



Let's Talk Adjustments:

A guide to discussing reasonable adjustments at work

Introduction

In the UK, approximately one in four people is disabled¹ and almost 5 million disabled people are in employment². This short guide considers adjustments to the workplace or working arrangements to enable disabled people to work well and have fulfilling careers. The aim of the guide is to support effective discussion of work adjustments between line managers and those affected by physical and psychological conditions.

The guide includes illustrative quotations taken from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' (RCVS) *Let's Talk Adjustments: real stories and insights series*. Developed as part of a joint campaign with the RCVS Mind Matters Initiative, the series explores veterinary professionals' experience of the implementation of adjustments at work.

Adjustments for disability at work: legal considerations

In the UK, the Equality Act (2010) protects disabled people from discrimination when applying for a job, at work, or in the event of dismissal or redundancy. (This protection is provided by the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) in Northern Ireland.)

The Act defines disability as a 'long-term' physical or psychological condition that has a 'substantial' adverse impact on a person's ability to carry out day-to-day activities. Long-term is defined as a condition having lasted, or being likely to last, for at least one year, although the Equality Act identifies a number of specific conditions, including visual impairments and cancer, as disabilities from the point at which they are diagnosed. An example of a substantial impact is that the person requires more time than most to complete a task.

If a person tells their employer that they have a disability, the Equality Act requires the organisation to make 'reasonable' adjustments to work premises, work equipment or working practices to ensure that the person is not disadvantaged compared with colleagues who are not disabled. The term 'reasonable' refers to what is practicable and affordable for the employer to implement. Organisations are not required to make adjustments that are not feasible for practical or cost reasons, nor does an employer have to change the requirements of a job role if this is not possible.

Although the Equality Act states that adjustments must be reasonable for the organisation in relation to practicality and cost, employers are often concerned that adjustments may be demanding to implement. Adjustments can include changes to the physical workplace or work equipment, such as installing access ramps or providing adaptive IT equipment. Commonly, adjustments involve changes to working practices. These are often simple

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and required only for a specific time period rather than being permanent, with examples including:

- changes to work start and finish times;
- building in additional breaks at work;
- avoiding particular duties or arranging for the person to undertake different duties;
- providing mentoring or additional feedback;
- providing guidance on organising and managing workload; and,
- debriefing after demanding tasks.

Commonly, adjustments involve changes to working practices. These are often simple and required only for a specific time period:

“When [I was] experiencing severe anxiety symptoms, managers would only book one or two simple surgeries on my operating days and rework appointments to ensure I had a reasonable lunch break so I could get out for a walk [which] made the day more manageable” (Carole)

The wider benefits of adjustments at work

Not all people experiencing a long-term condition will view themselves as disabled. Although adjustments at work are not legally required in these circumstances, it's good practice to consider if these colleagues would benefit from support. Adjustments can also be helpful for those who are affected by shorter-term health conditions, as well as those who are experiencing difficult life events, such as bereavement. This approach helps to build an inclusive workplace culture that gives people a sense of being valued and supported, which in turn can promote people's engagement at work and enhance the effectiveness of the organisation.

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Discussing adjustments at work: **potential challenges**

Good communication between line managers and the colleagues they manage is fundamental to supporting disabled people at work. However, there can be a number of barriers to effective discussion of disability and work-related adjustments. Almost half of disabled people are reluctant to disclose details of their condition at work³. This reluctance might be greater for disabled people who are in the early stages of their career or who are new to an organisation. Some people experiencing physical and psychological conditions might be hesitant about discussing their circumstances if they do not have a formal diagnosis. Others might not fully recognise that they are experiencing difficulties. Research with people with long-term conditions indicates that they do not always know what work adjustments might be implemented to meet their needs^{4,5}. Finally, for some of those with conditions that can involve difficulties with social interaction, such as anxiety and autism, discussing their experiences and support needs can involve particular challenges.

