

**R N I B**

Scotland

See differently



MARRIOTT  
GLASGOW

# Let's Work Together:

Helping employers keep workers with sight loss



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# Introduction

**If you have an employee who is losing their sight, it makes good business sense to keep them.**

With advances in accessible technology and the financial support from the government's Access to Work scheme, keeping an employee can be easier and more cost effective than you might think.

This pack has been designed to help you keep an employee who is losing their sight, which means that your business will continue to benefit from the skills, knowledge and relationships that they have built up over time.

Many people leave their job when they are diagnosed with a sight loss condition or when their sight begins to deteriorate. Leaving employment will have a major impact on a person's quality of life. It will also affect their employer, who will lose a valuable member of their team.

While each person's experience of sight loss will be different, there are no hard and fast rules about how to support blind and partially sighted people in the workplace. By giving you some useful information and shared experiences, we're sure we can help you work successfully with your blind or partially sighted colleague.

Sometimes it can be difficult to understand how someone is going to be able to do certain things at work, for example, reading or using a computer. And how do you ask someone about

their sight loss without offending them? How can you better understand how a blind person uses a computer? This guide is intended to answer these and other questions..

RNIB Scotland, in partnership with Marriott Hotels Glasgow, has developed this Retention Resource Pack, which is supported and funded by the Scottish Government and the Voluntary Action Fund. The pack is available online and in print for employers across Scotland. While the pack was originally developed with workers aged 50 and over in mind, the steps to keeping an employee apply to all ages.

The pack is divided into chapter headings for ease of use and finding what you need to know. Alternatively, you can read it from cover to cover to get a better understanding of what you can do to keep your employee in their job. It contains the latest up to date information to make sure that you're offering the support your employee needs, while encouraging good communication between managers and employees; maintaining that all important working relationship.

At RNIB we don't think that sight loss should mean job loss. This pack includes everything you need to know to make sure your employee has the right support to continue to be successful in their role and to progress their career.

# Marriott's commitment to diversity and inclusion



**The Marriott family has personal experience of the effects of sight loss, so Marriott has a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion in the workplace for blind and partially sighted people.**

Even though Stephen Marriott, the grandson of the founders of the international hotel company, was blind, he went to work every day. Equipped with his cane, he travelled around the US teaching at Marriott conventions and giving presentations on the Marriott culture as a family business. He promoted their core values of putting people first and providing opportunities for everyone in the company.

Described by his family and others who knew him as a great hero and a true inspiration, Stephen worked his way up through the family business, working in positions from the front desk to housekeeping, marketing and accounting.

Through his work, Stephen proved to be a staunch advocate for people who are blind and was a member of the American Foundation for the Blind Board of Trustees and was involved in the work of the Marriott Foundation for People with Disabilities. A role model for anyone facing major challenges, Stephen Marriott helped many people, especially those with sight loss.

# Visual impairment

## Being blind or partially sighted

What does it mean to be blind or partially sighted? We prefer not to use the term “visually impaired” or “visual impairment”, but some people find it a useful term for describing the different kinds of sight conditions people experience.

There are many forms of sight loss; some people are born with sight loss and therefore don't actually “lose” their sight, some lose their sight as a result of an accident and some will have lost their sight as a consequence of a medical condition. Whatever the cause, people with sight loss may experience a range of difficulties, most of which can often be overcome with the right adjustments.

Ninety-three percent of people who are blind or partially sighted actually do have some vision. Very few people have no sight at all.

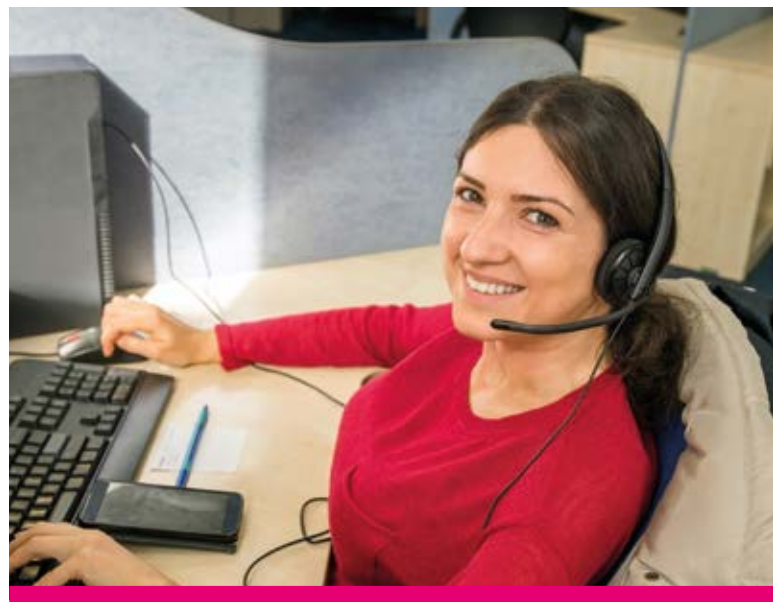
## How our vision changes as we get older

Just as our general health changes as we get older, our vision may also be affected. Once you reach the age of 40, you may start to notice difficulty in focussing on objects close up. This is called presbyopia and is a normal part of the ageing process. You might manage for a while but eventually you'll need glasses to read.

Ageing may also have an impact on how you cope with bright light, and sunlight and glare can easily dazzle. You may become more prone to dry eyes, colours may not seem so bright and your visual field may become narrower. You might also start to see spots or ‘floaters’, especially in bright light conditions.

While this can simply be a part of getting older, some of us will experience more serious age-related eye disease that can have a major effect on our quality of life. These conditions include glaucoma, macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy. While cataracts are an age-related condition, they are very common and easily treated with minor surgery.

