged 75 and over is living with sight loss and one in two people aged 90 and over is living with sight loss. Also, adults with learning disabilities are 10 times more likely to be blind or partially sighted than the general population.

Sight loss affects the visual acuity and/or the field of vision.

Visual acuity

Visual acuity allows people to look at objects in detail, describing how clear or sharp the vision is.

[1] RNIB

Field of vision

The field of vision is the area that people can see without moving the eyes from side to side.

Few people who have sight loss have no vision at all and so your employees may have different levels of vision. For example:

- Blind and partially sighted people only 4% of people registered as `blind' have absolutely no useful vision.
- People who have no central vision or no vision to the sides.
- People with blurred or patchy vision.

Many people with sight loss are able to get around, using their remaining vision or with the use of a mobility aid, such as a white cane or a guide dog. The degree and nature of sight loss is specific to the individual and assumptions about what that might mean for individuals should not be made.

Employment and people with sight loss

Many people with sight loss will be protected under the Equality Act 2010 but may not consider themselves to be disabled.

Nevertheless employers have a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments and not discriminate against current or potential employees who might be facing barriers at work because of a disability or long-term condition – even if it has not been diagnosed as a disability or accepted as such by the individual.

Employers should be aware that non-visible disabilities, such as sight loss, mean that specific barriers can be less obvious. This means reasonable adjustments may be more challenging for employers to determine and put in place. Employers can seek advice from Work Coaches and Disability Employment Advisers at Jobcentre Plus who refer people with sight loss for positions. There are also organisations which offer specialist advice and disability awareness training to help employers ensure that their recruitment process takes into account any barriers faced by those with sight loss – **see page 29 for further details**.

It is important that employers have an honest conversation with new employees and their support staff about the barriers that may be present in the workplace and what simple measures might help to remove them. The best practice approach is to make reasonable adjustments for anyone who needs them in order to work effectively and contribute fully to your organisation. Most employers will want to know what is 'reasonable'. Doing what seems fair for the individual and others who work for you given the size and resources of your organisation is a good place to start.

This guidance will help you deliver best practice.

- You might need to treat people differently in order to treat them fairly.
- Don't make assumptions about what people can and cannot do.
- Ensure that everyone knows who is responsible for doing what and when it must be done.
- Involve the individual in identifying barriers and generating solutions to them.
- Respect their right to confidentiality.

For more detail on the law and making reasonable adjustments contact **Business Disability Forum's** Advice Service on telephone number **+44-(0)-20-7403-3020** or by email **advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk** or see the Briefing on The Equality Act 2010.

Reasonable adjustments and best practice

Only one-third of blind and partially-sighted people of working age are in employment,[2] representing a significant untapped resource in the labour market.

As age-related eye conditions are the most common cause of sight loss in the UK, even if you do not currently employ someone with a sight loss, it is likely that you will have to manage the retention of an employee with sight loss in the future.

Employers often regard people with sight loss as particularly hard to employ. Misconceptions include the belief that they are restricted to certain jobs and will require a lot of specialist support. However, people with sight loss can undertake many jobs and, with adjustments, training and support, can demonstrate the same employment potential as anyone else.

Consider the skills, abilities and aspirations of each individual and implement appropriate and reasonable support so that everyone can maximise their potential; this can have a positive effect on an organisation as it unlocks different ways of tackling problems, removing barriers and making decisions.

The severity and impact of sight loss varies, as do the strategies that help people with sight loss overcome barriers in employment. Adjustments may well be simple and inexpensive and they make good business sense. Without adjustments, good candidates may not apply for jobs and good employees could be lost. Precise requirements vary from one individual to another, so you should always ask the person what they need. By talking to employees both at the beginning of employment but also regularly about their work going forward, employers are better able to identify difficulties that could be attributable to an employee having sight loss.

[2] RNIB

Recruitment and selection

Candidates with sight loss may be prevented from both applying for jobs and demonstrating their abilities and potential by conventional recruitment processes and a more creative approach might be worth considering.

