

Working with blind and partially sighted colleagues

An employer and staff guide





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Introduction

This guide is essential reading for line managers, supervisors, or those supporting blind and partially sighted (BPS) colleagues in the workplace. It has been developed in partnership with a group of blind and partially sighted people, who have a keen interest in improving the employment situation of people with sight loss.

Each person's experience is different and unique and there are no hard and fast rules about how to support blind and partially sighted people in the workplace. We hope that by offering useful tips, shared experiences and guidance across a range of areas, including eye conditions, sharing information, assistive technology and workplace adjustments we will instil you with the confidence to work successfully with blind and partially sighted colleagues; and dispel a few myths along the way.

Sometimes it can be difficult to understand how someone with sight loss is able to do certain things in the workplace, for example, read documents or share written information.

What do you do if you want to ask someone about their sight loss, but don't want to offend? How can you better understand how a blind person uses a computer? What is the best way to support someone with sight loss at work? If a colleague's sight deteriorates, how do you behave towards that person? This guide is intended to answer these questions and more.

This report contains an array of personal stories that highlight some of the key issues people with sight loss often face in the workplace.

Our aim is to assure you that working alongside a blind or partially sighted person can be straightforward and mutually beneficial.



The facts

- There are just over 84,000 registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in the UK.
- Many people in the general public underestimate disabled people, including those who are blind or partially sighted.

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, office workers, MPs, journalists, web designers and teachers.
- Just like any other worker, BPS employees will need the right tools to do the job – in this case additional tools that enable someone to complete tasks with little or no sight.
- Blind and partially sighted people should not be excluded from employment. Sight loss should not equal job loss.

- People in work should be supported and encouraged to stay in work whenever possible, and provided with the right information, advice, equipment and support to help them retain work, and progress in their careers.
- 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 like Access to Work mean that many of the costs can be met by the Government.

What is “visual impairment”?

We prefer not to refer to people as “visually impaired” as this phrase is unpopular with many blind and partially sighted adults.

However, “visual impairment” is a useful term for describing the different kinds of sight conditions people experience.

Some people are born with a visual impairment, some experience sight loss as a result of an accident, while others may have lost their sight as a result of a medical condition. Regardless of the cause, people with sight loss may experience various difficulties arising from their condition.

It is important to understand that many difficulties can be overcome with the right adjustments.

People with sight loss are no different to anybody else, apart from the fact that they have reduced eyesight or none at all.

In considering sight loss, it is easy to think in terms of how far down an eye chart somebody can read. However, sight loss can be measured in many different ways.

Some examples include:

- distance vision
- tunnel vision due to not being able to see to the side, top or bottom
- diffused central vision (the opposite of tunnel vision)
- sensitivity to light

- night blindness
- the ability to recognise distance or speed
- the rate of focus
- the ability to see contrast.

Being registered as blind does not always mean that a person has no sight at all. Many have some useful sight and around 50 per cent can recognise a friend at arm's length. This means that some workplace adaptations can simply be to change font sizes and contrast on documents, computer monitors, and keyboards.



How managers and supervisors can support blind and partially sighted colleagues at work

We know that line managers and supervisors have a challenging job. Not only do you do your own job, but you coach, support and develop others in theirs too. As a manager, you play a really important part when it comes to the support given to colleagues, and you are in the front line when it comes to looking after your team at work.

We also know that if a colleague has a line manager or supervisor who is comfortable talking about disability and understands what support to provide or signpost to, then the experience for that colleague is much better. As a result, they are more likely to stay in, and progress at, work.

Some adjustments may be needed to improve the everyday work experience for a colleague with sight loss. This will allow your colleague to be more comfortable in the workplace. It's best to discuss the impact of a colleague's visual impairment directly with the person concerned, but some areas you may like to consider are described here:

