Employing and retaining a blind or partially sighted person: Guide for small and medium enterprises
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Introduction

We understand that, as a small or medium sized business, you may have concerns about taking on someone with sight loss, or about an existing employee who is losing their sight.

This guide has been designed to address those concerns and to set out the benefits of employing a blind or partially sighted person. It covers everything you need to know about employing someone with sight loss, from the recruitment and interview process to making sure an employee has the right equipment in place to carry out their role.

Advances in technology mean that blind and partially sighted people can now overcome many of the barriers to work that they faced in the past, and grant schemes like Access to Work mean that many of the costs can be met by the government.

There are simple steps you can take to ensure that a blind or partially sighted employee is an asset to your organisation.
The facts

There are almost 80,000 registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in the UK
The majority of these have some useful vision. This represents a huge pool of potential applicants for you to tap into.

Blind and partially sighted people can do almost any job
Aside from obvious jobs such as piloting a plane or driving a car, a blind or partially sighted person can do just about any job. Just like everyone else, it comes down to whether they have the training, skills and experience. There are blind and partially sighted secretaries, car mechanics, nurses, scientists, stockbrokers, MPs, journalists, web designers and teachers. Just like any other worker, they will need the right tools to do the job – in this case additional tools that reduce or eliminate the need for eyesight.

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 useful vision, as many people registered with sight loss do, they can use a larger monitor or software that magnifies the image on the screen. If a person has no useful vision, they can use technology that converts the text on the screen into sound via headphones (a screen reader) or tactile information (such as a refreshable braille display).

Also many mainstream computers have accessibility features built into them, so they can be used “out of the box”.

You can get financial help to pay for any necessary equipment
Blind or partially sighted employees will often require some specialist equipment or software to allow them to do their job. However, the government’s Access to Work scheme means that you will not have to cover most of the extra costs incurred.

Blind and partially sighted people can move around and get to work
Getting to work is the employee’s responsibility. Before seeking employment, most blind and partially sighted people will have had some form of mobility training and will be quite capable of getting around. Just like anyone else, they will consider if they can get to a place of work in a timely fashion before applying for the job. They may use public transport or
have someone drive them, or they may walk using a long cane or a guide dog. They will probably spend some time with a mobility worker, provided by the local authority, to familiarise themselves with the route before their start date. It’s up to the employee to organise this for themselves.

**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. In a study by DePaul University, participants noted low absenteeism rates and long tenures. They also described their employees with disabilities as loyal, reliable, and hardworking (“Exploring the bottom line: a study of the costs and benefits of workers with disabilities”. DePaul University. 2007).

**Employing a blind or partially sighted person will send out a message that your organisation is committed to equality**
Having a culturally and socially diverse team with a range of different skills and backgrounds will give you an edge in today’s competitive marketplace.
The employer’s perspective: a case study

Afshan Nawaz heads up a small London law firm employing six people. The firm recently took on Joanne who is registered blind. She is completely blind in her right eye and has limited vision in her left eye.

Afshan, Joanne’s employer, says:

“Joanne’s ambition and work ethic is something to be admired. I think it’s all too easy for employers to focus on what a person with a disability can’t do, rather than all the things people like Joanne can do.

We haven’t incurred any additional costs due to employing Joanne and the Access to Work scheme has been really efficient; recommending and funding different pieces of equipment that will help Joanne at work.

Joanne’s sight loss hasn’t stopped her from any of her day-to-day duties, including interviewing new clients, making applications to the Home Office and issuing judicial review applications in the high court.

Joanne has been able to complete all her work with just a few extra pieces of equipment, including a larger computer screen with the resolution set to maximum and a portable magnifier for reading small print documents.”
The job application process

The application process is your first opportunity to make sure you open up a job to the best possible range of candidates, and this includes blind and partially sighted people. As a smaller employer you might not have a specialist human resource team to do your recruiting, so getting this right from the outset can save you time and effort in the long run.

- Advertise jobs where blind and partially sighted people can access them. For example, give vacancy details to your local disability employment adviser at Jobcentre Plus or post the vacancy on an accessible website that works with screen magnification and screen reading software, such as Guardian or Monster. Accessible websites sometimes (but not always) display the W3C or RNIB’s Surf Right logos.

- Make sure that the application form and pack is available in an accessible format such as large print or as an electronic document. This is a requirement under the Equality Act. Alternatively, you could offer a reasonable adjustment to the recruitment process, for example allowing someone to complete the form over the phone.

- Your application form can ask applicants if they need any support at the interview. However, the applicant is not required to disclose if they are blind or partially sighted at this stage.

- Consider including an equal opportunities statement, and a disability statement in your advertisement, outlining your commitment to equality and diversity.

- Sign up for the “Disability Symbol” campaign. This shows a commitment to equality in the area of recruitment and retention of people who are blind or have a disability. Contact your local Jobcentre Plus for more details.