Some people experiencing signs or symptoms of a physical or psychological condition might be hesitant about discussing their circumstance if they do not have a diagnosis:

“A grey area that I have personally struggled with is knowing my workplace rights...while still undergoing diagnosis.” (Lauren)

Some might not fully recognise that they are experiencing difficulties:

“I have autonomic dysfunction, manifesting as syncope and hypotension, with periods of self-resolving asystole. I am also undergoing diagnostics for neurodivergence. I list these openly now, but I...did not know this while in practice. I had no idea that my stress...was unusual. I genuinely believed my fainting was a personal weakness.” (James)

Line managers can also experience challenges in discussing disability and adjustments at work. They might believe they lack sufficient knowledge about a condition a colleague is experiencing and might feel unsure about how to identify and implement appropriate adjustments.

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Holding conversations about adjustments at work: practical guidance

This section offers some practical tips for line managers and employees experiencing physical and psychological conditions to support more effective discussion of adjustments at work.

For line managers:

- Consistently demonstrating to your colleagues that health and wellbeing matter, as well as having regular formal and informal one-to-one contact with your team members, can make it easier for them to approach you about any physical or psychological difficulties they're experiencing. It can also make it easier for you to start a conversation with a colleague if you notice something that might indicate that they're experiencing a physical or psychological condition.
- You don't need to be an expert on the condition a person is experiencing to have a conversation about it with them. Indeed, it's better to let the person tell you what's happening and how it affects them, rather than making assumptions about what they're experiencing.

It's better to let the person tell you what's happening and how it affects them, rather than making assumptions about what they are experiencing:

“At the heart of it is a mindset: listen first. Make it safe for people to share what they need, even if they're not sure how to say it.” (Laura)

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- Not everyone experiencing physical and psychological conditions will need adjustments at work to be put in place, but it's good practice to consider if they would benefit from support. In particular, if a person takes time away from work because of a physical or psychological condition, it's important to consider whether they require adjustments to be implemented on their return to work.

Not everyone experiencing physical and psychological conditions will need adjustments to be put in place:

“[When I] explained I was experiencing post-natal anxiety, the managers called me in for a meeting to ask if they could do anything to help. Just having that conversation made me feel better, and I didn't feel the need to ask for anything else at that time.”

(Carole)

- In discussing the person's support needs, it's important to establish what they're able to do rather than focusing only on aspects of their work they find more difficult.
- It's typically the case that effective adjustments are specific to the person and their circumstances, therefore it's important to ask for the person's views on what support and adjustments might be appropriate. Don't 'impose' adjustments. Some people won't know what adjustments might be suitable for them, so you may need to explore options together. This can include introducing adjustments on a trial basis to establish whether they're effective.

Some people won't know what adjustments might be suitable, so you may need to explore options together:

“Adjustments are a negotiation, a discussion, a compromise from both sides. Not all of us know what adjustments are right for us, but it's a lot easier...if you have someone to hold your hand and work it out with you.” *(James)*

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- Draw on specialist guidance to help you to understand the person's needs at work. This can include information from the person's doctor and resources provided by your organisation, such as an occupational health service or employee assistance programme. External organisations that support people with specific physical and psychological conditions can also be useful. A good starting point is the disability charity, Scope, which provides guidance on a range of work-related matters, including adjustments.
- If work adjustments are implemented, this should be treated as confidential unless the person wishes to share details with their colleagues.
- Adjustments may be required only for a specific period of time and can then be discontinued. It's important to follow up with the person at regular intervals to monitor the effectiveness of adjustments and to consider if alternative or additional support measures are required. Adjustments should be reviewed if the person is returning to work following an absence related to their condition, or if their work role changes.
- Share brief notes of meetings and any agreed actions with the person.

It's important to follow up with the person to monitor the effectiveness of adjustments and to consider if alternative or additional support measures are required:

“Don't fall into the trap of thinking that reasonable adjustments will be perfect first time - what works for one person at one point in time may not work for [them] at a later point. Allow trial adjustments, and anticipate needing repeated conversations and check-ins.” (Jenny)

For employees experiencing physical and psychological conditions

- The charity, Scope, provides advice and support relating to a range of work and career issues for disabled people. This includes practical guidance on disclosing a physical or psychological condition at work and asking for adjustments.

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- You might find it helpful to invite a trusted colleague to join you and be a source of support when you discuss your condition with your line manager.
- In your discussions with your manager, it's very helpful to describe the effects of your condition, and which aspects of your work you feel able to do and which are more difficult for you. You might be unsure what adjustments at work would be beneficial or possible to implement. Your manager might not have all the answers either, so you may need to explore adjustment options together. This can include implementing adjustments on a trial basis to establish whether they're effective for you.