You need to make sure that you do not discriminate against a disabled job applicant during the recruitment process. You may also have to make reasonable adjustments during the recruitment process. It is important not to make assumptions about what the applicant can or cannot do; instead, ask applicants about any adjustments they may require. Your willingness to make such adjustments should be well publicised as part of any recruitment process. If you use external recruitment agencies, ask for evidence that they make reasonable adjustments for disabled applicants and work to the standards that underpin this guidance.

Employers should be aware that some potential employees with sight loss may have in place or need to put in place effective support from a specialist job coach. Local employment support providers can be contracted by Jobcentre Plus staff to support people before, during and after recruitment. The Access to Work (AtW) scheme can help fund adjustments, for example adaptations to equipment. For more information on this support, visit: **GOV.UK - Looking for a job**

Further information on best practice in recruitment and selection is also available from the Government's Disability Confident Scheme. For further information, visit: **disabilityconfident.campaign.gov.uk** or contact **Business Disability Forum's Advice Service** on telephone number **+44-(0)-20-7403-3020** or by email **advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk**.

Remember that it is unlawful to ask questions about health or a disability prior to a job offer under the Equality Act 2010 unless the question relates directly to an intrinsic aspect of the role for which the person is applying, or is for the purpose of making reasonable adjustments to the application or interview process. Questions about disability can still be asked on equal opportunities monitoring forms.

Job descriptions

Job descriptions can inadvertently place unnecessary barriers in the way of people with sight loss. When drawing up job descriptions and candidate specifications:

- Be specific about what skills are needed and what the job involves.
- Distinguish between essential and desirable requirements and ensure you present an accurate picture of the job and key skills actually required, e.g. the essential criteria of a receptionist is to answer the telephone and meet and greet visitors; a desirable skill may be to take notes of meetings.
- Be flexible. Very often minor changes can make a significant difference.
- Do not ask for educational qualifications that do not relate to the position. This may exclude people with sight loss who have not been successful in education.
- Do not needlessly exclude a candidate with sight loss. Concentrate on what is to be achieved in a job rather than on how it is achieved, e.g. stating "must be able to drive" may exclude a candidate with sight loss who is able to demonstrate how they will be able to travel extensively throughout the UK to meet clients using alternative means of transport or support from a travel buddy financed via Access to Work.
- Be prepared to provide job recruitment information in alternative formats as well as accepting completed application forms in alternative formats. Appreciate that a written application may have been completed with support.

There is no requirement to alter the fundamental nature of a job so that a candidate with a disability can do it.

Advertising and attracting applicants

When advertising a job:

- Use positive wording like "we welcome disabled applicants" or "being part of Business Disability Forum's membership highlights our commitment to becoming a disability-smart organisation".
- Be clear that you are willing to make reasonable adjustments.
- Display or mention the Disability Confident symbol if you are a symbol holder.
- Ensure the print size and type used in printed advertisement is a minimum of 12 point for accessibility. Avoid light type weights and unusual typefaces.
- Ensure that online advertisements are posted in plain text and not as a picture; this will allow people to enlarge and modify the font based on their specific needs.
- Advertise in more than one place. In addition to mainstream press, advertise on local radio, talking newspapers and in the community press.
- Consider targeted advertising through specialist organisations that work for people with sight loss (e.g. Action for Blind People or the RNIB) or employment agencies such as Jobcentre Plus.
- Provide a point of contact for people who are concerned about the recruitment process, giving a range of contact methods, e.g. email and telephone.
- State that information is available in alternative formats and that applications will be accepted in alternative formats, e.g. by email or on USB stick.

Application forms

To make sure you do not unintentionally exclude a candidate from applying for a post:

- For printed documents, use a clear, sans serif font, minimum font size 12 point and where possible, use matt pastel-coloured paper.
- Electronic application forms should be provided in an open format that allows applicants to modify font size and font face. Avoid using tables and boxes to format the document as it can prevent a person from navigating the document easily.
- Be ready to provide the form and job details in large print, email, or in audio format. Better still, offer this facility when the job is advertised.