- Make sure that all staff involved in selection and interviews understand equality and diversity. This is to make sure that they deal with all applications in a fair way and promote equality of opportunity.
Interviewing

Meeting a blind or partially sighted person for the first time can be daunting, but there are some things you can do to help things run smoothly and ensure the process is fair.

- Once you have shortlisted, you should ask applicants if there is anything they need in order to give them a fair interview. If they do need something, they should tell you at this stage so you can make reasonable adjustments. They might ask for extra time if the interview has a written component, such as a test, or for test material to be provided in large print.
- You can only be expected to make reasonable adjustments to the interview process if the applicant tells you about their disability.
- Don’t make assumptions. For example, not all blind people read braille and not all partially sighted people like a brightly lit room. Needs will vary from person to person, so make sure you ask the candidate if they require any adjustments.
- Ask if the lighting level is suitable, or if the person wants to move towards or face away from a window.
- Keep the room free of clutter and obstacles, particularly on the floor.
- Offer to guide the candidate to the interview room and within the building. See page 17 for more information on guiding.
- Focus on the candidate’s abilities, rather than their sight loss. They should be able to explain how they go about completing tasks and getting things done.
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 participate in jobs that they may otherwise be excluded from. The use of a computer installed with appropriate access technology software, plays a fundamental role in a blind or partially sighted person’s ability to work in a wide variety of roles.

What is access technology?
Access technology refers to a wide range of specialist equipment or software that helps blind or partially sighted people participate in activities as independently as possible. It often refers to a computer that has been adapted so that information can be entered or retrieved (accessed) by a person with limited or no sight. Examples include:

- Screen magnification software. This is software installed on a normal computer, which allows the user to enlarge the image on the screen. This would generally be used by someone with some level of useful vision.

- Screen reading software. This is software installed on a normal computer, which converts text on the screen to speech. The user typically listens using headphones so as not to disrupt others. This would generally be used by someone with little or no sight.

IT compatibility with your business systems
Blind or partially sighted employees may need to use access software, such as the types described above. We have produced a factsheet designed 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”. It is available at www.rnib.org.uk/itatwork

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

A work-based assessment is a visit to the workplace, by a specialist, to recommend equipment, software, and adjustments that would better allow the employee to fulfil their role.

You should ensure that a work-based assessment is carried out before a blind or partially sighted person starts work, or if you are looking to retain an employee who is losing their sight.

The assessment may consider:

- **the environment** – simple adjustments you could make to your work offices and surroundings to make them more accessible
- **equipment** – providing 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.

Assessments are normally provided by Access to Work, but can be directly commissioned by an employer from a specialist provider such as RNIB. Both the assessment and any subsequent costs for equipment can often be paid for through the government’s Access to Work scheme.
Access to Work

Access to Work is a scheme run by Jobcentre Plus. The scheme provides advice and practical support to disabled people and employers to help overcome work-related obstacles resulting from a disability.

Access to Work pays towards any extra employment costs that result from a disability. If one of your employees or new starters has a disability then Access to Work may be able to help. It applies to 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 individual requires support or adaptations beyond the reasonable adjustments which an employer is legally obliged to provide under the Equality Act.

How does Access to Work help me as an employer?

Access to Work can help you:

• retain an employee who develops a disability or long term condition (keeping their valuable skills and saving both time and money recruiting a replacement)
• take on a new employee who is disabled.

What type of help is provided by Access to Work?

Access to Work can support you in a number of ways. For example it can provide funds towards:

• an initial work-based assessment
• special aids, equipment and software
• adaptations to equipment
• training in the use of any specialist equipment or software
• travel to work and travel in work
• a wide variety of support workers.

Access to Work does not provide the support itself, but provides a grant to reimburse the cost of the support that is needed.
Will I have to pay anything?
Small businesses generally do not have to pay anything. Access to work will normally meet 100 per cent of the costs of any adaptations, equipment or training for small businesses (less than 50 employees).

Medium-sized enterprises may have to meet a small proportion of the cost – for existing employees only. You will only have to share the cost for:

- special aids and equipment, and
- adaptations to premises or equipment.

Access to Work normally covers 100 per cent of the cost of travel and support workers.

In all cases though, Access to Work normally pay grants of up to 100 per cent for any new employee (that is, someone who has been working for less than six weeks when they first apply for Access to Work).

What will be my share of the costs?
Depending on the size of your business, Access to Work will refund up to 80 per cent of the approved costs above a threshold determined by the number of your employees:

- 0 - 49 employees: nil
- 50 - 249 employees: £500
- Over 250 employees: £1,000

You will also be expected to meet the costs up to the threshold, but any balance above £10,000 will normally be met in full by Access to Work.