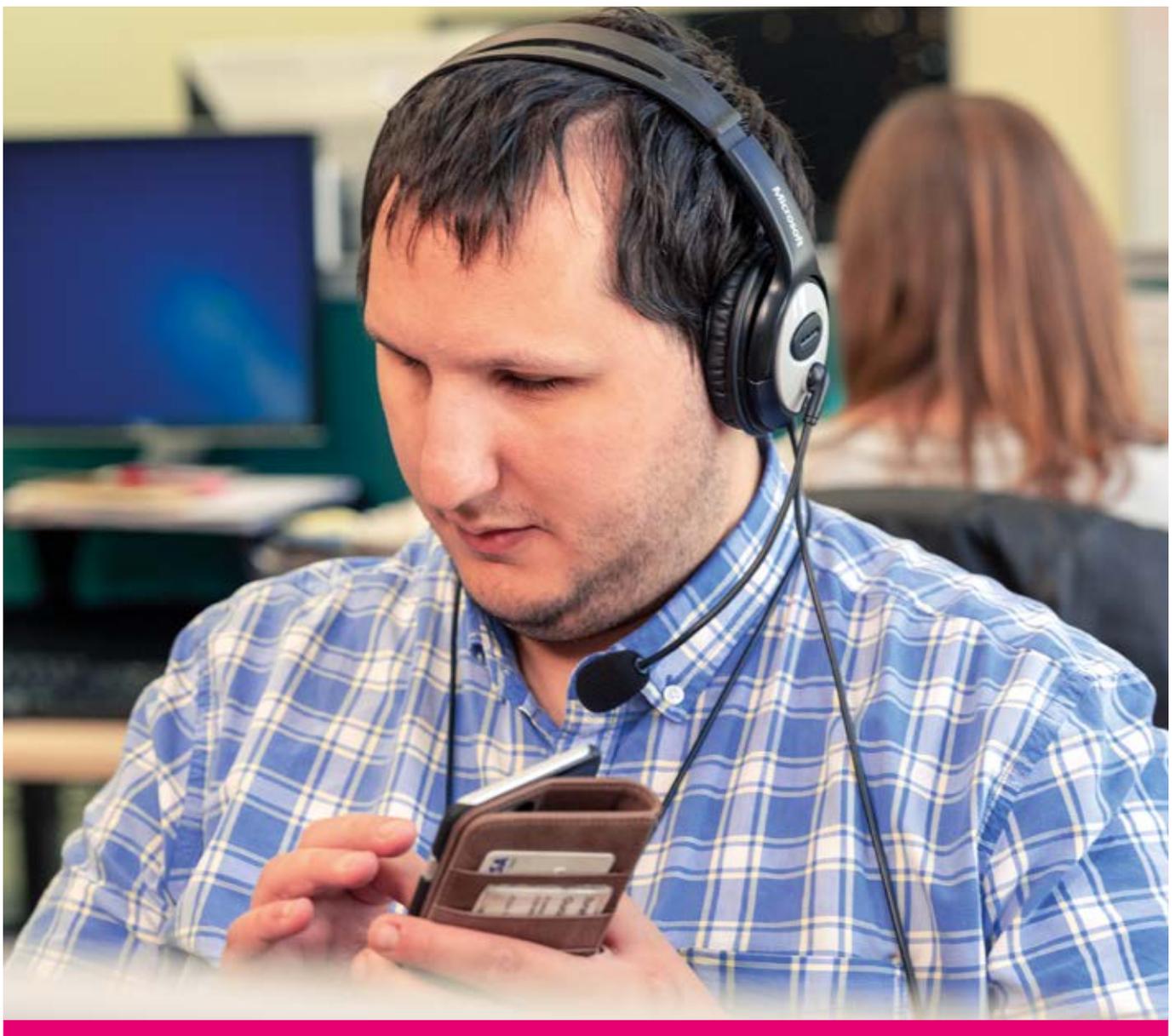
- You are more likely to make better decisions by involving your colleague in generating solutions.
- Interestingly, you might need to consider treating people differently in order to treat them fairly. This could mean your blind or partially sighted colleague might not have exactly the same working conditions as other members of staff.
- For example, your colleague could find it easier to be based in one place rather than 'hot desking', so that they are better able to remember where things are kept.
- Being aware of someone's visual impairment can be helpful in considering how best to support that person. However, as with any employee, it is important to respect your colleagues' right to confidentiality. You should only consider revealing details about someone's visual impairment to others if it is absolutely necessary, and if you have their consent.
- By speaking directly with your blind or partially sighted colleague, you can avoid making assumptions about what they can and can't do.

Kirin Saeed, an Audience Liaison Officer, describes excellent support from her line manager:

"My most positive experience working as a new employee was with an organisation that had a one week induction programme. I had one-to-one meetings with all my colleagues and a long meeting with my manager. In the meeting we discussed my role, the tasks I needed to do in my job, what access support I needed, and how he could support

me to acquire it. My manager was extremely understanding, as it took a little time to get the right equipment in place.

