

R N I B

See differently

Employing someone with sight loss: A guide for employers





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Introduction

We understand that as an employer 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 sets 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 the right equipment is in place for their employee to carry out their role.

Advances in technology mean that blind and partially sighted people can overcome many of the barriers they have faced at work in the past, while grant schemes such as Access to Work mean that many of the costs can be met by the government and not the employer.

There are simple steps you can take to ensure that a blind or partially sighted employee becomes 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

People with sight loss succeed in a wide variety of jobs across almost all employment sectors. Apart 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 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 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 software to convert text on the screen into speech (using headphones), or braille (using a refreshable braille display).

Also, many systems 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 may not have to cover 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. Research has shown that employers have noted low absenteeism rates and long tenures amongst their disabled employees, and describe them as being 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:

"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. 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."



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. If you are 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 Employment Service Adviser at Job Centre, or post the vacancy on an accessible website that works with screen magnification and screen reading software, such as Guardian, Universal Jobmatch or Evenbreak. Accessible websites sometimes (but not always) display the W3C or RNIB's Surf Right logos.
- Make sure that application forms and information packs are 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 government's Disability Confident 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 or go to [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) for more details.
- Make sure that all staff involved in selection and interviews understand equality and diversity. This is to ensure 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 workplace 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 free of charge by Access to Work, but can be directly commissioned by an employer from a specialist provider such as RNIB. Any subsequent costs for equipment can often be paid for through the Access to Work scheme.



Access to Work

Access to Work is a government scheme that 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). This means you'll be investing in their valuable skills, and saving time and money spent on a recruitment process.
- 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?

The amount you have to pay depends on the size of your business.

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

All other costs, and those for new employees, are met in full.

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 the Operational Support Unit directly. Contact details can be found on the [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) website.

www.gov.uk/access-to-work/how-to-claim

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 (if applicable)
- 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, who will take an initial application over the phone and advise the employee that they will pass their application on to an Access to Work adviser.

An assessor will come 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 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 contribution 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.

- 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.



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, shortlisting 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 reasonably be made at minimal cost and involve little inconvenience. Assistance with funding more costly 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 it is unfair to dismiss someone on the grounds of disability, and that an employer must 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 2010 – guidance for employers which is available to download at: www.acas.org.uk/equalityact

The Equality 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 half-day courses, which provide a comprehensive overview of how loss of vision can affect individuals. They offer 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 for more information, contact **Helpline@rnib.org.uk**

Getting around and guiding someone with sight loss

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: **Helpline@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 a mobility aid. 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/supporting-employees

Training and development

Blind and partially sighted employees should be given the same opportunities to develop in their career as sighted colleagues.

We have produced a factsheet called, Providing training courses for blind or partially sighted people, which 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: rnib.org.uk/supporting-employees





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 blind or partially sighted.

We provide 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.
- sign posting to access technology specialist that can visit your work place and provide tailored training 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 Helpline mailbox:

www.rnib.org.uk/employingsomeone
Email: **Helpline@rnib.org.uk**

Further information and resources

Useful contacts

Access to Work

Web: www.gov.uk/access-to-work

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/employingsomeone

Email: Helpline@rnib.org.uk

RNIB Legal Rights

Email: legalrights@rnib.org.uk

Web resources

Visit the Employing a blind or partially sighted person section of our website for further information and resources.
www.rnib.org.uk/employingsomeone

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/supporting-employees

Providing training courses for blind or partially sighted people

www.rnib.org.uk/supporting-employees

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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