Having regular eye check-ups and telling your doctor about any symptoms or concerns you have about your eyes and vision will help to keep your eyes healthy for your lifetime.



## **Some facts about blindness and partial sightedness**

### **There are around 9,000 registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in Scotland**

Blind and partially sighted people do perfectly well in a wide range of jobs across almost all employment sectors. Just like everyone else, it comes down to the right support, training, skills and experience for the job. There are blind and partially sighted secretaries, car mechanics, nurses, scientists, stockbrokers, MPs, journalists, web designers and teachers. Just like anyone with the right tools for the job – and in this case, some extra tools, there's very little that a blind or partially sighted person can't do.

### **Blind and partially sighted people can use computers**

Computers have opened up many jobs to blind and partially sighted people. Using a computer largely comprises of putting information into it, or getting information out of it. Even with little or no sight, this is entirely possible with current technology.

If the person has some vision, as many blind and partially sighted people have, they can use a larger monitor or software that magnifies the image on the screen. If they have no vision, they can use software which converts text on the screen into speech (using headphones), or Braille (using a refreshable Braille display).

Many computer operating systems have accessibility features built into them, so they can be used "out of the box" and are ready to go.

### **Financial help is available to pay for any necessary equipment**

Blind or partially sighted employees will often need some specialist equipment or software to help them to do their job.

Advances in technology mean that blind and partially sighted people can overcome many of the barriers to work that they faced in the past, and grant schemes such as Access to Work mean that much of the cost can be met by the Government.

### **Blind and partially sighted people can move around and get to work**

Getting to work is an employee's responsibility. Before looking for work, blind and partially sighted people may have had some form of mobility training and will be more than capable of getting around. Just like anyone else, they will consider if they can get to a place of work on time before applying for the job. They may use public transport or have someone to drive them, or they may walk using a long cane or a guide dog.

### **Blind and partially sighted people don't take lots of sick days**

Blindness isn't an illness, and there is evidence to show that disabled employees take less than average sick leave, scoring high in loyalty, reliability, and hard work.



**Employing a blind or partially sighted person will send out a message that your organisation is committed to equality**

Having a diverse team with a range of different skills and backgrounds will give you an edge in today's competitive marketplace, attracting customers and business from a range of sectors and communities.

**Anita Borland, Department Manager at John Lewis said:**

"I am delighted we could help Andy continue in his job with us at John Lewis. He is a valued and experienced member of our team and popular with customers. With some support from our IT colleagues, we had magnification software installed on his computer and arranged for a free app to be downloaded onto a device in the store to help Andy to read printed information easily. It was really easy and straightforward and with minimal costs to the business."



# Job retention

## What is job retention and how will it help my company?

Job retention is about taking steps to make sure people in work can be supported and encouraged to stay in their job, by providing them with the right information, advice and equipment. It's about supporting your employee to stay in their job and develop their career. If your employees know your company is keen to help staff, they'll be more likely to tell you that they need your support.

## The business case for job retention

We believe that sight loss must not equal job loss, and encourage you make every effort to hang on to an employee who is losing their sight.

Keeping your employee means that your business will continue to benefit from the skills, knowledge and relationships they have built up over time. It means you'll have a diversity of experience within your team and this will have a positive impact on your business.

There are a range of technologies designed to help blind and partially sighted people and the government's Access to Work scheme can advise you on the best solutions and help with the financial side of things. Retaining your employee can be more straightforward and less costly than you might think.

Some cost-benefits for your business will include:

- avoiding redundancy pay or other costs associated with terminating employment
- reducing costs of your employee being on long-term sick leave
- eliminating costs of recruitment and induction training for replacement staff
- avoiding any potential costs arising from a disability discrimination claim
- increasing staff morale and loyalty, and a workforce that is more representative of its customers and community

By keeping your employee in post, you will also help them maintain their income and independence. This has a positive impact on you, your employee and others in the team.

**Duane, Team Manager at Riverside supported his employee when she had problems with her sight.**

Duane said: "I had never dealt with this type of scenario before whereby a staff member was having sight issues. I had no idea how to deal with it. I gave the usual advice of taking breaks from the screen and told Mel she could go home if the problem got too bad. To have this job retention pack at my fingertips was fantastic, knowing how to deal with the situation as an individual and as a company. I personally wasn't aware there was so much help available for employers and employees. Every company should be able to get this information to allow them to support staff in the best way possible."

Mel commented: "I have been so fortunate with the help and support I have received from the RNIB, not just from the working side of things but on an emotional level too. Throughout the last few months I have met some great people who, in some cases, are worse off than me, but still manage to work. It is so uplifting to find out that working life doesn't have to be finished due to sight loss."



# What the law says

## **This section is about the Equality Act and explains some of your duties as an employer.**

The Equality Act 2010 states what you need to do to make your workplace and services fair, so you are complying with the law. The Act says that, as an employer, you must make “reasonable adjustments” for your staff to help them overcome any disadvantage that result from their disability.

The Equality Act aims to eliminate discrimination and promote equality. It does this in relation to what are called “protected characteristics”. Disability is one of the protected characteristics. Most blind and partially sighted people are likely to be considered “disabled” and so protected by the Equality Act.

The Act applies to employers of any size, and covers temporary, part-time and permanent employees, and contract workers. It also covers applicants and potential applicants when you are recruiting new staff. Volunteers are generally not covered by the Act, but you will probably want to take proportionate steps to support them.

## **Reasonable adjustments**

The law states that employers must make “reasonable adjustments”, or changes, to the workplace.