Remember though, that this cost-sharing only applies to existing employees, and only for the cost incurred for adaptations, equipment, and training.

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 an Access to Work contact centre directly. Contact details for your nearest contact centre can be found on the GOV.UK website:

www.gov.uk/access-to-work/how-to-claim
Employing and retaining a blind or partially sighted person

The sooner Access to Work knows about the request for support, the more time they have to ensure everything is in place when the employee starts. The Access to Work adviser will need some detailed information, and it will help if you make sure the employee making the application has the following information to hand:

• a job description for the role
• expected start date
• line manager’s contact details
• contact details for the employer’s IT support
• contact details of the person who will authorise the purchase and cost sharing.

Making a claim
The employee should contact Access to Work directly. They will be sent an initial two-page form asking them to complete some basic details about the job as well as their contact details and the contact details of the employer. If the employee already knows what they need in terms of support, it is possible for Access to Work to approve costs at this stage. However, we would recommend a formal assessment, as there may be additional support available that your employee could miss out on.

An assessor will come out to the workplace in order to work out exactly what you require to support the employee. You can get the most out of any assessment by thinking about all aspects of the job beforehand. The assessor can produce a formal document, or the employee can supply a letter containing the necessary information (for example, what equipment they require, who manufactures it, and how much it costs). There should always be a formal report as a result of an assessment. The Access to Work adviser will present a final figure of necessary costs to you, and any split of costs will then be discussed.

When can I purchase equipment?
You can purchase the equipment as soon as permission has been granted, applying for reimbursement of the Access to Work’s agreed contribution with supplied documentation.

Is the cost of installation and training covered?
The costs of installation and training will have been outlined in the assessment report, and you can apply for reimbursement of any agreed Access to Work’s contribution to these through supplied documentation.
The business case for job retention

We believe that sight loss should not equal job loss, and strongly recommend that you make all efforts to retain a person who is losing their sight.

Retaining an employee who is losing their sight means that your business can continue to benefit from the skills, knowledge and relationships they have built up over time. With the increase in accessible technology and the financial support of the government’s Access to Work scheme, retaining an employee can be easier and more cost effective than you think. Cost-benefits for your business could include:

• avoidance of redundancy pay or the costs associated with terminating employment
• reduced costs of someone on long-term sick leave
• reduced costs of recruitment and induction training for replacement staff
• avoidance of potential costs from a claim arising from disability discrimination cases
• added benefits of increased staff loyalty and morale, as well as a workforce more representative of its customers and community.

By retaining an employee who is losing or has lost their sight, you will also help them maintain their income and independence.

We’ve published a report called “Vocational rehabilitation: the business case for retaining newly disabled staff and those with a long-term health condition”. The report explores the positive impact of job retention on both the employee and the employer. It is available at www.rnib.org.uk/employingsomeone
The law

This section gives you some information on the Equality Act. It explains some of your duties as an employer or prospective employer.

**The Equality Act 2010**
The Equality Act clarifies what you need to do to make your workplace and services fair, and comply with the law. The Act puts a duty on you as an employer to make reasonable adjustments for your staff to help them overcome any disadvantage resulting 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” within the meaning of the 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 for employment. Volunteers are generally not covered by the Act.

**Fairness in recruitment**
The law states that an employer must not discriminate in the recruitment process – which includes the application process, sift and interview. This might include:

- producing application forms in accessible formats (such as large print)
- allowing the candidate more time for interview tests.

**Reasonable adjustments**
The law states that employers are required to make “reasonable adjustments” (changes) to the workplace. Many adjustments can be reasonably made at minimal cost and involve little inconvenience. Assistance with funding the adjustments is available through the government’s Access to Work scheme.

Some examples of reasonable adjustment include:

- providing specialist equipment (such as a video magnifier)
- providing specialist software (such as screen magnification or a screen reader)
- altering lighting levels around an employee’s workstation
• making small changes to a job description to reassign some duties to other staff
• providing information in an accessible format.

Terms of employment, benefits, and dismissal
The law states that an employer must also not discriminate:
• in the terms of the employment (such as salary)
• by not offering access to opportunities for promotion, transfer or training or receiving any other benefit.

Further legal information
For more information on any of the above please contact RNIB’s legal team at legalrights@rnib.org.uk

There are also a number of specialist organisations that can help you understand or resolve more complex queries.

The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS)
ACAS aims to improve organisations and working life through better employment relations. Visit their equality section for more in-depth information about the Equality Act. Detailed information about what is covered in the Act is provided in their booklet, “The Equality Act – what’s new for employers” which is available to download at: www.acas.org.uk

The Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC)
The EHRC can also give you information on the Equality Act, including guidance for customers, employees and service providers. www.equalityhumanrights.com
Other useful information

Visual awareness training
If you employ someone who is blind or partially sighted it can be useful for colleagues and staff to have some visual awareness training. We run a half-day course which provides a comprehensive overview of how loss of vision can affect individuals. It offers practical advice and guidance on how to support blind and partially sighted employees or clients. The training aims to build participants’ confidence in working with colleagues, staff and customers with sight loss.