He gave me other tasks to undertake, and I shadowed my colleagues. Because of this, I had a greater understanding of how the department worked and was often able to cover for short periods of sick leave. I was also given flexible hours to work thus avoiding extensive travel difficulties."



Communicating with your blind and partially sighted colleague

Verbal communication

Here are a few tips:

- It is good to ask if someone needs help and how, particularly if it seems to be needed, but avoid asking personal, medical questions about their eye condition.
- Introducing yourself by name when you begin speaking to your colleague can be helpful, if they require this. It is often difficult for people with sight loss to recognise other people, and can be embarrassing when they don't know who they are speaking to. Remember to acknowledge any blind or partially sighted colleagues when walking around the workplace, as they may be unable to notice you.
- Likewise, letting your colleagues know when you leave their presence will save them the embarrassment of speaking to someone who is no longer there.
- Be mindful that a colleague might need help introducing themselves to other team members when entering a room, or finding their way around new places. For example, some eye conditions can cause a person to become completely blind when entering a room with different lighting, even though they might have some useful vision at other times.
- During meetings, it is useful to advise the chair or facilitator to ask those attending to introduce themselves at the start, and before they contribute; to ensure that your colleague knows who is speaking.
- Your colleague may not be able to see your facial expression or body language, so try to be as straightforward and clear as possible with anything you say.
- Some blind and partially sighted colleagues often do not feel comfortable in places with loud background noise, as it is difficult for them to know what is happening around them. Where possible, have your discussion in a quiet place.
- A useful rule of thumb is to assume that if your colleague with sight loss asks for something to be done differently, there will be a reason for doing this. This may not be obvious, so try to find the time to discuss this with your colleague.
- Feel free to use words that refer to vision, such as 'see' and 'look.' People with sight loss use them. They might 'see' with their other senses, often creating mental images of what is being described.

As part of a series of sight loss guides, RNIB has published “ten tips to help you communicate with a person with sight loss”. To read these tips, visit: [rnib.org.uk/communicating](https://www.rnib.org.uk/communicating)

Written communication

Ask your colleague what is their preferred format: for example, computer-based or large print, and try to give documents and paperwork in advance. Some partially sighted people like documents to be reproduced

in a larger font, and they will be able to tell you what size is best for them.

You'll find most of your blind or partially sighted colleagues will ask you to simply send them an electronic

copy (for example, a Word document) in advance. This will allow them to print it themselves, or read directly from their computer using their assistive technology software.

The same principles apply to any training materials your colleague might need, for example as part of an induction programme or as they progress with their career. If you are using external trainers, or colleagues not familiar with producing accessible material, point them in the direction of the verbal and written guidelines described here.

For more advice on producing accessible documents, see: [rnib.org.uk/accessibledocuments](https://www.rnib.org.uk/accessibledocuments)



Eve, a psychology teacher, reflects on some interesting conversations at work:

“I often find that, either I am talking to someone who is not there, or talking to someone and I don't know who they are. Sometimes people will start talking when they are very close to me but I didn't realise they were there.

I have screamed out in shock at times, which came as a surprise to them! The other day someone tried to help me by grabbing both my elbows unexpectedly. They were only trying to help but I actually thought I was being attacked. Luckily we both saw the funny side!”

Kimberley Hargreaves, an HR and Training Assistant, explains how much easier it is for blind and partially sighted people if information is provided in the right format:

“I was registered as sight impaired when I was 19 years old. When I applied for my current job it was a CV-based application. I never disclosed my disability to them on my CV, but when they called and invited me for an interview I was very open and honest in disclosing my visual impairment.

“We discussed the different aspects of the process, which I would go

through when I came in for my interview. I requested that they provided me with written materials in my specified size and style of font, and that they set up a screen magnifier and extra time for the verbal and numerical reasoning test on the PC, which was all set up when I arrived. Having this conversation prior to interview was hugely important as it meant that I could be confident in the knowledge of exactly what to expect, and reassured that the company were aware of what I needed before I attended. This gave me confidence to focus on impressing them at the interview which must have worked, because I got the job!”

Kirin talks about a breakdown of communication with her line manager and how this was resolved:

“When I have started a new job I have always tried to be clear with my employer about my access requirements. However there have been occasions when managers just aren’t sure how to approach me.

“In one job, a manager was unwilling to allow me to undertake all the tasks I needed to do, despite giving me the job in the first place, and kept handing work over to my colleagues. This caused resentment, to such a great extent that one day in the staff room one of my colleagues suggested I was being lazy.