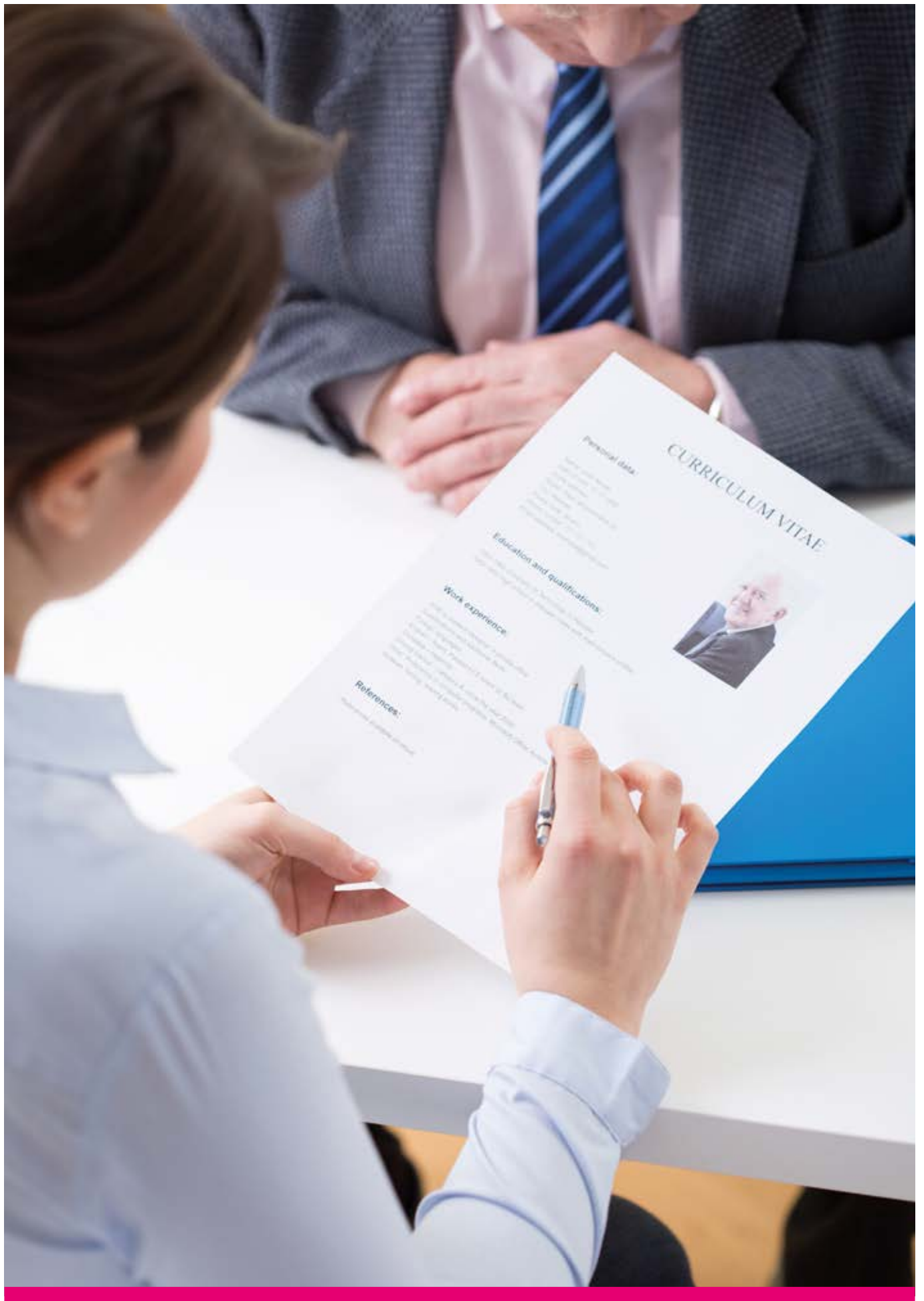
A reasonable adjustment is an adaptation or alteration in the work place so that an employee with a disability can do their job safely

and effectively. The aim of reasonable adjustments is to remove any disadvantage that an employee with a disability has, compared to their colleagues.

Many adjustments can be made at very little cost and inconvenience. You may be able to get some help with funding more costly adjustments through the government’s Access to Work scheme.

Some examples of reasonable adjustment include:

- providing specialist equipment, such as a video magnifier, which can help your employee to deal with paperwork
- providing specialist software, such as screen magnification or a screen reader, so your employee can use a computer
- adjusting lighting levels around your employee’s desk area
- making small changes to your employee’s job description so that some duties can be reassigned to other staff
- providing information in a different way, such as in a larger size print or by email
- providing support in staff development and training sessions, such as making changes to visual presentations by describing them in words



## **Who decides what reasonable adjustments should be made?**

There are specialists who can help you identify what adjustments should be made. For example, an occupational health professional can make recommendations on what adjustments you should consider implementing. They might also advise that you work with a specialist sight organisation to explore assistive technology options and other solutions.

The Access to Work scheme can also arrange for a specialist to carry out an assessment of your employee's needs. Or your employee's GP might suggest changes that could be made.

Reasonable adjustments should be regularly reviewed to make sure they are working if the situation changes in the future.

## **What if the job ends?**

The law states that it is unfair to dismiss someone on the grounds of their disability, and that an employer must not discriminate. But what if your employee can't continue in employment?

In some instances, your employee's contract might come to an end. Sometimes an employee will decide that they aren't able to return to work. They may, for example, have too much change happening in their lives that they need time away from work and want to leave. However, people often tell us that they wish they hadn't left work when they did.

If an employee wants to leave work, they might be worried about raising this with you. If, for example, medical retirement or redundancy are possible, an employee may be aware that volunteering to leave their role may mean they miss out on a financial settlement.

Similarly, you as an employer may be reluctant to discuss the end of someone's employment, because you don't want to be seen to discriminate against them.