Remember that 42% of all people with sight loss people in the UK can read print if it is of sufficient size and clarity. As well as providing these forms, make sure you have a mechanism to accept applications that come back by email.

Adjustments may need to be made to the shortlisting process, because an applicant may:

- Apply for a job for which they are over qualified because they need to regain confidence.
- Have gaps in their CV due to their disability.
- Have gained experience outside of paid employment, e.g. work experience and voluntary work.

Application forms should be clear, easy to complete and as straight forward as possible to improve accessibility. Where possible, an easy read version should also be made available.

Be careful about using selection criteria which might disadvantage someone with sight loss, e.g., using handwriting to sift out candidates or asking for requirements which aren't directly related to undertaking the job role such as `must have current driving license' unless the job is a driving job.

Interviews and tests

Ensure that candidates who have sight loss are able to demonstrate their ability to do the job and what they can contribute to your organisation. Focus on the person's abilities, not on the person's sight loss. If you have any doubts about a person's ability to do an intrinsic function of the job simply ask how they would do it.

When you invite applicants for an interview, make sure the details are offered in alternative formats and that you ask the candidate if they require any adjustments to be made in advance for the interview. Remember that different people will have different requirements. Not everyone will need all or even any of these adjustments.

- Consider how the candidate will reach the interview venue. If public transport could prove difficult, offer to reimburse the taxi fare.
- Ensure that reception and security staff know how to welcome and assist visitors with sight loss.
- Arrange the layout of the interview room so the candidate can get around – ask the applicant where they would like to sit for the interview.
- Ask if the candidate wishes to be accompanied from reception to the interview. If so, ask how they would like to be escorted. If your offer is declined, lead the way at a steady pace and continue talking.
- Ensure that interviewers do not sit with a light source directly behind them. They should introduce themselves clearly, giving the candidate time to relax and to identify panel members.
- A candidate with sight loss may find it difficult to respond to eye-to-eye contact, so do not use this as assessment criteria for them.

If selection normally involves a test, be sure that it does not discriminate against a disabled applicant:

- Discuss the test with the test publisher and seek guidance on possible adjustments including alternative formats.
- Consult disabled candidates in advance so that necessary adjustments can be made.
- Ensure that test instructions are clearly read aloud and/or provided on paper in a format suitable for the candidate (if the information is provided prior to the interview date).
- Allow the use of a computer if it is the way the candidate prefers to access written documents. If this is not possible then allow the use of an amanuensis (a person employed to write or type what another dictates or to copy what has been written by another).
- Ensure that any instructions are understood by the candidate.
- Allow candidates with sight loss more time to complete the test unless the job requires the task to be completed in a specified time.
- If adjustments are unsuitable, be prepared to waive the test. There are often equally satisfactory ways of getting information.
- Use assessment processes which are directly related to the job, e.g. don't ask candidates to give a presentation unless this would be part of the job, as such tasks might discriminate against some candidates with sight loss.

Post job-offer

Once someone has been offered a job, you may need to put in place adjustments to ensure they can perform to the best of their ability.

Start getting the adjustments in place as soon as practicable after you have made a job offer – it may take time to set up adjustments and secure Access to Work funding when applicable. Consult the individual and make sure that the employee's manager or supervisor understands the agreed adjustments. Appropriate disability awareness training may be especially useful for the candidate's team.

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

Completing a 'tailored adjustment plan' with new employees who have a disability or with an employee who develops a disability is a good way of recording and reviewing adjustments that have been agreed and actions that will be taken if the employee is off sick.

To see an example of a tailored adjustment agreement and to download a template, visit Business Disability Forum's website at **businessdisabilityforum.org.uk** or contact **Business Disability Forum's Advice Service** on telephone number +44-(0)-20-7403-3020 or by email **advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk**.

Working arrangements to retain employees

Many adjustments will also help you to retain those who develop sight loss.