I then decided to approach my manager directly and ask why I wasn’t being given all my responsibilities in my role. He then admitted he wasn’t sure how I would fulfil some tasks. I sat down with him and went through the various tasks; it turned out that with a few minor adjustments and an application to Access to Work we could resolve the problem. In fact, one adjustment benefited everyone in the organisation and made life easier for all. I guess I was able to resolve the problem because I was an assertive person, but this isn’t always the case.”

Practical support in the workplace

When considering adjustments for a blind or partially sighted colleague, it helps to consult with them directly. After all, they are the person most likely to understand what they may or may not need.

Depending on the size of your organisation, we also recommend that you speak with the human resources team or any inclusion or equality staff you have. Access to Work will also offer advice on workplace adjustments.

The importance of a work-based assessment

A holistic and person-centred work-based assessment is central to providing practical support to anyone with sight loss. A work-based assessment typically involves a visit to the workplace by a specialist, to recommend equipment, software, and adjustments that would better allow the employee to fulfil their role. This can be provided through the Access to Work scheme, or can be directly commissioned by an employer from a specialist provider, such as RNIB. More information is available on RNIB's website at: [rnib.org.uk/employmentassessments](https://www.rnib.org.uk/employmentassessments)

It is helpful to build in regular reviews of adjustments, for example at the end of the probationary period, and in supervision sessions and appraisals, to ensure that any adjustments are still effective.

Lighting

Both the quality and quantity of lighting can have a significant impact on all working environments. For some people, it can help to create a comfortable workplace. For others, poor lighting can pose a barrier to effective working.

Lighting can be a particularly important issue for blind and partially sighted people.

The type of task-lamp and amount of ambient lighting a person requires for reading or other work depends on individual requirements.

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 lamps emulating natural light (daylight bulbs) are very effective.

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

It is also important that fluorescent lamps are suitably shielded and worn lamps are promptly replaced, preferably before they begin to wear out and flicker.

Your colleague is often the best judge of what works well, and what kind of lighting is best. The key to resolving lighting issues is to talk to the person involved and call in specialists where necessary. Sometimes the simplest change can make a huge difference to a working environment.

Mobility and navigation

Most blind and partially sighted people develop strategies for navigation around a working environment space, such as equipment, shelves and furniture.

If someone has very little or no useful vision they will usually rely on some kind of mobility aid. Mostly, that involves navigating using a long cane. The cane provides, by touch and sound, what eyesight tells a sighted person about their environment.

You can help your colleague to navigate independently around the workplace by using a combination of common sense and applying simple health and safety rules.

- It is a good idea to 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 mindful of workplace clutter (open drawers, bins, etc.) that might present a trip hazard. Try not to move your colleagues' 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.
- The routes into and out of your colleague's workstation, amenities, and especially the route to a fire exit, should not be used as a storage area, temporary or otherwise.
- Advice and guidance on designing a workplace for blind and partially sighted people is available from RNIB Business Services. Further details on the RNIB business website at: **rnib-business.org.uk**

Sophie Stowell, a Barclays graduate, talks about difficulties she faces in the workplace:

"I was diagnosed with Stargardt's Macular Dystrophy when I was 13 years old. For me, one of the hardest things about starting my new job was orientating around the building and getting to know my colleagues. Simple things like identifying the ladies toilets were quite difficult and I was unable to read the signs on how to use the microwave and coffee machine.

"I found the first few weeks to be very isolating as I was unable to recognise people, and therefore felt quite secluded. I avoided walking into public spaces with large groups of people.

"Talking to my wider team about my visual impairment and how it impacts me has been very beneficial. My team are now much more conscious about the difficulties I face, and this allows me to be more confident in asking them for help with the things everyone else takes for granted; like reading the restaurant menu options!"



Guiding a blind or partially sighted colleague

If you see someone who you think needs assistance, you can offer help and introduce yourself. Don't feel you should wait for someone else to do so. If your offer is accepted, ask where they want to go and how they'd like to be guided.

RNIB recommend the following tips:

- Introduce yourself, communicate clearly when offering help and listen to their response (they will confirm if they want assistance).
- Ask where and how they would like to be guided. Allow them to take your arm, rather than you holding or grabbing theirs.
- Point out kerbs and steps as you approach them and say whether they go up or down. Mention any potential hazards that lie ahead and say where they are.
- If you are guiding someone into a seat, place their hand on the back of the seat before they sit down, so they can orientate themselves.
- Say when you have finished providing assistance and are leaving them – make sure they know where they are and which way they are facing.

