

# Briefing

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## Employment adjustments for people who Stammer

**This briefing is not an authoritative statement of the law. While we have made every effort to ensure that the information we have provided is correct, Business Disability Forum cannot accept any responsibility or liability.**

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# Introduction

## What is stammering?

Stammering is typically recognised by a tense struggle to get words out.

This makes it different from the normal non-fluency we all experience which includes hesitations and repetitions. Commonly it involves repeating or prolonging sounds or words, or getting stuck without any sound (silent blocking). Sometimes people put in extra sounds or words. Often people lose eye contact.

Some people who stammer talk their way around difficult words so that you may not realise they stammer at all. This avoidance of words, and avoidance of speaking in some or many situations, is an important aspect of stammering.

Stammering varies tremendously from person to person and is highly variable for the person who stammers who may be fluent one minute and struggling to speak the next. Stammering affects about 1% of the adult population, 380,000 adults of working age in the UK.

About 3.5 to 4 men stammer for every woman who stammers.<sup>[1]</sup> Current research holds that stammering has a physiological basis in the way our brains process speech. This neurological difference only affects speech fluency, and has no impact on intelligence, temperament or any cognitive abilities.

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[1] British Stammering Association

# Employment and people who stammer

Many people who stammer will be protected under the Equality Act 2010 but will not consider themselves to be disabled, often because they have found coping mechanisms such as avoiding certain words or activities e.g. telephone calls.

Nevertheless employers have a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments and not discriminate against 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 stammering mean that specific barriers can be less obvious. This means reasonable adjustments may be harder 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 who stammer for positions. There are also organisations which offer specialist advice and appropriate disability awareness training to help employers ensure that their recruitment process accounts for barriers faced by those who stammer – **see page 21 for further details.**

It is important that employers have an open and honest conversation with new employees about the barriers that may be present in the workplace and what simple measures might help. 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.

## Employment adjustments for people who Stammer

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 can't do.
- Ensure that everyone knows who is responsible for doing what and when it must be done.
- Involve the individual in generating solutions and 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

As stammering is often misunderstood, people who stammer represent a significant resource in the labour market and their talents are often underutilised at work.

Most people, once they understand their disability, are inventive in developing coping strategies that enable them to work effectively.

Decisions about suitability for employment, promotion or retention are too often based on general assumptions or misconceptions, rather than a factual assessment. This can lead to discrimination against existing or potential employees. The individual facts should always be considered in consultation with the person. Assumptions should not be made, such as assuming the person is just nervous or shy. The pressure to speak quickly and the attitude and response of the listener often cause difficulties.

A person who stammers may have particular difficulties with:

- Interviews (especially telephone interviews).
- Presentations and meetings.
- Tiredness, time pressure or anxiety.
- Using the telephone.

Managers who work with people who stammer need to be sensitive to the person, while at the same time exploring what it is about the job that may initially be considered by the person and employer to be problematic.

## Employment adjustments for people who Stammer

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 and making decisions.

By making adjustments and communicating effectively with people who stammer, your organisation can benefit from highly effective communicators. Employees who stammer can make a valuable contribution to the workplace as they are likely to be more aware of the need to prepare for meetings and presentations and of customer and communication needs. Focused listening, clear thinking, approachability and an interest in people are qualities that do not depend on fluent speech.

Because they know they will have to try harder with the spoken word, people who stammer are more likely to:

- Plan better what they want to say.
- Think before they speak.

By becoming experienced in making adjustments for people who stammer, your organisation should also benefit from better communication generally. Many adjustments and etiquette will benefit everyone and may well be simple and inexpensive and therefore 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. Always ask the person who stammers what they need.



## Recruitment and selection

Candidates who stammer may be prevented from demonstrating their abilities and potential by conventional recruitment processes.

You need to make sure you do not discriminate against a disabled job applicant during the recruitment process. For example, people who stammer should not be refused a job or an interview on the grounds that the job requires 'excellent communication skills'.

You may also have to organise reasonable adjustments. It is important not to make assumptions about what the applicant can or cannot do; instead, ask applicants about any reasonable adjustments they may require. People who stammer may well have excellent oral and communication skills. People who stammer have succeeded in many areas, including sales and customer service. There is no justification for arguing that customers won't like being served by someone who stammers.

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.

Further information on best practice for recruitment and selection is also available from the Government's Disability Confident scheme; for further information, visit: [disabilityconfident.campaign.gov.uk](https://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](mailto:advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk).