Leaving employment should in any case be the last resort. It would be unfair to discuss this unless you are sure you have discussed support at work fully with your employee, taken advice, implemented adjustments to workplaces and workplace practices, considered role changes, and ensured that external support has been looked into. The role of occupational health practitioners and human resources specialists will be particularly important.

If you are in doubt, please get advice. You have a legal as well as a moral obligation to support your employee. Making hasty or ill-advised decisions can cause considerable distress and may have legal implications.

For further legal information, see the further information and useful contacts section at end of the pack.

# Technology at work

## How technology helps

The increased use of technology in the workplace means that blind and partially sighted people can do almost any job.

“Access technology” enables blind and partially sighted people to take more control over their work, and take on jobs that they may otherwise be excluded from.

There are a wide range of access technology products available to assist blind and partially sighted people in their work. For example, software that changes the way a computer screen looks, or a video magnifier which can make it easier to see printed documents more clearly. The type of technology

products that your employee needs will depend on many things including their eye condition and the job they do. Access technology can be paid for through the Access to Work scheme.

## Some types of Access Technology

### Computer use for people with low vision

There are many ways that partially sighted people use computers. For some people the solution may be as simple as a larger monitor or changing the appearance of the programmes to display large fonts and icons or change the colour scheme. Other people will use software to magnify what is on the screen and others may use “text to speech” software such as JAWS.



### **Video magnifiers**

Video magnifiers, or CCTVs as they are sometimes called, use a combination of camera and screen to magnify things. They are usually used for reading and writing but can help with any task where magnification would help. There are several kinds of video magnifier available, including those that display the magnified image onto the computer screen, portable models, and units that can focus on distant objects such as signs and notice boards.

### **Using a computer with no vision**

Someone with no vision can use a computer by using screen reading software. The software will allow them to navigate through the system and control programmes from the keyboard instead of using a mouse and have the text from the screen read to them (through ear phones) using text to speech software. For people who are unable to use a standard keyboard, there are specialist keyboards and voice recognition software available.

### **Digital voice recorders**

People often need to be able to write a quick message, a note or a telephone number. A digital voice recorder will make this a much simpler process.

### **Reading aids**

Blind people can read printed documents by using a scanner with optical character recognition (OCR) technology to convert print into electronic text that can then be read out to them by text to speech software.

### **Braille displays**

Some blind computer users use a Braille display to 'read' the information on the computer screen. These can be used in addition to text to speech software.

### **Braille embossers**

If a blind person who also reads Braille needs hard copy (paper) information, this can be produced using a Braille embosser and transcription software. They might use a Braille document so they have notes when delivering a presentation, or to refer to at a meeting.

## **IT compatibility with your business systems**

Blind or partially sighted employees may need to use access software, such as the types described above. RNIB has produced a factsheet to help you test the compatibility of access software with your organisation's IT applications. The factsheet is called Testing the compatibility of access software and IT applications and is available at [rnib.org.uk/itatwork](http://rnib.org.uk/itatwork)

Installation and configuration of access technology software can often be paid for by Access to Work.



# Practical support

## Access to Work

Access to Work is a government scheme that provides advice and practical support for people who have a disability or long term health condition. It also helps their employers to overcome work-related barriers resulting from a disability.

Access to Work contributes toward any supplementary employment costs that result from a disability. If one of your employees or a new member of staff has a disability, then Access to Work may be able to help. It is available for any paid job; part-time or full-time, permanent or temporary. There is no minimum number of hours for eligibility for support under the scheme.

It is provided where an employee needs support or adaptations beyond the reasonable adjustments which an employer is legally obliged to provide under the Equality Act.



## How does it work?

Access to Work pays a percentage of the total cost of approved support depending on how the individual has been employed, what support is needed, whether or not there is any business benefit, or whether they are self-employed.

Access to Work can pay up to one hundred per cent of the approved costs for:

- unemployed people starting a job
- self-employed people
- people changing jobs with a new employer.

Whatever the employment status of the applicant, Access to Work pays up to one hundred per cent of the approved costs of help with:

- support workers
- communicator support at an interview
- additional travel to work costs (above the normal costs).

For people working for an employer who have been in the job for six weeks or more and who need special equipment or adaptations to premises, Access to Work pays a proportion of the costs of support, and will look to agree this with the employer.

## How do I apply for Access to Work?

The application is made by the employee, but you can of course help facilitate this process. The employee should contact Access to Work directly at [gov.uk/access-to-work/how-to-claim](https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work/how-to-claim)

An Access to Work adviser will require detailed information that will help the process. It will help if the employee making the application has the following information to hand:

- a job description for the role
- line manager's contact details
- contact details for the employer's IT support
- contact details of the person who will authorise the purchase and any cost sharing.

An assessor will come to the workplace in order to work out exactly what you need to support your employee, so it's a good idea for them to think about all aspects of their job beforehand and about areas they have difficulties with.

A formal report should be created as a result of the assessment, with details of what equipment the employee needs, the supplier who sells the product and how much it costs. The Access to Work adviser will then discuss any cost sharing with you.

You can purchase the equipment as soon as permission has been given by the Access to Work adviser. You can then apply to Access to Work to reimburse you for the contribution they agreed they will pay. Purchases made before the approval date will not be reimbursed.

The costs of installation and training will have been outlined in the assessment report, and you can apply for reimbursement of any amounts agreed by Access to Work.

## Work-based assessments from RNIB

A work-based assessment involves a visit to your workplace by one of our employment specialists, who will recommend the equipment, software, and adjustments that will enable your employee to do their job.

The assessment may look at:

- the environment – simple adjustments you could make to your workplace and surroundings to make them more accessible
- equipment – recommending modified equipment and access technologies such as magnification software, or screen reading software

- training – specialist training for the person with sight loss, or for other members of staff working with them
- systems – ways to make work-related systems more accessible

After the assessment, you will have a detailed report that identifies the work-related issues that an employee is facing because of their sight loss. The report will normally recommend a set of practical solutions that can help. Many of the recommendations made are eligible for an Access to Work grant.