Download one of our "How to Guide" documents for more detailed information about guiding blind and partially sighted people:
rnib.org.uk/guiding

Guide Dogs UK also provide training in guiding techniques, to enable you to acquire the skills to guide safely. For more information visit:

guidedogs.org.uk/myguide

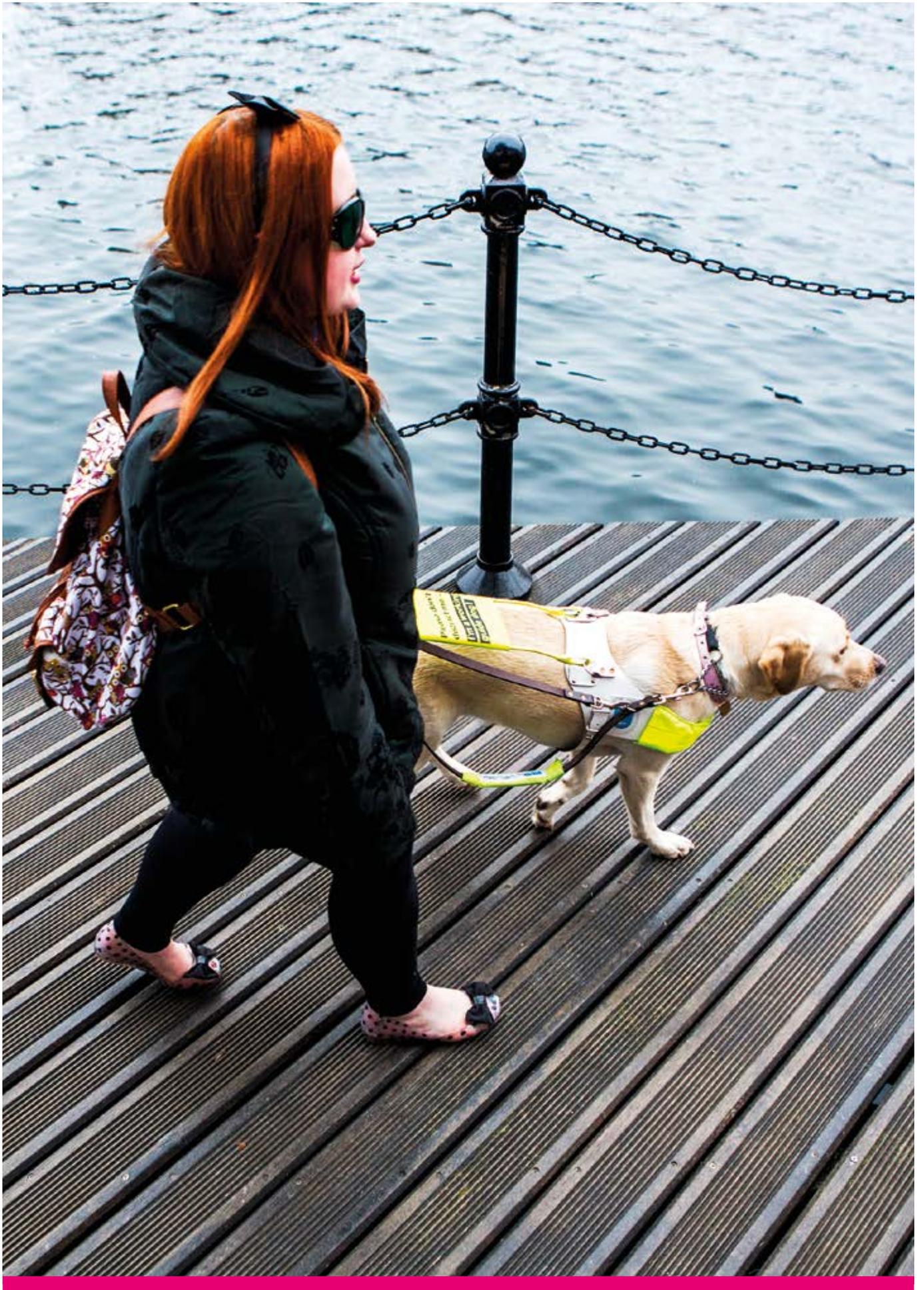
Guide Dogs

The majority of blind and partially sighted people don't use a guide dog. 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. Having said that, if an employee brings a guide dog to work, proper planning is required to ensure that 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.