**Remember it is unlawful to ask questions about health or a disability prior to 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

When drawing up job descriptions and candidate specifications:

- Be specific about what skills are needed and what the job involves.
- Be flexible. Very often minor changes can make a significant difference, e.g. if the person has difficulties with telephone work, consider whether it is essential or only a small part of the job and whether these duties can be easily allocated to another member of the team.
- Do not needlessly exclude someone who stammers. Concentrate on what is to be achieved in a job rather than on how it is achieved. Someone who stammers may simply do things differently, e.g. communicate externally using email, or in writing.

## **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”.
- Provide a point of contact for people who are concerned about the recruitment process, using a range of contact methods, e.g. email and instant messaging services.
- Display or mention the Disability Confident symbol if you are a symbol holder.
- Be clear that you are willing to make reasonable adjustments.
- Consult your local Jobcentre Plus which can help you make your recruitment process accessible. As well as advising on your recruitment process, Work Coaches and Disability Employment Advisers at Jobcentre Plus will also know of individuals who stammer who may be suitable candidates. Business Disability Forum Members and Partners can contact us for help.

## **Application forms**

Adjustments may need to be made to the short-listing 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.

### Interviews

Ensure that candidates who stammer 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 stammer. 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 you ask all candidates if they require any adjustments to be made. With adjustments, the interview allows you to assess the ability of candidates who stammer. Ensure that reception and security staff know how to welcome and assist visitors who stammer.

A job interview can be the single most difficult speaking situation for someone who stammers. Their stammer may increase, particularly when the person is enthusiastic. As well as being under pressure, like every other applicant, a person who stammers has the added stress created by trying to get their point across while worrying about the interviewer's reactions. The person may unintentionally come across as reticent, hesitant or confused, by using avoidance strategies such as pausing before words and/or using words such as "you know", "well actually" and "it could be said".

## Employment adjustments for people who Stammer

As stammering can vary depending on how the person and listener interact, it is useful to adopt the following communication tips:

- Listen to the person and allow them to finish what they are saying. Do not interrupt and/or attempt to finish their words or sentences. Give the person time to deal with speech blocks (when words are difficult to get out).
- Maintain eye contact as much as possible.
- Speak normally in a relaxed manner. Reducing your own rate of speech may be helpful in creating an unhurried atmosphere.
- Allow extra time for communication.

Remember that the interview situation is an artificial and tense environment. Once in post and after a proper induction, the individual is likely to stammer significantly less than in the interview.

Be careful if you use telephone interviews, as these may not allow someone who stammers a fair interview. Ask if the applicant is happy with a telephone interview and be prepared to offer an alternative interview process, for example a face-to-face interview.

In conjunction with the interview, written evidence could also be used as evidence of the person's competencies for the post.

### Selection tests

If selection normally involves a test, be sure that it does not discriminate against someone who stammers:

- Discuss the test with the test publisher and seek guidance on possible adjustments.
- Consult candidates who stammer so that necessary adjustments can be made.
- Allow more time for an oral test if a person's stammer increases significantly under stress, or allow it to be in a written form.

If specific oral skills are required, e.g. public speaking or customer service, consider the applicant's work history in conjunction with the test for evidence of those skills.

# Post job-offer

Once someone has been offered a job, you may need to put in 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 an appointment – it may take time to set up reasonable adjustments and, in some instances, to secure Access to Work funding. Consult the individual and make sure the employee's manager or supervisor understands the agreed adjustments. If the individual is comfortable with this, appropriate disability awareness training that includes stammering may be useful for the candidate's team so they know best how to communicate with someone who stammers.

Building in regular reviews of adjustments, for example at the end of the probationary period, in supervisory sessions and performance appraisals will help ensure that the adjustments are still effective.

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.

To see an example of a tailored adjustment plan and to download a template, visit Business Disability Forum's website at [businessdisabilityforum.org.uk](https://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](mailto:advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk).

Ensure that you take the same approach to adjustments when an employee who stammers applies for promotion, again not making assumptions about what the employee can or cannot do.

## Working arrangements to retain employees

It is very important to involve the person concerned when considering or making any adjustment. Further adjustments to ensure the employee can work effectively include:

- Making sure the person has support and preparation time and is confident in undertaking a role.
- Reallocating minor or subsidiary duties, e.g. making or answering occasional telephone calls.
- Appropriate awareness training for those who interact with the employee.
- Allowing time off to attend medical appointments, rehabilitation or assessments, see the 'Managing sickness absence' briefing.
- Modifying assessments or performance appraisals in line with any communication difficulties identified and/or being addressed so that someone is not marked down on communication skills in an assessment because they stammer.

By investing in the development of employees who stammer you will obviously gain as the person is able to contribute more to your organisation. You may also benefit from more effective communication across the team as colleagues also learn valuable communication skills.

As good communication techniques are shared, you will also learn as an organisation how to better serve customers who don't speak fluently or whose first language is not English.



