

Briefing

Employment adjustments for people who Stammer

Abridged content for sample purposes

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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.^[1] 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.

[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 or contact **Business Disability Forum's Advice Service** on telephone number +44-(0)20-7403-3020 or by email 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.

Content has been removed for sample purposes. Pages 11 to 22 are available in the full booklet.

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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.



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