In most cases, working practices can be adopted to ensure a safe and comfortable working environment.

Guide dogs are highly trained and when in an office 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 UK will be happy to talk to employers about any changes that need to be made to accommodate a guide dog. For more information, visit: guidedogs.org.uk



Support workers

Your colleague will typically be able to undertake their job as independently and effectively as possible. However, there may be some tasks that could benefit from the assistance of a support worker.

Use of a support worker is an adjustment that can be made, for which funding is normally available via Access to Work.

This could be an additional role for someone who is already within your organisation, or they could be recruited for this purpose. A support worker can take on tasks like driving, data management and checking documentation.

Access to Work can assess this need over the phone, or it can be part of a work-based assessment. Colleagues

will need to think about how best to communicate with the support worker, for example copying them into emails about deadlines, changes to procedures or meetings.

Risk assessment

If you need to carry out a risk assessment, it can sometimes be a daunting prospect if you haven't worked with blind or partially sighted people before. For example, it can be very easy to over-estimate risks or to make assumptions about what blind people can or can't do.

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. Workplace 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)

Access technology – technical support

The use of a computer installed with appropriate access technology software, plays an important role in a blind or partially sighted person's ability to work in a wide variety of roles.

Any problems with access technology should be discussed with your IT support team in the first instance. They will probably have been involved with its procurement and installation in

the first place. Technical support for access technology software can also be obtained from the UK distributor's technical support team.

RNIB have produced a factsheet designed to help an organisation test the compatibility of access software with its IT applications. The factsheet is called Testing the compatibility of access software and IT applications. It is available at: [rnib.org.uk/itatwork](https://www.rnib.org.uk/itatwork)

Eve describes working as a full-time teacher

"I am registered blind due to Retinitus Pigmentosa. I don't read braille. I use ZoomText and JAWS every day, which are programmes that help me with documents, emails and the internet. I also have a support worker for anything else I need, like turning documents into a format I can read, or filling in databases."

Kirin explains the relationship between someone with sight loss and their support worker:

"Throughout my 25 years of work in a variety of jobs, I have used support workers. A good support worker is someone who is able to take direction and yet know when to step back and remember that I am their employer. A good colleague will recognise that the support worker is not the person doing the job - I am. I would never stop my fellow workers communicating with my support worker in general conversation, but they should ensure that when discussing work matters I am the point of communication. I feel it

is my responsibility to ensure my colleagues understand this.

"In one of my many roles, because I was so efficient in doing my job with the aid of my support worker, one of my fellow disabled colleagues realised they needed support too. He asked for my assistance to approach our manager. I dealt sensitively with the situation, and the manager thanked me. My colleague had key skills and knowledge which, if it had been lost, would have been hard to replace. My colleague also thanked me, as I decreased his stress at work and made him realise it was not a failing to ask for help."



Colleagues who acquire a visual impairment, or whose sight deteriorates

Colleagues who have deteriorating sight that affects their performance, may be unwilling or unable to admit, sometimes even to themselves, the seriousness of what is happening. Behind this may be an understandable fear of being discriminated

The question of if, when, and how to disclose sight loss is a complicated one.

We know that most organisations and staff act in helpful and supportive ways when faced with an employee experiencing the onset of sight loss. Yet some people may conceal their sight loss out of fear of losing their jobs.

It may be helpful to build into your review meetings or appraisals a mechanism for identifying and resolving disability-related problems, for example a standard question asking if any working arrangements are causing the colleague problems. A colleague may need a period of disability-leave to adjust to changes caused by losing some, or all, of their sight.

But the key message for anyone in work and losing their sight is that sight loss should not equal job loss.

David shares his experiences of deteriorating sight at work:

“If your sight deteriorates while you are in post, it is important to negotiate any support you may need in order to continue to be productive. It is your job, and so do not give up on it at all until you have exhausted every possible source of support and assistance in order to continue. Redeployment is an option but only if you do not give up on pay, prospects, status and other benefits.”



Is it okay to ask...?

This section takes inspiration from the Channel Four TV programme "The Last Leg", where its disabled presenters discuss questions about disability that some members of the public might be too embarrassed, or fearful of causing offence, to ask. The following questions are taken from real-life examples fielded by the blind and partially sighted people who co-wrote this guide.