## **Beano Studios/ DC Thomson & Co. Ltd.**

Beano Studios is a new content business which creates mischievous entertainment for kids, teens and families worldwide. Founded in 2016, Beano Studios is best known for the much-loved Beano comic, the successful TV series Dennis & Gnasher Unleashed and beano.com, the fastest-growing kids' website in the UK. Beano Studios is part of the DC Thomson family of companies, with offices in London and Dundee.

"In late 2017 one of our employees had a sudden and permanent deterioration in eyesight, caused by a glaucoma episode. They are now registered as visually impaired, with significant field of vision loss, poor low-contrast vision and high sensitivity to ambient conditions. This means they are easily dazzled in bright conditions and find focus changes, such as looking from a keyboard to a screen and back, a challenge. Their role requires extensive use of IT equipment and programs.

We asked RNIB Scotland what we could do to retain our employee and help them perform their duties in comfort and to the best of their abilities.

RNIB Scotland visited our offices in Dundee and carried out workplace and workstation assessments which were informed by and tailored to our employee's specific requirements. Their practical recommendations enabled us to make changes to our employee's office environment, such as fitting black-out blinds to create a 'dark zone' within the wider office environment, and supplying portable

light management shields which enable local shade at the employee's desk. RNIB Scotland were also able to advise on the best IT solutions for our employee. As a result, in addition to their normal desk computer, they now also use a tablet and stylus, meaning written work can be done via handwriting recognition software, reducing eye strain and dazzle. The tablet is also completely portable and networked via wi-fi.

Our employee is an experienced creative with more than twenty years' knowledge of our brand, its history and its intellectual property. It made perfect business sense for us to find the most effective way to address the challenges our employee faced, so we could retain them and benefit fully from their skills and experience. RNIB Scotland helped us by providing practical solutions to manage our employee's working environment, and innovative IT solutions which ensured maximum comfort and productivity.

We are delighted that with their assistance we have successfully retained our employee."



# Who else can help (and how do you co-ordinate them)?

Every work place is different and organisations may have procedures or rules to follow. Your company might have specialist services that can help you (for example, a human resources department) or you may be looking for advice from external sources.

Although other departments and organisations all want to help in their own way, it can be a challenge to co-ordinate them.

This section explains how other people can help you, and gives some tips on how you can keep on top of things.

**Tip:** your employee is likely to know more about their sight condition than anyone. Ask them to explain how they are affected and keep them involved when bringing in other people to help you.

## First discussion

We recommend that your employee should talk to their line manager first. It helps if they have prepared the information they need to share with you and are able to ask you about what they want to happen. Not everyone will have done this when they first approach their line manager, so it may be helpful to look at the guidance later in this section.

## People at work who can help

### Occupational Health

If your employee has recently experienced sight loss, you may want to refer them for an occupational health assessment. This may not be directly available for smaller employers, although in some areas, there are services aimed specifically at employers who do not have access to occupational health services.

Occupational health services can assess an employee's ability to do their current job and may advise whether the employee is considered disabled under the Equality Act. If so the employer has a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments.

Undergoing an occupational health assessment can sometimes be stressful for an employee who may not understand why the assessment is taking place. It will be useful if you, or their line manager, are able to discuss a referral to occupational health and what you both want to achieve from it.

### Human Resources

If you work for a larger organisation, there will be a human resources (HR) team who will offer both your employee and you impartial support and advice. There may also be specialist Diversity or Disability Officers who will be able to assist you.

## Trade Union

Trade union representatives can offer support and advice for your employee and can support them at meetings. Checking your company's procedures will help you know when it is or is not appropriate for a trade union representative to attend.

## People outside of work who can help you

### Local societies for blind and partially sighted

Local societies offer various services for blind and partially sighted people and can offer support with issues outside work.

The RNIB Helpline **0303 123 9999** can put your employee in touch with their local society or they can visit [visionary.org.uk](http://visionary.org.uk) for details of their local sight loss charity.

## RNIB Helpline

You can get information and advice on supporting your employee by calling RNIB's Helpline on **0303 123 9999** or email [helpline@rnib.org.uk](mailto:helpline@rnib.org.uk).

## RNIB Emotional Support Telephone Service

This service offers confidential telephone support, information and counselling to people who, because of sight loss, are experiencing emotional difficulties. This can give your employee time to talk about their situation and how they are feeling. The Emotional Support Telephone Service is available through the RNIB Helpline and there is more information later in the Emotional support and counselling section.