It's helpful if you can describe the effects of your condition:

“Ever since I first informed [my manager] of my diagnosis, their ongoing support has been hugely important for me. Being able to be honest about how my condition impacts me allows me to ask for help when needed. My honesty is also useful for my [manager], as by being open they can better understand how, at times, my condition impacts my life.” (Sallie)

A survey exploring experiences of disability in the UK veterinary sector found that more than two-thirds of respondents who were working had disclosed details of their conditions to their current employer⁶. Reasons for disclosure included accessing support and acting as a role model for others. Some respondents believed that disclosure was unavoidable because aspects of their conditions were visible to colleagues. Sharing details of conditions and/or adjustments with colleagues beyond line managers can be personally helpful, and can also have benefits for the wider team. However, it's your decision what information, if any, to share, and you may prefer to keep details of your condition(s) and/or adjustments private.

Sharing details of condition(s) and/or adjustments with colleagues can be personally helpful, and can also have benefits for the wider team:

“[Discussing my condition] resulted in colleagues being open when their own health waxed or waned. [This] helped us all, despite the additional pressure and stress of the COVID pandemic on a small team.” (Kelly)

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Further resources

- The UK Government Equalities Office provides an [accessible guide](#) for organisations on their legal obligations relating to disabled job applicants and employees, including reasonable adjustments.
- Mind has developed a [Wellness Action Plan](#) template to aid identification of practical steps for supporting people experiencing mental health conditions.
- Bupa offers a [practical guide for managers](#) on supporting disabled colleagues, including advice on holding a conversation with a colleague about their support needs at work.
- The UK Government [Access to Work](#) scheme provides grants to people with physical or psychological conditions to fund work-related support measures such as specialist equipment or coaching. Note that only the individual themselves, rather than their employer, can apply for an Access to Work grant.
- Scope offers guidance on a wide range of matters relating to disability, including work and careers. In particular, its [advice for disabled people](#) on disclosing a physical or psychological condition at work and asking for adjustments, may be helpful.
- The Mind Matters Initiative Applied Mental Health Science series, offers a collection of bitesize guides on mental health topics developed with experts, and includes examples of reasonable adjustments: [Applied Mental Health Science Series - Mind Matters](#)

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About this guide

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The guide has been developed by Professor Elinor O'Connor, Chartered Occupational Psychologist and Professor of Occupational Psychology at Alliance Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, in partnership with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) as part of the joint RCVS and RCVS Mind Matters Initiative 'Let's Talk Adjustments' campaign.

Please note that it is important to seek your own guidance or legal advice regarding any specific matters related to reasonable adjustments.

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As part of our commitment to continuous improvement, we welcome feedback and suggestions for future updates to this guide.

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About the RCVS

As the regulatory body and Royal College for veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses in the UK, our mission is to enhance society through improved animal health and welfare by upholding and advancing the educational, ethical, and clinical standards of the UK's veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses. As a regulator, we set, uphold and advance veterinary standards in accordance with the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966. As a Royal College, we promote, encourage and advance the study and practice of the art and science of veterinary surgery and medicine. We do all these things in the interests of animal health and welfare, and in the wider public interest. Our vision is to be recognised as a trusted, compassionate and proactive regulator; and a supportive and ambitious Royal College, underpinning confident veterinary professionals of whom the UK can be proud.

Mind Matters was set up in 2015, is funded and delivered by the RCVS, and supports the mental health of the veterinary community across all settings and career stages, through facilitating accessible, high-quality, and evidence-based mental health projects, research, content and events.

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Alliance Manchester Business School (AMBS) was established in 1965 as one of the UK's first two business schools. AMBS is part of the University of Manchester and is the largest campus-based business and management school in the UK. Our brand ethos 'Original Thinking Applied' sits at the heart of everything we do. Ranked third in the UK for research power, our influential research impacts all areas of business and management. We provide world-class, industry-focused education to undergraduates, postgraduates and executives, and engage with businesses globally to share our expertise.

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