### Telephone work

People who stammer usually have more difficulty on the telephone, as information is solely through verbal cues. Adjustments could include:

- Allowing extra time, particularly if there are targets for employees to speak to a certain number of clients in a specified time period.
- Using other forms of communication, e.g. email, instant messaging services (such as Skype conversation or dedicated smartphone apps) or text relay services (services that enables deaf, hard of hearing, deafened and speech-impaired people to communicate with hearing people using the telephone network).
- Using a script for some key parts of a call or allowing time to prepare notes before the call.
- Modifying a script if one is used, e.g. in a call centre, so the employee can avoid certain words that are particularly difficult.

# Induction, training and development

The need to make adjustments should be embedded in all policies such as policies on sickness, training and performance appraisals. New recruits should be made aware of these policies during the induction procedure.

It is important that your standard induction and training programme is accessible. You may also want to provide a workplace mentor to ensure supportive training. This can also provide another employee with valuable personal development.

- Allow more time and greater flexibility for induction and training.
- Brief the trainer and training group on basic 'disability communication'. This will help to ensure the person who stammers can participate fully in any training as well as others. It should also generally improve communication between colleagues.
- Use the same basic etiquette as described in 'Interviews' and 'Selection tests' when the person is in post, i.e. listening to the person and allowing them to finish what they are saying, maintaining eye contact, etc.

The employee may have valuable skills which you are unaware of or be able to develop skills and expertise in areas that you have not considered. Talk to the employee and encourage training and work opportunities in areas that the person may have previously avoided.

For example, the employee may be reluctant to participate in meetings because of their stammer.

## Employment adjustments for people who Stammer

Ensure that employees who stammer have equal access to further in-house and external training, meetings and career development opportunities.

It may be necessary to help build the person's self-confidence for this task as part of their professional and personal development. Indeed, personal development and performance plans could include goals for improving important communication skills, in agreement with the employee. You could agree on certain tasks that can be monitored, for example, talking at meetings, greeting clients and company visitors, and giving in-house or external presentations.

Some further adjustments that you should consider:

- Ensuring the employee has an opportunity to speak at meetings.
- Encouraging the employee to take part in meetings and give presentations.
- Encouraging the employee to arrive a few minutes early for meetings. This will enable time to relax and to slow their rate of speech.
- Allowing extra time in face-to-face meetings.
- Organising a training course in communication skills or telephone skills for the employee.
- Sponsoring the employee for a speech course. This often increases fluency and has long-term gains in communication skills and confidence.
- If the person is to give a presentation, making sure they have the support and preparation they need in order to feel confident about their material.
- If an employee's preferred method of communicating is via email or writing then allow them to do this freely.

# Harassment

A person who stammers may be particularly vulnerable to harassment from their colleagues.

As an employer, you are ultimately responsible to 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 who stammer experience increased risk of harassment and provide appropriate 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 and 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 SE1 2NY

Tel: +44-(0)20-7403-3020

Website: [businessdisabilityforum.org.uk](http://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.

### **British Stammering Association**

15 Old Ford Road,  
London E2 9PJ

Tel: +44-(0)20-8983-1003

Email: [mail@stammering.org](mailto:mail@stammering.org)

Website: [stammering.org](http://stammering.org)

Since 1978, the British Stammering Association provides impartial information and support on stammering. The BSA's Employers Stammering Network has a special focus on creating a workplace culture where everyone who stammers can achieve their full career potential. For further details visit British Stammering Association's website at [stammering.org](http://stammering.org).

Business Disability Forum gratefully acknowledges the help of British Stammering Association with the advice and guidance included in this Briefing.

## **Next Generation Text Service**

NGT Team,  
c/o Internal Box 14, Telephone House,  
170–175 Moor Lane, Preston,  
Lancashire, PR1 1BA

**Tel: +44-(0)800-7311-888**

**SMS or NGT Lite app: +44-(0)800-500-888**

**Website: [ngts.org.uk](http://ngts.org.uk)**

NGT connects text users with phone users. People can use an app on computers, smartphones or tablets and interact with people using a telephone or the app as well.

## **Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists**

2 White Hart Yard,  
London, SE1 NX

**Tel: +44-(0)20-7378 1200**

**Email: [info@rcslt.org](mailto:info@rcslt.org)**

**Website: [rcslt.org](http://rcslt.org)**

Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists produces a list of registered speech and language therapists.

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# Contact us

**Business Disability Forum**  
**Nutmeg House**  
**60 Gainsford Street**  
**London**  
**SE1 2NY**

**Tel: +44-(0)20-7403-3020**

**Fax: +44-(0)20-7403-0404**

**Email: [enquiries@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk)**

**Web: [businessdisabilityforum.org.uk](http://businessdisabilityforum.org.uk)**