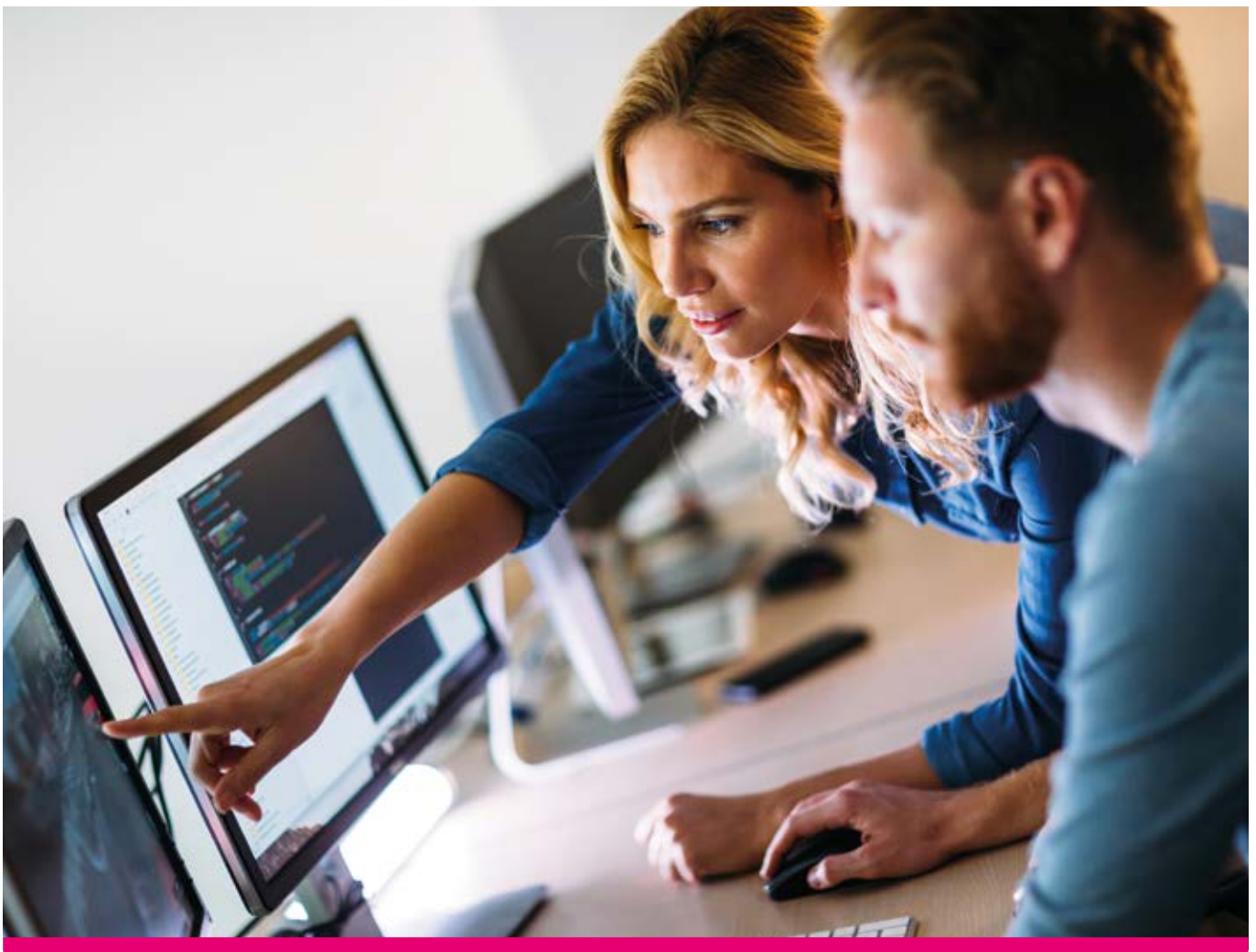
# Guidance for a line manager and employee meeting

It would be helpful for you and your employee to be clear about what each of you want to get out of any meeting. In a first meeting you might ask your employee to come ready to discuss the following.

## Step 1 – Expectations

What they would like to happen is the foundation on which everything else is based. What do they see as the full range of future options? These could include staying in their current job, becoming part-time, starting a new job with a new employer, re-training, or medical retirement.

You should emphasise to the employee that you are keen to keep them in their job.





## Step 2 – Gaining perspective

Although some aspects of your employee's working life may have become difficult, there are probably many other aspects that they can still carry out. To get a clear picture of what work-related activities they can and cannot do, ask them to prepare a list of all the tasks and duties required in their job. Ask them to list everything they feel they are unable to do. They can use the suggestions below to help them focus on their duties, equipment they use, the working environment, their contact with others (colleagues and customers), travel to work and their working hours.

### Physical and sensory

Seeing, hearing, lifting, talking, standing, walking, sitting, and kneeling.

### Mental

Memory, decision-making, problem-solving, concentration, planning, organising and prioritising.

### Tasks

Repetitive work, working at speed, meeting deadlines, reading, writing, following instructions, using a computer or telephone and driving.

### Contact with others

Working alone, working with others, working under supervision, supervising others, working with customers.

### Work conditions

Fixed hours, flexible hours, shift work, working indoors, working outdoors, bright or dim lighting.

## Step 3 – Finding solutions

Ask your employee to think if there is anything not required in their present job but that they feel they could offer? This might include new tasks they could take on at work.

Finally your employee can go back over everything they have listed as being difficult and see if they can see a solution, saying "I could do this in my present circumstances provided that..."

### By following this structure, you can work with your employee to identify:

- aspects of your employee's work that they are having difficulty with
- any suggestions your employee has about how these difficulties could be overcome
- aspects of your employee's work that they can do well, and any that they particularly enjoy
- any changes your employee feels might be helpful to make

# Emotional support and counselling

Losing your sight or realising your sight is deteriorating can be difficult to cope with, as it can affect so many different aspects of your life. RNIB has a Sight Loss Counselling Team that offers confidential telephone support, information and counselling to people who, because of sight loss, are experiencing emotional difficulties. Your employee can call the Helpline team on **0303 123 9999** or email **helpline@rnib.org.uk** to find out more.

There are a number of other routes to getting counselling services; through a GP, a trade union or through a local society for blind and partially sighted people.

Some employers offer an employee assistance programme (EAP) for staff. This is a scheme that employers contribute to so their employees can have confidential and independent advice on any issue that is troubling them, causing stress or interfering with their job performance or attendance.

There is often support available both at the point of and following a diagnosis.

There may be an Eye Clinic Liaison Officer (ECLO) or Vision Support Officer) available at your employee's eye clinic.

Local authorities also have social work staff specialising in the support of blind and partially sighted people.

## Melinda works for Irvine Housing Association

She said, "I didn't really know what help there was – even when I got in touch with RNIB, I had no idea of just how much support they could offer me, in work and in real life too."