Keeping an existing employee's skills and experience saves the cost of recruiting and training a replacement, and possibly the cost of early retirement. Remember, employees who experience sight loss that begins to affect their ability to do the job are often unwilling or unable to admit the potential implications of what is happening.

An employee may well need a period of disability leave to adjust to changes caused by the development of sight loss for example to obtain a guide dog and/or develop new ways of working and living independently.

For more information, see the 'Managing sickness absence' Briefing and the 'Attendance management and disability – Line manager guide'.

It may be helpful to build into your annual performance appraisal system a mechanism for identifying and resolving disability-related problems, for example by incorporating a standard question asking if any working arrangements are causing the employee problems or creating barriers. A tailored adjustment plan may also be a useful way of recording and reviewing adjustments that an employee with sight loss needs. A template for a tailored adjustment plan can be found on Business Disability Forum's website at **businessdisabilityforum.org.uk** In some cases the team around the employee may benefit from greater awareness on the subject particularly on how to work effectively with colleagues such as explaining specific activities or work documents which contain graphs and so on, how to escort someone when travelling as well as how to treat a guide dog if one is used by the employee.

Below and overleaf is a non-exhaustive list of suggested adjustments organised under three categories: reading; writing; using a computer and software. Consider these adjustments to ensure an employee can work effectively.

A number of suggestions are listed under each category. A person's pattern of sight loss may make some of these inappropriate. For example, if a person has difficulty in handwriting, then asking them to take notes and check them as a way of remembering and following verbal instructions will not be appropriate. Instead, encouraging the employee to use a digital voice recorder (Dictaphone) or to take notes on a computer may be the best solution. Try out some of the adjustments until the person finds the best way of working.

Remember, do not assume that as the employer, you know best – always consult the individual.

Reading

- Allow plenty of time for the person to read information.
- You may need to provide printed information in an alternative format.
- Computer settings can be modified to change the font size of electronic documents; alternatively; refer to page 23 for more information.
- Supply a scanner (for print documents) and an Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software (for both print and electronic documents); this will allow documents to be modified by the user when necessary. Alternatively, allocate a colleague (or a support worker through Access to Work) to read post and other literature.
- When possible, provide meeting hand-outs and other related documents in advance of meetings.
- Use brightly coloured labels, thick pens with good contrast with the background colour, dots or tactile marks.

Writing

- If it suits the person's need, allow the person to type rather than handwrite. You may also want to consider providing them with a speech-to-text/dictation software.
- It may be difficult for a blind person to easily spot their spelling or grammatical errors; supply a phonetic spellchecker designed to pick up common errors.

Using a computer and software

- If required, supply a screen reader or screen magnifying software.
- You may want to check with the person that they can use the software that's in use in the company and discuss any possible alternative with them.

Assistance Dogs

People with sight loss may have assistance dogs that they may want to bring to work.

The dog would need a "dog station" where it can have a water bowl and food bowl. The employee will need space by their desk/work station for their dog. Colleagues will need to know the rules of having an assistance dog in the workplace. The person with sight loss will also need an area to walk and take their dog to the toilet.

Support Workers

Some people with sight loss might use a support worker particularly when travelling. Access to Work may be able to assist with the cost of support workers.

Premises

The design of premises can place someone with sight loss at a substantial disadvantage in accessing an employer's premises.

Simple adjustments can enable an employee with sight 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 support 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 a lift.
- Ensure that staff know simple health and safety practices to prevent hazards which can be particularly dangerous for someone with sight loss, for example, making sure filing cabinets are closed when not in use, and not leaving boxes and general clutter around the office.
- Matt finishing on signs to avoid reflections and improve visibility.

Make sure that someone with sight loss has time to familiarise themselves with the building, including any changes to the layout of the workplace – ask them about changes to the building which would help. Make sure they are shown where the washrooms and staff canteen or kitchen are. Once familiar with surroundings, a person with sight loss will usually be able to get around safely by using their memory of the surroundings and any remaining vision they have.

Assistive Technology

People with disabilities, including people with sight loss, may find it beneficial to use Assistive Technology (AT).