By the end of the awareness session participants should have increased their understanding of:

- the wide range of effects sight loss may have and how it impacts on daily life
- communication and etiquette when working with blind and partially sighted people
- awareness of hazards, and ways to assist a blind or partially sighted person
- how to guide a blind or partially sighted person.

Training could be paid for through the Access to Work scheme. To arrange training from RNIB or Action for Blind People, or for more information, contact employmentservices@rnib.org.uk

Getting around and guiding a blind person
Many blind and partially sighted people have some useful 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 useful vision they will usually receive some kind of mobility training before seeking a job. Mostly, that involves learning to navigate using a long cane. The cane provides, by touch and sound, what eyesight tells a sighted person about their environment.

It is a good idea to arrange a tour of the workplace, as you would with any other employee. Offer to guide them. If they do want guiding, you do this by offering your arm to the person and then relaxing. They will follow the movement of your body. Announce what is about to happen, such as saying “Steps down”. We have a “How to guide” section on our website available at www.rnib.org.uk/howtoguide

We can provide you and your colleagues with visual awareness training, which includes guiding a blind person. For more information contact employmentservices@rnib.org.uk. This can often be paid for through the Access to Work scheme.
Guide dogs in the workplace
Guide dogs are one example of an aid to mobility. However, it has been estimated that as few as one or two per cent of blind or partially sighted people use guide dogs to get around. It is therefore important that you don’t assume that people either use guide dogs, or choose to bring them to work.

If in doubt about any aspect of working with guide dogs, representatives from Guide Dogs will want to help you with this. Email them at guidedogs@guidedogs.org.uk or call them on 0118 983 5555.

Risk assessment
Carrying out a risk assessment of the workplace or an activity for blind or partially sighted people doesn’t have to be difficult, but it can sometimes be a daunting prospect. 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.

Whilst 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. In a way, it suggests that the individual 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 to not make assumptions. Even people with the same eye condition can have widely different levels of useful sight. 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.

We have 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: www.rnib.org.uk/employingsomeone

Training and development
Blind and partially sighted employees should be given the same opportunities to develop as sighted colleagues.

Our “Providing training courses for blind and partially sighted people” factsheet covers everything you need to know to meet the needs of blind or partially sighted delegates on training courses you may be organising. The factsheet is available to download from: www.rnib.org.uk/employingsomeone
Our employment services

We can help you retain a current employee who is losing their sight, and we can help you to take on someone who is visually impaired.

We provide a number of services that can be directly commissioned by employers. These include:

• **work-based assessments** – a visit to a workplace, by one of our specialists, to evaluate the potential for equipment, software, and adjustments that would better allow an employee to fulfil their role.

• **1 to 1 access technology training** – our technology specialists can visit your workplace and provide training tailored to suit your employee’s needs.

• **visual and disability awareness training**.

For further information about any of these services, please visit our website or contact us via our employment services mailbox:

Web site: [www.rnib.org.uk/employmentservices](http://www.rnib.org.uk/employmentservices)

Email: [employmentservices@rnib.org.uk](mailto:employmentservices@rnib.org.uk)
Further information and resources

Useful contacts

Access to Work contact centres
Web: www.gov.uk/access-to-work/how-to-claim

Action for Blind People
Web: www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk

Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service
Web: www.acas.org.uk

Equality and Human Rights Commission
Web: www.equalityhumanrights.com

Guide Dogs
Web: www.guidedogs.org.uk
Email: guidedogs@guidedogs.org.uk

Health and Safety Executive
Web: www.hse.gov.uk

Jobcentre Plus
Web: www.gov.uk/contact-jobcentre-plus

RNIB Employment Services
Web: www.rnib.org.uk/employmentservices
Email: employmentservices@rnib.org.uk

RNIB Legal rights
Email: legalrights@rnib.org.uk
Web resources

Visit the Employers and employment professionals section of our website for further information and resources.
www.rnib.org.uk/employmentservices

We also produce the following factsheets and guides for employers:

Access to Work
www.rnib.org.uk/accesstowork

Blind and partially sighted people at work – Guidance and good practice for Risk Assessors
www.rnib.org.uk/employingsomeone

Guidelines for meeting the needs of blind or partially sighted delegates on training courses
www.rnib.org.uk/employingsomeone

RNIB Work-based assessment services
www.rnib.org.uk/employmentassessments

Testing the compatibility of access software and IT applications
www.rnib.org.uk/itatwork

Vocational rehabilitation: The business case for retaining newly disabled staff and those with a long-term health condition
www.rnib.org.uk/employingsomeone

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