Melinda says she would always encourage people to use the support that's there for them.



# Other adjustments to consider

## Low-tech solutions

It is not possible to use access technology to solve every problem your employee might encounter. For example, many photocopiers use a touch-screen display to select copying options. In this situation it is possible to use a 'low tech' solution to the problem, such as a tactile overlay for the screen, or various functions could be programmed into the copier so a blind or partially sighted employee can easily select the function they need via the keypad.

## The working environment

There are a number of adaptations that can be made to the working environment to help your employee in their job and these adaptations may be funded through the Access to Work scheme. For example, if conditions are too bright or too dark then adjustments can usually be made to the lighting levels.

As well as the amount of light, the source of light can also be an important factor. Many people find that natural light is best. This can mean making the best use of light from windows, rather than relying on electric lighting. Similarly, some people find that "natural light" (daylight) bulbs are very effective.

In general however, direct glare from windows, lamps, and overhead strip lighting should be avoided.

It is also important that fluorescent lamps are suitably shielded and worn lamps are replaced, preferably before they start to flicker or stop working altogether.

Your employee is often the best judge of what works well, and what kind of lighting is best for them, so the key is to talk with them or call in specialists where necessary. Sometimes the simplest change can make a huge difference to a working environment.

## Support workers

Despite the developments in technology, there may be aspects of the job that your employee cannot do because of their sight problem. In this case, you might consider using a support worker to help with these tasks.

They may help with:

- reading
- completing tasks that need to be hand written
- driving
- guiding the employee around
- describing diagrams

The Access to Work scheme covers all the costs of recruiting and employing a support worker. As an employer, you may wish to provide the support worker via an employment agency or as a self-employed person. Or you might choose to employ the support worker directly or provide this support via an existing employee.

**Iain Wilson, Senior Broadcaster, Connect Radio:**

"I have three members of staff, all presenters, who each have their own support worker and they certainly make life a lot easier – not just for me, but for other colleagues as well.

Two of the broadcasters are partially sighted, one is completely blind. The support workers ensure the radio studio playout system is correctly set up. They organize transport for the presenters for going out to interviews etc, take care of various admin roles, ensure recording equipment is correctly set up for interviews/recording and aid in a multitude of other tasks that ensures the smooth day-to-day running of our radio station. Apart from signing their claim form there is nothing I have to do. It's no exaggeration to say our support workers play a major part in ensuring we remain on air. And it doesn't cost the station a penny."



## Adopting and adapting policies

Many employers will have introduced positive policies to improve working environments for us all, but specifically for people with disabilities. These policies could help you make minor changes to your employee's duties or hours, consider alternative roles or introduce more flexible ways of working that suit both you and your employee.

In later life, many of us take on different roles in our personal lives, such as caring for older relatives, and we may also be affected by our own health issues. With the right support at work, you can make sure your employee's skills are not being wasted so that your business commitments are still being met.

## Risk assessment

Carrying out a risk assessment in the workplace for blind or partially sighted people doesn't have to be difficult, but

it can sometimes be quite daunting. If you haven't worked with blind people before, it can be very easy to over-estimate risks or make assumptions about what blind people can or can't do. Don't assume. Ask!

While the law requires employers to identify groups that might be at risk of harm, telling someone that "you must be risk-assessed" sends out a negative message. It suggests that the person is the issue, when this is clearly not the case. It sounds much more positive to tell someone that their role and activities are being assessed.

It is important not to make assumptions. Even people with the same eye condition can have widely different levels of vision. Your blind or partially sighted employee is usually the best person to describe how their sight loss affects them and you should be able to tap into that knowledge.



Risk assessments carried out without the involvement of blind and partially sighted employees, or based on assumptions, are likely to be inaccurate. RNIB has produced a detailed factsheet for risk assessors called "Blind and partially sighted people at work – Guidance and good practice for Risk Assessors". You can find the factsheet at [rnib.org.uk/supporting-employees](https://www.rnib.org.uk/supporting-employees)

## **Training and development**

Blind and partially sighted employees must be given the same opportunities to develop in their career as sighted colleagues. It is important to offer opportunities to all team members to learn new skills and knowledge that is relevant to their job. Nobody wants to feel stuck in their position with no possibility for growth and advancement.

### **Case Study: Chris Clark, Senior Rail Regulation Manager**

Chris was born with a sight condition and he went through school and university without any additional support. He just sat at the front of the class so he could read the board. Chris graduated from the University of Paisley with a BA (Hons) Social Policy but very soon afterwards, his eyesight deteriorated significantly. While Chris was still very independent and could get around safely, he could not read print and used a video magnifier and screen magnification on his PC.

Chris's first experience of work was an unpaid post in basic admin. It wasn't the start he'd hoped for but he was grateful to get a foot in the door. Putting in lots of effort to make sure he had the same opportunities as others

to develop in his work, Chris made sure his employer saw the best of his talents and skills. As he worked his way up the grade system, Chris proved his sight loss did not need to hinder his progress and, within three years, he had secured a post within 'middle management'. Chris went on to further in-work study and was recognised as the highest performing student on the programme.

Continuing in his management post with Transport Scotland, Chris has experienced further deterioration in his vision and is now blind. Again he has adapted to his new circumstances and welcomed the full support of his employer. Chris secured financial support from the Access to Work scheme to fund the cost of his taxi commute to and from office as he was no longer able to make his journey independently. He now gets around the building using a long cane and sometimes colleagues assist when going to external meetings or events. With the support of his employer, Chris remains a fully effective contributing employee.

### **Bill Reeve, Director for Rail, Transport Scotland, is Chris's manager and says:**

"Transport Scotland will always look to support staff who may require additional help to fully participate in an open and inclusive work environment.