This can be a piece of equipment or software that alleviates part or all of the difficulties they have in a certain area. New pieces of software and equipment are developed regularly but we have compiled below a short list of AT that can be considered for people with sight loss. The below focuses on Windows computer software however there are MacOS and smartphone equivalents available.

Equipment

- Large computer monitor.
- Large print keyboard stickers and large print keyboards.
- Large display calculators.
- Scanners, to allow the use of OCR software (see below).
- Big button telephones and telephones with 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.
- Handheld magnifiers, including electronic handheld magnifiers.
- Anti-glare monitor reducing reflection.

Software

- Magnification software that allows the user to increase the size of information on the screen. Most common magnification software also integrate contrast change and allow the user to modify how text is displayed on a screen.
- Text-to-speech software allow the user to hear written text from either printed documents (using a scanner) or from electronic documents.
- Screen readers are different from the above text-to-speech software. Screen readers read aloud all the information from the screen, including bar menus and alt-text. They also have specific shortcuts allowing the user to quickly navigate on the computer. Please note that Apple Mac computers have an inbuilt screen reader called VoiceOver. As do Windows 10 onwards called Narrator and other screen readers are commercially available.
- Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software; can convert most images and printed documents (in conjunction with a scanner) into transformable text. Although it may not produce "accessible" content, it allows the text to be read out loud by text-to-speech and screen readers. There are also specialist software packages especially designed to produce accessible documents from scanning.
- Speech recognition (dictation) software may be useful for some people with sight loss, allowing them to transfer their ideas on a computer using their voice.
- Spellchecking software and autocorrect features may be useful for some people with sight loss to reduce the time spent on locating errors.
- Colour overlay software may make it more comfortable for people to look at a computer screen.
- There are a range of speech output notetakers which are like Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) with built in speech.

Braille equipment

- Refreshable braille displays enable a person with sight loss to 'read' the screen via a strip of electronically controlled pins connected to the computer.
- Braille notetakers are electronic PDAs and some can be linked to a PC to use their braille output.

Inbuilt accessibility

Computers

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 through the computer's control panel or within programs. These include:

- Changing the colour and size of the mouse pointer and its speed of movement.
- Changing colour options. Many people with sight loss can see some colour combinations better than others. For example black text on a yellow background is much more visible for some people.

Changing font size and type.

Changing display settings and the way information is laid out on a screen

Most mobile phones have settings allowing the user to change the size of application icons and all text displayed as well as settings to change displayed colours.

iPhones and iPads have an inbuilt screen reader called VoiceOver and a screen magnifier called Zoom. Siri is a 'personal assistant' that allows the user to easily access some of the phone's features and can search information online. Siri requires an internet connection. Voice dictation is also available to replace or help with typing written information.

Cortana is Windows' equivalent to Siri available on Windows 10 devices, including phones and tablets. Windows phones also have a 'Speech' option to control the phone. Narrator is the screen reader and the screen magnifier is called 'screen magnifier'. All accessibility features are part of the "Ease of Access" settings.

Other mobile phones running Android Operating Systems offer different levels of accessibility. From Android 3.2, users can access the TalkBack screen reader. Voice Access allows users to control their device using spoken commands and requires Android version 5.0 or later.

Expert help is available to guide individuals with sight loss and their employer through technology options. See the page 29 for organisations that might be able to help.

Induction and training

Disability and the need to make adjustments should be embedded in all policies, for example, policies on sickness, training, and performance appraisals.

New recruits should be made aware of these policies during the induction process. People with sight loss should be made aware that they can ask about any issues they may have, particularly at the beginning of a new job.

It is important that your standard induction and training programme is accessible, so that someone with sight loss can gain the same information as everyone else. You may also want to provide a workplace mentor to ensure supportive training. This can provide another employee with valuable personal development.

Ensure employees with sight loss also have equal access to further in-house and external training, meetings and career development opportunities.

- You might need to allow more time and greater flexibility for induction and training.
- Ensure that training materials and job instructions are available in the appropriate format, e.g. large print, braille, audio, electronic or on an accessible intranet webpage.
- Avoid using some colours such as red ink on flip charts in training sessions.