You don't look blind?

Someone may be able to make eye contact at times, or appear to. They may wear make-up and may not wear dark glasses. Their eyes may not look any different.

Haven't they found a cure for that yet?

There isn't a single cause that explains sight loss, and there isn't a single 'cure'. People with the same diagnosis may have quite different experiences of how it affects their everyday life. Some people are born with a visual impairment, some experience sight loss as a result of an accident, while others may have lost their sight as a result of a medical condition.

So you must have really good hearing?

People sometimes assume that other senses develop to replace sight loss. Whilst some blind and partially sighted people may have good hearing, or touch, or sense of smell, this is no different to any other cross section of the general population.

Does that mean you can read braille?

Only a very small proportion of people who are blind can read braille fluently, typically those born with blindness. Most people with sight loss read using large print or audio instead of braille, and use accessible apps on phones, tablets or computers.

How can you use a computer if you can't see?

Blind and partially sighted people successfully use computers in the workplace through synthetic speech, magnification and braille displays.

It must cost a fortune to keep you at work, because your employer has to change everything?

Access to Work, a government scheme, funds the cost of specialist equipment that a blind or partially sighted employee needs. Between 80 and 100 per cent of costs for items such as computer adaptations can be refunded. Access to Work funds can also cover a support worker to read and deal with paperwork; a driver where public transport is not available to travel to, from and for work; or other equipment such as special lighting and magnifiers.

What's that white stick for?

A white cane is used by blind and partially sighted people as a mobility tool, to detect objects in the path of the user. This "traditional" white cane is also known as a Long cane. There are other types of cane; the most common are the Guide cane and Symbol cane. The Guide cane is a shorter cane, with a more limited mobility function. It is

primarily used to scan for kerbs and steps. The Symbol cane is used mostly to let other people know that the user has a visual impairment.

Can your guide dog read road signs?

Guide dogs are highly trained, intelligent dogs. Amongst many things, they learn to: stop at kerbs and wait for the command to cross the road; judge height and width so that its owner does not bump their head or shoulder; deal with noisy traffic. As such, guide dogs are invaluable in helping people to get around. But there is only so much they can do!

BBC3, as part of their 'Things Not To Say...' series that focuses on misunderstood groups of society, have produced a new film titled 'Things Not To Say to a Blind Person'. RNIB were happy to help them find a unique group of people ready to take on questions like:

- "You don't look blind."
- "What's the point in getting your hair styled?"
- "Oh, you have an actual job?"

Watch the video at:
rnib.org.uk/thingsnottosay





Closing remarks

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 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 that enable tasks to be completed with little or no sight. We hope that by reading this document you will have gained the confidence and knowledge to work successfully with your blind and partially sighted colleagues.

This guide can be downloaded from
[rnib.org/workingwith](https://www.rnib.org/workingwith)

Further information and resources

RNIB provide 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

Useful contacts

RNIB

rnib.org.uk

Access to Work

gov.uk/access-to-work

Equality and Human Rights

[Commission equalityhumanrights.com](http://Commission.equalityhumanrights.com)

Guide Dogs guidedogs.org.uk

Health and Safety Executive hse.gov.uk

JAWS and ZoomText are distributed by Sight and Sound:

sightandsound.co.uk

Supernova is distributed by Dolphin UK:

yourdolphin.com

Employers Network for Equality and Inclusion (ENEI)

enei.org.uk

RNIB resources

RNIB produce lots of resources for blind and partially sighted people and employers. Here are just a few examples:

Employing someone with sight loss: a guide for employers

rnib.org.uk/employingsomeone

Access to Work

rnib.org.uk/accesstowork

Blind and partially sighted people at work – Guidance and good practice for Risk Assessors

rnib.org.uk/supporting-employees

Eye conditions

rnib.org.uk/eye-health/eye-conditions

Providing training courses for blind or partially sighted people

rnib.org.uk/supporting-employees

RNIB work-based assessment service

rnib.org.uk/employmentassessments

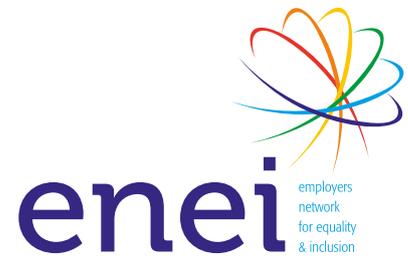
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