We are delighted that by providing the support Chris needs, he can make a full and valued contribution to our business."

## **Travel to work and travel in work**

It is possible that your employee is no longer able to drive due to sight loss. If this is the case then travel to work or travel in work may be an issue, particularly if they can't use public transport. It may be possible to get support through the Access to Work scheme to help meet the extra costs of travelling by taxi.

## **Getting around and guiding someone with sight loss**

Many blind and partially sighted people have some vision. Some people will be able to see fine detail, while others may have very good peripheral vision. If someone has very little or no vision they will usually receive some kind of mobility training before they start looking for work. That involves learning to navigate using a cane. The cane provides, by touch and sound, what eyesight tells a sighted person about their environment.

Access to Work can also fund route learning and mobility training, if it is going to help your employee to keep their job.

Most blind and partially sighted people learn ways of getting around their workplace. You can help your employee to navigate independently by using a combination of common sense and applying simple health and safety rules.

- Arrange a tour of the workplace, as you would with any other employee, although a little more time and attention to detail may be required.
- Be aware of workplace clutter (open drawers, bins, etc.) that will present a trip hazard. Try not to move your colleague's things or change where things are kept without discussing with them first.
- Your colleague may not be able to walk unattended across hazardous areas or places where there might be unforeseen obstacles.
- Marking the edges of any steps with a contrasting stripe provides useful visual feedback. Similarly, marking external corners of walls with a contrasting colour to the wall, and marking the ground can also aid navigation.
- A simple banister running along the length of stairways is always important, and not just for blind and partially sighted people.
- The routes to and from your employee's desk area, and especially the route to a fire exit, should never be used as a storage area, temporary or otherwise.



## Guide dogs in the workplace

The majority of blind and partially sighted people don't use a guide dog. It has been estimated that as few as one to two per cent of blind or partially sighted people use guide dogs to get around. If your employee does bring a guide dog to work, proper planning is needed to make sure things run smoothly. The dog will need to have a safe place to sleep, access to water and a toilet area. Other colleagues or customers may need to be given information on how to behave around the dog, for example, by not petting them when they are working.

Guide dogs are highly trained and when they are at work, they will sit near or under their owners' desks.

Guide dogs are trained not to interact with or disturb other people in a work environment. Guide Dogs will be happy to talk with employers about any changes that need to be made to accommodate a guide dog. For more information, visit the guide dogs website at [guidedogs.org.uk](http://guidedogs.org.uk)

## Visual awareness training

If you employ someone who is blind or partially sighted, it is useful for colleagues to have some visual awareness training. RNIB can provide a comprehensive overview of how loss of vision can affect individuals, offering practical advice and guidance on how to support blind and partially sighted employees at work. This can often be paid for through the Access to Work scheme.

**Julie Steel, Project Manager**, valued the training her team received from RNIB. She said, "Visual awareness training was very important for our team when we first experienced working with someone with sight loss. It was a useful tool for us to learn how to work with and best support our new colleague. For us, it was the personal interaction that mattered, understanding how and when to offer assistance. Visual awareness training helped remove and manage our concerns in a supportive and practical way for us all."





# Suggested approach

- 1.** Encourage your employee to talk with their line manager and discuss their support needs (see information on pages 24 and 25).
- 2.** Ask for advice from relevant people, with the employee's consent. This could include talking to occupational health advisers, HR support, GP, Access to Work, RNIB advisers, health and safety advisers, trade union reps.
- 3.** Agree what steps you need to take with the employee and set reasonable and achievable target dates for this.
- 4.** Plan when you will meet with the employee, either face to face or by phone.
- 5.** Think about who would be best to take this forward in your organisation. Sometimes the local line manager acts as the main point of contact, but sometimes issues are bigger than local teams and it may be more appropriate for a senior manager or HR person to take the lead.
- 6.** Be open about budget implications. Often, changes are made without incurring cost and you are likely to receive funding support (from Access to Work). Sometimes, there will be costs involved for the company. Think about who in your organisation will support you in the decision making. Remember, you are expected to make reasonable adjustments and cost could be a factor in this decision. But potential costs are related to the organisation as a whole and not restricted to one budget or team.
- 7.** Ask for help when you need it.

# Closing comments

People with sight loss succeed in a wide variety of jobs across almost all employment sectors. Just like everyone else, it comes down to whether they have the necessary training, skills and experience.

And just like any other worker, they will need the right tools to do the job – in this case, additional tools mean that tasks can be completed with little or no sight.

We hope that by reading this document you will have gained the confidence and knowledge you need to work successfully with your blind and partially sighted colleague and to help keep your employee in work.

## Further information and useful contacts:

RNIB provides specialist support and advice to employers and to blind and partially sighted people in work. For further information please contact:

**RNIB Helpline**  
0303 123 9999  
helpline@rnib.org.uk  
www.rnib.org.uk

**Access to Work**  
Web: [www.gov.uk/access-to-work](http://www.gov.uk/access-to-work)

**Equality and Human Rights Commission**  
Web: [www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com)

**Guide Dogs**  
Web: [www.guidedogs.org.uk](http://www.guidedogs.org.uk)

**Health and Safety Executive**  
Web: [www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)

**ACAS**  
Web: [www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)

## RNIB resources

RNIB produces a range of factsheets for blind and partially sighted people and their employers. Here are just a few examples

- Access to Work
- Work-based assessment services
- Blind and partially sighted people at work – Guidance and good practice for Risk Assessors
- Testing the compatibility of access software and IT applications
- Guidelines on meeting the needs of blind and partially sighted participants on training courses

Our factsheets are available at:  
[www.rnib.org.uk/employingsomeone](http://www.rnib.org.uk/employingsomeone)

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