- Brief the group on basic 'disability communication'. This will help to ensure a person with sight loss can fully participate in any training as well as other people with a disability. It should also generally improve communication between colleagues however, how this is done and what is said should be confirmed with the individual.
- Allow the employee to organise their work area in a way that suits them and it might be that such systems as hot desking should be adapted for someone with sight loss.
- Ask if it would be helpful to assign a colleague to help the employee find their way around the work area.

Health and safety

With reasonable adjustments there is no reason why a blind or partially sighted person should pose a greater health and safety risk than anyone else as it is about identifying and managing any risks.

In limited circumstances, for example where an employee has lost part or all of their sight through an accident or degenerative condition, it may be necessary to conduct an individual risk assessment.

A risk assessment will help the employer to determine whether the individual's sight 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 sight loss, must know about emergency evacuation procedures. Sometimes a 'buddy' is assigned to help a person with sight loss in the event of an evacuation. In any event all such employees should have a Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP).

For more information about health and safety and how to carry out an individual and competent risk assessment, see the `Health and safety' and the `Equality Act' briefings.

Also refer to the Health and Safety Executive guidance on this issue available on their website **HSE.gov.uk**

Harassment

A person with sight loss may be particularly vulnerable to harassment from their colleagues.

As an employer, you must take all reasonable steps to deal with harassment. Harassment includes not only physical or verbal abuse but also anything which violates a person's dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.

Harassment stems from stereotyping, lack of understanding, intolerance of difference and fear. To prevent bullying and harassment of anyone you should:

- Ensure your organisation has clear policies on workplace bullying and harassment and that complaints are investigated promptly and effectively. Ensure these policies are communicated across the organisation through campaigns and awareness raising initiatives.
- Make it clear that any harassment, including on the grounds of disability, will not be tolerated and that offenders will be dealt with through the organisation's disciplinary procedures.
- Ensure management understands that people with sight loss experience increased risk of harassment, and provide training for line managers to help them to identify and manage incidents connected to bullying and harassment in the workplace.
- Make the employee aware of their right to equal treatment, their entitlement to make a complaint and to initiate a grievance.
- Allow employees access to support networks internally or externally from work. If possible, ensure employees who have experienced bullying or harassment have access to professional and confidential counselling.
- Ensure appropriate disability awareness training is implemented across your workforce to challenge stereotyping.

Further sources of reference

Useful organisations

Business Disability Forum

Nutmeg House, 60 Gainsford Street, London SEI 2NY

Tel: +44-(0)20-7403-3020 Website: businessdisabilityforum.org.uk

Business Disability Forum (BDF) is a not-for-profit membership organisation that supports businesses to recruit and retain disabled employees and serve disabled customers.

Business Disability Forum provides pragmatic support, expertise, advice, training and networking opportunities between businesses. Our aim is to transform the life chances – and experience – of disabled people as employees and consumers.

RNIB

105 Judd Street, London, WC1H 9NE

Fax: **+44-(0)20-7391-2195** Helpline: **+44-(0)303-123-9999** Email: **helpline@rnib.org.uk**

RNIB offers support and advice to blind and partially sighted people in the UK, helping people who have lost their sight to find their lives again.

Blind in Business

4th Floor, 1 London Wall, London, EC2M 5PG

Tel: +44-(0)20-7588-1885 Email: info@blindinbusiness.org.uk Website: blindinbusiness.org.uk

An organisation that offers a range of services to undergraduates, graduates and employers to ease the transition between education and employment for blind and partially sighted people.

British Computer Association of the Blind (BCAB)

BCAB c/o RNIB, 58-72 John Bright Street, Birmingham, B1 1BN

Tel: **+44-(0)845-643-9811** Email: **info@bcab.org.uk** Website: **bcab.org.uk**

The British Computer Association of the Blind (BCAB) is a group of blind and partially sighted computer users. Offering training, discussion, networking and help.

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